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# Timothy Findley's Community of Responsible Readers in *Headhunter*

Sabin Jeanmaire

In his dystopian novel *Headhunter* (1993), the Canadian writer Timothy Findley creates a complex network of intertextual relations between his characters, other literary texts, and real-life events from Canadian history. In doing so, he foregrounds the knowledge that is necessary to recognize the respective connections, and thereby delineates the inclusions and exclusions of the community of those who can be called responsible readers. In part a rewriting of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Headhunter* explores topics of responsibility and power, as well as different types of darkness within a psychiatric institution. The implicit community of readers consists of those characters who successfully navigate through the near-apocalyptic version of Toronto the novel presents. Making Kurtz the head psychiatrist of a clinic, Findley raises the question of who or what is considered sane or mentally ill; and he offers a view on how storytelling and access to narrative information are vital in negotiations of power.

A story set in Toronto, a plot revolving around characters who are either doctors or patients at a psychiatric institution, and a subsequent focus on topics of mental illness and power abuse – dark, yes, but not unrealistic so far. However, Timothy Findley's novel *Headhunter*, first published in 1993, presents a dystopian future version of the Canadian metropolis in which many things appear sinister. In addition to its clearly dystopian characteristics, the world of Findley's characters expands beyond Toronto through a myriad of intertextual links to both other literary works and historical events relevant to Canadian culture. At

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the same time a gripping text about the human psyche, about the ethics and morals involved in psychiatric treatment, and about establishing a series of riddles for people familiar with some of the best-known English-language novels, *Headhunter* offers two quite different types of communities. One is based on spatial proximity and professional necessity: namely, the community of all the characters in this particular psychiatric institution. With the setting in and around this institution, topics of mental illness, but also of power struggles within this clearly hierarchical structure, are foregrounded. It is in this space that the fictional doctors and patients meet for therapeutic sessions, that doctors negotiate their procedures and methods, and that secrets are traded and stories told. This aspect of storytelling, however, is also the basis for the second community, which I will focus on mainly in the present essay. This is a community of reader figures within the novel, established through a shared interest in reading and literature; a community whose inclusions and exclusions are also delineated by their knowledge of literary works, and hence by their ability to trace intertextual connections. My main claim is that in the dystopian world presented by Findley, both this knowledge of cultural history and the ability to become a responsible reader<sup>1</sup> are necessary for survival; conversely, it is precisely the threats to this community of readers and to successful acts of storytelling that make this such a dystopian world. As will be shown, storytelling is threatened by irresponsible readers/listeners, and especially through situations in which those who have a story to tell are denied a voice – a crucial consideration when it comes to witness testimonies.

A successful community is generally one in which communication works, i.e., where people understand each other and are able to respond to what they are told. In the spatial community of the clinic in *Headhunter*, this is not guaranteed, and thus the bond among the members of the community of reader figures is actually much stronger, albeit far more abstract. The novel is set precisely where the two communities overlap and where the private and the public intersect: The interaction between doctors and patients is based on an exchange of stories, in the form of what the patients tell the doctors about themselves. Revealing very personal information and talking about memories of traumatic

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<sup>1</sup> I suggest that a coupling of empathy and understanding is called for in this particular novel. As Suzanne Keen argues, “conscious cultivation of narrative empathy by teachers and discussion leaders could at least point toward the potential for novel reading to help citizens respond to real others with greater openness and consciousness of their shared humanity” (147). The response as re-action, thus, is one step further than a mere empathetic response on an emotional level, and requires training as a reader.

events create a fragile state that transfers a lot of responsibility onto the character that serves as receiver of the story, namely, the psychiatrist on duty. As for Findley's novel though, it is tempting to expand this toward the real-life reader.

Such an expansion would be as courageous (not to say dangerous) as it would be grounded in the text. It is courageous from a methodological point of view, as it implies bringing into dangerously close connection two levels crucially kept apart in classical narrative theory. I follow this tradition in that I distinguish between "readers" on three levels: the real-life biographical reader, the "implied reader," and characters who are readers on the level of the plot. The role of the responsible reader as it is discussed here applies mainly to characters that are presented as reader figures in the novel, but also points roughly to what is sometimes described as the "ideal" (cf. Culler 51) or "implied" reader (cf. Iser 34) of the novel. What is striking about this particular novel, however, and Findley's moral/ethical imperative as I understand it, is that he seems to be calling upon real-life readers to step into the shoes of the ideal responsible reader his novel constructs. Thus, these two levels cannot always be kept apart neatly. In repeated metafictional gestures and acts of metaleptic interpellation, the novel stages the act of reading on the plot level that mirrors the ideal response requested of the reader of the novel.

The expansion is, at the same time, grounded in the text. As we pick up the novel, we accept the role of readers, and are asked to become members of this community of responsible readers. The opening scene of the novel, our first contact with the book, already presents a meta-reflection on the connections between the different levels of readers:

On a winter's day, while a blizzard raged through the streets of Toronto, Lilah Kemp inadvertently set Kurtz free from page 92 of *Heart of Darkness*. Horror-stricken, she tried to force him back between the covers. The escape took place at the Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, where Lilah Kemp sat reading beside the rock pool. She had not even said *come forth*, but there Kurtz stood before her. (3)

What frames the novel as a whole is thus a scene of reading, and this act of intense engagement with a literary text functions as a doubling of our own act of reading, and, as such, as a metaleptic interpellation – from the very start, we are encouraged to compare our reading to Lilah's.

After Lilah, a former librarian and diagnosed schizophrenic, accidentally conjures up Kurtz from the pages of a copy of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the latter escapes into the streets of Lilah's hometown,

Toronto, and becomes the head psychiatrist at the fictional Parkin Institute, where most of the plot unfolds. This character's literary origin is given in great detail, including the page number from which he escapes, in order to ensure that everyone recognizes the intertext of *Heart of Darkness* from the start – thus making it the most prominent (though by far not the only) intertextual link in *Headhunter*. Kurtz's job at the clinic is a position of power comparable to the one in Conrad's novella, and there is a Marlow to interfere with Kurtz's abuse of power in Findley's text, too. By choosing Conrad's novella as a key intertext Findley evidently also raises questions of responsibility, power hierarchies, and different kinds of darknesses:

*Headhunter* suggests that each new generation in each invented community must reenter its own particular heart of darkness in search of its own Kurtz – its own shortcomings, its own weaknesses. Books, and by extension art, are the best guides on that journey. (Brydon 61)

For the purpose of the present argument, it might be appropriate to add that books are among the best guides for the journey *through and possibly out of* whichever heart of darkness one has penetrated into – whereas the absence of literary understanding can mean condemning a character to remain trapped in that place of darkness.

In connection to Conrad's key intertext, it is vital to look at the title of the novel, *Headhunter*. We know the word from a professional context, where it refers to a person whose aim it is to find the best people for a given job (cf. *OED* "headhunting, *n.*, 2"), which in turn is connected to Findley's Kurtz and his position at the clinic, where he is looking for the best people to fit into the roles of doctors, patients and investors. But we might also remember the image in Conrad's novella of the heads impaled on wooden posts that Kurtz collects (164), which links to the first and far more literal definition of "headhunter" the *OED* provides, namely, "a person who decapitates an enemy and preserves the head as a trophy" ("headhunter, *n.*, 1").<sup>2</sup> The word also goes back to the idea of bounty hunters or, to borrow from the *OED* again, to "a person who pursues wanted criminals, etc., for the sake of rewards offered" ("bounty-hunter, *n.*"). In the first chapter of Findley's novel, the title is echoed literally when we find a description of his Kurtz character with

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as an example sentence for "headhunting, *n.*, 2" from 1961 shows, "headhunter" was formerly used as one of several derogatory terms to denote recruiting firms – others being "body snatchers," "flesh peddlers," and "pirates" – but seems to have passed into value-neutral business vocabulary since.

the following attributes: "Kurtz, the harbinger of darkness. Kurtz, the horror-meister. Kurtz, the *headhunter*" (6; my emphasis). In the context of psychiatry, of course, the idea of hunting for people's heads has the additional layer of meaning that it is all about tracking down people's secrets, capturing them, making them one's own – and, in this modern Kurtz's case, orchestrating them to his own benefit.<sup>3</sup> This Kurtz's trophy collection hence is far more abstract than physical, but no less threatening: It consists of the ideas from inside those heads rather than the actual heads on poles.

The formal structure of *Headhunter*, too, reminds us of the plurality of thoughts expressed during psychotherapeutic sessions. The novel is divided into ten books, each including sub-chapters in which the many plot strands are developed. One easily loses track of the connections between the various characters, but the point where they all cross paths is at the Parkin Institute, and, more precisely, in their interactions with Dr. Kurtz. Given the setting and the episodic structure of the novel, what the real-life reader of the novel is offered is a series of brief stories which allow glimpses into the lives of all those characters. In simple terms, Findley coerces his implied reader to assume a position similar to a prototype therapist's, who also meets his or her patients one by one for relatively short meetings and learns more about them each time, before they disappear again for quite a while. The structural analogy between the positions of the implied reader and that of the prototype therapist invites the former to respond to the patients' stories just as the latter does, namely, by taking them seriously and trying to see overall coherence in their accounts. If we allow this – again, admittedly courageous – transfer a right to exist, it works the other way around, too: The therapist is also shown as a reader figure, who is confronted with texts in the form of his or her patients' testimonies and needs to have the

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of how the patient might question the power hierarchy in doctor-patient relationships, see Lupton (114-20). May further uses Foucault's idea of the clinical gaze to distinguish between the visible (and thus more easily categorizable) physical symptoms of the illness (591) and the personal information about the self which the patient can withhold: "Unlike the 'truth' of the disordered body, visible through examination or biochemistry, the truth of the subject cannot be exposed without the explicit permission of the subject concerned. It cannot be exposed or fixed without positive action on the part of the patient, who may lie or remain silent in the face of such enquiry. The question 'do you want to talk' offers the possibility of answering 'no'" (600). In the psychiatric context in particular, the accessibility and reliability of information can be severely affected by the mental health of the patient or be manipulated more subtly by those in power.



necessary readerly competence to recognize links to other texts, and patterns within the same.

To fully concentrate on the intradiegetic communicative levels again: The moment all characters set foot in the clinic, they enter a shared space and thus become members of the spatial community of the Parkin Institute. It is made up of a sub-community of mental patients on the one hand, and of doctors responsible for them on the other. Parkin is an institution in which hierarchies are to be strictly obeyed, and in which power is linked to authority. Authority can also be read as author-ity, i.e., as a response to the question of who has a voice, who is allowed to tell and own a story, and who is not, which in turn leads to the question of what kind of power is conferred upon the listeners. This power in any case comes with response-ibility<sup>4</sup> – the ability to respond to what one is being told in a way that shows understanding and an appropriate reaction. In Findley's novels, the psychiatrists do not behave the way they should in terms of medical code. As outlined by Judith Herman in her classic *Trauma and Recovery*, therapists ought to

use the power that has been conferred upon [them] only to foster the recovery of the patient, resisting all temptations to abuse. This promise, which is central to the integrity of any therapeutic relationship, is of special importance to patients who are already suffering as the result of another's arbitrary and exploitative exercise of power. (134-35)

Herman thus highlights the importance of integrity and the responsibility that comes with the position of power that the psychiatrist has. By being the recipients of so many stories, so much personal knowledge, the sub-community of doctors has a type of power that can easily be abused. It is thus in the moment of storytelling, as a patient talks about his/her trauma and the therapist listens, that the public and the private begin to intersect. Something that is most private, namely, a set of recollected scenes, especially traumatic ones, is exposed to the eyes and ears of a representative of the power structure of the clinic. The doctors are the chosen people to whom a story is told, in the hope that through their act of listening they should help the patients transform the fragments of their trauma into a narrative – a process of *working through* their

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<sup>4</sup> In the preface to her long essay "Playing in the Dark" (1992), Toni Morrison also makes use of this pun and explains that "[w]riting and reading mean being aware of the writer's notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and response-ability" (xi). Furthermore, the idea that the subject is responsible for his/her response to the various "texts" life confronts him/her with also (roughly) corresponds to Bakhtin's idea of "answerability" (cf. Holquist 167).

memories. For Laurence J. Kirmayer, storytelling is of paramount importance for psychiatric treatment, given that “one effective ingredient in narrating previously suppressed memories is the structuring or reorganizing effects of narration” (594). However, communication in the Parkin Institute is anomalous in this respect as well as in others – not least in that there is not exactly an excess of exchange among the doctors, nor among the patients. Put briefly, the community of the Institute, much as it seems spatially coherent, is disjointed and characterized by a sense of isolation and alienation. This stands in contrast to the second community created by the text: As opposed to the strict spatial boundaries of the Parkin Institute, the seemingly scattered individual readers still form a more coherent (albeit abstract) community that is predicated on their shared literary knowledge and understanding.

The psychological gain which should result from a successful kind of narration, namely “heal[ing] by allowing symbolic closure, bringing a sense of completeness or coherent emplotment to the fragmented and chaotic elements of illness experience” (Kirmayer 595), is diametrically opposed to what Findley's Dr. Kurtz achieves (or even aims for); he rather uses the information imparted to him by his patients to raise money for his institution and thereby to increase his own power. According to Michel Foucault, power relations

are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums which occur in the latter, and conversely they are the internal conditions of these differentiations; relations of power are not in a superstructural position, with merely a role of prohibition or accompaniment; they have a directly productive role, wherever they come into play. (94)

All these “other types of relationships” are present in *Headhunter*. The economic processes are foregrounded in that Kurtz is always looking for investors for the Parkin Institute (107); knowledge relationships are illustrated by all the files stored in the clinic, to which Kurtz has access and which include all the secrets that make people vulnerable and blackmailable (348); and, finally, the sexual relations also play a vital role here, both in the form of romantic involvement and instances of rape which trouble hierarchical boundaries (Marlow's feelings for a patient [186]; adult patients “recruiting” boys for abuse [128f.]). It is important to note, however, that all these relationships are negotiated through acts and moments of storytelling.



Kurtz functions as the figure of an irresponsible reader, who *is able* to process the information, but abuses it in a breach of confidentiality. He is thus a threat to the transmission of stories and hence to the community of readers, in abstract terms. His abusiveness is summed up by the key pun of the novel. We read of a patient who walks through the clinic with her mother; she suddenly stops in her tracks and stares at one of the doors. “‘That sign,’ said Peggy. ‘*THERAPIST*,’ said Eloise, reading. – ‘Yes, I can see that now, Mother. But when I saw it first, I thought it said *THE RAPIST*’” (370-71).<sup>5</sup> As the accompanying nurse comments, Peggy is not the first patient to commit this misreading, and what these misreaders have in common is a specific type of trauma. They illustrate the trope of readers who always understand a text along the lines of what they already know, or what Barthes calls the “*déjà lu*,” the “already-read” (82). The survival of a traumatic event determines Peggy’s misreading of the door sign, because the framework she thinks in establishes a highly revealing connection between the rapist who caused her trauma and the doctor who is supposed to help her cope with this trauma – but who might be equally abusive when it comes to power relations.

This creative misreading reveals a well-hidden kernel of truth. Yet unlike a competent reader, who might have recognized the warning inherent in the name of Kurtz, Peggy is obviously ignorant of *Heart of Darkness* – much in opposition to Lilah, who is an avid and passionate reader and anticipates what the appearance of Kurtz will bring along. As soon as Lilah’s new neighbor, Dr. Marlow, moves in, she puts her faith in his abilities to overthrow Kurtz, and ultimately, she is shown to be right in doing so. Such examples abound, and Lilah functions as focalizer for many of the key scenes. This may be taken as a metareflection on the importance of reading, as those characters who *do* read widely are able to make important associations. At the same time, the choice of intertexts in *Headhunter* needs to be critically assessed with a view to what is considered the “Western Canon” (cf. Rippl and Straub; Morrison, “Unspeakable”); it raises questions of cultural imperialism (cf. Brydon). The central role of Conrad’s reflection on colonialism, as well as other elements – such as Findley’s mentioning of Susanna Moodie (49), a historical settler figure who would later also appear as a character in Margaret Atwood’s *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) – all introduce the

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<sup>5</sup> This pun is also employed in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, when Humbert reflects upon his role vis-à-vis Lolita: “The rapist was Charlie Holmes; I am the therapist – a matter of nice spacing in the way of distinction” (150). Thus, *Lolita* serves as yet another intertext, especially given that the topic of pedophilia comes up in *Headhunter* as well.

idea of voices from the peripheries: Colonial subjects and women are given a voice, and, again, it is crucial for Findley's characters to take their accounts into consideration as they deal with "colonizers" such as Dr. Kurtz who attempt to keep them silent/silenced.

Analogously to other activities that involve hermeneutic processes, reading depends on previous instances of reading; in other words, having a broad knowledge of literature will help any reader categorize and handle new impressions. If the responses of different readers are then similar, we can observe the formation of what Stanley Fish calls an "interpretive community" (171) – and, as discussed above, in this case it is the ideal community of empathetic and responsible readers. However, readers' relations to the knowledge of others cannot be separated from power. The key power network (as defined by Foucault) linking all elements of *Headhunter* is a web of intertextual references, but associated with the ability to read are the dangers of subtle exclusion (as in cases of elitism) and of blatant abuse (as with Kurtz). Yet *Headhunter* is quintessentially dystopian in that another danger, namely, that of declaring obsolete the act of reading, or prohibiting it altogether, is equally present. Its world is one in which people do not read, and where the ones who *do* have a clear connection to literature are considered insane and put on medication that limits or eliminates their imagination. Although some books are still found in a wealthy character's house, these turn out to be abridged versions of classics "uniformly bound in green leather" (306) to fit into the design of the apartment; they were never read, most likely (307). In other words, art is only treasured as status symbol; it has lost its aesthetic or instructive value and has been reduced to a mere commodity. As a result, these books can be seen as failed transmission of information (across generations).

As we have seen, the novel presents instances of failed storytelling as the origins / causes of Findley's dystopia. So far, we have been mainly concerned with the failures on the part of the recipients of a story and less so with those of the speaker / writer. It is equally difficult to establish a working community based on stories if the stories needed are never told in the first place. In a novel concerned with many traumatic events and the patients who have witnessed those events, the idea of bearing witness is of great importance. Giving testimony of what happened is all too often impossible (if the patients do not survive what is done to them), very difficult (if the therapist does not respond in the way he / she should), or simply forbidden by the more powerful in the hierarchical system of the Parkin Institute. This last case is again closely related to our initial question of who has a voice and who is silenced. In

the microcosm of the clinic, silencing also happens on a very literal level: The doctors working in the laboratories of the clinic cut the vocal cords of the rats used for tests because “their voices get in the way of human sensibilities” (290). In the macrocosm of the diegetic characters, there are cases whose accounts are presented solely through vivid descriptions by the third person narrator and where the reader is compelled to witness their trauma. The questions raised by this form of presentation (as opposed to allowing them to have a voice of their own in direct speech) is, ultimately, how big the community of silenced witnesses might be, or in other words, the question who, in such settings, is entirely denied the chance to verbalize their story and to testify to the horrors they have experienced.<sup>6</sup>

Another set of voices that is silenced radically in this dystopian world is that of starlings. As these birds are suspected of transmitting to human beings a mysterious, fatal, and highly contagious disease called *Sturnusemia*, special forces called D-Squads drive their tanks to streets with trees and spray gas at the birds in order to eradicate them. In addition to the actual animals, references to birds abound in *Headhunter*, generally loaded with symbolism. This is most visibly the case in relation to one patient at the Parkin Institute. A young poet named Amy is obsessed with saving the birds and does not believe that they need to be killed to save human lives, which is considered as yet another symptom of her madness. In the course of her treatment, Dr. Marlow has a PET scan done of her brain and the resulting image “looks like a Rorschach test” that can be read as “a bird in flight” (466). The open wings of the birds are used to visualize the flights of the imagination, and Amy’s insistence that the birds be saved dovetails with her refusal of taking any further medication; she wants to remain a poet and be able to foster her creativity.<sup>7</sup> As Marlow explains, putting her on drugs would mean that

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<sup>6</sup> An example are the children treated by Dr. Eleanor Farjeon at the Parkin Institute: Throughout the text, they never speak a word (and it is implied that they never speak at all – and that this is not an omission on the part of the narrator), but through the background information provided by the narrator which is partly presented as Eleanor’s research, the reader learns about the trauma that resulted in their muted state (180).

<sup>7</sup> In staying true to herself and her originality, Amy manages to avoid what the feminist theologian Mary Daly describes as the detrimental effects of religious views on women and psychotherapy: “a woman’s initial surrender of her private Self to the [therapist] is the condition for his cleansing of her original sin, that is, of her original Self-moving Self. This Self-Denial places her in a state of therapeutic grace, purified of Originality” (251-52). Daly is highly critical of the relationship between any male doctor and female “patient / penitent” (252) and, just like Findley, describes the doctor as “the/rapist” (255).

“[she] would have no poems, no birds, [. . .] no other world but the dead world out there now – and she would be *incapable of responding* to it” (466; my emphasis). Without her medication, on the other hand, “she could go home to her house – and be with her birds [. . .]. There is every chance this Amy would continue to produce poetry” (467). Here again, the explicit connection is made between having access to literature and being able to respond to the world around oneself.

If we thus accept that, in this novel, birds are used as symbols for (art and) literature, then violently and systematically getting rid of birds by means of D-Squad interventions stands for a radical attempt at eliminating (artwork and) literature, an objective that seems implicit in many of the proceedings of those in power at the Parkin Institute. Limiting access to books is then connected to one of the openly mentioned intertexts of *Headhunter* (49), namely, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (first published in 1953), in which books are burned as an extreme form of censorship. Obviously, the gassing of the birds also recalls the Shoah. The novel even compares the two scenarios openly, but immediately points out this dystopian Toronto's devious attitude towards history. What happens is that, after one of the D-Squad missions is witnessed by different people in the street,

some – mostly senior citizens with extended memories – said prayers. Others – mostly children – applauded. It *depended on what one knew about the past* – and the young, for some time, had been sheltered from all history containing episodes of chemical warfare. (Findley 217; my emphasis)

The narrating voice thus highlights the importance of memories and the transmission of the memory of warfare with tremendous atrocities to future generations, as well as the fatal consequences of any discontinuation of this form of storytelling. It is as if the author made the case that literature is a key way of maintaining knowledge once the last survivors of historical events are gone and that “shelter[ing]” people from this knowledge may lead to the repetition of terrible historical events.

What further becomes clear is that historical events for Findley often function as a multitude of stories, serving as yet another form of intertexts. The fact that people are no longer familiar with their history is yet another act of misreading which has its roots in a fundamental lack of knowledge, which in turn makes it possible for terrible things to happen again due to people's failure to recognize the similarities or references to previous moments in history / stories. As Brydon puts it, “if the world is also a text, it demands attentive reading” (57), and a novel like *Headhunter* with its clear self-reflexive thrust certainly highlights the textuality

of the world and the vital importance of being attentive, empathetic and responsible readers.

Another historical connection evoked by Findley's discussion of Sturnusemia is alluded to with the propaganda of the D-Squads, who come in to spray the trees with chemicals: It takes on the form of the slogan "Kill a starling – save a life!" (422) and thus evokes the residential schools in Canada, which served the purpose of a systematic elimination of First Nation cultures from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Under the motto "Kill the Indian and Save the Man" (Child 78), First Nation children were taken away from their families to be so-called "westernized," ideally losing any last trace of their native cultures. This often resulted in horrible physical treatment, with a high number of children who did not survive their stays in those institutions (Child 80). These children are thus another implicit community of silenced witnesses who never had a voice and could not even respond to history. With this, the reader figures are called upon to recognize the allusion and to respond to or provide a voice for the telling of their untold stories. Findley's narrator, when restating the slogan "Kill a starling – save a life," merely adds the afterthought "life, presumably, was a human possession only" (422). But indirectly, the question remains whether what in the eyes of North American settlers was worth saving was a white/Western possession only.

As another historical intertext, psychiatric experiments must not go unmentioned. In *Headhunter*, Kurtz cooperates with a female doctor named Shelley, "whose vision of re-created lives was almost *literary* in its *imaginative* applications of science" (135; my emphasis), which reveals her very favourable attitude towards extreme and dangerous experiments. The reference to Mary Shelley and her novel *Frankenstein*, and hence to the idea that scientific progress can have disastrous outcomes, is almost impossible to miss. For a Canadian audience, however, the topic of medical experiments would certainly also recall the public scandal surrounding the experiments conducted by Dr. Donald Ewen Cameron in Montreal in the 1960s (cf. *McGill Daily*) which are even mentioned in passing in the novel (134). From what is known about these real-life experiments, similar to the "The White Mind Theory" (134) Findley's Kurtz employs, scientists at McGill University, headed by Cameron, tried to delete the memories of patients and to "re-pattern" their brains with new impressions (cf. McCoy 42-45; Krishnan 24).

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<sup>8</sup> Findley did not live to see Prime Minister Stephen Harper's official apology for those schools in 2008 – after the last school had been closed only in 1996.



Cameron was a highly ambitious psychiatrist, and at the time the highest-ranking doctor at the Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal. There are thus clear parallels between this real-life person and the Kurtz character Findley draws in *Headhunter*. Given that the CIA was allegedly involved in the experiments, there is very little official information on these proceedings, and the information available is often dangerously close to conspiracy theories. Furthermore, it was not until many years later that survivor testimonies began to surface (cf. Collins; Weinstein; both published in 1988, i.e., several decades after the events – and only a few years before *Headhunter* was first published). Due to the traumatic effects of the experiments and the time elapsed between the event and its telling, the reliability of these testimonies is uncertain. This, in combination with the secrecy surrounding the events, amounts to a radical form of censorship, which again resonates in the silencing of entire groups of witnesses – rats, birds, patients on medication to name but a few – in Findley's text.

As mentioned earlier, the importance of intertextuality in *Headhunter* reaches far beyond Kurtz and Marlow, and also beyond hints toward chapters in mainstream Canadian history. Some allusions to other famous literary texts are straightforward and prominent, but in the majority they are brief and playful: Books are read and treasured by characters, for example *Wuthering Heights* (11) and *Peter Rabbit* (29) for Lilah; a pet dog's name is Grendel (174), and one character's name is Mr. Gatz (185). The allusion to *The Great Gatsby* seems to bring together several aspects discussed above: Not only does Fitzgerald's novel prominently touch upon "reading the signs" and "being attentive," it also evokes questions of privilege – and it pokes fun at a society that fetishizes a form of book-related habitus (cf. the famous pages in *Gatsby*'s library that he "didn't cut," [Fitzgerald 46-47]), an idea *Headhunter* seems to take up in the form of the abridged classics bound in green leather.

Scenes that deal with reading – clichéd or not – are never innocent, particularly given the opening of *Headhunter* discussed above, and given that the metalepsis does not stop there. Metalepsis is here understood in Genette's sense, namely, as

that deliberate transgression of the threshold of embedding [. . .]: when an author (or his reader) introduces himself into the fictive action of the narrative or when a character in that fiction intrudes into the extradiegetic existence of the author or reader, such intrusions disturb, to say the least, the distinction between levels. (Genette 88)



In *Headhunter*, there are several instances where characters from one diegetic level suddenly appear on a different one. The Kurtz who physically escapes out of the book *Heart of Darkness*, and “arrives” on the diegetic level of Lilah and the Torontonion clinic is later mirrored by the reverse case, when the author of the novel, Timothy Findley, writes himself into the plot and is mentioned as a character. Although he is far less central to the plot than Kurtz, and only mentioned in passing, it is relevant to note the function of this character. When Marlow arrives as a new doctor at the clinic, he receives a set of patients from his predecessor Dr. Rain, and the first is “this fellow Findley” (162). As he reads his file to prepare himself for Findley’s appointment, Marlow finds a note that Findley “has threatened to sue [the] Parkin Institute,” and goes on to reflect, “ah, yes. *A ranter. And a writer. Novels. Stories. Plays*” (162). Whilst the biographical information is correct – the real-life Findley had indeed written novels, short stories, and plays – the character Findley seems to use language not only for art, but also to stir up unrest. The next item in Marlow’s folder is a transcript, and he reads,

Findley was saying: *you know, Rain, we do the same thing, you and I. We’re both trying to figure out what makes the human race tick. And the way we do that – both of us – is by climbing down inside other people’s lives to see if they’re telling the truth or not. Most of us are lying.* (162)

In the context of our argument, it is crucial to note that the real-life author’s fictional double has the role of a patient. Both Findleys are creative thinkers, and it is due to this attribute that the intradiegetic one is considered unstable and problematic by the predominant regimen at the Parkin. Similar to Amy, Findley the character does not neatly fit into the categories of either “sane” or “mentally ill” and causes trouble for the Parkin community. The lawsuit against the clinic he has allegedly threatened is presented as one way in which language could be employed to counter corrupt power structures, just as literature is shown to be the more effective way of doing so in the long run, which is – thus goes the implication – what Findley the real-life author pursues. Lastly, if the writer figure takes the position of the patient, i.e., the one who is telling his own story, this reinforces my previous claim that the implied reader is modelled to have the function of both reader and therapist, i.e., as the one who receives the story and is asked to respond to it. Just like Marlow, the implied reader of the novel is asked to put the bits and pieces together to form a coherent narrative. With reference to Kirmayer’s stance about the importance of narrativizing trauma testimony, this might be read as follows: Findley’s novel brings up the topic of how an

individual responsible reader can lend an ear to society's collective trauma.

With the reading experience of one character, Lilah, as its frame, the novel positions itself clearly on the side of the intradiegetic community of readers, and paints a bleak picture of what could happen in a dystopian future if literature were lost. Literature hence takes on a connecting function not only between people, but also between the past and the present. It also blurs the boundaries between the communities of the "sane" and the "mentally ill," as defined by the institution in this novel. It is exactly some of the characters who are diagnosed as mentally ill (e.g., Lilah or Amy) that we end up relying on and identifying with, given that they embody the literary knowledge and readerly competence that seems necessary to navigate through the near-apocalyptic world of this novel. In putting the implied reader in a therapist's position, the novel further challenges us to make sense of a maze of stories, in short, to be responsible readers – readers who, beyond recognizing intertextual clues, can reflect on the multitude of communicative levels established in the act of reading.

Intradiegetically, Marlow, who even employs literature in his treatments (149), is shown as a responsible reader, and, just like the Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, he survives – unlike Kurtz. The plot of *Headhunter* ends with Kurtz's death – by Sturnusemia, ironically – but without rendering Conrad's Kurtz's famous last words "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 178).<sup>9</sup> In both Conrad's and Findley's text, Marlow witnesses Kurtz's death. Yet while it is spelt out that Conrad's Marlow hears Kurtz's final utterance – "revealed" to the reader in the form of direct speech – and then keeps it to himself (Conrad 186), Findley's text immediately shifts to a different sub-plot and leaves Kurtz's death un-commented. This takes away Kurtz's voice and authority in the very final instance, while at the same time highlighting a crucial topic of the entire novel, namely, that of filling gaps and piecing together disjointed parts. Furthermore, not repeating Conrad's Kurtz's famous words at this point seems to imply that there are plenty of other characters in this dystopian world who had to witness their own horrors, and the reader has received their narration through their own voices, which renders any

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<sup>9</sup> One of Findley's earlier novels is called *Famous Last Words* (1981). In that text, he focuses on the importance of written testimony for future generations and for the transmission of historical knowledge in the context and aftermath of the Second World War.

mediation through Kurtz unnecessary.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the ghostly presence of this intertextual quote raises the question of which horrors are alluded to in this novel, and what heart of darkness these characters have encountered. The almost clichéd “abyss” of the human psyche that is exposed at the Parkin Institute (less so in mental illnesses than in abusive power games) accounts for many of the horrors, but the dystopian world in which people no longer recognize when the horrors of history repeat themselves – this seems to be the true darkness, the one cloaked in the name of progress, analogous to the colonial endeavours described by Conrad.

On the very last pages, we return to the key reader figure, Lilah, who notices that Kurtz, after his death in her world, has returned into her copy of *Heart of Darkness*. As she goes back to her medication, the novel ends with her solitary reflection, “*who would believe it? – no one. [. . .] It’s only a book, they would say. That’s all it is. A story. Just a story*” (510). As Lilah closes her book, we notice that we, too, are on the final page of our book, and the mise-en-abyme of the two paralleled acts of reading makes us reflect upon Lilah’s questions on a second level. Brydon reads this as unmistakably a final call to us readers: “The novel’s ending challenges its readers to move beyond the frame, connecting the text we have just read back to the world in which we live” (57). These connections between the novel(s) and our real world are often established and made visible via intertextual links, and engaging with them is important to avoid repeating the horrors of history. Yet what it takes is the willingness to perceive the value of literature beyond entertainment and cultural capital, and to foster empathy and response-ability, to enter the realm where literature can make voices heard. Therefore, *Headhunter*, if it manages to create a community of responsible listeners and responders, is far more than “just a story.”

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<sup>10</sup> To be precise, the words are not entirely suppressed, but can be found throughout *Headhunter*. As demonstrated above, the opening of the novel already shows us a “horror-stricken” Lilah (3), and Kurtz is introduced as the “horror-meister” (6).

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