
Fictional Friendships and Their Effect on Socialization

ANNAKA SKAVNES

Produced in Jacob Stewart's Spring 2015 ENC 1102

Introduction

A fictional novel is a fantastic world made of words, filled and brought to life with the author's heart and mind. It wouldn't be unusual for the author to feel some attachment to the characters they create, much like how an artist cherishes a piece of their work. However, this does not explain the connection that a reader experiences when reading a book. Despite fictional characters really being a large collection of words and phrases throughout the book, for some unknown reason "readers persist in regarding characters as more human than 'substantial hypothetical beings'" (Keen 295). What I hope to accomplish is to explore the nature of the bond that exists between reader and character and why such a relationship forms. Furthermore, I wish to show my audience how this "fictional friendship" can be utilized as a tool to inspire socialization and relationship building skills among youths and their peers. I hope to benefit many young children who suffer from childhood isolation due to their lack of communication skills, much like I did as a child. Being unable to socialize with friends and peers at a young age can be very damaging to a child's self-esteem, and so I hope that my research will help to prevent more kids from feeling alone and isolated. As a child, I was able to find solace through books and fictional characters, and eventually made friends because of them. If, by some chance, bonds between fictional characters and people can be used as a means to allow less socially apt children a way to relate and interact with their peers, then I definitely see worth in pursuing this topic further, and I want to call on others to do the same.

As Suzanne Keen points out in the beginning of her research paper, "Readers' Temperaments and Fictional Character," "[W]hen it comes to character, narrative theory has long been at odds with ordinary experiences of fiction reading" (295). Basically, much of the discourse community concerning bonding with fictional beings is at odds with itself. Researchers had initially agreed that characters are no more than an amassment of words, and yet the reactions people have in accordance to fictional characters cannot be ignored (Keen). People are now starting to explore whether or not bonds truly can exist between a character and a real person and how that can further affect the behavior or development of that reader. Others, much like Keen, are trying to discover other reasons for this reaction provided by the reader that has no connection at all to what's in the book. And even then, there are still many researchers who are undecided on the matter, like Marco Carraciolo, who I will discuss later. Such researchers believe that while you can form bonds with fictional characters, it is the conditions in which the character was written that actually inspire that bond instead of the character themselves. I wish to contribute to this community, approaching many different aspects of this argument. I hope to touch on just what can influence a relationship between character and reader, whether there really is a viable bond that can exist with something fictional and just how that can affect the reader as a person. Specifically, I will focus on how a bond with a fictional character can indirectly affect how someone socializes

with their peers. This is a less looked at subject, for many researchers are more interested in the direct behavioral effects that a character can have on a reader. Currently, there isn't enough solid evidence to support any positive, long lasting, behavioral changes in people who feel empathy for certain fictional characters, although I cannot say that research on this topic will stop anytime soon. This is why I'll be taking a look at the secondary effects that this supposed friendship can have on a person's social life. However, in order to do this, I must approach this subject with a supportive perspective on the existence of character-people bonds (or at least take a middle ground attitude) and explore the reasons behind such a bond.

Methodology

In order to collect data on the bonds forged between a reader and fictional character, and further explore how they can be used as tools for socialization, I made use of both surveying and interviewing as methods of research. In order to help support my hypothesis that the strong bonds and attachment a reader feels for a specific fictional character from a book can be used as a tool for socialization, I looked to interview individuals in-depth and find out more how readers interact with fictional characters and how that affects their real life, much like Deborah Brandt did in her article, "Sponsors of Literacy." When researching how outside influences can sponsor a person's literacy, she interviewed many people, and dissected and analyzed the responses, drawing conclusions not only from their direct answers, but also from more obscure information about their lives. I will attempt to do the same, and reach past what was simply told to me to instead look for deeper meaning in even seemingly irrelevant information given to me by my subject. Once I have thoroughly analyzed the data collected from my interview, I hope to supplement what I found with the results that I received from a six-question survey that I had 33 freshman UCF students respond to. The survey helped me to ascertain just how relevant and credible my area of research is and whether it'd be important to the public. The site I used to make my survey is called freeonlinesurvey.com. The only reason behind this was because of ease of use and accessibility. For many of the same reasons, the link to my survey was posted to the UCF Class of 2018 page. Additionally, this ensured that my research subjects would all be of the same age group, as well as randomly selected.

Data

In order to find out more about the bonds built between reader and character and how they can be used as tools to help kids socialize, I had to first get into the mind of a reader who could tell me what it is like being friends with a fictional character. I was able to do this by interviewing a fellow freshman student and friend of mine, Sami Glaser. Sami is an avid reader and is a member of the Harry Potter Club at UCF, much like I am. From the beginning of the interview, she was very clear in the fact that she feels a true connection of friendship with fictional characters, specifically Hermione from the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling. As a child, Sami faced hardships with growing up. As she grew older, her peers seemed to be less accepting of certain behaviors that they considered to be more childish, and as a result, Sami lost all but two friends. For her, who didn't understand at the time why the rest of her class and friends started to ignore her; it was a very lonely and tough time. It was around then that Sami started to build her friendship with Hermione. She explained how Hermione "was another one of [her] friends, helping [her] through, going through the same things." For Sami, it was almost as if this strong female protagonist was "helping and encouraging [her] through the tough times," comforting her and saying, "I was there too and I am stronger because of it." For her, Hermione was a monumental help in overcoming her sadness while staying true to herself. Sami admitted that she looks up to Hermione a lot as a friend and role model, and she feels a deep comradery through both their similarities and differences. Sami also

mentioned that as the books went on, she felt her bond deepen with the character, both reader and character were growing up beside each other and overcoming life's challenges as they did. Presently, Sami talks about this fictional character as if she were an old friend or sister even, despite her not being real.

Another thing that I was able to gather from the interview was Sami's personal views on a reading program or curriculum being implemented in schools meant to focus on increasing peer interaction in a class, as well as sharpening the reading skills of young minds. When I asked her about the benefits of such a program being implemented in public schools and what effects they may have on socialization, she told me that she believes that it would not only be beneficial in boosting children's confidence and socializing skills, but it will also help to generate a generation that better appreciates reading and books. She stated that if a program like this were to be initiated in schools (mostly from grades 4 through 8), it would "give kids who don't have a lot in common or kids who have personalities that don't mesh well some common ground to stand on. It would give them something to talk about." When I asked her at what point she'd believe this program to be most effective, she emphasized the importance of this type of program being implemented early on and carried on through to middle school, in an attempt to smash the bad impression kids have about reading. It will also introduce a new way of socializing with peers that is pretty much accessible to everyone in middle school, no matter who they are. She points out that while not everyone will be able to quickly find their niche, like sports or music, everyone at that point in their life should be able to read. No one can have a lack of skill in a reading program like that, and so it becomes an inviting topic for the entire student body, not just small groups of kids. Another aspect of this type of program that she pointed out is that by reading various books, students can not only reengage themselves in reading books that suit their own tastes, but also, through talking about the books and characters of the stories they read, they can engage with fellow students in a way that is both fun and educational. I asked her in what ways she thought this could be done, and she replied that students can maybe approach other students when they hear about a book or character that sounds interesting to them, and that allows for a conversation to start.

When asked about socializing by using aspects a character the reader feels close to, Sami answered simply that "by talking about your favorite character, people can learn a lot about you as well." She believes that by first talking through a character, it is easier for people who are normally shy to open up about their personal interests and life experiences. She thinks it's because it's easier to tell someone about yourself by saying something like, "Oh I like this character because of this experience I had in the past, so I really feel a connection," rather than just going head on into your own backstory. It gives kids an easy, common ground to start a conversation with, which can later progress into talking about yourself and your own life. In short, she thinks that characters that people feel especially close to can act as a sort of "gateway" that allows shy kids to open up and become more confident.

Despite gathering descriptive detail from my interview with Sami, I still needed to know whether her ideas aligned with the majority or not. In order to do this, I surveyed 33 freshman students from UCF. In the survey, I asked participants six questions, each pertaining to the relevance and applicability of my research. The first question presented to the participants was whether they ever felt emotionally attached to a character from a fictional book. Of the people who took this quiz, 29 people said that they have, four people say that they never have, and none of the participants chose the "I don't know" option.

The next question asked was, "If [participants] had felt some emotional attachment, at what point in the participant's life did this happen?"

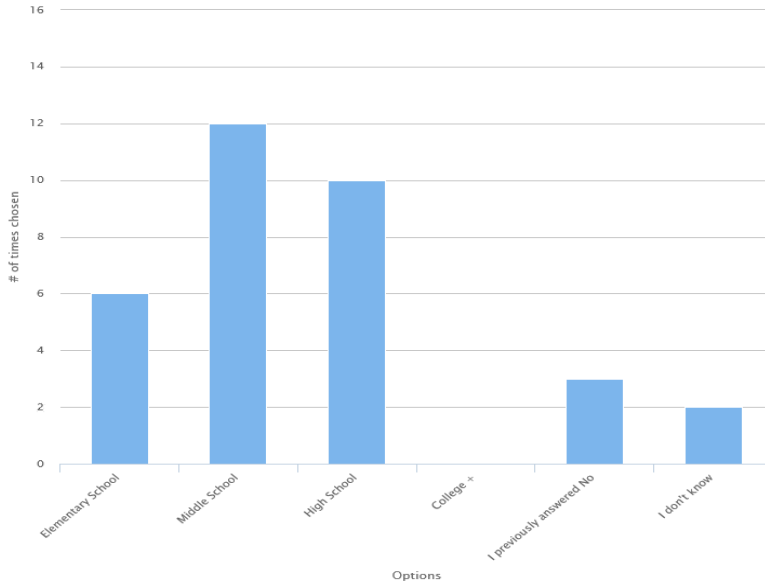


Figure 1: Responses to “If [participants] had felt some emotional attachment, at what point in the participant’s life did this happen?”

Twelve of the participants responded with middle school, and high school came in closely at second with ten people. Following that, six participants said that they had a character they feel emotionally attached to from elementary school, while a total of five people chose “I don’t know” or “I previously answered No.” No one chose college.

The next question pertained to a topic which I will be talking about in the discussion portion of my research essay: “If there was a program dedicated to encouraging social interaction among peers through reading non-educational, fictional books, would you be interested in participating? And if so, when in your life would you be most likely to join such a program?” Of the participants who took my survey, this question is what received the least amount of responses, with some parts of the question not being answered by the full 33 people.

	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Very Likely	Responses	Weighted Average
Before Elementary School	9 (28.13%)	10 (31.25%)	6 (18.75%)	3 (9.38%)	4 (12.50%)	32	2.47 / 5
Elementary School	2 (6.06%)	5 (15.15%)	6 (18.18%)	15 (45.45%)	5 (15.15%)	33	3.48 / 5
Middle School	2 (6.06%)	2 (6.06%)	6 (18.18%)	21 (63.64%)	2 (6.06%)	33	3.58 / 5
High School	2 (6.06%)	7 (21.21%)	8 (24.24%)	10 (30.30%)	6 (18.18%)	33	3.33 / 5
College	8 (25.00%)	5 (15.63%)	9 (28.13%)	5 (15.63%)	5 (15.63%)	32	2.81 / 5
After College	7 (23.33%)	8 (26.67%)	8 (26.67%)	5 (16.67%)	2 (6.67%)	30	2.57 / 5
I would not join this program	7 (24.14%)	3 (10.34%)	12 (41.38%)	5 (17.24%)	2 (6.90%)	29	2.72 / 5
							3.01 / 5

Table 1: Responses to “If there was a program dedicated to encouraging social interaction among peers through reading non-educational, fictional books, would you be interested in participating? And if so, when in your life would you be most likely to join such a program?”

As you can see, this question has many parts, which asks each participant to rate an option from “very unlikely” to “very likely.” What I found is that the data represented a bell curve, with the average peaking at the middle school option and steadily declining averages before and after middle school. The further the time period from middle school, the lower the chance that people would be willing to participate in the mentioned program. In order from highest average to lowest, the option choices are listed as: Middle School, Elementary School, High School, College, After College, and Before Elementary School, with the only exception being “I wouldn’t join” that is between College and After College.

The following question given asked participants who said “Yes” to the first question about the length of the book series in which their so called “fictional friend” is written. Disregarding the seven people who chose “I answered No” or “I don’t know,” the most popular choice was a series of either six or seven books, with nine people. Two to three books came after, with seven people choosing that option. The options of one book and four to five books tied for third with each being chosen four times, and lastly “8+ books” was only picked twice.

The second to last question inquired how often participants empathize with or get attached to fictional characters.

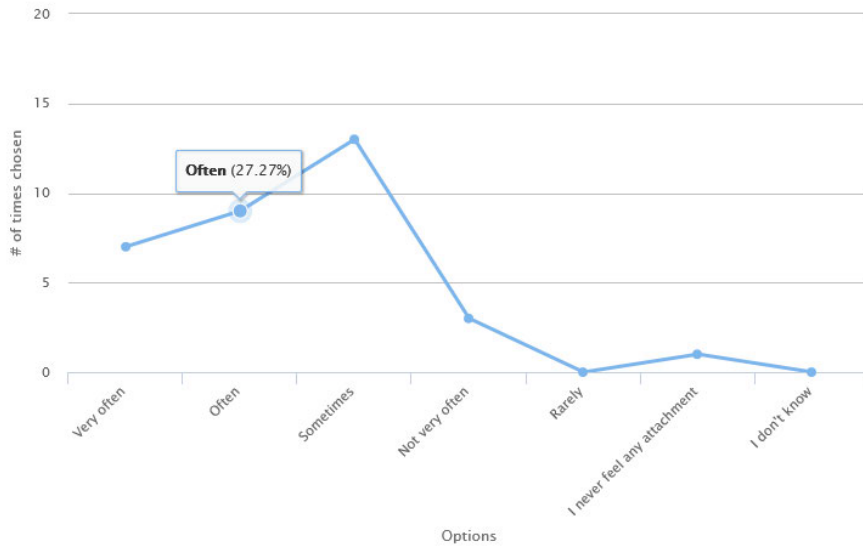


Figure 2: Responses to “How often do you empathize or get attached to fictional characters?”

As shown above, most readers at least sometimes feel empathy or attachment for characters, if not often. After the choice “Sometimes,” we see a huge decrease for those who chose “Not very often” to “I never feel attachment” with an overall total of four people choosing one of those answers.

The last question given on the survey was simply asking for the participant’s gender. Twenty-three of the participants were female, while six were male, and four didn’t identify with either gender. All of these questions will be used to supplement the data extracted from the interview I conducted, and they are meant to represent the voice of the public in regard to my research area.

Discussion

Through my research, I have arrived at the conclusion that bonds between people and fictional characters are not only plausible, but these bonds can act as a catalyst to forming strong bonds of friendship between two real people as well. As we know, there are many different types of bonds and each are formed through different circumstances. What I have found through both primary and secondary research is that this feeling of friendship people feel with fictional characters can come to be through a unique mix of a reader’s personality, stylistic writing choices made by the author, whether the content of the character coincides with something happening to the reader at the time, and a sense of growth over time shared between both reader and character. Each one of these elements differs in amount and nature depending on the reader, which results in each character seeming to leave different impressions on all its readers, and giving each reader a feeling of sharing a unique relationship that can’t exist between anyone else.

As I mentioned before in my introduction section of this essay, researchers are still trying to figure out the reasoning behind the feeling of friendship and humanity people project onto a compilation of words. Many researchers in the field have agreed that an author’s strategic use of writing style and technique can persuade a reader’s mind into empathizing and interacting with a fictional mind, which in turn affects how people react to a character despite them being nonexistent (Carraciolo). However, some argue that a reader’s temperament and current mood can affect how fictional characters appear to the reader and how that influences a reader’s reaction to a character just as much as the actual writing in the book, if not more so (Keen). From what I gathered when interviewing Sami, I believe that it is a combination of the two that truly brings about the feeling of friendship readers feel with certain characters.

Sami made it very clear from the start that, because of her own shy yet hardworking temperament, she felt incredibly close to Hermione. She explained that she hardly ever put herself in Hermione's shoes, however, because while she identified with the character, she knew that both she and Hermione were very different as well. Instead, she felt as though Hermione was a friend cheering her on through the similar struggles and triumphs the two faced in their lives. This is very clearly an example of Sami comparing her own experiences and thoughts with that of a character and bringing them to life. She is projecting a personality onto the character gathered on what she knows through the book and through her own life. In "Readers' Temperaments and Fictional Character," Keen explains that this sort of personality projection is a result of temperamental differences in each individual. These differences "express themselves not only in the ways people respond to other people (cautiously, shyly, warmly, defensively, openly, etc.), but also in the way they construct imaginary humanlike persons in fictions" (Keen 296). However, despite Keen's solid ideas on temperamental projection, I cannot entirely discount the author's part in building a character to bond with either.

There are just as many elements to the writing as there is to the reader that can affect just how strongly one can feel for a fictional character. One main element is what David Herman calls "direct, 'inside' views of characters' minds," which happens expressly in fictional narratives (qtd. in Carraciolo 31). This means that "stories can give us the illusion that we are engaging with a character's mental life in precisely the situations in which a real person's mental life would be most opaque and inaccessible to us" (Carraciolo 35). This feature of fictional stories is what I believe to be the largest appeal to fictional friendships over real ones. For many people, the strange is a cause for anxiety (Blanchet and Vaage). Humans fear what they don't know. This is especially true when interacting with other people. We don't know the mental life of those we interact with, and so we must always carefully contemplate what to say or how to act when we face other people, whether it be friends, family, a higher up, or a stranger. This is why fictional characters are so appealing. The nature of a story allows us to feel "closer to the mental life of characters than they could ever be to that of real people" (Carraciolo 32). Basically, people who have trouble interacting with their peers find it easier to bond with a fictional mind because when engaging with characters in narrative situations, the reader cannot misinterpret the character's mental states (Carraciolo). If we look at Sami's relationship with the character Hermione, we can also find this element of fictional stories taking up a role in the formation of this friendship. When Sami first started really bonding with the character, it was a time in her life when she was facing rejection by many of the kids around her for not meeting social expectations. I can infer that this is what partly caused her to flee to the world of books. Sami probably preferred the companionship of Hermione, with whom she had full access to all mental thoughts and opinions, to that of the opaque mental states of her classmates. While I have no doubt that Sami's alignment with Hermione's written personality traits played a great role in giving Sami the feel of similarity and closeness to the character, I think that this element of fictional novels also helped a lot in allowing her the feeling of safety and intimacy that she didn't receive from her real life peers.

Now that I've discussed the nature of a bond between real people and fictional characters and how they come about forming, I will now explain how this can be considered a legitimate bond despite one half of it being occupied by a nonexistent mind, and how this bond can inspire bonds to form between real people as well. As of today, the term friendship is used to describe a bond "involving mutual liking and similarity, mutual self-disclosure, sharing activities, and a shared history" between two people (Blanchet and Vaage). While not all of the criteria can be specifically met under the circumstances I am analyzing, there is a striking similarity between the bonds of humans and fictional characters and this definition. As I've already discussed in Sami's case, she feels a sense of similarity and self-disclosure with Hermione due to their perceived interests and comparable pasts. Hermione also enjoys school activities and reading books much like Sami does. Not only that, but also even without direct interaction, Sami shares a history of observing

Hermione's life as it progresses through the story, much like how a person can grow attached to their neighbor's kids as he watches them grow up (Blanchet and Vaage). The element of a shared history is what really allows this type of relationship to grow past just a feeling of empathy for a character, since even as a character grows and changes out of what we first knew them as, one still retains a feeling of love and camaraderie for the person that character has become. Combining all these elements allows the reader to really grow close to a character despite there being no true interaction between the two. It is a friendship-like bond that is constituted by the mere fact that they have followed and remembered following a character throughout both of their lifetimes (Blanchet and Vaage).

This concept of character history being a string cause of character bonding is also supported by my survey results. If you refer back to the fourth survey question I discussed in my data, you'll see that I polled people on the length of the book series in which the character they have become attached to exists. From the statistics, I gathered that the longer the series, the more likely you are to bond with a character. The reason that I say this is because we see a downward slant from 6-7, to 2-3, to one book or 4-5. While I am aware that 8+ got a lower percentage, I am also taking into consideration the number of series that have that number of books in it that are open to the public. There aren't many series that run as long as 8+ books, and so naturally the statistics for that choice may be lower than a shorter series. This is why I'd like to focus on the other four lengths. As we can see, the longer the series got, the more responses that series had (excluding 4-5, which I again suspect to be lacking in number as far as availability goes). As Blanchet and Vaage pointed out, "Being exposed to a certain stimulus or object several times tends to increase our liking of it." The same could be said for characters. The longer the series, the more a reader is exposed to a character and can watch that character evolve. This is what truly allows researchers to set character relationships aside from simple empathy or sympathy (Blanchet and Vaage).

Through my research, I feel as though I can safely say that a real bond can exist between a person and a fictional character and that it has the potential to at least rival that of acquaintanceship, if not friendship. However, now that I have gotten the results, I am hoping to put them to good use. I propose that schools, mainly elementary through middle school, start implementing reading programs that take advantage of a reader's bond with a fictional character and use it as a tool to help encourage students to socialize with their peers and make friends. Much like how Tony Mirabelli explains the multiliteracy of a waiter as how the "waitress or waiter understands and uses texts such as the menu and how she or he 'reads' and verbally interacts with the customer reflect carefully constructed uses of language and literacy" (145), I hope to use the fictional characters found in narratives as a genre that allows children to "read" and interact with their peers.

Though I consider this program to be a worthwhile pursuit, considering the large amount of social turmoil that kids face when entering middle school, it doesn't necessarily mean that others would as well. This is why I thought it mandatory to inquire about the relevance of such a program in both my interview and survey. The results that I got were overwhelmingly in agreement with my own thoughts. The survey revealed that, while a majority were neutral about joining it, there were definitely more people interested in the program than disinterested. It is also through my research that I found out that such a program would be most effective in the late elementary school to middle school age group. When asked about it, Sami said that she believed without a doubt that the aforementioned program would provide both social and educational benefits to young kids. Despite

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the majority of the survey supporting the notion that this program would be most effective in middle school, Sami brought up a very good point that I too agree with. She thinks that by introducing this sort of thing to kids earlier not only would they be more accustomed to the curriculum by the time they reach middle school, but talking about books and their characters would also become a more “socially acceptable” medium for children to bond over. This is especially important, since middle school is a time where children are starting to grow up and peer pressure is starting to become more present among classmates. Children start considering what is socially acceptable to say or do and what isn’t, and if we can make reading a more social media from a younger age, it may be more accepted as kids grow up. This may be why people feel as though this program could be most useful in middle school. This is the time when they are most uneasy about how to act in front of others or what to say. If we make reading more socially acceptable by introducing this around the end of elementary school, by the time it is used in middle school, kids will feel more secure in using this as a way to make friends.

What makes me want to specifically focus on characters as the genre through which interaction take place is the unique interpretations that children can have of each character that they can’t experience with the story, among a few other elements that are also special to a book’s characters. Mainly, the idea of a character, and its unique relationship with the reader, allows for much more flexibility in conversation than the concrete story does. Two different readers can have both similar and different opinions of the same character based on each person’s unique temperament, but the story of a book will never change depending on the reader (Keen). This allows for infinite conversation topics when discussing a book’s characters rather than its story. In Kathryn Wentzel’s and Cynthia Erdley’s study on childhood friend-making strategies, evidence proved that “prosocial rather than antisocial behavior appeared to be the key mediator between friendship-making strategies and peer acceptance” (825). They described how kids prefer it if others approach them by initiating conversation rather than just not doing anything “socially unacceptable” (Wentzel and Erdley). By introducing a reading program like the one I described, we can help encourage both. Reading is a pretty much universal skill among children in middle school, yet reading for fun is somewhat not considered socially normal. By making reading a medium through which children socialize, we can destroy the notion that reading isn’t meant to be entertaining, along with providing a large range of children a way to implement prosocial strategies. Strategies that implement the use of the unique and vast nature of character relationships could include strategies used in Wentzel and Erdley’s studies, like conversation starters, shared interests, introducing one’s self through a character, and participating in similar activities. Additionally, whereas one will eventually run out of things to discuss about one story, a single character can prove to be an ever-useful friend-making strategy due to its inherent flexibility. People need to take advantage of these unique relationships readers build with characters in order to help either themselves or their children to grow both socially and as a reader.

While my research has proven that there is definitely potential in exploring this type of program, there are certainly things that need more research. For instance, while my survey shows that it certainly isn’t uncommon for people to grow attached to fictional characters, most of my survey participants were female. If females are more likely to bond to fictional characters than men are, my research would be mostly restricted to the female demographic. Other things like location and current events need to be taken into account as well. And so while my research has generally shown a use for my research, more exploration on the subject is definitely needed.

Conclusion

While I touched upon the bonds between fictional character and reader, as well as explored how they can be used as tools for socialization, there is still much more research that needs to be done. The discourse community is still undecided about their opinion on just how solid these

relationships are, and much more psychological research needs to be done in order to really know how big of an impact these characters can have on a person. Also, the research that I have done needs to be tested for other variables that could have affected the final results. I'm sure that there is much more research that could be done concerning my thesis and other topics relating to it, but what I listed above is what I believe to be the most prominent areas in need of further investigating.

Despite the extensive amount of research that needs to be further explored, I think it would be well worth the effort. Not only could more options to socialize become open to those who struggle with doing so, but also many other benefits aside from socialization could make themselves known. For instance, by establishing a program along the lines of the one I described throughout my paper, we may see better reading skills among students. Reading classes that become more fun and interesting to kids may very well help to disassociate the action of "reading" with "an assigned task." With the introduction of a reading curriculum focused on getting children to both enjoy books and interact with classmates in a more pleasurable way, kids may actually come to see reading a book as a good thing instead of an assignment. If this were to come about, it wouldn't be unreasonable to expect boosted class participation, higher reading levels among students, and more motivation to do classwork. I truly believe that if we were to explore how to use the relationship between reader and character as a catalyst to encourage interaction between students, we'd not only have a happier, more social generation of kids, but we'd also see mass improvement in their reading capabilities as well.

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Annaka Skavnes

Annaka Skavnes is currently a sophomore at the University of Central Florida. She is majoring in Graphic Design and has a minor in Writing and Rhetoric. She is a student heavily devoted to her studies and her interest in the arts. Annaka made Dean's List in her college her first semester, and hopes to uphold this further into her college career. Upon graduating, she is looking to get hired for designing packaging and advertisements.