The Discourse of Reading Groups is an AHRC-funded project in which discourse analysis, corpus analysis, and ethnographic observation are used to investigate the reception of literary texts by real readers. To avoid the need to construct artificial experiments or ask readers to respond to literature in an unfamiliar manner, we have taken already-existing reading groups for our research subjects, observing and recording their regular meetings. Members of these groups range from teenagers to pensioners and meet in diverse locations, from Dorchester to Glasgow, from a knitting shop to a gay bar. Research questions include:

- What kinds of interpretations and evaluations of contemporary fiction and other literary texts do reading group members produce?
- How are interpretations/evaluations constructed: e.g. how are they justified; how are ideas developed between group members; how are agreements and disagreements negotiated?
- How is such critical work interwoven with the social, interpersonal and affective demands of group interaction?
- To what identities do group members display an orientation in the course of responding to literary texts?
- How do group members’ interpretations and evaluations relate to the judgements made by professional reviewers and academic critics?

By July 2008, this project will be nearing completion, and the PALA conference will provide an excellent opportunity to disseminate results and receive feedback before publication. In the meantime, it is already becoming apparent that the responses to literature to be found in our data are subject to multiple determinations, beginning with the immediate context in which reading is produced as action (Scollon 1998). This raises questions about certain methodologies for empirical literary study (eg. Miall 2006), which arguably bias findings by isolating readers from their environments and preventing them from engaging in their habitual reading practices.

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1 The proposed paper will be jointly authored by all three researchers, though it will be presented by one on behalf of the group as a whole.