

Read, Understand, Have Fun

Prologue

I have always wondered why the book cover includes the author's bibliography (when people are very unlikely to check it out). To give credit to the writer? Of course. But what if, understanding the background of the author may create some chemical reaction during reading? Like, you may be able to understand what and why the author put this sentence in his or her creation. And with that, the reader may probably enjoy the reading more as they understand the author. Therefore, I decided to conduct research on this particular topic -- the goal of this research is to find the association between the understanding in the author's background and the enjoyment of comprehension.

I.

Expert Opinion

I believe there are people who have similar thoughts like me. So, I searched up online if this is actually confirmed effective or ineffective in reading strategies.

According to the article "Reading Comprehension Strategies", Unal Ulker states that exploring the "causes of events, explanation of characters' behaviors, and other moments that identify why the events in the text take place and why the author mentions something" so that the readers are able to understand the meaning of the text in an effective way. For example, there is a

book I really like called “The Things They Carried”. Maybe you have heard about it, it is a fiction about soldiers struggling in the Vietnam War. Ah, just another fiction among the school collections, great. Let me stop you right there. What if I tell you... the author, Tim O’Brien, actually served in the Vietnam War? Now this is interesting. Although the creation is considered as a “fiction”, knowing the author’s actual experience in war may make us think: hm is there any truth to the story? Since Tim O’Brien is a former soldier in the Vietnam War, is there anything he wants to convey through the book? Let me give you some hints: According to LibGuides, Tim O’Brien “debated fleeing north to Canada” when he received his drafting notice. This shows his negative opinion towards war. From this, we can safely presume the reason why he wrote this book is expressing his negative opinion on war by showing the struggles people went through during war in his work. Hence, author’s writing is usually heavily influenced by environment, and personal background. There is always a reason why the author decided to spend their time, sit down and write their creation. Therefore, knowing the experience of the author helps comprehending the writing.

From another article “Personalised Reading for Pleasure with Digital Libraries: towards a Pedagogy of Practice and Design”, Kucirkova and Cremin point out that there are many teachers who are not active readers since they have no idea on the background of the books, which specifically refers to the author’s intention of creating their work. This will cause difficulties when they try to arrange a book that fits the preference of the children and ruins the fun reading experience the children can have. Think in this way: when you want to read a book about cultural diversity, you wouldn’t want to read a book written by a racist author, would you? In short,

understanding the book helps people find their own preferred reading, indirectly affecting their enjoyment of reading based on their preference.

Now after two articles above, you may say, “Oh, so knowing the information about the author really helps comprehension and enjoyment of the reading!” Not so fast, let’s keep checking other articles out before we come to a conclusion:

In “Investigating the contributions of background knowledge and reading comprehension strategies to L2 reading comprehension: an exploratory study”, the researchers try to address the connection between background knowledge, reading comprehension strategies and second language reading comprehension. Let’s just focus on the background knowledge part of the experiment, shall we? Firstly, the participants are questioned with their background knowledge on different topics. Also they have 90 minutes of self questioning training sessions that “requires students to create questions about the text they are reading, and studies document its effectiveness” (887). Then, the participants have to take a reading comprehension test. Last, they will be asked the difficulty and enjoyment of the text in the follow-up surveys. Contrary to the conclusion we have come to above, the result suggests that “background knowledge, in the current study, accounted for less than 1% of the overall variance in reading comprehension” (897). Therefore, it states that “background knowledge proved not to be a strong contributor to reading comprehension in this study, but regression analyses indicated that self-questioning accounted for 56% of the variance in reading comprehension scores” (898).

Oh no! An actual research contradicts what we have so far! Don’t fret. Although it states the background knowledge is not as effective as other reading strategies, it also states that there

needs to be more research to prove the accuracy of this study since past studies show the effectiveness.

So I think, why don't we conduct another study to confirm as they suggested?

II.

Primary Research

I designed an experiment to investigate the difference of people's understanding and enjoyment before and after knowing the author's background.

In this study, I have prepared a short set of questions about the reading. The short reading is composed of a poem for the first section and a quote from a nonfiction for second section. Every section has two different parts which is before and after given the background of the authors. There are two questions per part:

- 1) What do you think this work is trying to convey?
- 2) Rate this work. (From 1-5)

Total of 16 college students have participated in this experiment.

In the first part, a poem named “Evening” is shown to the participants:

Evening

Tiredness stitches.

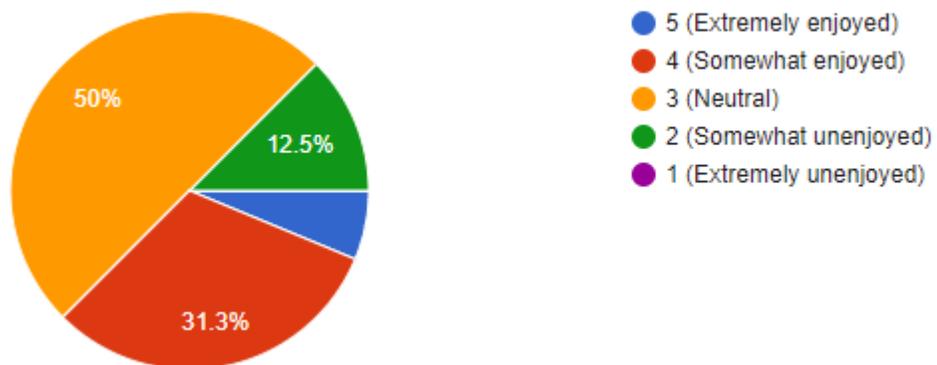
Dullness dims.

Prayers press down.

The wounding sun

caresses you.

Most of the participants have the first impression of “tiredness”, “evening”, and “relax”.



The figure above shows the rating of “Evening” before the author’s background is given.

Later, the participants are presented with a brief introduction to the background of the author of “Evening” and the date of creation:

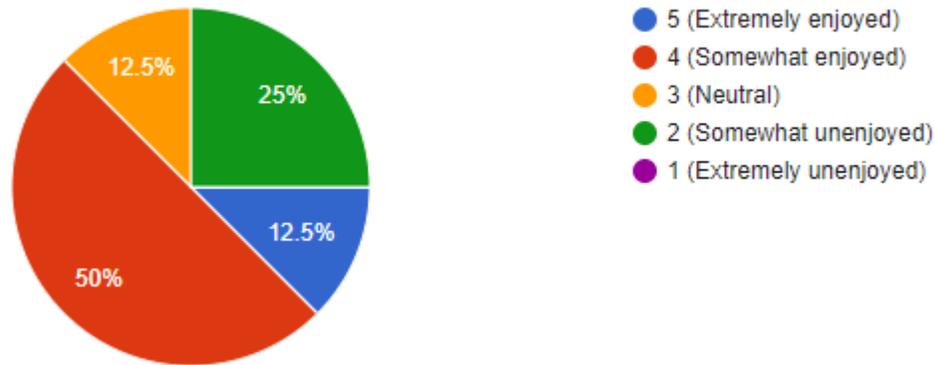
August Stramm- The Author of "Evening"



August Stramm is a German dramatist who was living in the middle class in his early life. Between 1897 and 1902, Stramm often traveled to New York City as a member of the German Postal Administration’s Overseas Department. Later in 1913, Stramm became a captain in the Prussian Army. During World War I, he had participated in the actions of both the eastern and western fronts. He survived more than seventy battles, and "became perversely fascinated": 'We ourselves are demons and laugh at all the others. That’s how the soldier in the field feels ... He kicks the earth and shoots the sky / Heaven to death. And horror is within him and around him, he himself is horror.' On September 1, 1915, Stramm was killed during an attack in the Rokitno Swamps, Gorodenka, Russia. The poem “Evening” is published after his death by others.

(Poetry Foundation)

After the author’s background is given, most participants have pointed out the poem is related to war, which is entirely different from their first impressions.



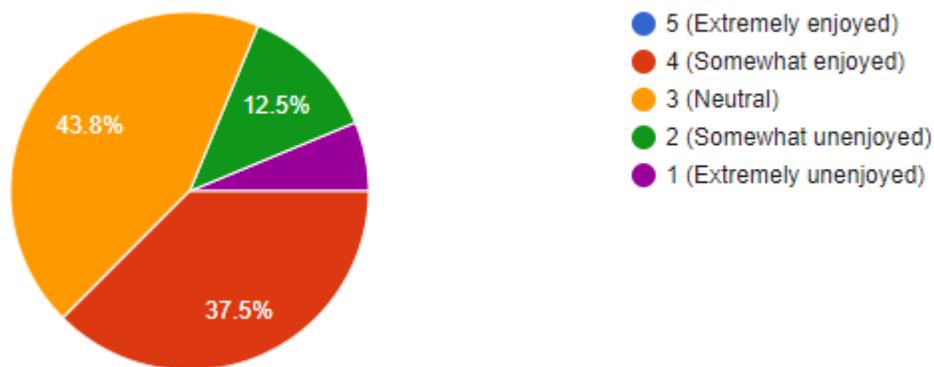
The figure above shows the rating of “Evening” after the author’s background is given.

This is a very interesting result. The distribution of participants’ opinion shifted the peak from “neutral” to “somewhat enjoyed”. The percentage of participants who stayed neutral greatly decreases while the percentage of participants who were somewhat enjoyed and extremely enjoyed increases. While the majority of participants show enjoyment, the percentage of participants who were somewhat unenjoyed also increases.

In the second part, a quote from a work piece (unknown identity) is shown to the participants:

"When one parent dies, the world is dramatically altered, absolutely, but you still have another one left. When that second parent dies, it's the loss of all ties, and where does that leave you? You lose your history, your sense of connection to the past. You also lose the final buffer between you and death. Even if you're an adult, it's weird to be orphaned."

Most of the participants have the first impression of "sadness", "loneliness", and "orphan".



The figure above shows the rating of this piece before the author's background is given.

Later, the participants are presented with the name and identity of the work, which is a nonfiction, and a brief introduction to the background of the author of “Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss”.

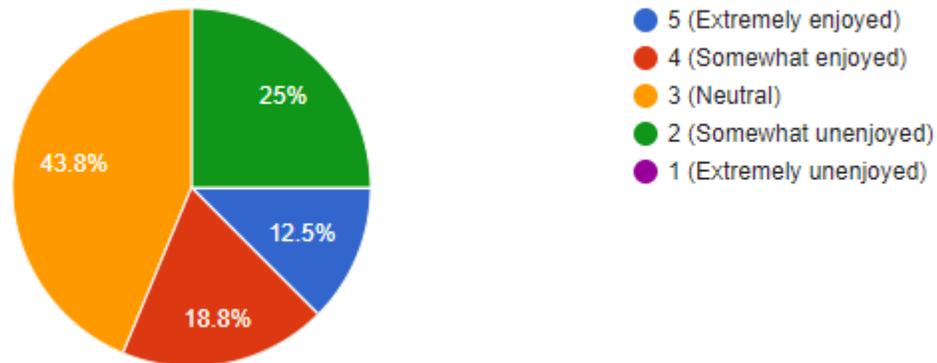
Hope Edelman- The Author of "Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss"



Loss of mother in early life. A mother who has two daughters, feeling helpless during her first pregnancy, so she sought help from other motherless mothers for their advice. Through taking notes from her motherless friends, this began the start of the book "Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss", which was intended as a parenting book.

(Hope Edelman)

After the author's background is given, most participants agreed on the previous impression but noticed the book is more for "those who have never grown up with parents and having some rootedness and support".



The figure above shows the rating of "Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss" after the author's background is given.

Unlike the result from the first sample, the percentage of participants who stayed neutral remains unchanged. The percentage of participants who were somewhat unenjoyed increases while the percentage of participants who were somewhat enjoyed decreases. Surprisingly, the percentage of participants who were extremely enjoyed increases.

Isn't it interesting why these two samples received different results even though both of the results are collected in the same manner? In order to answer this question, let us retrace what we have done in this experiment.

Firstly, the participants are given the composition without any prior knowledge. The only thing they can rely on to interpret the message of the writing is imagination. Imagination plays a big role before the background information is given. It helps the reader to complete the story after they have gathered some ideas from the writing. These fragments of ideas still need one component to be linked together--imagination. Readers use imagination to connect all the ideas together and generate their own version of the story.



I have drawn the picture above based on the result of the first section of the study. It shows the difference of participants' impressions before (left; "tiredness", "evening", and "relax") and after (right; war) knowing the background of the author of "Evening". Imagination creates imagery in our head. Although both show an "evening" scene, they set off an entirely different atmosphere.

Unlike "Evening", the quote from the "Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss" is more direct and obvious than the metaphors in the poem. The imagery people created are similar before and after gaining background information. Therefore, it does not make a big change in rating.

The rule is very simple: If their own version of interpretation does not match what the story actually is, their impression of the story will be different before and after knowing the truth. Hence, the rating between these two pieces are different.

Overall, the participants' understanding of the context boosted after knowing the background of the author. However, the results from both pieces of work are so different so there is no direct correlation between the enjoyment and understanding of the writing.

Epilogue

Based on the articles and research conducted by myself, there is no definite conclusion that can be drawn because the data is sparse. I have made some presumptions based on my

experiment but the truth will remain a mystery until further research has been done. There are some imperfections about my own experiment such as small sample size, and limited number of examples. In the future, I wish to conduct a larger experiment project with greater sample size which can attain a more accurate result. It is a very fun learning experience and there is always a possibility that I will meet you in my further research paper in the future.

Work Cited

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