

Reading Fiction and Psychological Wellbeing During Older Adulthood: Positive Affect, Connection and Personal Growth

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Disclosure Statement

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Rights Retention Statement

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Open Research Statement

This study was preregistered and details (including interview schedule) can be found here: <https://osf.io/n6rfv>. The research team intend to make the anonymised qualitative dataset available on the UK Data Service in August 2025.

Additional Information and Resources

Further information and resources connected to this project can be found here: <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/literacylab/current-projects/readwell/>

Abstract

The relationship between reading and wellbeing is gaining increasing interest among those working in research, policy and practice, as we seek to better understand if, and how, reading books supports wellbeing. To date, the majority of research has focused on children and young people, neglecting to consider the wellbeing benefits that reading books may have later in life. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 15 older adults (aged 63-83) from COUNTRY and COUNTRY, we provide novel insights into how reading fiction supports feelings of positive affect (emotions elicited by, and influencing, reading experiences), connection (to fictional characters, settings, and authors, in addition to real-life others) and personal growth (lifelong reflection, empathy and enhanced understanding of others, and improved knowledge and communication). This article provides much needed nuanced insights into the role of fiction book reading later in life. Implications for practice and future research directions are suggested.

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'Without books life would not be the same. I just could not do without books.' (Male, aged 83)

'Yes, it's memories. It's help. It's somewhere to go when you don't feel that you belong anywhere, you can go into a book and you belong there.' (Female, aged 79)

'But you know, I've only just realised that in the last 10 years I think, that that's what I was doing. I was educating myself.' (Female, aged 66)

With an increasingly aging population (WHO, 2022), the gap between 'life expectancy' and 'healthy life expectancy' is widening (Cao et al., 2020) which creates a compelling need to better understand how different leisure activities can support positive later-life experiences. As an often intellectually demanding activity, reading books in older adulthood has been found to protect against late-life cognitive decline, support better cognitive functioning (Hertzog et al., 2009; Hultsch et al.,

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1999), have a positive impact on health outcomes, daily life functioning and longevity (Bavishi et al., 2016; Bialowskila et al., 2023; Yamashita et al., 2018), and support psychological wellbeing (Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018).

For many, reading can be both a cognitively and emotionally enriching activity, and books offer a vast array of choice for older adults to pursue their personal interests and preferences. Previous research demonstrates that reading fiction books in particular provides opportunities for personal introspection, reflection, intellectual and social cognitive development (e.g., Eekhof et al., 2022; Mar & Rain, 2005; Mar et al., 2006; 2011; Oatley, 2021). However, to date, there are only two studies which have directly explored how books and/or reading can support older adults' later life experiences and/or psychological wellbeing. The first is an interview study with five Canadian older adults (aged 75-90), in which reading was considered a 'lifeline', that is, a way of mapping ones' life; a means of escapism, both from pain and/or isolation and to pleasure and enjoyment; and was a life preserver, that is it preserved what was important about life and living (Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018). More recently, Poerio and Totterdell (2020) in a randomised controlled trial in the UK to examine the personal wellbeing benefits of listening to fiction vs non-fiction audiobooks among older adults (n = 94, aged 50-84), found that book type did not matter. Instead, it was those who reported greater absorption in, and appreciation of, the audiobook that had greater subsequent wellbeing, these benefits extending beyond book completion. Combined these

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studies provide a good foundation in which to further explore the breadth of wellbeing benefits afforded by books and reading later in life.

Psychological Wellbeing

Psychological wellbeing is a complex construct and research typically falls into one of two traditions: the hedonistic which focuses on happiness (i.e., the presence of positive affect and absence of negative affect) and the eudaimonic which places more emphasis on meaning and self-realisation (e.g., personal growth, autonomy, self-acceptance, mastery, positive relatedness) (Diener et al., 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Within this project, dimensions of psychological wellbeing from both hedonistic and eudaimonic traditions were explored, specifically positive affect, connection (i.e., positive relatedness) and personal growth. These were purposely selected as they represent distinctly different aspects of psychological wellbeing and therefore provide in-depth insight into the breadth of potential benefits that reading narrative fiction may have on older adults' psychological wellbeing. Each of these dimensions is defined and discussed below, in relation to relevant research.

Positive Affect

Reading fiction can elicit positive and sometimes profound emotional experiences (Koopman, 2015; Mar et al., 2011; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018; Poerio & Totterdell, 2020; Seymour & Murray, 2016) and has potential to contribute to older adults' psychological wellbeing through feelings of positive affect, such as enjoyment or nostalgia (Mar et al., 2011; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018; Seymour & Murray, 2016).

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Positive feelings may be elicited by book content, for example, characters, settings, or story events, or through the cueing of personal memories and/or personal reflection of ones' own life (Mar et al., 2011). Furthermore, these benefits have potential to have a lasting positive impact on older adult readers' wellbeing beyond the reading period, if they have engaged deeply with the books they have read (Poerio & Totterdell, 2020). Research suggests that older adults in particular may be predisposed to focus on emotional content within books (Carstensen & Turk-Charles, 1994; Carstensen et al., 2003) thus providing greater opportunities for emotional reflection, introspection and enhancement. Further, research highlights that readers are often drawn to sad books out of a desire for meaning making and deep emotional engagement (Koopman, 2015), contributing in a different way to their psychological wellbeing.

Connection

Fiction books may provide a sense of connection, as readers report feelings of companionship and connection with the book and its characters (Oatley, 2021; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018) and feelings of connection to the authors, settings, emotions and experiences depicted within fiction books (Mar et al., 2011). However, books can also help older adults feel more connected to real-life others, as they develop an enriched understanding of others in their own life, and/or talk with others about books they have read (Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018). Indeed, reading has potential to mitigate against loneliness (Toepoel, 2013), by

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facilitating connections with others via informal book-talk, visits to the library (Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018) or organised book groups (Malyn et al., 2021). To sum, the wellbeing benefits of fiction reading may be twofold: offering opportunities to experience greater connection with fictional and real-life others.

Personal Growth

Reading books is associated with a wide range of rich and diverse positive outcomes, from cognitive to social and emotional. For example, vocabulary, oral language, social cognition, self-awareness, sense of self, perspective taking, empathy, concentration, critical thinking skills and general knowledge all have the potential to be enhanced through reading books (Djikic et al., 2013; Eekhof et al., 2022; Gasser et al., 2022; Malyn et al., 2020; Mar et al., 2006; Mol & Bus, 2011; Stanovich et al., 1995). However, research suggests advantages for fiction over non-fiction reading in several areas including development of verbal abilities (Mar & Rain, 2015), social skills and empathy (Mar et al., 2006) and memory and comprehension of texts (Mar et al., 2021).

However, for these reading experiences and outcomes to be realised, readers need to engage deeply, both cognitively (e.g., via concentration, attention, inference-making) and affectively (e.g., via introspection, reflection) with the books that they read (Barnes et al., 2018; Johnson, 2013; Kumschick et al., 2014; Mar et al., 2006; Montgomery & Maunders, 2018; Poerio & Totterdell, 2020). With increasing age, readers attend to qualitatively different information from

younger readers. For example, older adults are more inclined to recall texts with a focus on gist rather than detail (e.g., Hultsch et al., 1984) and demonstrate a preference for deep-synthetic response to narrative texts, that is focused more on encoding the themes and ideas of a story, its deeper meaning and significance compared to their younger counterparts (Adams et al. 1997). This may reflect a shift in older adults' motivational goals, whereby they are more motivated to focus on emotional content and meaning (Carstensen et al., 2003).

Furthermore, each reader brings their own personal characteristics, life and past literary experiences to the books that they read, and with fiction books, there is potential for content to resonate with, but also enhance or potentially extend, life experiences, as readers explore personally meaningful content, and/or learn about the lives of others (Barnes, 2018; Koopman, 2015; Rosenblatt, 1994). Indeed, while research has demonstrated psychological wellbeing benefits from reading books (Kennewell et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2023), it is those readers who report greater absorption in, and appreciation of, the books they read that will most benefit (Koopman, 2015; Poerio & Totterdell, 2020).

Aim

This study aimed to make a significant and novel contribution to our understanding of how fiction book reading can support older adults' psychological wellbeing (specifically positive affect, connection and personal growth). It is part of a larger study exploring the role of fiction

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reading throughout the lifespan, among children (aged 9-11), young people (aged 15-17), adults (aged 30-50) and older adults (aged 65+).

The study was pre-registered and can be found here: [LINK](#)

Method

This project resulted from a research-practice partnership between university-based researchers (n=3, from different disciplinary backgrounds, including psychology and sociology) and national literacy organisations (n=2) who shared an interest in understanding the relationship between reading and psychological wellbeing. All were involved in the conceptualisation of the project and methodology.

Participants

15 participants (11 female, four male, aged 63-83) were recruited through study advertisement in project partner newsletters/emails, X (formerly Twitter), via word of mouth at reading groups and by attending a wellbeing group for older adults. The recruitment approach invited individuals who were readers of fiction books to take part, to ensure they could fully participate in the interview. Participants reported their ethnicity as COUNTRY (n=6), COUNTRY (n=3) and COUNTRY (n=3) with one preferring not to respond. All were retired, two reported caring responsibilities and one reported having a disability. Four participants preferred not to disclose their age and so are described as 65+ in the article.

Interview Schedule

The interview focused on the three wellbeing concepts of positive affect, connection and personal growth, in addition to questions focusing on social context for reading (e.g., when and where one reads, and how it fits into their daily pattern of life – analysis of this data was not undertaken for this article). During the interview, each wellbeing concept was introduced, followed by an open question that enabled interviewees to lead the direction of the discussion, followed by questions to explore the wellbeing concept in more detail. The interview schedule can be found within the preregistration: XX. The interview schedule was developed as part of a larger project exploring reading and wellbeing across the lifespan and the questions were therefore designed and piloted (n= 9, two older adults) to ensure that they were suitable for all age groups.

Procedure

Participants were interviewed online via MS Teams (n=14) or via telephone (n=1). All participants completed a brief demographic and reading habits survey and returned this prior to the interview. At the start of each interview there was informal conversation about reading and the interview to develop rapport. Participants were informed of the topics to be covered in the interview, the use of recording equipment and later transcription and were given the opportunity to ask questions before commencing. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed, removing any personally identifiable information. At the end of each

interview there was informal discussion and the opportunity for interviewees to ask questions. Each interview was also followed up by an email thanking the participant for their time, giving a link to the project website and a £10 book token for participation. The study was approved by University of XX Ethics Committee. Participants were asked to read the study information and consent form and were provided with contact details for the research team should they have questions. All participants gave written consent prior to taking part in the study.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out using the six stages of thematic analysis identified by Braun and Clarke (2006). Both a deductive (pre-defined wellbeing concepts of interest: positive affect, connection and personal growth) and a data-driven inductive (identification of subthemes within each wellbeing concept) approach was used. Following our planned preregistration process, all interviews were transcribed (Phase 1) and the first and final author independently read three randomly selected transcripts in full, generating initial codes to identify key features of the data in a comprehensive way (Phase 2) before sorting these codes into themes and subthemes and gathering data relevant to each (Phase 3). The first and final author then discussed the codes and preliminary themes and subthemes in depth. This process (Phase 1-4) was then repeated for the entire dataset by the first author, with ongoing discussion with the final author throughout. Once completed, the themes were reviewed and refined by both authors in an iterative process to

ensure that they accurately represented the data, and that the full complexity of the data was realised (Phases 5). This stage resulted in some amendments to subtheme names to (e.g., 'interaction between emotions and reading' to 'interaction between emotional state and reading behaviours' and 'developing general knowledge' to 'improving knowledge and communication' to improve accuracy and precision, before being written up for publication, with quotes to exemplify each (Phase 6). See Figure 1 for a summary of the themes and subthemes. Due to the volume of qualitative data, this process was managed using nVivo, which also allows prevalence information to be shared.

Results and Discussion

The results and discussion sections are integrated to allow the full complexity of the data to be discussed more fully and is structured to focus on the concepts of positive affect, connection and personal growth, with subthemes under each arising as a result of the inductive analysis approach.

Positive Affect

Reading can be a positively and profoundly emotional experience (Koopman, 2015; Mar et al., 2011; Poerio & Totterdell, 2020; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018; Seymour & Murray, 2016) and interviewees reflected on a range of rich and diverse positive emotions experienced through reading fiction; either through the activity of simply reading itself, or

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through the book content which elicited positive emotions or prompted personal memories. Four subthemes were identified: *positive emotional responses (to reading and being a reader)*; *mixed emotional responses*; *interaction between emotional state and reading behaviours*, and *an aesthetic appreciation of reading*. Each are discussed below.

Positive Emotional Responses (to Reading and Being a Reader)

Older adult readers reported diverse positive experiences from reading fiction and being a reader (117 references by all 15 interviewees). Interviewees described how fiction books evoked feelings of hope, nostalgia, comfort, relaxation, humour, beauty, escapism and happiness. For example:

'I do like a bit of hope. I'm not good on denial of hope or at the end of a book when you think 'oh, I didn't like them and I don't care'.' (Female, aged 70)

'I know what I'm gonna get and it's it's it's like slipping into a warm bath in a way.' (Male, aged 74)

'...and the feelings that you get are just, I mean, so he's so-, some of it is so funny, it's laugh out loud funny.' (Female, aged 65)

'When my husband died, I was reading just complete total fantasy, I was looking for anything that would make me smile.' (Female, aged 65+)

Fiction can also prompt personal reflection (Mar et al., 2011; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018) and older adults spoke of books which reminded them of cherished personal memories:

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'...as you get older, you get more problems with mobility and things like that, so remembering the days when you really could chase down the deck and grab the ropes that were thrown [laughing]. Reminds you of happy times.' (Female, aged, 78)

'It's nice to, you know, recall your teenage years, when you get to 65, it seems such a long way away.' (Female, aged 65)

These positive emotions or thoughts sometimes lingered for days, months or even years after (Mar et al., 2011; Poerio & Totterdell, 2020):

'Yeah, usually there's kind of overtones for a few days.' (Male, aged 63)

'I must have read it a couple of months ago, I read loads of books after it, but just nothing came close. It just stayed in my mind and my heart sort of, you know...' (Female, aged 65+)

'It lived with me and I still think about it every once in a while.' (Female, aged 70)

Furthermore, interviewees shared how being a reader and/or reading in general supported their wellbeing (Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018): it was enriching, provided them with a sense of belonging, and/or was positively integrated into their identity:

'I am a huge believer in reading enriches something in you, and it can lead to other things.' (Female, aged 65)

'Yes, it's memories. It's help. It's somewhere to go when you don't feel that you belong anywhere, you can go into a book and you belong there.' (Female, aged 79)

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'For all, all that I value in life, for all that makes me what I am, for everything there is, I need books.' (Female, aged 65+)

Indeed, they stressed the essential role of reading in their lives, and the detrimental impact that an absence of reading, and access to books (for example, via their library service), would have on their wellbeing and/or quality of life:

'I don't know what I'd do without it really. Umm, you know, especially say now, I'm retired, I don't know what I would do.' (Female, aged 70)

'Without books life would not be the same. I just could not do without books. 100%. 100%. It would be a. It would be like a life sentence to me.'
(Male, aged 83)

'Um, well, massively, I'd say it's maybe the only thing that stuck with me throughout life and other things have sort of come and go-, and gone.'
(Male, aged 63)

'I think libraries are essential. And as you get older, you feel they're more and more essential.' (Female, aged 79)

Related to this, some shared concerns about how the aging process (e.g., deteriorating vision) could affect them, and how important it was for them to find alternative ways to enable reading to continue (see Lang & Brooks, 2015, for a discussion of audio book reading groups for older adults with visual impairment):

'I've been thinking about that recently as my eyesight is getting worse. You know, I can't read in the bath any more. I can't read without glasses.'

And every now and again I think 'Oh my God, that would be absolutely awful'. And then I cheer myself up with, you know, 'well first you'd move on to a Kindle and have the print really big, and then you'd move on to audible books. Don't worry [Name], don't panic'. But I think I would desperately miss the physical, holding a book.' (Female, aged 65)

Mixed Emotional Responses

Despite the highly positive emotional effect of reading, the books older adults chose to share in their interviews often included sad, tense, or emotionally difficult content. Indeed, research suggests that older adults may be more predisposed to reading books with sad or adverse experiences, as these books offer more opportunities for emotional reflection on life, and greater immersion and deeper connection with characters (Carstenesen et al., 2003; Koopman, 2015; Poerio & Totterdell, 2020). Despite adverse content, interviewees often shared positive feelings (e.g., hope, admiration, or a strong sense of connection with characters who had experienced difficult circumstances) elicited by these books. During the interviews, there were 33 references (by 13 interviewees) made to negative or mixed emotions felt in response to reading fiction:

'In [Book], he kind of let you know what was coming, and you're going 'I don't need to read this, I don't need to be hearing this, but I need to know this young boy comes out the other side'.' (Female, aged 65)

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'...it's how people managed to get through some tricky, difficult situations or whatever, and the effect that these events might have had on them, how they've coped and how they've moved on.' (Male, aged 74)

'Definitely a sort of admiration and sympathy for the sister because her central problem is that she didn't want to be alive at all.' (Male, aged 63)

'It's very, very tense and every, every chapter has got another challenge and problem and issue popping out and surprises around every corner... I enjoy things like that because it's so engaging and you buy into the the travails of this family and the the cohort that they end up travelling with and you really feel for them.' (Male, aged 74)

Interestingly, research suggests that books containing sad or adverse content may also be more likely to encourage post-reading emotional reflection (Adams et al., 1997; Koopman, 2015) and this effect was described by some older adults:

'If you're in the middle of a book like [Book name] things keep coming into your head during day-to-day life about just scenes from it and emotions from it, particularly that. Umm, without dwelling on them, there's, it has an effect on you.' (Male, aged 74)

Further, some readers felt that emotionally gripping content distracted them from their own personal experiences of sadness:

'And so, you, you get so absorbed in that way, there's a well, good book, so absorbed in that world, that it, it, you know, you, you, you, your sadness has gone for a bit.' (Female, aged 65+)

Interaction Between Emotional State and Reading Behaviours

Emotions and reading can interact in complex and often unpredictable ways, with emotions also having the potential to influence whether and/or what readers choose to read (Mar et al., 2011; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018). In total, 35 references (by 14 interviewees) were made in relation to this. For most older adults, emotional state did not strongly influence their reading choices:

'I think I'm quite-, I know what I like, I know the authors I like, you know, I know the kinds of books I like, and I just-, no, I don't think my mood influences it.' (Female, aged 65+)

'I need to read every day, and if I'm sad, I wouldn't go for a book that made me happy, I might go for another sad book. You know, it, it, no, it isn't a connection between-, I don't use them as-, to change my mood except to take me out in, in the sense of taking me out of my world.' (Female, aged 65+)

However, often it did influence whether or not they would choose to read, with difficult points in their life being particular points of reference for increased or decreased reading:

'I think if the times are difficult enough, it's probably quite hard to concentrate on reading, because you've got enough going on and you're, sort of, of churned up by your own life's activities and you can't get a handle on others. Maybe that would be the sort of time where you end up reading, you know, history or memoir or something.' (Male, aged 63)

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'As soon as we went into lockdown, within days I thought 'What? No, no. I don't want this,[referring to a particular book] I don't want challenge'.
(Female, aged 65).

'But if I was in, a worried time. It wouldn't stop me reading. And I don't get in a bad mood very often but if ever I was depressed with something that had happened, I would read the book and that that can. Yeah, that can just take you out of the present and you and enjoy the. The surrounds of the books, you know.' (Male, aged 83)

'Reading fiction helps me through all the difficult times of my life. I've always got to have-, I've always got to have a book. I can't stand it if I don't.' (Female, aged 65+)

Aesthetic Appreciation of Reading

Finally, the majority of older adults shared an aesthetic appreciation of the quality of writing in the books they read and this led to feelings of positive affect. There were 28 references (made by 11 interviewees) to this. Interviewees talked about an appreciation of words, of authors' skill in the craft of writing and/or their ability to create rich immersive descriptions:

'I think, 'Am I enjoying this as a story, or am I enjoying it because of the way it's written, the use of language', that sort of thing. I think at the moment, I'm probably thinking, yeah, it's more of that, it's more the actual craft of writing that is the interesting bit for me.' (Male, aged 74)

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'...that link with nature and the beautiful way she described things.'

(Female, aged 70)

'...you know, sometimes you're actually conscious that this is a beautiful paragraph or a beautiful scene. Beautiful. I mean, she's just such a wonderful writer that you just felt you were there with those people, you just had to see what happened to them, you know?' (Female, aged 65+)

Connection

Reading offers social connection experiences (Toepoel, 2013), through connection with fictional characters, settings, story events, and/or authors (Mar et al., 2011; Oatley, 1999; Oatley, 2021; Poerio & Totterdell, 2020) or through opportunities for social connection with real life others, for example, through informal book-talk or participation in reading groups, which allow older adults to experience new social networks and/or feelings of friendship and belonging (Lang & Brooks, 2015; Malyn et al., 2020; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018). Interviewees shared examples of both types of connection and there were two subthemes: *connection with books* (e.g., characters, settings, authors) and *connection with family and friends*.

Connection with Books

There were 120 references (made by all 15 interviewees) to feelings of connection with books, as older adults reported feeling connected to characters, settings and authors through their fiction book reading (Mar et al., 2011; Oatley, 1999; Oatley, 2021). Older adults felt a

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sense of connection to characters if they were relatable and authentically portrayed, and/or offered insight into experiences that interested or resonated with them (Poerio & Totterdell, 2020). While research with children and young people highlights the importance of them seeing themselves reflected in what they read (Picton & Clark, 2022; Author, Year) older adults participating in this project were less motivated to see themselves reflected in the books they chose, but instead had a preference for learning about the lives of others, or extending their own life experiences through the characters in books. Further, the older adults also spoke of authors' skill in creating feelings of connection with fictional characters.

'Yeah, if they're well written and you-, and even if they are not particularly likeable or a feisty sort of character that, you know, who does things you would never do, you still care about them, you know.'

(Female, aged 72)

'And I like, I suppose, I like to read a book that has a character that I can-, not necessarily relate to in the sense of sort of equating yourself, but I can understand the character and they're not shrouded in hidden mystery all the time. And then perhaps even, you know, put you in mind of somebody else, other people.' (Male, aged 74)

'And I probably related to that, because I wasn't adventurous, you know, I was very kind of, shy and, you know, didn't go out and do things. So maybe that was my way of going out and doing things without-, without being too adventurous.' (Female, aged 70).

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'The characters were so real that, you know, they were-, she drew the characters even with their flaws. You loved them, even with their flaws or hated them because of their flaws, you know, it's just really-, I don't know why I loved it so much. It just totally drew me in.' (Female, 65+)

Interviewees often talked about characters with real passion and deep concern, either as though they were part of the character's life or an invested spectator:

'It was impossibly sad and you loved that kid [book character]. You just loved him, you know.' (Female, 65+)

'She [book character] doesn't seem important to anybody, and yet she's struggling along, trying to help everybody. For example, the little nephews. It's just-, it's a very special person, I think, and she deserves the happiness that's obviously coming at the end.' (Female, aged 79)

'Because it's about her whole life, I felt as if I'd lived the whole life with her when she died. So I've really, I sort of lived and breathed the series actually, yeah.' (Female, aged 66)

'...you know because you are, you do feel involved with them, so it is-, I suppose it is a kind of friendship, and seeing the struggles that they go through, you know.' (Female, aged 70)

The importance of character connection was illustrated among older adults who cited a lack of connection with the book or its characters as a key reason to stop reading a book (Poerio & Totterdell, 2020).

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'I can't think of one specifically because obviously I didn't read to the end, but sometimes you just don't connect to characters. So I think five chapters, I give it a shot, and then stop reading the book, because I can't relate to them, yep.' (Female, aged 70)

The location or setting depicted within a book was also reported to elicit positive emotional experiences, sometimes due to feelings of familiarity, a sense of belonging, or general interest in a location. On the other hand, inaccurate portrayals of locations impeded a sense of connection:

'And this is fiction. But they said an awful lot of truth in it and because I had been there and read the history of [Location], I was able to connect up between the two, you know? So that was a a very interesting book.' (Male, aged 83)

'Yes, the feelings and times in my life are very much connected. I've, I've moved around a lot, um, throughout life, and I-, and, you know, the, the, the places give me the feelings.' (Female, aged 70)

'The setting was something totally outwith my experience. Painted a really, a really realistic picture of it. I mean, you could just feel yourself there.' (Female, aged 65+)

'...things they said about [Location] and about island life and things and I thought 'that doesn't happen. It's not real', it meant that I think I didn't think the character was real.' (Female, aged 70)

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Older adults also reported feelings of loyalty and a sense of connection to particular authors, with some older adults re-reading and/or seeking out new work by their favourite authors. Some older adults also expressed a desire to better understand authors' personal backgrounds, interests and motivations, where these were relevant to the book:

'Well, at the moment I'm doing my annual read through Jane Austen. I'm very fond of Jane Austen's fiction.' (Female, aged 79)

'And since then I've I've bought all his other books I can lay my hands on and that's quite often what happens. Umm I I tend to get involved with writers who write or have written a lot of books, and I read all of them.'
(Male, aged 74)

'He was a very interesting guy. He had, he'd been in one of the services. I'm not just sure it must have been the Navy. He he wrote three books and there were, that was the one that I thought was very very good.'
(Male, aged 84)

'...but she's such an intelligent woman [author], and she's, she's steeped in her own culture.' (Female, aged 65+)

Connection with Family and Friends

Reading also offers opportunities for enhanced connection with real-life others: friends, family and community members, either through shared reading experiences, informal book-talk or participation in reading groups (Lang & Brooks, 2015; Malyn et al., 2020; Rothbauer &

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Dalmer, 2018). In total, there were 109 references to connection with family, friends or wider community (made by all 15 interviewees):

'My daughter is a school librarian, so we often discuss-, in fact it was her that recommended this book to me, but we often discuss the books. You know, many of our conversations are 'have you finished that book yet? Because I'd like to talk to you about it' [laughing].' (Female, aged 70)

'My sisters in particular, one in-, my two sisters read very different books, so I have different conversations with them.' (Female, aged 70)

'And it's really-, they're [grandchildren] reading stuff about, oh, the Second World War and about, you know, poverty and stuff like that. So, it's things that I'm quite happy to read along with them. It's very it's a great kind of connecting tool, you know.' (Female, aged 65+)

'So we had these great discussions with them and it gave me a an appreciation I suppose of having the privilege to become educated, go to university by comparison with these men who didn't have that opportunity but were clever individuals and had a great love of reading books and literature.' (Male, aged 74)

Older adults also enjoyed learning about different perspectives on books and were interested in the emotional impact books had had on others (Carstensen et al., 2003; Narvaez et al., 2011). These conversations were fulfilling and often spontaneous, rather than being facilitated by book groups:

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'And you know, I don't want to know about the plot, but I want to know about, what-, what's the book doing for you?' (Male, aged 74)

'As far as connecting with other people, I think, it's quite nice to have a conversation with somebody else who's read the same book and just see what the-, you know, whether their views are same as yours, but I don't-, I don't belong to a book group or anything else.' (Male, aged 74)

However, for other older adults, book groups (in person and/or online) played a significant role in their reading lives, as they helped to open up opportunities to read books they wouldn't usually consider, gave insight into others' perspectives, and the opportunities to share their own thoughts with others (Lang & Brooks, 2015; Malyn et al., 2020).

'We certainly do because we all come from different backgrounds [in our book group] and that's good because you're not all saying the same thing, and we certainly don't all agree.' (Female, aged 65+)

'Well, the thing is, I'm not sure that other people necessarily enjoy having me because I tend to hog the conversation. I enjoy saying what I think about a book, what I enjoyed about it, the good, the things about it.' (Female, aged 65+)

Finally, many interviewees expressed hope that future generations would experience the joy and benefits of reading that they had, with some feeling compelled to support this. For example,

'You know, I would, I would just say. Encourage children. To read not just fiction some, some non-fiction.' (Male, aged 83)

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'The, the only thing I, I would like to say is that I really hope we can get this love of reading to young people, that it becomes part of their life.'

(Female, aged 65+)

'Just getting folk into this whole-, so literacy just in itself is such an important thing, but the wellbeing aspect of it as well. The joy that you can get from it. The healing that you-, all these things that we've talked about, I just want everybody to be able to get that. To get that buzz.'

(Female, aged 65)

'I'd always buy them [non-reading friends] a book for their birthdays, so that at least-. And they usually read them out of some kind of sense of duty, but at least they'll be one book a year, and it might catch fire later.'

(Male, aged 63)

Personal Growth

Finally, fiction reading can support readers' understanding of the world, themselves and others. It offers opportunities to develop language skills and general knowledge (Mol & Bus, 2011; Stanovich et al., 1995), reflect on life-resonant experiences (Koopman, 2015; Mar et al., 2011; Poerio & Totterdell, 2020), and better understand others, potentially developing social cognition and/or empathy (Eekhof et al., 2022; Mar et al., 2006). Interestingly, previous research suggests that older adults may have a preference for the emotional or moral content of narratives (Adams et al., 1997; Carstensen et al., 2003; Lockenhoff & Carstensen, 2004; Narvaez et al., 2011) which may therefore lead to greater perceptions of personal growth in this area. Among older adults

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participating, fiction books supported personal growth in different ways and three subthemes emerged: *personal lifelong reflections, empathy and understanding of others/humanity* and *improving knowledge and communication*.

Personal Lifelong Reflections

While all older adults discussed books they had read recently within the interviews, the majority also reflected on reading experiences across their lifetime. There were 112 references to personal lifelong reflections (made by 15 interviewees) as they shared how reading fiction provided time for introspection and quiet contemplation, sometimes reshaping the narrative they held of their own past experiences, and/or seeing themselves and/or their lives more clearly:

‘But I think the quieter arena of reading is more likely to bring about change, or slow change. At least some self-questioning.’ (Male, aged 63)

‘And you know it’s always so powerful to hear other people talk about things that you’ve experienced and, you know, sometimes change your mind about what you’ve experienced.’ (Female, aged 70)

‘You know, there’s lots of things I understand about myself which books have shown to me, ‘well, that’s me, and I shouldn’t do that’. Doesn’t mean we change but does mean I see, I see myself more clearly.’

(Female, aged 65+)

‘...think all these books are about me unravelling my own family too.’

(Female, aged 66)

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Through reading, older adults were able to process difficult emotions, recognise shared human experiences, and had access to words to think more deeply about life events:

'And although people tell you that you'll-, you know, day by day it'll [grief] get better and in the future-, you definitely don't believe that at the time, it just sounds like a, sort of, platitude. But, you know, if-, the more you see that sort of opinion, especially, no matter how tangentially in novels then it does begin-, it does come across as one of life's truths, so you might, kind of, embrace it a bit more.' (Male, aged 63)

'...in books, people voice things that you haven't had the words for. I think it can help, you know, that kind of, somebody phrasing it for you so that you can think about it, I think.' (Female, aged 70)

Many older adults shared their reading histories, recognising the changing pattern of their reading practices and experiences, and how specific books had been influential in their lives as readers (Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018). For example:

'So I didn't really enjoy children's literature until I could read myself. And then teenage years was very much stepping outside to see how other people's lives were. Then in the 20s, there was much more of a kind of emphasis on the political and adult life and learning about, uh, yeah, adult lives. And then the 30s and 40s, definitely about being a woman and um, being a woman and in my 50s trying to extend that about not just a white woman living in Scotland, actually other cultures as well and

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yeah. And then now it's a bit of everything, I feel it's wonderful just now actually.' (Female, aged 66)

I think, when I looked through, you know, you said to have a look at some of the books over the years, I look through this and think, 'yeah, that crops up an awful lot'. (Male, aged 74)

In doing so, interviewees often reflected on the transformative and enriching role that fiction reading had played in their lives, feeling gratitude for their lives and reading experiences:

'I think that's what reading does for me. It takes you away from what you're doing now, which is not a lot at my age, and it reminds you of things that you've done in the past. And then you start looking back over your own life and you think, 'yeah, I've not had a bad life, really, there've been bad bits, but everybody has bad bits'. (Female, aged 79)

'I knew nothing and reading has given me everything that I feel as a human being, I mean my life experience as well, but so much more has come from reading.' (Female, aged 65+)

'I think it makes me feel quite privileged, that my life has been a good one and by good I mean relatively easy.' (Female, aged 66)

Further, some older adult readers reported an interest in reflecting on and understanding how reading had shaped their thoughts, beliefs, and/or values:

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'I'm interested in exploring whether reading, sort of, influences how I would react towards people or has made changes within me. That's something certainly to think about.' (Female, aged 65+)

Empathy and Understanding of Others/Humanity

The majority of older adults (68 references, made by 14 different interviewees) also shared how reading supported their empathy (Dijkic et al., 2013) and enhanced their understanding, and appreciation, of the human experience, as they reflected more deeply on life's meaning (Carstensen et al., 2003). In relation to empathy and understanding of others, older adults shared diverse examples of how reading helped them gain insight into others in their own lives:

'I've read a number of books, fiction and non-fiction, that connected with particularly World War Two, because that was what my mum and dad went through in the services, and whether that's just to kind of, give me a little bit more insight into where they'd come from, you know, how it had affected them and so on, I don't know.' (Male, aged, 74)

'...if there's such a thing as, um, personal growth, retrospectively, then I know now through reading some tales, which had terrible hardship for children in them, a lot more about some of the kids I was at school with, especially at primary school, you hardly know anything about what's going on around about you, but now that I'm older and I have read more, I can imagine more what some of these poor people were going through and why they were all so angry all the time and, you know, so violent or objectionable, in whatever way.' (Male, aged 63)

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Further, fiction often provided rich insight into others who were not a part of their own lives, introducing them to diverse groups or cultures, in ways which were emotionally powerful and enhanced their empathy, or understanding, of others they would never meet:

'And I think because the world is-, there's so much going on, I think that's probably the best way to describe it, that I'm not involved in, you know, simply because I'm 70, I'm retired, you know, I have my group of friends, but, but that's-, I've kind of settled in that group of friends that I think it's really important to find out. I've always been interested in it, but I kind of set myself to task of reading books from other cultures to find out other characters, other situations, you know, just to find out how that world works if you like...' (Female, aged 70)

'Emotionally, I can just empathise how you could live in certain areas of the country, both in the UK and the States, and be in an almost impossible situation of trying to improve your life chances, yes.' (Female, aged 65+)

'So those, those I, I really enjoy and especially books written by, not by, erm, British people but by people of that culture, who, who, who, who can give you such a, a good insight.' (Female, aged 65+)

Indeed, many older adults recognised the powerful and transformative effect that fiction can have, not only in enhancing empathy, but also making them a better person:

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'So that's really the real core of reading. It gives you an understanding and an insight and maybe hopefully an empathy into those experiences that you, you were not gonna have yourself but help to be maybe, hopefully a better human being and more understanding human being.'

(Female, aged 65+)

Improving Knowledge and Communication

There were 51 references (made by 15 interviewees) sharing how fiction reading had developed their knowledge and understanding of the world around them, for example, of historical events, or had enhanced their language skills, in ways which could positively transfer into other aspects of their lives:

'It was just making me think about-, think differently about how Britain came to be a powerful country, it was the history really that was-, more than personal to me.' (Female aged 72)

'...I would say I went to India, I went to Africa, I went to, you know, there was all these countries I went to with all of these books.' (Female, aged 70)

'But you know, I've only just realised that in the last 10 years I think, that that's what I was doing. I was educating myself.' (Female, aged 66)

'But now I do some writing, poetry and stuff, and I think the fact that I have a good vocabulary 'cause I read a lot, is probably helpful.' (Female, aged 72)

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Interpersonal and communication skills, essential later in life (Hertzog et al., 2009), were additionally highlighted by some older adults as a valued benefit from their fiction reading:

'So, I think the more you learn about society and people, that does enable you to open conversations. Although they might be fairly superficial, but just to be able to talk about something with them.'

(Female, aged 65+)

'If you want to communicate with people, if you-, even if you, if you want to talk to a friend who's lost somebody, if you don't have the right words. Um, yeah, I mean, sometimes you just need a hug, but, but words facilitate communication and, and understanding and empathy, and they are, and reading gives you those words because we have a wonderful, I mean, just wonderful literature.' (Female, aged 65+)

General Discussion

This article provides nuanced and novel insights into the enriching and transformative effects that reading fiction can have among older adults, contributing to their psychological wellbeing through supporting positive affect, feelings of connection, and personal growth. It adds significantly to the limited existing research exploring reading and wellbeing among older adults (Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018; Poerio & Totterdell, 2020) demonstrating a broader range of wellbeing benefits, while

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simultaneously recognising the importance of connection between reader and text for these positive experiences to accrue.

In relation to positive affect, older adults shared diverse positive emotional experiences resulting from reading, and being a reader, recognising that sometimes even sad, tense or difficult content could support their psychological wellbeing. Older adults also spoke of the interaction between their own emotions and reading behaviours, with emotions typically influencing whether, rather than what, they read. Further, they shared their aesthetic appreciation for books, words and reading. This significantly extends previous research highlighting the positive enriching emotional experiences offered by books (e.g., Koopman, 2015; Mar et al., 2011; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018; Poerio & Totterdell, 2020; Seymour & Murray, 2016) by providing nuanced insights from an older adult population, and by illustrating the multiple sources which can elicit positive affect.

In relation to connection, older adults reported feelings of connection to fictional characters, settings, story events and authors (consistent with Mar et al., 2011; Oatley, 1999; Oatley, 2021; Poerio & Totterdell, 2020), in addition to feeling more connected to family, friends and others through informal book-talk or participation in reading groups (Lang & Brooks, 2015; Malyn et al., 2020; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018). This project is, to the best of our knowledge, the first that has simultaneously studied readers' sense of connection to fictional and real-life worlds/others, and in doing so, demonstrates the diverse ways in

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which reading can support a sense of social connection and potentially mitigate against feelings of loneliness during older adulthood (Toepoel, 2013).

Finally, in relation to personal growth, older adults felt that fiction reading provided opportunities for personal reflection, empathy and understanding of others, and supported their knowledge and communication skills. This adds to a significant body of existing literature highlighting and demonstrating the cognitive, social and emotional learning benefits of fiction reading (Barnes, 2018; Eekhof et al., 2022; Mol and Bus, 2011; Mar et al., 2006; 2018; 2021; Stanovich et al., 1995). However, it also extends our understanding, by sharing older adult readers' perspectives of these benefits, thus contributing to our evolving understanding of the reading experiences of this age group.

Implications

This research is likely to be relevant to those working with older adults, whether from a library, community, care or social perspective. Indeed, there is an urgent need to understand, and deliver, community-based approaches which can enhance the quality of older adults' lives (Cao et al., 2020), as loneliness, social isolation and poor mental health are recognised as serious public health concerns in an increasingly aging population (Cao et al., 2020). Within the COUNTRY at present, where this research was conducted, social prescribing, that is, the recommendation of community, social and leisure activities, is being increasingly used as an intervention to support patient health and

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wellbeing (National Health Service England, 2024) and reading, book groups and library/literacy-based activities should be a part of this, alongside other leisure activities (Zheng et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). However, for this to be possible, public libraries, and professional librarians and/or library staff, need to be sufficiently resourced and skilled to support with this. Indeed, public libraries will likely play a key role in efforts to support older adults' wellbeing through books and reading, and will need to offer inclusive activities to ensure accessible participation for all. Normal aging naturally shapes 'a zone of possible functioning' (Hertzog et al., 2009), with reading disproportionality impacted by poor vision among older adults (Boey et al., 2022), therefore literacy activities will need to be diverse (e.g., audio books, short stories, book groups, shared reading, live literature events) and inclusive, allowing older adults opportunities to engage in ways which are meaningful and accessible to them (e.g., Land & Brooks, 2015). This article has potential to contribute towards librarians' professional knowledge of how books and reading can support older adults' psychological wellbeing: extending these benefits more widely within this population could be an important and impactful endeavour. In a landscape of increasing library closures, it is important to note that for this approach to be effective it is necessary that libraries remain open, accessible and professionally staffed in all communities, especially given older adults' sometimes more limited mobility.

Further, training health and care staff in shared reading approaches has been found to be effective in increasing quality of life for

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those living with dementia (Ainsley, 2023). Given this, training in shared reading, bibliotherapy and other reading approaches could prove beneficial to older adults' well-being in a variety of health and care settings.

Future Research Directions

Qualitative research provides rich and detailed insights, offering ideas and avenues for future research and it is our hope that this article inspires more research into older adults' reading. Below we discuss three areas for future research arising from this project.

Non-Fiction Reading

While this study focused solely on fiction book reading, non-fiction books or content were mentioned by some readers. While non-fiction is often positioned as inferior to fiction (Mar et al., 2006; Mar & Rain, 2015; Mar et al., 2021), non-fiction has potential to spark new interests, develop knowledge, challenge and change thinking, and inspire learning, giving readers an opportunity to learn more about personally important issues and/or the ideas and thinking of others (Oatley, 1999). In this way, non-fiction similarly has potential to support older adults' positive affect (e.g., interest, enjoyment), connection (e.g., to ideas/thinking that excites, affects or inspires them, in addition to connection with others through discussion based on shared non-fiction interests) and personal growth (e.g., new knowledge, critical thinking). Rather than focusing on fiction or non-fiction, what is most important is that books personally resonate with older adults' interests, preferences, lives and motivations for

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reading, and that they are engaged in text content, in order for wellbeing benefits to accrue (Poerio & Totterdell, 2020). This study is limited by its focus on fiction, and understanding older adult readers' perspectives of the wellbeing benefits associated with non-fiction reading, and how these are similar and/or different, would be of interest.

Social Reading Activities and Bibliotherapy

While this study focused on solitary reading, participation in social reading activities (e.g., book groups) was mentioned at times, and has the potential to motivate reading, and extend older adults' reading experiences, by broadening the books they read and the gaining of insights from others through discussions. Indeed, book groups or other literature-based activities also have considerable potential to support wellbeing, through facilitating social interaction, integration and friendship (Lang & Brooks, 2015; Malyn et al., 2020; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018; Toepoel, 2013). However, there is very little research insight into how best to initiate and facilitate older adult reading groups, for example, those that may be aiming to integrate older adults with different life and personal experiences. Related to this is bibliotherapy, the guided reading of fictional literature, combined with introspection, reflection and discussion with the intention to support wellbeing or healing (Billington et al., 2010; Heath et al., 2005; Malyn et al., 2020). Future research is necessary to better understand how to optimally extend the wellbeing benefits associated with social reading activities,

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and support the professional development of adults (e.g., library staff) to do this.

Writing for Wellbeing

This study focused solely on reading, yet at times, older adults spontaneously mentioned writing as supportive of their wellbeing. Indeed, reading and writing for wellbeing groups can support older adults' sense of connection to others, providing safe spaces for them to express themselves, and learn about others (Malyn et al., 2020). Further, feelings of nostalgia represented within older adults' written narratives can transfer to young people: research by Wildshult et al., (2018) found that when young adults read older adults' nostalgic (as opposed to ordinary autobiographical recollection) written narratives, they reported feelings of nostalgia themselves, alongside other psychological benefits, specifically social connectedness (greater connection to own loved ones), self-continuity (sense of feeling greater connection to one's own past) and meaning (sense of life as meaningful and purposeful). This provides insight into the powerful effect that written narratives may have not only on older adults' wellbeing, but also younger adults. Future research exploring the connections between reading and writing for wellbeing, and the benefits older adults accrue from taking part in diverse literacy activities, would also be of interest.

These future research studies should have integrated within them a clear focus on understanding how professionals can most effectively integrate research findings to ensure future programmes, resources and

activities optimally reach and resonate with older adults and contribute to healthy aging.

Limitations

While this study had a sufficient sample size (Hennick & Kaiser, 2022) and participants were geographically dispersed across COUNTRY, it is limited in terms of demographic diversity, and therefore representation, despite efforts to achieve this. For example, 14 adults described themselves as COUNTRY/ETHNICITY, COUNTRY/ETHNICITY OR COUNTRY/ETHNICITY (one preferring not to say). We therefore recognise that we have not represented the experiences of many older adults who read and enjoy reading fiction, specifically those from minority groups. Further, the psychological wellbeing benefits described here may have accrued, and possibly amplified, over time and the extent to which these profound wellbeing benefits would be found among older adults introduced to reading later in life is unclear. For example, research suggests that extended reading is important for fiction benefits to accrue (e.g., mentalising: Samur et al., 2018). In addition, some research suggests that some types of fiction (e.g., literary fiction) may offer more in terms of cognitive and emotional enrichment (Kidd & Castano, 2013); however, the nature of fiction read by our participants was not explored in this study. That said, other research highlights the importance of personal interest/relevance to book content, rather than literary quality, for wellbeing benefits to accrue (Poerio & Totterdell, 2020).

Finally, our framework for studying the influence of fiction books on psychological wellbeing (positive affect, connection, personal growth) provides a useful structure to contemplate and reflect on the role of fiction reading in our lives, and many of our participants reported finding the interviews useful for shaping their own thinking about their reading. However, use of this framework may unintentionally suggest that these are distinctly different aspects of wellbeing. Yet within our data and existing literature, there is overlap and interaction between these different dimensions of wellbeing. For example, developing a positive sense of self (Lang & Brooks, 2015) and feelings of being ‘acknowledged, accepted, challenged and inspired’ (Malyn et al., 2020) can all contribute to feelings of positive affect, connection and personal growth. Furthermore, readers are often attracted to books out of a desire to fulfil different aspects of wellbeing, for example Koopman (2015) reported that adults are motivated to read sad narratives out of a desire to simultaneously have impactful emotional experiences and also support their personal growth.

Conclusion

This article provides rich and nuanced insights into the diverse psychological wellbeing benefits older adults experience from reading fiction. Using the framework of positive affect, connection and personal growth, older adults described a range of emotionally and cognitively enriching experiences which, in many different ways, contributed to their psychological wellbeing. It is essential that we improve our understanding of how to extend these benefits throughout the older adult

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population, and support professionals in a position to do this, to ensure our collective efforts to contribute to positive healthy aging in older adulthood are realised.

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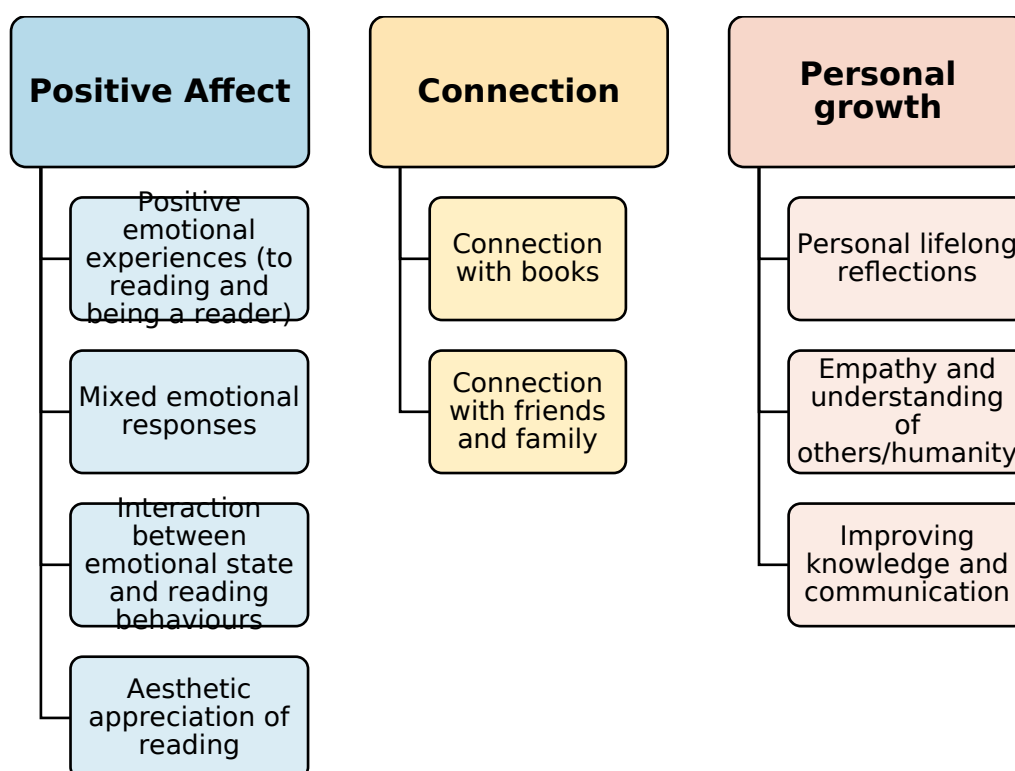
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Figure 1. Summary of themes and subthemes.



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