Conference paper abstract

In the act of reading: anecdotes about reading, and how to read them

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The Reading Experience Database exists to collect and organise what might best be called ‘anecdotal’ evidence of reading, ie. references to reading found in such documents as diaries, autobiographies, letters, and witness statements. It is, then, an interesting fact that what are to date the twenty-first century’s two most celebrated histories of reading – Jonathan Rose’s The intellectual life of the British working class (2001) and William St Clair’s The reading nation (2004) – have taken diametrically opposed approaches to this form of evidence: though St Clair admits anecdotal evidence to be trustworthy in the majority of cases, he dismisses it from consideration, while Rose, though admitting some reservations, bases the greater part of his argument upon the literal interpretation of published autobiographies.

This paper argues that anecdotal or autobiographical accounts of reading cannot be taken at face value, but nonetheless provide a valuable resource for the study of contemporary and historical reading. It develops the idea that autobiography should be interpreted as a species of fiction (Lyons and Taksa 1992) by proposing an interdisciplinary approach to the narrative and discursive functions of represented reading experiences. This is exemplified firstly with a critique of examples drawn from Rose (2001), and secondly with interview data collected in the course of the Discourse of Reading Groups project.