Losing an imagined friend: Deriving meaning from fictional death in popular culture

Rosa Schiavone,
Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Stijn Reijnders,
Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Balázs Boross,
Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract:
This study focuses on the meanings fans ascribe to the death of fictional characters. Previous research on this topic has been predominantly quantitative in nature, concerned with correlations between the consumption of fictional narratives and people's coping mechanisms and attitudes. In contrast this paper provides a contextualized account of how the mourning of fictional characters works in practice by revealing the underlying meaning making process of this kind of grief and exploring how this is related to people's everyday lives. By analysing 15 in-depth interviews, this article concludes that these respondents actively utilise fictional narratives of death for reflecting on personal loss; contemplating unexperienced situations and feelings, and more generally, coping with the prospect of death.

Key words: Fiction, mourning, death, parasocial relationship, everyday life

Introduction

Anna Karenina leaps in front of a train to escape her torment in Tolstoy's famous novel; Severus Snape sacrifices his own life to save Harry Potter; George O'Malley jumps in front of a car to save a stranger's life in *Grey's Anatomy*. These are prime examples of fictional characters from novels, TV series or movies that die in unexpected or heroic ways. Such

fictional deaths often incite strong reactions from people who consume these stories, prompting various studies to explore how fans create memorials, shrines and chat rooms devoted to these characters (e.g. Gibson, 2015; 2009; Andrus, 2014). Illustrative of this research focus on online fictional character bereavement is DeGroot & Leith's (2015) analysis of a Facebook memorial group dedicated to Lawrence Kutner, a character on the television show *House, M.D.* who committed suicide. To date, most of the research on fictional character bereavement has been quantitative and socio-psychological, predominantly concerned with examining correlations between variables such as people's sense of empathy or how fiction helps people manage their emotions (e.g. Koopman, 2013; Bernstein & Rudman, 1989). Although this work suggests how important and pervasive fictional narratives can be in people's lives, the underlying meaning making processes that are at work are often overlooked. Moreover, this type of research generally consists of isolated case studies of particular media (products), such as DeGroot & Leith's (2015) study mentioned previously, or Andrus' (2014) work on a fan shrine for *Battlestar Galactica*'s character Laura Roslin. These medium- and story specific studies pay little attention to the wider implications of this practice for people's daily lives.

By way of contrast, this article will explore how and why people who consider themselves to be fans of particular media texts mourn over fictional characters' deaths. We aim to provide insights into the kinds of meanings that people ascribe to the death of characters from a variety of fictional media narratives that they consume, and the significance that these meanings may or may not have within their everyday lives. This research aims to shed light on how western audiences for popular culture, as in the Netherlands, may find a possible space within fictional narratives for reflecting on the inevitable prospect of human finitude.

A significant characteristic of contemporary western societies is the secularisation and privatisation of death (Stone, 2009). This entails the relocation of experiences and meanings relating to death from the public sphere to the privatised realm of individual lives. Consequently, mortality and the inevitability of death have become sensitive topics that are not discussed openly and that have become somewhat taboo (Stone, 2009). In a society where death is often 'swept under the carpet', media products may therefore play an important role in bringing people (indirectly) into contact with death. Increasingly, it is through news items, films, television series and novels that audiences encounter and process the experience of death and suffering. In light of these developments, this article reveals how people contemplate their own mortality through the consumption and utilisation of media narratives.

The role of fiction in people's everyday lives

Previous studies have shown that fictional narratives fulfil a prominent place in our lives (Felski, 2011; Saler, 2012): they offer us the chance to immerse ourselves in different worlds and to experience new encounters. These narrative worlds provide a simulated reality which 'make[s] available nuances of appearance and gesture to which ordinary social perception is

attentive and to which interaction is cued' (Horton & Wohl, 2006, para. 1 [Horton & Wohl, 1956]). Anticipating responses though the 'simulacrum of conversations', audiences of for example television shows engage with such 'staged' interactions in ways that make them both observer of, and participants in the show. This type of 'conversational give and take', which is apparent in a wide variety of media productions offering audiences narrative worlds, is traditionally conceptualised as parasocial relationships, indicating the 'seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer' (Horton & Wohl, 2006, para. 1 [Horton & Wohl, 1956]). Parasocial relationships encourage audiences to identify emotionally with the central characters within media productions (Oatley, 1994; Novitz, 1980).

Prior research has treated these relationships mainly from a 'uses and gratification perspective' (Conway & Rubin, 1991), thereby suggesting that consumers who engage in such relationships are active, rather than passive consumers. Here, parasocial relationships are treated as complementary to real life social relationships and as part of a viewer's or a reader's social life (Ballantine & Martin, 2005; Cohen, 2014).

Parasocial relations are based on vicarious interactions: we live through fictitious character's lives and experience their interactions and emotions that offer deeply- felt simulations of real-life social experiences (Oatley, 1994; Mar et al., 2009). It is through such interactions that viewers and readers of fictional narratives feel like they 'know and understand the personae in the same intimate way that they know and understand their flesh-and-blood friends' (Ballantine & Martin, 2005, p. 199).

The extent and intensity of these parasocial relationships may differ according to socio-demographic and/or cultural characteristics, such as gender, age and attachment lifestyles (e.g. Cohen, 2004; Oliver, 1993; Mares, Oliver, & Cantor, 2008). Nevertheless, such relationships may hold real consequences both for a person's social world and inner life (Mar, Oatley & Djikic, 2008, Koopman, 2015). Parasocial relationships may foster not only identification (Mar et al., 2011), but can also eventually lead to processes of 'self-formation' (Gibson, 2007): that is, people may pick up and incorporate aspects of the personality and the mannerisms of a fictional character in their own life. In this way, fiction is incorporated into the self in ways that may contribute to the formation of an indvidual's own persona or personality (Gibson, 2007; Mar et al., 2011).

It is also believed that fictional narratives can maintain and improve empathy and social understanding in real life (Mar et al., 2006; 2011). Prior research has shown how the frequency of engaging in narrative worlds is positively related to maintaining and improving social skills and social understanding (Mar et al., 2006). For example, Mar et al. (2009) examine the association between exposure to narrative fiction and empathy, finding that there is a positive association with sociability. That is, respondents who were highly absorbed in fictional products performed better on tests of empathy and social ability.

Likewise, fiction can be utilised by people for managing emotions and feelings (Koopman, 2015; Zillmann, 2000; Oliver, 1993). As Aristotle suggested watching a dramatic play may have a cathartic effect. In other words, having a particularly intense emotional

response to a mimetic text can make people feel cleansed and lead them to personal and reflective insights that may be relevant to their everyday lives (Koopman, 2015; Novitz, 1980). This is especially true when we come to the death of a fictional character. However, aside from a handful of studies on the loss of fictional characters (e.g. Gibson, 2007; Andrus, 2014; DeGroot & Leith, 2015), most research on bereavement with an apparent 'parasocial' component has been devoted to exploring how people grieve over the death of non-fictional media figures such as celebrities or victims (Pantti & Sumiala, 2009; Courbet & Fourquet-Courbet, 2015).

A common focus of many of these prior studies of both fictional and non-fictional mediated deaths is the ritualistic aspect of this type of grief within today's online realm (Courbet & Fourquet-Courbet, 2014; Gibson, 2015). Such research generally consists of an examination of online manifestations of bereavement over a deceased celebrity or fictional character (e.g. web shrines). Mainly concerned with the role of the Internet and social media in contemporary bereavement over (non-) fictional personae, this research demonstrates the 'transmedia' nature of people's contemporary engagement with media texts. In this context, the Internet is postulated as a realm in which media narratives from television shows or films are prolonged, thereby offering people 'an extended, immersive experience' (Brooker, 2001, p. 456).

Examples of such bereavement practices include research on how youth use social media to construct memorials for strangers (celebrities or victims), and an analysis of the condolence messages that are posted there (Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Gibson, 2015). Also illustrative is Andrus' (2014) research in which she examines a memorial website devoted to the deceased character, Laura Roslin, from the show *Battlestar Galactica* and the ways in which this character is commemorated within the online fan community. Similarly, DeGroot & Leith (2015) conducted a thematic analysis of fan postings on a Facebook memorial group site displaying elements of parasocial grief created in memory of the fictional character Lawrence Kutner from the television series *House, M.D*. These case specific studies are predominantly concerned with the manifestations and the 'products' of grieving in an online setting. As such, they do not reveal a lot about the process and experiences of grieving itself, or how people attach meaning to fictional deaths.

Method
In order to investigate this inherently personal, individual and subjective process, and to encourage respondents to speak freely about sensitive topics such as death and mourning, a certain level of trust between the interviewer and the respondents is required. For this reason, an approach similar to the one deployed by Reijnders (2015) has been used in this article. That is, acquaintances, friends, and family members (n=15) were interviewed, selected on the criteria that they considered themselves to be a fan of the deceased character of one or more fictional novels, television series, games and/or films. The recruitment of participants started with two family members and three friends of the interviewer, after which snowball sampling was used in order to recruit the other 10

participants (non-family members and friends). The recruitment of participants stopped with data saturation.

The sample thus consists of self-identified fans who engage with fictional media in different ways and to different extents (Gray, 2003). It includes avid fans that undertake typical fan activities such as substantially spending time on fan fora, but also more casual fans, who are limited in their participation in fandoms. These varying degrees or intensities of 'fandom' did not pose a problem to the research, as more casual or 'light' fans can also be impacted by certain elements of shows or movies through casual watching, viewing only short sequences, or in a distracted manner (Gray, 2003, p. 65). Moreover, to move from medium- or product specific accounts of fictional mourning towards more general patterns, respondents were encouraged to bring up any fictional character death(s) that had impacted them significantly.

As a result of the recruitment process, the respondent group has a distinct profile: most participants are Dutch and from urban areas in the Netherlands (e.g. Rotterdam, Amsterdam). All respondents (of whom 10 out of 15 are white, 2 are Dutch/Indonesian, 1 is Chinese/Indonesian, 1 is Chinese and 1 is Turkish/Dutch) were born and raised in the Netherlands and have predominantly western European cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the majority of the respondent group consisted of highly educated, female (12 out of 15) young adults. These factors should be taken into account in interpreting the analysis.[1] The interviews were semi-structured; they followed a number of pre-established topics which were determined from previous studies (Koopman, 2015; Mar et al., 2011; DeGroot & Leith, 2015; Andrus, 2014; Gibson, 2007). These included: the type of fiction the participants generally consume, including the medium (e.g. television or literature) and genre (e.g. thriller or comedy), the meaning of the death of fictional characters to respondents, the place of the fictional character's bereavement in the respondents' everyday lives and how they expressed the mourning process. However, the interviews were still open and flexible in the sense that respondents were free to come up with their own topics if these bore a relation to the pre-determined topics of the research inquiry within the current study (Galletta, 2013).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim (Reijnders, 2015). In order to analyse these, qualitative content analysis (using Atlas.ti) was conducted. This is a method 'for the subjective interpretation of the content of texts data through a systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns' (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), or conversely, the discrepancies therein. This means that the pre-determined topics served as the initial framework to identify 'key concepts or variables as initial coding categories' (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). In the process of coding, all instances (i.e. sentences, words) in the interview transcripts relating to these predetermined topics were highlighted. The next step in analysis entailed the coding of all highlighted passages using the predetermined codes. During the coding process, there was room for discrepancies and new themes or foci to emerge; any passage, word or sentence that did not fit within the initial

coding scheme would be given a new code and subsequently categorized (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281).

All respondents were given the option of anonymity and 4 out of 15 respondents asked for this. Their names have been changed and their place of residence has been omitted in quotes, while their age has remained unanonymised.

Analysis

From the stories that were shared during the interviews, it became clear that each respondent holds a small number of fictional deaths close to their hearts. These stemmed from all kinds of media and genres, from television shows such as *Once Upon a Time* (2011-2018) and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013*)* to books like *Discworld* (1983–2015) and *The Kite Runner* (2003). Respondents easily conjured up the memory of those fictional deaths that had continued to stay with them. It would appear that most deaths would linger in respondents' minds initially because of the 'powerfulness' of the death scene; the perceived unexpectedness, unfairness and/or spectacle were often cited as elements that made these scenes memorable.

The interview setting was often the first time that the participants actively recalled the experience of fictional deaths (cf. Reijnders, 2015). Nevertheless, the interview prompted respondents to disclose discernible ways in which they would reminisce and 'relive' the death of fictional characters in an everyday setting. As such, respondents would occasionally recall the death of a fictional character whenever triggered by 'external stimuli' in real life (Reijnders, 2015) that had some sort of relation to a particular story or character. For example, Tonia (22) stated how at random moments in her life she would be casually reminded of her beloved character from the novel *The World According to Garp*:

> You see someone doing something really specific, something odd… For example, I'll see you doing really typical things, saying random things … and I think, 'Oh well, that's just The World According to Rosa' or whomever. Then I am reminded that you are like Garp, you also have your own ways, your own life … those kind of things, they remind me of him again. (Tonia, 22, Rotterdam)

This comment is indicative of the unstructured and unpredictable ways in which the death of fictional characters generally has an impact on the respondents' everyday lives as was revealed during the interviews. Other respondents described how they would recall the death of fictional characters in the form of random, passing thoughts while undertaking everyday tasks, such as running errands, doing the dishes or relaxing. What these comments reveal is how respondents think back to beloved deceased fictional characters at unexpected and random times, and how as a result, the stories and consequently the deaths of these characters 'come to life' again for the respondents at particular, seemingly arbitrary occasions.

Despite the apparently 'fleeting' nature of mourning for a character, it became apparent that there are several ways in which respondents give meaning to the deaths of their beloved characters such that these impact on their everyday life as will be discussed below.

Intra-textual mourning: imagining a sense of grief

A common thread through respondents' accounts of how and why they mourn the death of fictional characters has to do with how respondents experience feelings of loss and grief *within* the structures of the stories themselves. Here, feelings of loss and grief seem to be instigated by what media narratives offer to the respondents: new worlds in which people can fully immerse themselves, complicated relationships into which people can delve and multi-dimensional characters to whom people can grow attached.

One specific aspect that made almost all respondents mourn the death of these fictional characters is the emergence of the sense of attachment to the character over time. When talking about why the deaths of *Dragonball Z*'s Vegeta and *Harry Potter*'s Sirius Black moved her, Nergiz (25) explained:

> You see how someone develops […] When you get to know someone's layers, in different situations, you get attached to these people. You form a connection, you know? The longer you follow someone, know someone […] It just becomes real. (Nergiz, 25, Rotterdam)

Nergiz mentioned development and longevity as factors that made her attached to these characters. It is important to note the relationship between the temporal dimension and the type of media here given that these sentiments were mainly shared by respondents who were involved in a narrative world for a longer period of time. This included media forms such as television series, books (series) or videogames, while the above sense of identification was absent in the case of single films.

Respondent Nergiz also touched upon another element that adds to the respondents' attachment to a fictional character: multi-layeredness. About half of the respondents discussed characters that were multi-layered, flawed underdogs or anti-heroes. Quinten (28) explained why the main protagonist of the game version of *Apocalypse Now* appealed to him:

> Characters that were unmistakeably good never appealed to me. The beautiful thing about the characters I mention is that they are neutral, in that sense. They are neither good nor bad. They are anti-heroes, I relate to that more. Because when someone is distinctly good or distinctly bad … that is too perfect. It's just so unrealistic, because … well, because I am not distinctly good or bad either. (Quinten, 28, Capelle a/d IJssel)

Here, Quinten used himself as a measure of the realism of a character, stating that he himself is neither good nor bad, and that an exaggeration of either quality makes characters inauthentic[2]. As a consequence, characters that are flawed and that show different sides of themselves were perceived as more relatable.

The element of relatability as an explanation for character mourning also recurs in instances when the deceased character has functioned as a role model for the respondent. For example, Nienke (22) explained why the deaths of Iza and Creb from the book series *Earth Children* moved her:

> It translates back to the idea of looking up to someone. They own up to who they are, and they are unapologetic, even if it leads to their death. They are mentors for Ayla but […] In a way, they are mentors for me as well […] When you read about them you get the feeling you want to be like them as well. I guess they are like meta-mentors, if that makes sense. (Nienke, 22, Amsterdam)

Calling them 'meta-mentors', Nienke expressed here a sentiment that echoes the concept of 'emotions of identification' (Mar et al., 2011), described as the way in which a person relates to a character and wanting to be like that character (Mar et al., 2011) as a sort of projection of the self. The death of that character, then, signifies the loss of this figure which embodies desired or admired qualities.

Interestingly enough, the deaths of these characters seemed to strengthen their function as a role model. Respondents indicated how, in some cases, characters' deaths were a consequence of the characters' 'admirable' personality, enforcing their function as a role model. Take for example Nienke, who indicated how these deaths epitomised the expression of 'owning up to who you are', or Quinten, who saw *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White's death as a worthy and fair sacrifice in the interests of family life and morality.

For respondents who themselves have not experienced real life loss, encountering the loss of fictive characters also offered the chance to experiment with novel situations and emotions, deploying the narratives as imaginary 'playgrounds'. As Jasmijn (22) illustrated when she talked about the *Winx* television-series, in which one of the protagonists' boyfriend (Nabu) dies:

> Luckily I am not in that situation myself […] but I can imagine, someone you get along with greatly and with whom you have future plans…and then suddenly he is gone. It makes you think, if this person passes away … what the hell would I do? My life would be over. I have a boyfriend myself, so it makes you think. (Jasmijn, 22, Rotterdam).

For Jasmijn viewing a situation in which a girl loses her boyfriend made her imagine what it would be like if she were to lose her own boyfriend. Robin (23) expressed her feelings about Derek`s death in *Greys' Anatomy* in a similar way:

> I kind of feel for the people who are left behind, because you can imagine what it would be like. I mean, Meredith's husband is dead and she stays behind with her two children. It makes you think, what if that were me? What would I do? I don't have children myself, but I can imagine how horrible that would be. (Robin, 23, Hoogvliet)

In this way, these media narratives offer simulated realities within which respondents can imagine situations and the accompanying emotions that they themselves have not yet experienced. In this sense, respondents mourn the death of fictional characters in an 'intra-textual' way, in which media narratives can be viewed as a space for contemplating projected experiences.

Spaces for reflection of one's personal experiences and life

The most pervasive theme in respondents' accounts entails personal association with the death of fictional characters. About three quarters of the interviewees recollected personal experiences and memories when discussing instances of fictional death. This is illustrated by the way in which Renate discussed the death of Baba, father of protagonist Amir in *The Kite Runner*:

> It hurt reading that part […] Because I know what it's like. And he went the same way. So like, that slow decaying part that cancer does to you … I didn't want him [Baba] to go. (Renate, 20)

In this quote, we see how Renate draws a parallel between the death of Baba and her own experience of losing her grandfather. This parallel is twofold. One the one hand, she places herself in the protagonist's shoes, Amir. In this way, she actively identifies with the protagonist`s presumed feelings of loss. On the other hand, Renate draws a parallel between her grandfather and Baba, based on the similarities in their roles and cause of death. Renate also denotes that she did not want Baba to pass away. Thus, as Baba's death presumably reminds Renate of emotions and feelings felt when her grandfather passed away, she identifies with Baba's loss.

Nonetheless, one should not view this type of mourning as one-directional or static. Rather, respondents' personal life experiences of loss and fictional death seem to be in interplay with one another. For example, Melissa spoke about deaths of parental figures in *Disney* films such as Mufasa in *The Lion King* and *Bambi*'s mother as having impacted her at a young age:

> I lost my grandparents when I was a kid […] You don't really understand what happens with your grandparents when it happens. But then you see something similar, so then you can place it better […] it makes you think, like, that person

handles it in this way, and this person handles it this way, and how you can deal with it yourself. I think you, maybe unconsciously, take something from that for yourself. (Melissa, 24, Amersfoort)

Similarly to Renate, Melissa commented upon the parallels between fictional deaths and her own experiences of loss. Taking these parallels as a starting point, Melissa described how she actively negotiated her own experiences of loss through engaging with relatable fictional deaths, and more particularly, through realising and learning from how those left behind in the fiction deal with death. These accounts illustrate how some respondents utilise fictional narratives for contemplating real life emotions and feelings.

Another recurrent theme in the interviews is the recollection of encountering fictional death at a young age. As Robin remarked when discussing why the death of Dumbledore in *Harry Potter* still stuck with her:

> [The Harry Potter universe] was just a very big, very important part of our lives, that whole world and the people in it. […] Harry Potter is part of our youth, if that makes any sense. We were 13 years old or something, and it was all fun and safe back then. And then, Dumbledore was one of the first ones to die. Then he just died. (Robin, 23, Hoogvliet)

Robin perceives the *Harry Potter* universe and Dumbledore as an essential part of her youth, which she ties to a time in her life that she considers 'fun and safe'. The loss of that character is then connected by Robin to her perceived carefree and innocent youth. Moreover, the death of Dumbledore made Robin recollect some fond childhood memories:

> We talked so much about it as well. We discussed every detail, we were so upset together, I don't do that anymore nowadays with other series … But then, it just really stuck with me because it was just such a big deal to us. We were so young back then and it was so important to us. It really was our thing. (Robin, 23, Hoogvliet)

In this excerpt, Robin reflected on Dumbledore's death as a memory shared between her childhood friends and herself. This also reveals how respondents often desire to outwardly express the mourning of fictional characters. As respondent Bobbie expressed, when talking about the death of the character Tish in the *Divergent* book and film series:

> I noticed my friends all had the same reaction. It creates a bond I guess, like, yeah I know exactly what you're going through. It just helps to share it with other people, even though it's just a movie or a game … it still feels like a loss, you know? You still lose someone and you want to share that. (Bobbie, 22, Hoogvliet)

Here, like Robin, Bobbie mentioned how she wanted to share her feelings of loss with her friends who she knew to be going through the same experience. Yet it is debatable whether this kind of outward expression of mourning has a long-term impact on respondents' daily lives, as most respondents mentioned how they would talk about these fictional deaths for a couple of days, but generally no more than that. Alternately, other kinds of introspective contemplation generated from fictional deaths might prove to be more long term and pertinent to the respondents' everyday lives as will be discussed in the following section.

'Memento Mori': further contemplations on death and life

The final recurrent theme underlying the 'functions' of fictional bereavement has to do with the broader ramifications of fictional death in general. In this sense, almost all respondents tend to reminisce about the way in which fictional death confront them with the prospect of real death. These fictional deaths stay with respondents and continue to linger because they impact the respondents' outlook on death and by virtue, on life. One manifestation of this is the way in which the death of a fictional character confronts some respondents with the prospect of death as something unavoidable. According to Tonia, who discussed why the deaths of the characters Leo and Garp from the novels *History of Love* and *The World According to Garp* continued to linger in her mind:

> It may sound corny but … it makes you aware that everyone grows up eventually, everyone has some sort of youth, everyone's getting a different job. Some people get married, some people do this, and some do that. But then, eventually, you die. We will all die. (Tonia, 22, Rotterdam)

Tonia revealed that the confrontation with death in these novels made her aware of her own and everyone else's mortality. Although respondents often mentioned this, it is rarely framed as a novel revelation. The narratives and fictional deaths worked rather as a reinforcement and powerful illustration of the knowledge that death is unavoidable. This reminder was often accompanied by an acceptance of this prospect, as Margaret suggested in her comments about the movie *Melancholia*:

> She knew the world was going to end [and] I could see acceptance, and that moved me. You cannot run away from it, I understand […] But Kirsten Dunst's character took her niece to a calm place and they sat there very serene and they just waited very calmly for the world to end – for them to end. And that's when I thought, yes. Alright, then. (Margaret, 58, Rotterdam)

Here, the character`s peaceful acceptance of death was met with approval by Margaret, even becoming a source of inspiration.

Another way in which fictional deaths impacted the respondents' outlook on death and life is that it seemed to reinforce what is important in life. For example, one particular

'lesson' that repeatedly emerged when respondents talked about the death of marginalized characters (e.g. underdogs or anti-heroes) pertained to an overall outlook on how to treat people. Nergiz' discussion of what she took from *Harry Potter*'s anti-hero Sirius Black's death exemplified this position:

> … he remained unaccepted in society, even after his death. It bothers me that people still don't know that he was a good man, because people don't look beyond the surface of people. I always try to be friendly to everyone, to include everyone. […] I think people don't make enough effort to get to know each other, they just base their opinion on what they see. (Nergiz, 25, Rotterdam)

Here, Nergiz underlined her outlook on life, which is to be open-minded towards people and to give everyone a chance, which is reinforced by the perceived similarities between how people treated the character, Sirius, in the series and how people treat each other in real life.

Encountering fictional deaths also reminded respondents how precious life is. As Whinney (23) reflected when pondering the meaning of August Water's death in the book and movie *The Fault in Our Stars*:

> It is not really a lesson, I think everyone knows that life is short. But it's more of a memory … or reminder like, oh yeah not everything is about school or work […] I realised again that life can be over very quickly and that you should not forget to enjoy it, as it is, whatever it is. (Whinney, 23, Tilburg)

August's death lingered with Whinney because it served as a reminder that one must not take life for granted and enjoy everything that comes one's way. This illustrates how generally respondents negotiate the meaning of fictional deaths so that they make sense in terms of their everyday life, and in a broader sense, for their time spent alive.

These interviews also demonstrate how, in a way, fictional characters become 'immortalised' in the respondents themselves. Beloved characters pass away and their deaths, whatever meanings they may bear for the respondents, become internalised, whether in the form of imagining how to deal with the death of a loved one, or in the form of valuable reminders about life and how to live it. As such, fictional deaths are incorporated into the respondents' beings, to become 'reincarnated'. In this respect, fictional character bereavement can perhaps be viewed as a circular process: people 'migrate' into fictional characters when consuming and processing their stories and fictional characters are incorporated into people through the kind of meanings they hold.

Conclusion

The current research has been concerned with the meaning making processes underlying fictional character bereavement. The goal of this inquiry was to contribute to existing

research on fictional mourning which is currently dominated by two strands of research: first, quantitative research focusing on the relation between cultural consumption and mood management; and second, fan studies of fictional mourning that are mostly based on textual analyses of isolated, individual case studies. Instead, this paper has taken a more holistic approach, interviewing respondents on their different and varying experiences with fictional character bereavement from a variety of media forms and genres, while trying to grasp the role and significance place and role of these cultural practices within the context of everyday life. The core finding of this article is that fictional character bereavement involves a meaning making process, which, while not always linear, develops at different stages through the interplay of the imagination with media narratives, personal memories, associations and the personal contemplation of death.

Generally, the certain fictional deaths linger with the respondents in the first place because of their impressive, shocking, heroic, tragic and/or unexpected nature. People tend to think back to these fictional deaths in an unstructured and occasional manner; either instigated by stimuli from their environment or more introspectively through daydream-like thoughts. People reminisce on these fictional deaths and as such, 'relive' them at random and at unexpected moments in their lives.

However momentary and sporadic this may seem at first glance, the meanings of fictional deaths may be valuable for respondents in ways that can leave traces in their daily lives. Through actively negotiating and reconstructing the fictional narratives, respondents give meaning to the deaths of their treasured characters in ways that are useful to their daily conduct. Through the narrative structures, such as multi-layeredness and longevity, people become attached to fictional characters and engage in parasocial relationships (Ballantine & Martin, 2005; Cohen, 2014). Subsequently, the death of a character may elicit an emotional response; respondents indicate experiencing feelings of loss and grief. In some cases, these feelings diminish, while in other cases the sense of loss can be quite profound for the participants.

Particularly important here is what these media narratives can mean to respondents; offering a space in which people can imagine possible situations and realities regarding the death of loved ones, but also a space for reflecting on personal emotions of loss, memories and sentiments of youth. This roughly corresponds to the cathartic element that consuming fiction is believed to encompass (Koopman, 2015; Markell & Markell, 2008): through experiencing similar emotions of losing loved ones through media narratives, people are able to borrow elements from that simulation of grief that helps them cope with real life experiences or the expectation of death and grieving.

Ultimately these interviews highlight how media narratives of death help people deal with the inevitability of death and contemplate their own mortality. As such, in a time where death continues to be a sensitive topic in people's direct environment, media could be seen to be a resource for redefining various assumptions about death and subsequently, about life (Stone, 2009).

It must be noted, however, that these findings are tentative. Since socio-cultural contexts heavily influence individual imaginative worlds (Ehn & Löfgren, 2010), the fact that the respondent group consisted of mainly female, highly educated Dutch young adults impacts the data and thus the generalisability. Further research should therefore be conducted within multiple socio-cultural contexts in order to move towards a more inclusive and comparative account of fictional character bereavement.

Moreover, a number of questions have been raised during the current study that go beyond the scope of this research but that are worthy of further investigation. First, it appears as though there is a gendered element as to what makes a fictional death particularly tragic or painful. Whereas female respondents would often mention the loss of love and romantic relationships as contributing factors, male respondents more often focused on the loss of a character with admirable moral qualities. However, since this research includes a limited number of male respondents, more research is needed to draw substantial conclusions in this respect.

A second issue that certainly deserves further attention is the level of realism of the stories and worlds in which fictional characters die. The current study deliberately focused on stories and fictional deaths from all kinds of media and genres, in order to reduce story and medium specific effects. However limited, the current findings do seem to point towards a slight disparity in how people experience deaths from on the one hand realistic stories and on the other hand fantasy stories. Namely, respondents seem to negotiate 'extraordinary' deaths within a fantasy setting in a more complex manner, as they appropriate fantastical, non-realistic elements in such a way that they make sense in actual reality. Thus, a research project comparing realistic and fantastic narratives could reveal more about how different types of narrative worlds influence people's imagination.

Nevertheless, what these conclusions offer is a first look at the broader ramifications of people mourning the death of fictional characters, and especially the very real consequences of this experience for people's daily life. As *Harry Potter*'s Dumbledore symbolically ponders in the book series when consoling Harry at the end of his journey: 'Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?' No matter how fantastical, extraordinary and imaginary the characters, the situations and the stories that people engage with are, the impact of these fictional experiences can be extremely relevant for people's daily life. And no matter how tragic, confrontational or upsetting these fictional narratives of death may be, what the current study shows is how these narratives can offer comfort and nurture in helping people to cope with one of life's most definite and inescapable consequences: death.

Biographical notes:

Rosa Schiavone is PhD candidate and lecturer at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her PhD project critically examines the development of film tourism in the UK and explores the interconnections between local and national heritage and fiction. Her previous research

focused on dark tourism and the role of fictional media narratives in everyday life. Contact: schiavone@eshcc.eur.nl.

Stijn Reijnders is Professor of Cultural Heritage at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Furthermore, he serves as member of the Executive Board of the Erasmus Research Center for Media, Communication and Culture, member of the Supervisory Board of Museum Rotterdam, and Chair of the Popular Communication Division of the Netherlands Flanders Communication Association. His research focuses on the intersection of media, culture and tourism. Currently he supervises two large, international research projects and 11 PhD students. Contact: reijnders@eshcc.eur.nl.

Balázs Boross is PhD candidate and lecturer at Erasmus University Rotterdam. His current ethnographic project investigates television productions as participatory spaces for ordinary people and the ways different social groups use traditional forms of media publicity to create order and meaning in their everyday life. Contact: boross@eshcc.eur.nl.

References:

Andrus, E. H. (2014). Remembering Laura Roslin: Fictional death and a real bereavement community online. *Digital Death: Mortality and beyond in the online age*, pp. 161-181.

Ballantine, P. W., & Martin, B. A. (2005). Forming parasocial relationships in online communities. *Advances in Consumer Research*, (*32)*, pp. 197-201.

Bernstein, J. E., & Rudman, M. K. (1989). *Books to help children cope with separation and loss: An annotated bibliography, (3)*. RR Bowker.

Brooker, W. (2001). Living on Dawson's Creek: Teen viewers, cultural convergence, and television overflow. *International Journal of Cultural Studies,* 4(4), pp. 456-472.

Cohen, J. (1997). Parasocial relations and romantic attraction: Gender and dating status differences. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *(41)*, pp. 516-29.

Cohen, J. (2004). Parasocial break-up from favorite television characters: The role of attachment styles and relationship intensity. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21(2), pp. 187-202.

Cohen, J. (2014). Current research on fandom, parasocial relationships, and identification. *Media and Social Life*, pp. 142-156.

Conway, J.C. & Rubin, A.M. (1991). Psychological predictors of television viewing motivation. *Communication Research*, (18), pp. 443-63.

Courbet, D., & Fourquet-Courbet, M. P. (2014). When a celebrity dies… Social identity, uses of social media, and the mourning process among fans: the case of Michael Jackson. *Celebrity Studies*, 5(3), pp. 275-290.

DeGroot, J. M., & Leith, A. P. (2015). RIP Kutner: parasocial grief following the death of a television character. *OMEGA-Journal of death and dying*, 0030222815600450.

Ehn, B., & Löfgren, O. (2010). *The secret world of doing nothing.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 9-178.

Felski, R. (2011). *Uses of literature* (Vol. 71). John Wiley & Sons.

Galletta, A. (2013). *Mastering the semi-structured interview and beyond: From research design to analysis and publication*. NYU Press, pp. 9-75.

Gerrig, R. J. (1993). *Experiencing narrative worlds*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 1-25.

Gibson, M. (2007). Death and mourning in technologically mediated culture. *Health Sociology Review*, 16(5), pp. 415-424.

Gibson, M. (2015). Automatic and automated mourning: messengers of death and messages from the dead. *Continuum*, 29(3), pp. 339-353.

Gray, J. (2003). New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans*. International Journal of Cultural Studies,* 6(1), pp. 64-81.

Horton, D., & Wohl R. (2006). Mass Communication and Parasocial Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance. *Particip@tions* Volume 3, Issue 1 (May 2006).

Horton, D., & Wohl, R. (1956). Mass Communication and Parasocial Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance. *Psychiatry* 19, pp. 215-29.

Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), pp. 1277-1288.

Koopman, E. M. (2013). The attraction of tragic narrative: Catharsis and other motives. *Scientific Study of Literature,* 3(2), pp. 178–208.

Koopman, E. M. E. (2015). Why do we read sad books? Eudaimonic motives and meta-emotions. *Poetics*, (52), pp. 18-31.

Mar, R. A. & Oatley, K. (2008). The function of fiction is the abstraction and simulation of social experience. *Perspectives on Psychological Science,* (3)*,* pp. 173-192.

Mar, R. A., Oatley, K., Hirsh, J., dela Paz, J., & Peterson, J. B. (2006). Bookworms versus nerds: Exposure to fiction versus non-fiction, divergent associations with social ability, and the simulation of fictional social worlds. *Journal of Research in Personality,* (40)*,* pp. 694-712.

Mar, R. A., Oatley, K., & Djikic, M. (2008). Effects of reading on knowledge, social abilities, and selfhood: Theory and empirical studies. In: S. Zyngier, M. Bortolussi, A. Chesnokova, & J. Auracher (eds.), *Directions in empirical literary studies: Essays in honor of Willie van Peer*, pp. 127-137.

Mar, R. A., Oatley, K., & Peterson, J. B. (2009). Exploring the link between reading fiction and empathy: Ruling out individual differences and examining outcomes. *Communications*, 34(4), pp. 407-428.

Mar, R. A., Oatley, K., Djikic, M., & Mullin, J. (2011). Emotion and narrative fiction: Interactive influences before, during, and after reading. *Cognition & Emotion*, 25(5), pp. 818-833.

Mares, M.-L., Oliver, M. B., & Cantor, J. (2008). Age differences in adults' emotional motivations for exposure to films. *Media Psychology,* (11)*,* pp. 488-511.

Markell, K. A., & Markell, M. A. (2013). *The children who lived: using Harry Potter and other fictional characters to help grieving children and adolescents*. Routledge, pp. 5-84.

Marwick, A. & Ellison, N.B. (2012). There isn't wifi in heaven!: Negotiating visibility on Facebook memorial pages. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media,* 56(3)*,* pp. 378–400.

Miller, J., & Glassner, B. (1997). The 'inside' and the 'outside': Finding realities in interviews. *Qualitative Research*, pp. 99-112.

Neimeyer, R. A., & Jordan, J. R. (2002). Disenfranchisement as emphatic failure: Grief therapy and the co- construction of meaning. In: K. Doka (ed.), *Disenfranchised Grief: New directions, challenges, and strategies for practice,* pp. 95–117.

Novitz, D. (1980). Fiction, imagination and emotion. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 38(3), pp. 279-288.

Oliver, M. B. (1993). Exploring the paradox of the enjoyment of sad films. *Human Communication Research*, 19(3), pp. 315-342.

Pantti, M., & Sumiala, J. (2009). Till death do us join: media, mourning rituals and the sacred centre of the society. *Media, culture & society*, 31(1)*,* pp. 119-135.

Peterson, R. A. (1997). Authenticity: A renewable resource. *In Creating country music: Fabricating authenticity*, pp. 205-220. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Reijnders, S. (2015). Stories that move: Fiction, imagination, tourism. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, pp. 1-18.

Rotaru, I. G. (2014). The doctrine of metempsychosis or metensomatosis of the soul in the concept of Plato and Plotinus according to Grigore Tăușan. In: *Proceedings in EIIC-the 3rd electronic international interdisciplinary conference,* pp. 385-387.

Saler, M. (2012). *As if: Modern enchantment and the literary prehistory of virtual reality*. Oxford University Press.

Seaton, A.V. (2002). Tourism as metempsychosis and metensomatosis. The personae of eternal recurrence. In: Dann G (ed.), *The tourist as a metaphor of the social world*. Wallingford, CT: CABI, pp. 135–168.

Silverman, D. (2013). *Doing Qualitative Research: A practical handbook.* SAGE Publications Limited, pp. 15-187.

Sharpley, R. & Stone, P.R. (2009). *The Darker Side of Travel: The theory and practice of dark tourism.* Channel View Publications: Bristol, UK, pp. 23-108.

Turner, J. R. (1993). Interpersonal and psychological predictors of parasocial interaction with different television performers. *Communication quarterly*, 41(4), pp. 443-453.

Von Fritz, K. (1957). Pythagoras' theory of metempsychosis. *Phronesis,* 2(2), pp. 85-89.

Zillmann, D. (2000). Mood management in the context of selective exposure theory. *Communication yearbook,* (23), pp. 103–123.

Notes:

[1] The current research includes mostly audiences of Western, predominantly Anglo-Saxon popular culture. Including participants varying in cultural backgrounds, ethnicity and race might facilitate additional insights, considering the possible cross-cultural variations in grieving.

[2] Authenticity is a key concept within discussions on fandom communities, generally connoting a sense of a 'real' or 'true' quality of both the object of a fandom (the extent to which a fan text is authentic as viewed by fandom communities) as well as fans themselves (the extent to which a person is considered a 'true' fan or member of the fan community) (Peterson, 1997). The scope of this debate is too broad and in depth to delve into regarding the small scope of the current article, but it could be an endeavour for potential lines of future research.