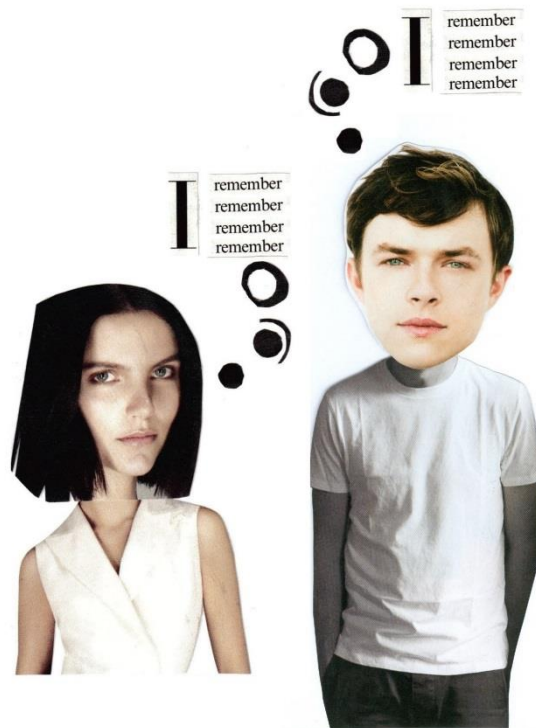


# Memory and Character in Prose Fiction:

Self-conscious reminiscence in *Never Let Me Go* and  
*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

by

Astrid Elisabeth Aston Blindheim



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Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Department of Modern Foreign Languages



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**I** remember . “With all the attention on her,” her friend Coppola told me,  
Who **AS USUAL** possessed a natural luminosity that goes straight to your heart.  
her sister, going through a bad day, knew  
I remember something mysterious **A LOT TO SAY**  
a blonde, beaming, startlingly lanky girl “I realized that I’d matured a bit.”

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Collage artwork by Astrid E. A. Blindheim

## 1.0 Introduction

Memory features in a variety of ways in *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro and in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon. In *Never Let Me Go*, genetically copied Kathy H. openly doubts her own recollections, yet tries to truthfully and meaningfully present her past. In *The Curious Incident*, autistic teenager Christopher Boone tries to solve the murder of the neighbour's dog. He confidently says that his memory is like a film and that he remembers everything. The novels cater to a discussion about the ways in which memory in prose fiction and the literary character can operate in light of one another. How can memory affect the way readers engage with literary characters who reminisce and narrate their own stories? What does memory in prose fiction look like compared to memory in real life? *Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident*, from 2005 and 2003 respectively, are appropriate for such a study of memory and character because a compelling and believable character narrator interconnects with intricate remembering in both novels. As such, character and memory function by means of one another and are strongly associated. Moreover, *Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident* evoke and negotiate fundamental ideas about memory, reliability, truth, and narrative through Kathy's and Christopher's self-conscious reminiscence (their self-reflexive contemplations on memory).

On a first reading of *Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident*, Kathy and Christopher come across as characters that the reader believes in and sympathises with – they are credible characters. One might easily jump to the conclusion that memory must inform their credibility as characters, since the character narrators talk about their memory self-reflexively. Kathy H.'s openness about her flawed memory is something that resonates with the imperfection of the reader's own memories of her experienced past, which creates an effect of believability. Christopher Boone's confidence in his own memory justifies the many specific details of the novel he is writing.

A more thorough examination of the novels, however, reveals that memory and character are connected in more intricate ways. Neumann underlines that "fictions of memory" often contain unreliability and that "textual incongruities, ambiguities, (self-) contradictions or the representation of deviant norms are most likely to be attributed to the narrator's unreliability" (338). Both Kathy's and Christopher's narrations confirm this statement. The novels contain paradoxes and contradictions when it comes to memory. To what extent these paradoxes and contradictions severely threaten either the coherence of the characters or the reader's sympathy towards them is crucial. *Never Let Me Go* and *The*

*Curious Incident* illustrate that characters in fictions of memory can still sustain their credibility through a surrounding narrative context which balances out and compensates for the unreliability of memory. This context enables character believability through other means, such as a convincing and coherent setting, positive character complexity, and that the characters evoke reader sympathy. Consequently, memory and unreliability do not jeopardize their ultimate credibility.

### 1.1 Memory and narrative

Prose fiction is permeated with concepts of memory and reminiscence. Memory is ubiquitous because a novel usually has a number of literary characters which are human-like at the core, and who are consequently dependent on memory. In *Narratology*, Mieke Bal reminds us that “literature is written by, for, and about people. That remains a truism, so banal that we often tend to forget it, and so problematic that we as often repress it with the same ease” (113). It is evident that literature could not exist independent of memory in the context of Bal’s assertion. The author and the reader are dependent on their individual memory to be able to write and read stories. The “paper people” of novels are accordingly “fabricated creatures made up from fantasy, imitation, [and] memory” (Bal 113) by both the inventive author and the imagining reader. What is more, the paper people that reside in fictional novel worlds are not only created by means of their author’s and reader’s memories – they are also portrayed as remembering and reminiscing creatures themselves.

The reliability or unreliability of memory is a core issue regarding memory and character. Psychologist Mark Freeman emphasises that the past can only be reached through the filter of the present, which makes memory an act of interpretation (5-6). To remember therefore means to reconstruct something rather than to simply retrieve it, which implies that the past is “as much *made* as *found*” (Freeman 30). Memories can be seen as artificial because people tend to distort, reinterpret, select, and confer new meanings on past experience (Freeman 8). Based on Freeman’s view, memory can be considered fictitious, just like the stories encountered in prose fiction. Hence, real life becomes a fiction in which people are both the authors and the characters of their own life stories. No wonder that flesh-and-blood readers identify with characters in literature, since “the resemblance between human beings and fabricated figures is so great that [readers] forget the fundamental difference” (Bal 113). The “character effect” that Bal describes is clearly indebted to the strong links between the external real world, and the internal constructed world of literature (113).



Kathleen Wall speculates that these days “the purpose [...] of unreliable narration is to foreground certain elements of the narrator’s psychology” (21). This purpose might as well be ascribed to the role of memory in many works of contemporary fiction and to the concept of “self-conscious reminiscence” in particular. Character narrators might scrutinise the workings of their memory self-reflexively, and often reveal their own inadequacy and unreliability as reminiscing narrators in the process. In the same psychological vein as Wall, Neumann maintains that many of the self-reflexive novels of our day highlight the productiveness of memory in meaning-making processes and in the act of identity creation (337). In both *Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident*, the relationship between memory, narration, and unreliability ultimately points to the ways in which the characters’ minds and perspectives on life are wired. As a result, the novels are “character heavy” rather than primarily centred on a nifty plot.

Ishiguro’s and Haddon’s choice of a character narrator rather than a non-character narrator further amplifies the importance of memory for psychology and identity in novels. To use a character narrator allows the authors to explore and play with memory phenomena from an internal and personal perspective. In Ishiguro’s own words, “things like memory, how one uses memory for one’s own purposes, one’s own ends, those things interest me” (Mason 347). Ishiguro’s novels reveal his particular addiction to character narrators. To apply a character narrator enables him to explore personal reminiscence and psychological aspects of the human being in far more depth, and to weave together compelling literary characters. A novel can impress and impact readers in a variety of ways: the plot can be thrilling, the themes can be pertinent and evoke new thoughts, or the construction of a novel world can be stimulating to the imagination. An encounter with compelling characters can refresh and touch the mind and the emotions. Believable characters such as Kathy H. and Christopher Boone arguably make the strongest and most lasting impression on the reader and yield most literary pleasure. Character narrators have an especially strong ability to bring forth such experiences because they establish a close connection with the reader through the first-person pronoun and through their personal perspective.

## 1.2 Context and approach

In “Where literature and memory meet”, Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning suggest that the connection between reality and literature is central to how studies of the workings of memory in literature are usually conducted. They place such studies within the diverse and interdisciplinary field of Cultural Memory Studies, where individual memory, collective memory,

media, identity, culture, social contexts, and literature are some of the key components.<sup>1</sup> Other representatives of theoretical research within the literature part of this field propose that intertextuality represents the memory of literature itself, and that literature can be seen as an important medium of cultural and collective memory (Erlil & Nünning 264-65).<sup>2</sup> The premise for most of the studies which deal with memory *in* literature is “that literature refers to the extra-textual cultural reality and makes it observable in the medium of fiction. Thus they are based on mimetic models of the relationship between memory and literature” (Erlil & Nünning 280). This study follows the same premise, and finds that memory in prose fiction does indeed imitate concepts of memory as psychology presents them. However, there is not a one-to-one relationship between memory in real life and memory in prose fiction. In the novel analysis section, *Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident* confirm Birgit Neumann’s idea that literature expands and renegotiates memory.

With regard to characters, it is worth noting that the enigma of characters in prose fiction is an issue that literary theorists still grapple with. To this day, no “satisfying, coherent theory of character is available” because of the complicated human aspects of character, although some breakthroughs have recently been made (Bal 113).<sup>3</sup> Accounting for the relation between the reader and the textual character presents itself most urgently. Fotis Jannidis argues that the reader’s identification, empathy, and response to literary characters can only be satisfactorily approached by means of empirical analysis, cognitive research, and psychological perspectives, which extends beyond the reach of narrative analysis. Nonetheless, Jannidis acknowledges that “it is widely recognized that to some extent identification results from and is controlled by various textual cues and devices” (36). Hence, an analysis of the ways in which a reader might respond to and identify with the protagonists in *Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident* is ultimately only one among possibly other (unidentified) ways to which various readers might relate to them.

To investigate the ways in which memory and character believability intersect, it becomes necessary and useful to at least move beyond the boundaries of classic structuralist

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<sup>1</sup> Ansgar Nünning is editor of a relevant issue of the *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* named *Fictions of Memory* (2003, 10:1), where several contributors (Herbert Grabes, Vera Nünning, Astrid Erlil, Christoph Henke, and Richard Humphrey) shed light on individual and cultural memory from a literary and theoretical perspective.

<sup>2</sup> Renate Lachmann, Herbert Grabes, Max Saunders, and Ann Rigney elucidate these different aspects of memory and fiction in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (2008).

<sup>3</sup> For an account of the most important contributions and questions related to the character debate, see Fotis Jannidis’s article “Character” in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (2013).

narratology.<sup>4</sup> James Phelan's rhetorical approach to narrative is a beneficial one as such. His methods are based on the premise that narrative is action and communication between the different storytellers and audiences of a narrative. There is a "feedback loop among authorial agency, textual phenomena [...] and reader response", Phelan argues (*Living to Tell about It* 18). This allows the rhetorical narratologist to consider the affective, ethical, and thematic aspects that can be inferred from a text and how they are connected (Goring, Hawthorn, & Mitchell 291). Phelan's work on narrative includes a taxonomy of components of character as well as models of nuances and effects of unreliability. They are indeed appropriate and effective tools for approaching the issue of memory and character in prose fiction.

### 1.3 Outline

In the following chapter, "Memory and Character in Prose Fiction", the theoretical foundation for the novel analyses in Chapter 3 and 4 will be established. It will consider and discuss central concepts pertaining to memory such as "fiction of memory", "self-conscious reminiscence", and "memory phenomena". Next follows a discussion of what makes a character believable or credible, where coherence, complexity, and sympathy are important qualities. Last, the chapter will address unreliability as an ever-present companion to memory, but not necessarily as a factor which undermines character credibility. In that regard, it will be relevant to make a distinction between an inadequate and an unreliable character narrator.

In the novel analysis section, Chapter 3 features a discussion of memory and character in *Never Let Me Go*. Kathy H.'s memory turns out to be surprisingly complex from both a psychological and a literary point of view, and serves several functions – both in relation to suspense, reader identification with the main character, and ethics. The chapter will also examine Kathy's inadequacy considering weakness of memory and personal shortcomings. Chapter 4 will deal with memory and character in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. For Christopher Boone, who has Asperger Syndrome, memory represents more a hard disk of knowledge than the source of his life story. His memory comes across as a system that is impressively reliable, yet vulnerable to overloads. Nevertheless, Christopher's inadequacy is what makes *The Curious Incident* a compelling and interesting read.

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<sup>4</sup> Astrid Erll (2009) considers how Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980) and Stanzel's *Theory of Narrative* (1984) deal with memory as classic contributions to structuralist narratology. She concludes that, although the connection between concepts of memory and concepts of narrative are evident with both Genette and Stanzel, *Narrative Discourse* and *Theory of Narrative* do not foreground and theorize much about memory per se. Stanzel has a short chapter entitled "Point of view and memory in the first-person narrative". In this chapter, he theorizes that first-person narratives are a mixture of "reproductive memory and productive imagination", which to Stanzel accounts for the stunning detail of first-person novels (cited in Erll, 215).



## 2.0 Memory and Character in Prose Fiction

Memory phenomena in prose fiction can be complex and paradoxical, but they do not need to inhibit the character narrator from being believable. *Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident* testify to this statement. A reader does not need everything to be in line with reality to enjoy a novel and to find it credible, because positive complexity, identification with the characters, and suspense are more important. One of the attractions of prose fiction is that it can extend reality in creative and imaginative ways, which also goes for memory. As Birgit Neumann proposes, “literature creates its own memory worlds with specifically literary techniques” (334). Such literary techniques connect to a number of “memory phenomena” that pertain both to reality and to literature specifically, and which in turn affect how readers engage with the characters.

Novels where the workings of memory are especially foregrounded and negotiated can be labelled “fictions of memory”. In such novels, unreliability is often a natural bedfellow to memory, particularly if the characters reminisce self-consciously. Traditionally, scholars have defined unreliability as something that causes distance between the narrator and the reader. While this may be true for many novels, the unreliability of memory does not automatically create such a distance. Memory might in fact enhance reader engagement in a way that leads to strong sympathy with the characters. To explain believability, it is important to consider a character in light of the entire novel, not just in light of the novel’s memory phenomena. Believable characters are often presented coherently, yet with interesting complexities within the limits of their character personalities. The reader is inclined to sympathise with the literary characters through the ways in which they are presented. In sum, believable characters project a vivid and convincing character effect onto the reader. Memory often contributes importantly to this character effect.

### 2.1 Fictions of memory and memory phenomena

Memory has always been present in prose fiction to various extents, but it has not been considered as a specific genre characteristic. Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning, however, have coined the term “fictions of memory” to label “texts which represent processes of remembering” (cited in Neumann 334). To have a specific term is useful when memory is under scrutiny in a narrative. For the two scholars, fictions of memory do not only include fictional, literary narratives that somehow foreground “the workings of memory”, but also “the stories that individuals or cultures tell about their past” more generally to figure out who they are in a larger context (Neumann 334). The narrower concept of “fictions of memory” is

most applicable to a study which deals with memory and character in prose fiction specifically.

Neumann goes on to discuss “mimesis of memory”, which does not merely refer to narrative imitations of how memory is represented and discussed in real life. “Mimesis of memory” in novels covers “the ensemble of narrative forms and aesthetic techniques through which literary texts stage and reflect the workings of memory” (334). She also emphasises that “mimesis of memory” is productive rather than imitative. Neumann’s term is valid and highly useful in her own context of cultural studies, but it is more useful for this study to consider how “memory phenomena” in works of fiction correspond and contrast with the ways in which people remember in real life. In addition, Neumann argues that the notion of time and the ways in which analeptic memories are organised figure in complex ways in many novels. Consequently, many fictions of memory “highlight the memory-like quality of narratives”, which is more haphazard and subjective than chronological and neat (Neumann 336). They have the potential to push the limits and explore memory phenomena in a fictional universe where exaggeration and contradictions are allowed.

*Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident* are both novels that illustrate such exaggerations and contradictions of memory. Kathy H. displays a multi-layered and excessively complex memory system which includes memories of memories, memories of forgetting, and memories of future anticipation. Although she half fumbles to reorganize and reinterpret her past, the final extent of her memories is impressive. Christopher Boone, on the other hand, brags of an excellent memory which nonetheless turns out to be contradictory and vulnerable to a number of factors. His memory seems to work by reversed mechanisms of memory encoding: he remembers in a vivid way when he is surrounded by routine and everyday life, while the unfamiliar and extraordinary prevent his memory from working properly. These preliminary observations show that certain memory phenomena work differently within a work of fiction than in reality. Kathy’s multi-layered memories are far too intricate and complex to be merely realistic, and Christopher’s memory at some level breaks with the notion that extraordinary and intense events are easier to recall than small variations of routines.

## **2.2 Mnemonic overkill**

Though memory in fiction often differs from memory in reality at some level, there is undoubtedly a connection to authentic memory which serves as a reference of imitation. Paul Ricoeur’s thoughts on mimesis are crucial in studies which combine fiction and memory

studies, namely through how the literary work relies on “its reference to the pre-existent extra-textual world” in the process of writing and reading (Erlil & Nünning 281). The context of both writing and reading fiction is so influenced by the human experience of life that it affects how people experience and imagine novel worlds. Consequently, when someone reads a fiction of memory, the hermeneutic starting point is her pre-existing knowledge and experience with memory from life as well as from other narratives. This will influence how she reacts to familiar and new memory phenomena in a novel (and, by extension, how she responds to the character narrator who remembers).

In *Transparent Minds*, Dorrit Cohn states her reactions to the way in which memory sometimes goes beyond realistic limits. In particular, she is concerned about how

the device of self-quotation [...] presents a more substantive problem of credibility. Remembering that a first person narrator (in contrast to the narrator of third persons who can tune in at will on the silent language of his characters) can reach his past thoughts only by simulating a perfect memory, long quotations of his past thoughts can quickly appear as a kind of mnemonic overkill, as contrived here as it would be in a real autobiography (162).

Importantly, Cohn asserts that fictional people found in literature may inappropriately break with notions of authentic memory. Even autobiographies, which are meant to stay true to reality, can fall into this trap.<sup>5</sup> Unless the narrator presents a context that can justify an abnormally excellent memory, self-quotation of thoughts will not create a realistic effect. Indeed, psychologist Alan Baddeley confirms that events are more easily remembered than thoughts (141). As such, to describe locations, events and incidents that have been sensed and experienced is more credible to Cohn than remembering inner thoughts and feelings.

Cohn reacts negatively towards mnemonic overkill in fiction, that is to say memory phenomena which move too far away from the realistic (which is often hard to define univocally). However, first-person narrators have a striking ability to remember more often than not. Neither readers nor critics seem to find this too problematic, despite the fact that it breaks with realistic “prescriptions” (Stanzel 215). If we consider the length of first-person novels cast in the past tense, it becomes very unlikely that all the details and the extensive retelling can be accurate and true. How would it be possible for Robinson Crusoe to remember the clothes that lay on the island forty years back, Mullan asks, or for Jane Eyre to write pages of dramatic conversation with Mr Rochester years after it happened? To doubt

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<sup>5</sup> In *How our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), Paul John Eakin discusses the genre of autobiography in more detail through perspectives from a number of fields – including memory studies. Eakin examines the stability or instability of the self, which connects to how memory studies discuss the nature of memory.

their record means that “the fiction crumbles”, he claims (*How Novels Work* 48). However, the reader is often willing to “suspend disbelief”, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge phrased it. In cases such as *Jane Eyre* and *Robinson Crusoe*, the reader is either so caught up in the narrative that she fails to notice the amazing memory feat that is taking place, or she accepts that this is the way fiction works and keeps reading.

To return to Cohn’s observation, she seems to say that only the most conspicuous memory overkill is a threat to credibility. Apparently, she does not mind other common memory phenomena in fiction, such as a generally remarkable memory of lived experience. In conclusion, literary memory phenomena must strike a balance in some way. The character narrator can only suspend the reader’s disbelief with regard to memory to a certain extent. To Cohn, extensive quotation of past thoughts represents such a limit. To precisely determine other “unacceptable” memory phenomena is a challenge, because it depends on a number of factors, including how the narrator relates to his or her own memory, how long ago events occurred, how conscious the reader is of a time-lapse, and what other narrative rules are established in the novel world. What Cohn’s example shows, however, is that memory can challenge the credibility of both the narrator and the narrative, and that memory as such is a complex issue in fiction.

### **2.3 Self-conscious reminiscence**

One way in which both Kazuo Ishiguro and Mark Haddon explore memory is by making their novels self-reflexive: their characters contemplate the nature of their own memory. Neumann observes that

if one takes a look at contemporary literature, one sees a clear increase in the number of such self-reflexive novels, which is evidence of a growing consciousness of the fundamental problems and the limits of the identity-creating appropriation of the past. Many contemporary novels problematize the process of remembering on a meta-level and foreground the ways in which memories are constructed (337).

To Neumann, the current awareness (and concerns) about how identity and memory are connected seems to be making its way into fiction. Memory is treated “on a meta-level”, which makes for very delicate novels that “openly reflect upon their own processes of artful composition” (Baldick). When character narrators critically assess their memories, it quickly turns into a self-reflexive act.

Especially in *Never Let Me Go*, the presence of a meta-level of memory is prominent. Neumann calls such novels “fictions of meta-memory”. They “combine personally engaged



memories with critically reflective perspectives on the functioning of memory, thus rendering the question of how we remember the central content of remembering” (337). Nevertheless, while terms such as “meta-fiction” signify fictions about fictions, and “meta-language” involves language about language, the “meta-memory” that Neumann describes is not a memory about a memory in the same sense. Rather, she tries to capture the nature of consciously assessing and discussing one’s own memory. Therefore, novels such as *Never Let Me Go* should be called fictions that display “self-conscious reminiscence” rather than “meta-memory”. As an aside, meta-memory proves to be a very beneficial term that can be used to describe a certain memory phenomenon found in novels. Memories that are multi-layered such as Kathy’s are good examples, where memories contain memories of memories. “Self-conscious reminiscence” is additionally a suitable term because it denotes the awareness of oneself as an individual who remembers (and subsequently an individual who also forgets and interprets). *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* illustrates this by stating that the narrator in self-reflexive works “is sometimes called a ‘self-conscious narrator’” (Baldick). As such, self-conscious reminiscence is indeed a precise and appropriate term to use. Self-conscious reminiscence can also be seen as a type of self-reflexivity at the same level as meta-fiction. On that note, self-conscious reminiscence significantly interacts with meta-fiction in *The Curious Incident*, which makes the novel self-reflexive in more than one way. Such double self-reflexivity affects how Christopher comes across as a character narrator to a great extent. In *Never Let Me Go*, however, self-conscious reminiscence stands more on its own as an extensive self-reflexive device.

## **2.4 Characters in fictions of memory**

Memory in contemporary fiction – which even involves exaggerating and twisting real-life memory phenomena – will arguably affect the reading experience and the way in which the reader responds to reminiscing character narrators such as Kathy H. and Christopher Boone. As we have seen, Cohn draws attention to the way memory can threaten character credibility. Yet there are many aspects of a novel that can potentially contribute to make a character “credible” (and in light of memory, “memorable”) or not. Memory and character credibility must therefore be seen in context of the other qualities that the character narrator possesses. Other aspects of the novel such as the setting, the form, and the narratee must also be considered. Only then can the reader determine her main response to a character who narrates a fiction of memory.

Characters with whom the reader has a positive encounter in fiction are often described as memorable, believable, credible, or convincing. These adjectives all reflect different aspects of a well-constructed character. The labels that are most interesting in light of memory and character are “credible” and “believable”, which will be treated as synonyms. Arguably, there are two principal ways in which a character can be credible or believable. The first is concerned with how much the character resembles a human being and can represent a possible person, as Mieke Bal describes it. When the reader encounters literary characters in novels, she experiences a “character effect” that makes her forget that they are not real people per se (113). The character effect comes about as a result of “repetition, accumulation, relations to other characters, and transformation”, Bal later specifies (127). The character effect, then, is to a great extent dependent on how many different situations and episodes in which the reader has opportunity to visualise the character as complex and life-like. Character narrators often achieve a strong character effect, since they more often than not are the protagonists of the novel. Because the novel circles around them more than any other literary character, there are plenty of opportunities for the reader to construct an image of him or her.

A related key aspect of credibility is the notion of a mimetic quality of character. Literary theorist James Phelan, who engages with the rhetorical dimensions of characters and narrative, explains the character phenomenon as a mixture of mimetic, synthetic and thematic aspects in *Reading People, Reading Plots* (3). The mimetic trait is what makes the reader identify with the character as a person. The synthetic makes the reader identify the character as an artificial construction, for example through meta-fiction. The thematic aspect places the character within a certain group or category of people (2-3). The mimetic aspect is especially interesting in relation to character credibility because it caters for reader recognition and engagement through an experienced human likeness. In exactly the same way as real people, characters are presented with names, bodies, and feelings. They walk and talk, make good and bad decisions, have fears and hopes, are motivated by different things, and live in virtual societies that are often similar to the reader’s own experience.

The second understanding of credibility asks to which extent a character is trustworthy or not. If the reader feels deceived by the character narrator and has a sense that she is being fooled and played around with, she finds the character unreliable. Within literary theory, unreliability means that the implied author communicates a different version of the narrative than the narrator “between the lines”. However, despite unreliability, the character effect can still be strong. After all, there are plenty of real people who are deceptive and unreliable yet undoubtedly real human beings. Even more importantly, an unreliable narrator does not

automatically equal an unsympathetic narrator. In Kathy's and Christopher's case, this is a crucial argument that explains why the reader responds to them in a positive way.

Furthermore, a believable character is someone who is simultaneously complex yet coherent, and who inspires sympathy. The character needs to be perceived as coherently representing a "possible person" within the novel world. If the acts of the character exceed the limits of what is acceptable and justifiable, the character becomes less believable. A character might suddenly develop in an unlikely direction and make choices that are too much out of line with who they are. In that case, the character either seems inconsistent or the reader might suspect the author of using the character for his own purposes. That being said, Bal claims that literary pleasure does not necessarily come about when characters comply with all the expectations of the reader. Rather, she suggests that characters who break with presupposed development are positive and stimulating (114). The reader is fond of being surprised, but there are limits. Characters should develop in unexpected ways in a manner that contributes with complexity and an enhanced "possible person" effect, not with a reversed "impossible person" effect.

Moreover, to linger in the mind of the reader after the last page is turned, a believable character displays that it has a depth and a complexity that makes it interesting and compelling. Skilful authors are able to invent characters that are especially credible in this sense, so that they not only resemble people, but seem to escape the role of being puppets of the author's intentions. They are experienced as credible because they come across as independent and surprising.

Last, a believable character is someone with whom the reader sympathises. The reader enjoys "spending time" with the character because the character evokes a variety of thoughts and emotions. The idea of sympathy is, however intricate, a useful criterion because an absence of sympathy can be a signal that the character lacks complexity. Complex characters are usually interesting and sympathetic at some level. Take Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, who is neither a loving person nor a fellow one would like to befriend. Nevertheless, Heathcliff is a complex character who the reader attempts to understand and sympathise with although his hatred runs deep and his deeds are vicious. For example, Heathcliff is to some degree a victim of his surroundings, which evokes the reader's empathy. Another useful way to understand sympathy is to consider how much closeness or distance there is between the reader and the character. Closeness is established when a reader identifies with a character on one or several levels. In other words, the reader is prompted to be empathetic and to put him- or herself in the character's position.

## 2.5 Unreliability and the inadequate narrator

Unreliability is worth some deeper consideration, since it is a natural bedfellow to character and memory. By today, the extensive unreliability debate is a salad bowl of different views and perspectives. Critics keep modifying and expanding the notion of unreliability that Wayne C. Booth coined in 1961: “[a] narrator [is] *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with norms of the work (which is to say the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not” (158-159). However, the discussion that has evolved from Booth’s treatment of unreliability shows that determining and describing what unreliability is and where it is found is challenging (Phelan, *Narrative* 223). What is striking is that different works of fiction display very intricate narrative and rhetorical patterns concerning unreliability. Finding common features across fiction and settling on a comprehensive theory is therefore not an easy task.

Originally, an unreliable narrator was understood as a character that would end up distanced from the reader because of a discrepancy between the version of the narrator and the true state of things seen from the implied author’s point of view.<sup>6</sup> Critics emphasised that the reader was able to detect an alternative version between the lines of the narrative. In other words, the unreliability issue was heavily coloured by the ethical perspective of narrative (Shen, 1-14). Phelan extends this theoretical debate in *Living to Tell about It*. He introduces a set of more precise terms and categories of unreliability that account for other aspects than ethically corrupt or misguided narrators. He makes a distinction between misreporting, misreading, and misevaluating on the one hand and underreporting, underreading, and underregarding on the other (51). When a narrative is viewed through the lens of these categories, unreliability pertaining to facts and understanding will become just as visible as the potentially deviating norms and ethics of the narrator. One of the benefits of Phelan’s taxonomy is that it potentially sheds light on memory and inadequacy. Underreporting, misreporting, and misreading will often be present in fictions of memory since memory is fragile and needs reconstruction and reinterpretation. Psychologist Mark Freeman emphasises that one cannot escape the instinct to interpret memories. What is more, one should acknowledge that “interpretations are neither true or false, but better or worse, more or less valid” (6). This is no surprise, as “the retrospective cognition of an inner life [...] cannot know itself at the instant of experience”, but only later (Cohn, 146). Both Freeman’s and

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<sup>6</sup> The validity and usefulness of the implied author is another matter which has not yet reached consensus. For an account of this debate, see «The implied author and the location of unreliability» (38-49) in Phelan, *Living to Tell about It* (2005).

Cohn's perspectives are important in relation to unreliability because they force us to reassess what it means to be reliable. Full reliability is impossible when one is dealing with memory because people do not only interpret, but select certain memories when they tell stories.

Crucially, Phelan's notion of unreliability is open to the possibility that a character narrator can still gain the reader's sympathy and trust although his reporting, interpretation, or evaluation is unreliable (49-53). Something that is a key in that respect is whether a narrator is consciously or unconsciously unreliable. Narrators who deliberately misguide the reader distance themselves from the reader to a much larger extent than the narrators who cannot help reporting, evaluating, or interpreting the way they do. Notably, Phelan deliberately sticks with the term "unreliable" instead of "creating separate terms for different deviations" (50). Nevertheless, it is useful to discuss the notion of an inadequate narrator, a term favoured by Mullan. *The Oxford Dictionary of English* defines inadequacy as a "lack of the quantity or quality required". When it comes to narration, inadequacy arguably means that the narrator has a lack of sufficient insight (quantitatively and/or qualitatively) and is subsequently unable to deliver perfect narrative accounts. Plainly put, the unreliability of a character can be innocent and unconscious, so that he is in fact truthful. As such, a character narrator can still be believable even if the reader is often able to read more into the text than the narrator.

On a later occasion in the journal *Narrative*, Phelan pin-points what this reliable unreliability encompasses. The unreliability that inadequate narrators display often corresponds to what Phelan calls "bonding unreliability", because they simply cannot help reporting, evaluating or interpreting events the way they do (223). This is a kind of unreliability that the reader sympathises with, and that reduces the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience (224). Mullan argues that inadequacy represents "a special type of first-person narrative that requires the reader to supply what the narrator cannot understand" (50). In line with Phelan's discussion of *Huckleberry Finn* as a novel that exemplifies bonding unreliability, Mullan deems young Huck to be an inadequate narrator. Significantly, this explains why the character narrators in *Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident* can come across as believable characters although they are unreliable; their unreliability takes an inadequate form which is bonding rather than estranging. Despite their different limitations, Kathy's and Christopher's credibility is significantly strengthened by their sincere effort towards veracity and accuracy.

## 2.6 Conclusion

Memory, unreliability, and character are interconnected in fictions of memory such as *Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident*, where the ways in which memory operates receive special attention. Memory phenomena that are reminiscent of real life can often take on new meanings in prose fiction through literary techniques. For example, character narrators often have impressive and complex episodic and autobiographical memories. As such, memory works in intricate ways in novels while still structured onto fundamental, real-life memory. The reader mostly accepts and appreciates literary memory phenomena, but memory can also pose a threat to credibility when exaggerations and paradoxes become too conspicuous and incredible. A narrative must therefore above all encourage the reader to suspend disbelief and to engage in the fictional universe. The memory phenomena which contrast with reality in the narrative will then work successfully.

Contemporary fictions of memory often contain self-conscious reminiscence and negotiate the ways in which people reconstruct their pasts. They also inquire into what consequences memory has for the understanding of identity. In different ways, *Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* testify to this. Importantly, fictions of memory often uncover the unreliability of remembering. Nevertheless, unreliable memories need not threaten the ultimate credibility of the character narrator. As James Phelan's distinction between bonding and estranging unreliability highlights, a character can still be sympathetic although he or she is unreliable. Unreliability which is unconscious or unavoidable suggests an inadequate rather than a mischievous and scheming narrator.

A character that is complex, coherent, and sympathetic will qualify as a credible character even if he or she is an inadequate narrator concerning memory. In such cases, memory is often so interconnected with the portrayal of the character that it can contribute to both character credibility and incredibility. As the discussions of *Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident* will show, self-conscious reminiscence, which draws the reader's attention to memory, can put the character's believability under pressure. However, the reader's final determination of whether a character is believable or not rests on a number of factors in the novel. Unreliable remembering, exaggerations, and paradoxes pertaining to memory can be balanced out by for example the setting, the plot development, ethical perspectives, character traits, or other justifications. Leaving issues of individual taste aside, a novel that has complex and interesting themes, actions, ethics, characters, narrative techniques, and resolutions will yield a satisfying read in the end. This is also true for fiction-of-memory novels.

### 3.0 Memory and Character in *Never Let Me Go*

*Never Let Me Go* is clearly a memory narrative, a “fiction of memory”. Such a fiction is “characteristically [...] presented by a reminiscing narrator or figure who looks back on his or her past, trying to impose meaning on the surfacing memories from a present point of view” (Neumann 335). The character narrator Kathy H. tells her life story from a present tense starting point. Mark Freeman contemplates that the telling of a life story is per definition “not a recounting of experience as it was,” but rather “a fiction, an imaginative – even imaginary – story we weave out of those tangled threads we believe to be responsible for the textures of our lives” (30). This notion corresponds well to the way in which *Never Let Me Go* is weaved together. Kathy H. does not merely present memories, but her own interpretations and reorganisations of them. Importantly, she often reflects self-consciously upon memory itself in doing so, and occasionally even draws attention to the memory of the reader. Self-conscious reminiscence is an important narrative device in the novel and affects how the reader responds to Kathy as a character and as a narrator.

On an overall level, the narrative strongly reflects what psychology labels as autobiographical memory. Kathy’s memories about herself, the world that surrounds her, and her relations to the world are central (Baddeley 138). Yet certain features of her recollections tend to contradict the way memory operates in real life. As such, Kathy’s memories pertain both to literary and to real-life memory phenomena. Furthermore, because Kathy H.’s memory is imperfect, it also becomes unreliable. Nevertheless, the fact that Kathy attempts to truthfully interpret her past makes an impression on the reader. What is more, the reader is gradually able to infer that to be a “student” of Hailsham means to be a clone, which means that Kathy’s life exists to donate vital organs in a hypothetical welfare system that is unwilling to face up to the ethical dilemma at hand. Like her fellow students, she will first become what is called a “carer” for other people who are in the midst of their donations. Then she will become a “donor” herself, “complete” her donations, and die. Memory contributes decisively to this ethical tension in the novel. Kathy H.’s memory mechanisms play the important role of convincing the reader that she is indeed a human being who has a soul. Uncomfortably, Kathy does not seem to fully realise the horrors of her destiny. Her unreliability does not merely apply to her memory, but also to her strategy of survival: she cannot or will not own up to the truth, which would make her world truly collapse.

### 3.1 “Maybe I’m remembering it wrong”

Kathy H.’s memory consists of a mixture of confidently-remembered episodes, vague interpretations, doubts, assumptions, recollections of recollections, and forgetting. The memory phenomena in *Never Let Me Go* are therefore far more multi-layered than in *The Curious Incident*, where Christopher has a straight-forward, fact-oriented memory. Due to the self-conscious reminiscence (Kathy’s scrutiny of her own memory in itself) and the mnemonic complexity of *Never Let Me Go*, the reader’s attention is often drawn towards the nature of Kathy’s memories, not just towards her memories in themselves. Early in the novel, Kathy talks about an incident by the sports pavilion at the Hailsham boarding school. Suddenly, she interrupts herself and admits that “maybe I’m remembering it wrong” (8). She gives an alternative interpretation of what she had felt towards her friend Tommy at the time. Next, she more confidently says that “what I do remember is that I noticed Tommy was wearing the light blue polo shirt” (8). The whole narrative balances these two types of memories: what Kathy rather freely interprets and openly admits to being potentially erroneous and what she confidently remembers as correct. In the given incident, what Kathy doubts is how she reacted and how she felt in the situation. She is more certain about what she actually saw. As previously stated, Baddeley asserts that in real life, it is easier to remember events than inner thoughts (141). The reader will recognise Kathy’s memory processes as reminiscent of reality, which enhances her character effect.

Reminiscence becomes more nuanced and complex as the novel evolves:

This was all a long time ago so I might have some of it wrong; but my memory of it is that my approaching Tommy that afternoon was part of a phase I was going through around that time – something to do with compulsively setting myself challenges – and I’d more or less forgotten all about it when Tommy stopped me a few days later (13).

This passage reveals Kathy’s subjective experience of time, which marks the whole novel. Kathy sees the incident with Tommy as “part of a phase”, indicating a period of memories that has no definite beginning or end. Kathy often places her individual memories within such imprecise periods. For example, she states early in the novel that “from what I remember, for a couple of months at least, these incidents kept coming” (15). Later, she similarly says that “I only have one vague memory of Ruth from that early part of our lives” (45). Keeping track of all the different times and phases of Kathy’s life – and when they overlap – becomes a complicated task both for the reader and the narrator herself.



Nevertheless, the lack of neat chronology gives a certain authenticity to the novel because of the story's length and detail. It makes sense that Kathy is uncertain about details and about when events took place. Freeman notes that

perhaps we have reverted too often to a kind of wholistic [sic]fictionalization of the past, imposing unity and continuity on that which doesn't deserve it. Perhaps, therefore, we ought to be paying greater attention to 'discontinuities', 'ruptures', 'fissures', and so on than we have (47).

Kathy dares to be vulnerable when she admits discontinuities, ruptures, and fissures within her memories (while Christopher in *The Curious Incident* is much more confident and self-assertive when it comes to strength of memory). Kathy's rather risky vulnerability makes the reader appreciate, rather than disapprove of, her openness and uncertainty. It also brings to mind what it is like to recollect the past – it is an act of finding and collecting what has been lost (Freeman 47). The self-conscious reminiscence enables the reader to identify with Kathy and her memory project.

The same passage from the novel illustrates memory of forgetting. Kathy says that she had forgotten about the incident at the North Playing Field by the time she met Tommy again. A paradox appears: is it possible to remember to forget something that isn't an object, but a memory? Mark Currie attempts to work out this dilemma. He suggests that it is solved by the retrospective tense of the novel. There is a gap between the actual incident and the moment of narration, which contains both the forgetting and the recollection of forgetting. Subsequently, the moment of forgetting and remembering do not coincide anymore so that logic is restored (Currie 96).

In reverse, Kathy might also recollect another memory. Once, she says, "[when] Tommy started telling me beside the pond about his odd talk with Miss Lucy, I found something tugging away at my memory" (37). This presents to the reader the notion of double memories, or meta-memories. Multi-layered memories such as these represent a compelling narrative technique that Ishiguro often resorts to. They add a kind of richness to the narrative through several layers of time. Multi-layered memories also complement Kathy's uncertain and interpretive narration because they open up a space where interpretation can unfold.

Currie also talks of a third type of memory, namely memories of anticipation. These memories are closely related to Kathy's meta-memories and her recollections about forgetting. In Currie's words, Kathy is often able to "remember what the future used to be like, or how [she] used to envisage it" (97). To give an example from the novel, Kathy

remembers “a marked change in the way we approached that whole territory surrounding the donations” around the age of thirteen (Ishiguro 83). In other words, the students started to think and act differently as a response to how they perceived the future at that time.

Throughout the novel, Kathy is able to remember what it was like to not fully know how events, relationships, and donations would turn out, and what hopes and fears accompanied this lack of knowledge (Currie 97-99). In conclusion, the complexity of *Never Let Me Go*'s memory phenomena centres on Kathy's advanced ability to remember both the presence and absence of knowledge at different times in life. Disturbingly, Kathy's final anticipation of the future has still not reached full insight. Her memory becomes who she is – a memory that is still somewhat immature and unwilling to face the truth. “Once I'm able to have a quieter life, in whichever centre they send me to” Kathy says, “I'll have Hailsham with me, safely in my head, and that'll be something no one can take away” (281). She clings onto her past, and the reader might infer that once Kathy becomes a donor, she will inevitably have to face that her life is about to end.

Whereas we shall see that memory in *The Curious Incident* is mostly centred on Christopher, the presence of several remembering “individuals” is an interesting memory phenomenon in *Never Let Me Go*. Various memories have been negotiated and shared with other characters, such as the idea of Norfolk being England's “lost corner”:

Not long ago, when Tommy and I were reminiscing about all of this, he thought we'd never really believed in the notion, that it was a joke right from the start. But I'm pretty certain he was wrong there. Sure enough, by the time we were twelve or thirteen, the Norfolk thing *had* become a big joke. But my memory of it – Ruth remembered it in the same way – is that at the beginning, we believed in Norfolk in the most literal way; [...] with vehicles moving all over England, delivering anything left behind in fields and trains to this place called Norfolk (65-66).

Kathy's dissonant memory monologue becomes a dialogue which includes the memories of her friends (Cohn 186). Kathy is no longer speaking only for herself, but for “Tommy and I” and “we”. Crucially, Kathy uses Tommy's and Ruth's memories to contrast and compare her own version, arguing that her account is believable in the end. Such negotiated memories enhance her narrative as earnest and open. Furthermore, Ishiguro neatly makes sure that there are no serious discrepancies between Kathy's memories and those of her friends. If there are differences between them, Kathy actively comments and resolves them. In the end, the reader

is inclined to find Kathy reliable and honest, however much she interprets and speculates about surrounding atmospheres and social dynamics.

Kathy is indeed willing to go far in her interpretation and guessing. The three friends are about to finish an excursion to see a stranded boat and have stopped at Ruth's donation centre. Kathy considers the scene and speculates that

[what I think] happened next – of course I can't know for certain – was that the both of us, Tommy and I, we remembered what had happened in the car, when we'd more or less ganged up on [Ruth]. And almost as an instinct, we both went to her [to help] (218).

Both "I think" and "I can't know for certain" testify to the speculation of Kathy's comment. She guesses that because of the nature of "what happened next", it is possible that a collective memory came to hers and Tommy's minds. The memory prompted them to act kindly towards Ruth, whom they had previously "ganged up upon". In this situation, Kathy appeals to the common sense of the reader. Kathy's cause-and-effect interpretation comes across as plausible, despite its uncertainty. Kathy brings coherence and meaning into the situation by making assumptions that fit and make sense based on the circumstances.

From time to time, Kathy also invokes the memory of the narratee, and by extension, the reader. "I'm sure somewhere in your childhood, you too had an experience like ours that day; similar if not in the actual details, then inside, in the feelings", she says (36). This enunciation strongly encourages the reader to draw links between her own childhood memories and Kathy's, although Kathy directs the comment to her narratee. At a later point, Kathy also encourages the reader to actuate the memory of her own storytelling: "You have to remember that until that point we'd never been beyond the grounds of Hailsham" (116). The flesh-and-blood reader's memory is activated to a significant extent. At other times, there is more distance between Kathy and the reader. "I don't know how it was where you were" is an opening clause that refers specifically to the boarding school or institution of her narratee (94). In other words, Kathy appeals almost exclusively to her narratee's shared clone experience. In sum, the memory phenomena of the novel has Kathy's own complex memory at the core, but also includes the memories of her fellow characters, the narratee, and the actual reader.

### **3.2 *Never Let Me Go* and real-life memory**

Beneath the surface, *Never Let Me Go* negotiates the rules and mechanisms of memory. Over the narrative as a whole Kathy finally contradicts her own forgetfulness as her memories keep

accumulating. Even if she neatly strikes a balance between what she confidently remembers and what she can only speculate, the frequency and detail of utterances and dialogue is remarkable if one considers that Kathy's memories span over a period of twenty years. Memory is compromised for the sake of re-living and re-entering important episodes from the past, which is a common technique in retrospective fiction. We will find that *The Curious Incident* displays a similar compromise of memory. Consequently, there is a constant negotiation between reliability and reader involvement in both *The Curious Incident* and in *Never Let Me Go*. Whenever the reader becomes particularly involved and engaged in the story, the reliability guard is dropped for the sake of enjoyment and anticipation of what will happen next.

A pivotal event in chapter nineteen illustrates the way in which suspense draws the reader's attention away from the unreliability of memory. Kathy does an excursion together with Tommy and Ruth to see a stranded boat. Both Ruth and Tommy are donors at this point, while Kathy is still a carer. They undertake the trip several years before Kathy commences her narrative, yet there are few hesitant moments. Kathy even includes plenty of direct discourse to shed light on the event. As a narrative technique, dialogue smartly enhances the tense atmosphere between the characters. The trio has not met for a long time, and Ruth eventually admits that she has deliberately prevented Tommy and Kathy from becoming a couple although they have loved each other all their lives. The reader has speculated about this and sensed the good atmosphere between Tommy and Kathy for a long time. As such, the scene brings sought-after closure to one of the conflicts in the novel. Direct discourse, although challenging the reliability of Kathy's memory, becomes an important device for creating suspense and drama in that context. This is in line with one of James Phelan's main arguments in *Living to Tell about It*, namely that "disclosure functions ultimately trump narrator functions" (79-80). Even if the confidence and detail of the chapter clearly breaks with notions of real-life memory, the dialogue represents a narrative device and a literary memory phenomenon that is nonetheless accepted and appreciated in a work of fiction. The reader willingly believes in the narrator's credibility.

Nevertheless, Ishiguro partially resolves the paradoxes of Kathy's narration by introducing an extra layer of reliability in the novel. To some extent, it resembles the reliability effect of Christopher's photographic memory in *The Curious Incident*. In *Never Let Me Go*, however, it is the surrounding context rather than a character trait that provides the narrative with reliability; in the present from which Kathy's past is narrated, she has entered a special mode of memory and solitude that serves to boost her memory. She spends a lot of

time in her own company driving around the country to different centres. Her life is about to enter its final stage, she will soon become a donor. The reader accepts and believes in Kathy's accounts of her past because of these peculiar, sad, and lonely circumstances that simultaneously seem comforting to Kathy.

Importantly, Kathy is prompted to tell her donors about Hailsham instead of merely mulling over memories in her own thoughts:

what [my donor] wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to *remember* Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood. He knew he was close to completing[. M]aybe during those sleepless nights, [...] the line would blur between what were my memories and what were his. (5)

This situation makes Kathy value and cherish her own memories more, as well as the kind of childhood and friends she has had. She confirms this as the novel is about to close, to assert one final time that her narrative is credible whenever it claims to be:

I was talking to one of my donors a few days ago who was complaining about how memories, even your most precious ones, fade surprisingly quickly. But I don't go along with that. The memories I value most, I don't see them ever fading. I lost Ruth, then I lost Tommy, but I won't lose my memories of them (280).

Here, the true nature of the novel's mnemonic rules becomes visible. The more Kathy tries to remember her past, the more she is able to regain and reminisce. In reality, as the *Brain Games* episode about memory explains, reminiscence works differently. Trying hard to remember something specific might just blur the original memory even more than if it had been evoked by a random trigger. Kathy does not, however, lose her memories like the donor she cares for. Despite this, the reader is more likely to accept Kathy's claims about the vividness of her memories than to decline them. Kathy's whole life and identity is defined by her recollections, and turning down her narrative means dismissing her as a character. It yields a more pleasurable reading experience to sympathise with a literary character and suspend disbelief than dismissing him or her as incredible.

### 3.3 The reader's sympathy towards Kathy

There is a relation between the way Kathy's memory works and the way in which the reader responds to her as a character. The premise of her narration is clearly that her interpretations cannot be taken as truth, but as attempts to reach some sort of validity nonetheless (Freeman 6). The reader quickly identifies with and shares Kathy's wish for comprehension when she

takes the reader down memory lane. Hence, she tends to sympathise with Kathy's point of view. The narratee in *Never Let Me Go* is important, as he or she contributes to an atmosphere that engages the reader and inspires sympathy with Kathy.<sup>7</sup> The narratee is a fellow carer who is an unidentified insider rather than an outsider. Already on the first page, Kathy addresses the narratee and says that "if you're one of them, I can understand how you might get resentful" about being a good carer and not getting much credit for it (3). That Kathy's narratee is a fellow carer creates an intimate, open and confessional atmosphere that the reader quickly shares. It engages the reader, who has to put the pieces together to construct an image of Kathy's world and deduce what her situation really is. Some might argue that the presence of a "you" which is clearly different from the flesh-and-blood reader can cause distance rather than closeness. However, the fact that Kathy has a specific audience that is manifested through the second singular pronoun makes her tone confiding and personal. This ultimately diminishes the distance between the reader and the narrator.

What is more, empathy towards Kathy as a fellow human being is crucial because Ishiguro has woven a strong ethical tension into the novel. The reader is encouraged to adopt a negative ethical stance. The horror of people being created and raised to face organ donation and premature death creeps under the reader's skin, and antipathy is directed towards the underlying governing forces of Kathy's society. Ishiguro significantly chooses a clone narrator and a clone narratee to make the reader identify with the clones and to stir up empathy in the reader. Kathy saturates the whole narrative with her retrospective and reminiscing voice, a voice that the reader recognises as human. The imitation of key features of memory, such as interpretation and forgetting, is decisive. They coincide with the way real people's memories operate. This narrative style convinces the reader of Kathy's humanness and makes her pity and sympathise with Kathy in light of the ethical dimension of the novel.

The reader is also drawn into sympathy with Kathy because of the way in which Kathy organises her memories haphazardly and anachronically. She explains that

in my memory my life at Hailsham falls into two distinct chunks: this last era, and everything that came before. The earlier years – the ones I've just been telling you about – they tend to blur into each other as a kind of golden time, [...] but those last years feel different. [...]

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<sup>7</sup> Anne Whitehead (2011) argues differently in her article "Writing with Care: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*". She proposes that the second-person address "acts rather to unsettle the reader, and to call into question how or where she is indeed positioned in relation to Kathy" (58). She finds that the ethical aftertaste of *Never Let Me Go* is an ambiguous and uncomfortable one on the part of the reader herself.

Maybe I've exaggerated it in my mind, but I've got an impression of things changing rapidly around then (76).

Notice that Kathy addresses the reader and makes a transition from one category of memories to the next. Since her memories often break with a linear chronology, the reader is dependent on Kathy's explanations and associations between the different memories and periods of her life to gain understanding and coherence. As a result of the reader's dependency upon her, she sympathises easily with Kathy as she tells the story of her life, what she has gained, and what she has lost.

This excerpt also illustrates a memory system which evokes sympathy towards Kathy as a human being. Imperfection, distortion of memories, and forgetting are all signs of normal human reminiscence and foreground what Phelan calls the mimetic component of character (ibid 3). In the novel, however, Kathy is not regarded as a human being by her society at large. In their eyes, clones are sterile, human-like creatures who are ultimately different and without souls. By contrast, the reader is convinced of Kathy's humanness. Her memory is emotional, interpretive and "normal", which proves that she does indeed have a soul.

### **3.4 Inadequate character narration in *Never Let Me Go***

Chapter 2 introduced the idea of inadequate narration and concluded that certain character narrators succeed in keeping the reader's sympathy despite limitations of memory, understanding, experience, or points of view. What marks them most distinctly, despite their unreliability, is an honest effort after sincerity. Kathy clearly qualifies as an inadequate rather than an unreliable narrator in light of this: she does not delay telling the reader about her memory's limitations, which makes her come across as earnest. While the reader might at times doubt the accuracy of Kathy's recollections, she never doubts Kathy's commitment to veracity on behalf of her narratee. The reader never has any reason to suspect the nature of Kathy's intentions. Rather, suspicion and antipathy is directed towards the inhumane system into which Kathy finds herself constantly trapped. When we turn to *The Curious Incident*, Christopher's pedantic honesty will prove to be significant and cause a similar effect of credibility as Kathy's sincerity.

John Mullan has begun describing the distinction between unreliable and inadequate narrators. He has similarly reached the conclusion that Kathy "is not so much an unreliable narrator, as an inadequate narrator" (Afterword111). Furthermore, Kathy's inadequacy is located at two different levels of the text. The first is located at the level of narration, with Kathy herself and her memory. Hence, the communication is located between the narrator and

the authorial audience rather than between the implied author and the authorial audience, between which Kathleen Wall finds it important to differentiate (19-20).<sup>8</sup> As a narrator, Kathy confronts the unreliability of the narrative herself. She addresses her own memory and carefully tells the reader how to understand the premises of narration. Her truthfulness in doing this makes her sympathetic and inadequate in her efforts rather than directly unreliable (Mullan, Afterword 109). To use Phelan's taxonomy, Kathy frequently misreports, misreads, and underreports (*Living to Tell about it* 51). Interestingly, it seems as if Kathy's misreading and misreporting often consist of over interpretation and perhaps also over reporting – she can speculate that something happened although it might not have. Her memory is unreliable, yet Kathy openly negotiates this herself. Typically, Kathy will use words and phrases such as “maybe”, “my memory is that”, and “I can't know for certain” to show that she interprets and calls into question the accuracy of her recollections.

However, the second level of inadequacy exists, as unreliability often does, in the space between the implied author and the authorial audience. There is a discrepancy between Kathy's knowledge about her own doom and her lack of understanding and evaluation of it. She misreads her role and her fate. This aspect of Kathy's inadequacy is also connected with her memories of anticipation, which not even at the close of the novel fully line up with reality. According to Mullan, the implied author in *Never Let Me Go* seems to know more about Kathy's world than we learn from Kathy herself, which can be a sign of inadequacy (ibid 109). Significantly, this discrepancy is something that the reader is able to detect although it is not stated directly, he claims. If I interpret Mullan correctly, he infers that Kathy has a lack of knowledge. By contrast, the alleged “lack of knowledge” can be a result of the relationship between Kathy and her narratee. They are both part of the same group, which makes it unnecessary for Kathy to explain her background and her world in detail. Slowly, the flesh-and-blood reader gains a fuller picture of Kathy's society by gathering the facts and hints that are part of the memories she recounts to her narratee. These inferences also include understanding what the notions of “carer”, “donor”, and “completing” truly involve. As such, Kathy's inadequacy is not due to a lack of knowledge about her own world, but to the way in which she fails to recognise it as morally wrong and with devastating consequences. She fails

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<sup>8</sup> In her article, Wall challenges theories of unreliability in order to primarily shed light on another novel by Ishiguro, entitled *The Remains of the Day*. There are several similarities between Stevens the butler and Kathy H. They both self-consciously reminisce about their life, and struggle to reconstruct it faithfully. However, Stevens's unreliability is deeply complex not only because of memory, but due to misjudgements, self-delusion, and strong internal conflict. As a fiction of memory, *The Remains of the Day* therefore emphasises the relation between memory and identity in a different way than does *Never Let Me Go*.



to fully understand the implications of being a clone; society does not treat her as an equal and has robbed her of the long and fulfilling life of which she has allowed herself to dream. Kathy has been a carer for over a decade, therefore she should know fairly well what the nature of “completing” donations is like.

Kathy’s unusually long career as a carer shows how differently she relates to her own destiny compared to her friend Ruth. She has not yet become a donor like Ruth, although according to her “it’s what we’re *supposed* to be doing” (223). Ruth has become the most melancholic of the three friends by this time in the novel because reality starts to dawn on her. Unlike Kathy, she does not let nostalgic memories from the past resurface. The difference between how Kathy and Ruth relate to their personal memories is a key to understanding Kathy’s inadequacy. When the trio stops to look at an advertisement poster on their way back from the excursion, Ruth refuses to remember a similar poster from their teenage years. She has let the implications of her life as a clone hit her with full force, which makes the past a painful subject:

“[...] You remember, Ruth?”

“I’m not sure I do”, she said quietly.

“Oh, come on. You remember. We found it in a magazine in some lane. Near a puddle. You were really taken by it. Don’t pretend you don’t remember.”

“I think I do,” Ruth’s voice was now almost a whisper. (225)

From the difference between how Ruth and Kathy relate to their pasts, to their memories, and to donations, the reader can infer that Kathy’s inadequacy is connected to her misvaluations of her own condition. The darkness of Kathy’s future fails to engulf her, as she keeps lingering in her relatively happy, but unresolved past. Miss Lucy at Hailsham once said to the students that “[t]he problem, as I see it, is that you’ve been told and not told. You’ve been told, but none of you really understand” (79). Kathy is still caught in this ambiguous position, to which her naïve and innocent narrative testifies.

In his afterword, Mullan observes that “[t]here have been many novels that have made the uncertainties of memory part of the texture of a first-person narration, but none where memory has quite the significance that it does for Ishiguro’s narrator” (110). There is an important connection, then, between Kathy’s two inadequacies (one which pertains to her memory and one which has to do with her lack of acknowledgement). As the narrator fails to let the reality of her premature death sink in, the past is all she has left. Consequently, her memory receives new meaning and emphasis. Since her memories are neither coherent nor

clear, however, Kathy needs to “order all these old memories” to understand “all the things that happened between me and Tommy and Ruth after we grew up and left Hailsham” (37). She tries to construct a life-story that has meaning and significance to the best of her ability, and which will keep her loved ones alive although they are gone (McDonald 80).

Last, Kathy’s inadequacies of memory and evaluation do not distance her from the reader in a way that threatens her believability as a character. As Chapter 2 established, Phelan’s notion of “bonding unreliability” helps explain unreliability and reader sympathy (*Narrative* 223). Since the narrator simply cannot help reporting, evaluating, or interpreting events the way she does, it reduces the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience (223-224). Consequently, Kathy stands out as a character who is complex because of her depth as a reminiscing individual, while also sympathetic in the eyes of the reader. Shortcomings as a human being are normal and something with which the reader identifies. Kathy comes across as honest and earnest, which together with her other characteristics enhance her character effect and believability. As such, her inadequate memory becomes her strength rather than her weakness, because she is able to connect with her reader through admitting what a challenge it is to reconstruct the past.

### 3.5 Conclusion

*Never Let Me Go* is a fiction of memory in which ethical tension and gradual empathy is a backdrop for the narrative. As such, Kathy’s memory is intertwined with her inability to own up to the injustice of her situation and with her subsequent indulgence in reinterpreting her past in a nostalgic light. Importantly, Kathy’s memory is both similar and dissimilar to the ways in which memory operates in real life. This makes her a character with whom the reader can identify but also a complex literary character. Moreover, Kathy’s memory contributes to a strong character effect. Specifically, the mixture of confident memories, interpretation, and forgetting imitates the reader’s own memory. Furthermore, a close reading of the novel reveals that reminiscence is indeed expanded beyond the boundaries of realism, as Neumann suggests (340). Kathy’s memories steadily accumulate and are surprisingly complex and multi-layered. Moreover, dramatic parts of the novel are characterized by long dialogues that would exceed the limits of memory in real life. Nevertheless, the reader’s disbelief is suspended because she engages in the narrative and seeks answers and closure.

The ethical dimension in *Never Let Me Go* is thus embedded into the memory phenomena of the novel, because the ethics of genetics represents a theme which makes the reader relate to Kathy with sympathy. The nature of Kathy’s memory testifies that she is

human, although she is just a “student” of Hailsham. Another important narrative device is Ishiguro’s choice of an insider relationship between Kathy and her narratee, which creates an atmosphere of fellowship. Additionally, it shows that Kathy does not relate to other people than those of her own kind, which makes her come across as isolated and lonely (Mullan, Afterword 112-113). As such, Ishiguro’s narrative techniques evoke the reader’s empathy towards Kathy. Inevitably, Kathy’s self-conscious reminiscence brings with it a certain degree of unreliability, or rather inadequacy. Nevertheless, she is honest and willing to question her own memories. Such an attempt at truthfulness convinces the reader that Kathy is worth trusting.

Kathy is inadequate because of her flawed memory and because of the way in which she suppresses true recognition of what her destiny encompasses. Indeed, Currie insinuates that Kathy’s consistent use of words such as “student” instead of clone, “carer”, “donor”, and “completing”, are euphemisms that “support[...] the supposition that the truth of what happens for Kathy at the end of the year is not being honestly apprehended, and that the horror of realization is averted in cheerful optimism” (100).<sup>9</sup> This seems to be an unconscious misevaluation, however, and does not make the reader resist Kathy as a narrator, but rather bond with her through sympathy. Indeed, Mullan comments about Kathy H. that she is a character who

does not have lost parents or unknown siblings. She has no possibility or fantasy of a biological relationship with another person. Yet she is another human being (I share the characters’ embarrassment about even using the word ‘clone’). Her inadequate attempts to make a story for herself and others who might be like her takes [sic] us to the elementary principles of human sympathy (Afterword 113).

The novel’s memory phenomena, self-conscious reminiscence, and unreliability together form a pattern which touches on the strange issue that Mullan presents. In the end, *Never Let Me Go* is an ethical fiction of memory in which the believability of Kathy H. is central and even crucial to the reading of the novel.

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew Eatough (2011) applies a sociological and medical approach to interpret this final “cheerful optimism”. He argues persuasively that Kathy’s composure at the end of the novel is a result of “affective indifference [towards her own body], vocational proficiency, and quality of life” (113). Eatough does not address unreliability directly, but applies quality of life studies to explain the ways in which Kathy’s society has manipulated her attitudes and emotions in a way that benefits the system.



## 4.0 Memory and Character in

### ***The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time***

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon is a multifaceted novel in which memory, self-conscious reminiscence, and meta-fiction are important. At the same time, the novel is clearly different from other fictions of memory. The “memory man” teenage narrator, Christopher Boone, has Asperger Syndrome. His teacher encourages him to write, and so Christopher embarks on the writing of a murder mystery novel in which he tries to resolve who killed the neighbour’s dog. On the one hand, his condition has equipped him with a remarkably good and accurate memory. It makes the novel surprisingly reliable, since retold details and conversations from the past are justified by Christopher’s unusual ability to remember. On the other hand, however, the Asperger Syndrome makes it difficult for the narrator to relate to people around him and to interpret their body language, figurative language, and motivations. This difficulty affects Christopher’s narrative on a stylistic level as well. He accurately describes facts and actions but leaves out describing and interpreting people around him. Consequently, a strong tension between reliability and unreliability prevails throughout the novel. This tension is due not only to the ways in which memory functions, but to how the narrative is completely immersed in Christopher’s Asperger Syndrome. Hence, *The Curious Incident* can finally be considered as a medical fiction of memory.

Most notably, the syndrome makes it difficult for Christopher to relate to strangers, crowds, and new places. It causes several behavioural problems as well. He needs certain patterns and conditions to be fulfilled at all times, such as different items of food not touching each other on the plate, or for his food not to be brown or yellow. Routine and predictability are important to his well-being and everyday life. Nevertheless, Christopher is very talented at maths, is intensely interested in science and logic, and has a remarkable ability to remember facts and knowledge. He can also, to a certain extent, cope with strenuous situations by taking on characteristics of his favourite detective (Sherlock Holmes), by solving maths problems, or by pretending to be in a video game.

An examination of Christopher’s memory reveals the strength of his memory but also paradoxes and reversed memory mechanisms that are linked to his syndrome. *The Curious Incident* therefore confirms Birgit Neumann’s suggestion that prose fiction negotiates existing concepts of memory, and works by its own narrative and aesthetic rules. As *Never Let Me Go*, the novel displays literary memory phenomena that bend the rules of reality. Furthermore,

because the unreliability of *The Curious Incident* is of a bonding rather than estranging type, these memory phenomena do not distance the reader from Christopher as a character narrator. The reader is invited to sympathise with him and to believe in his innocence and earnestness. As a character, he comes across as both complex and coherent, which yields a strong character effect and makes a lasting impression on the reader.

#### 4.1 “My memory is like a film”

Many first-person narrators do not make the reader explicitly aware that the narrative relies on memory. Avoiding self-conscious reminiscence keeps the reader from discovering how certain realistic limits of memory are being crossed. The result is a narrative that potentially comes across as more reliable from the point of view of realism than it really is. Kathleen Wall, for example, points out that “the convention that makes [*Wuthering Heights*] possible dictates that the lengthy narrations of events are entirely accurate, even though such a convention raises questions about the limits of memory” (20). The character narrator Christopher Boone, however, as many other fiction-of-memory narrators, draws attention to his own memory. Remarkably, and unlike Kathy H., Christopher does not confess that his ability to recollect is weak and of a reconstructive and interpreting nature. In the opposite spirit, he rather explains that his mnemonic capacity is excellent. Towards the middle of *The Curious Incident*, he says that

my memory is like a film. That is why I am really good at remembering things, like the conversations I have written down in this book, and what people were wearing, and what they smelled like, because my memory has a smelltrack which is like a soundtrack. And when people ask me to remember something I can simply press **Rewind** and **Fast Forward** and **Pause** like on a video recorder, but more like a DVD because I don't have to Rewind through everything in between to get to a memory of something a long time ago. And there are no buttons either, because it's all happening in my head (96).

This passage crucially establishes *The Curious Incident* as a contemporary self-reflexive fiction of memory, where the manner in which the character recollects can become more central than the actual content of his recollections (Neumann 337).

Furthermore, Christopher's statement that “I am really good at remembering things” suggests that memory in *The Curious Incident* is more reliable than unreliable. Through a simile, he compares his memory to a film. The advantage of a film is that it can stay the same no matter how many times it is replayed. A film is accurate, available, and vivid. Christopher's simile suggests that his memory encoding is like a hand-held camera that is

never switched off. Nevertheless, films are usually constructed, selective, and edited. As memory, a film is not reality itself but secondary images of it. One might ask if Christopher realises the full implication of his comparison, namely that in the end, both films and memory are selective and represent interpretations of reality, no matter how vivid they are.

A couple of instances in the novel suggest that Christopher's memory camera can indeed be switched off. Stressful situations clearly inhibit Christopher's memory from working as it usually does. It dawns on Christopher that his mother is still alive (which is contrary to what his father has told him), when he finds a pile of letters which were recently written by her. He feels sick and goes to bed. "I don't know what happened then", he says, "because there is a gap in my memory, like a bit of the tape had been erased" (142). Another dramatic situation is when Christopher is about to travel to London via the public transport system and exclaims that he "had forgotten to remember where [the railway sign] was" (172). This upsets him greatly because he usually remembers everything.

These examples show that the Asperger Syndrome makes Christopher's memory encoding function in an opposite way to what is normal. He easily remembers details from his routine everyday life and situations that follow his preferred patterns, but forgets to remember or blacks out when events that are too out of the ordinary occur. From a psychological perspective, situations that create emotional intensity and contain crucial or unusual information are easier to encode and retrieve from memory. We remember decisive moments in life which produce strong emotions better than details of a day characterized by everyday routines (Baddeley, 141). The answer to why Christopher's memory works by a reversed principle lies in the Asperger Syndrome, which makes him very sensitive to his surroundings and dependent on familiar routines. His memory encoding is affected by such strikingly strong perceptive senses. "I see everything", he says at a later point in the novel, and "that is why I don't like new places" (174). He explains that to him, a field of cows is a detailed image which includes the number of flowers, how each cow is distinguished from the others, the litter, the proportions of the sky, and the three types of grass. Although his perceptiveness and memory do not necessarily need to be dependent on one another, they do complement each other and make Christopher a complex and coherent character. His memory simply fails to encode things properly when there are too many new details to process or when he experiences something that is surprising or intense.

Regardless, Christopher's comparison between his memory and a film still conveys that his memory is extraordinary at least with regard to conversations, appearance, and smell. His ability to recollect is far better than for example Kathy H.'s in *Never Let Me Go*, who has

a flawed and sometimes diffuse memory. Throughout the novel, Christopher does not rely on memories from many, many years ago to tell his story the way Kathy does. However, to exemplify that he is able to do this, he confidently rewinds to “4<sup>th</sup> July 1992 when I was 9 years old, which was a Saturday, and we were on holiday in Cornwall and in the afternoon we were on the beach in a place called Polperro” (96). He remembers what his mother wore, what she smoked, what her towel looked like, what she read, and what she said. He makes an effort to truly convince the reader of his knack for accurate retrieval of memories. Importantly, these moments of self-conscious reminiscence show that the Asperger Syndrome justifies his good memory – and that the good memory justifies his narrative.

From a reader perspective, the first self-reflexive recollection statement also adds a new understanding of both what is already read and how the reader should understand the remainder of the novel. Up until now, the reader has suspended disbelief concerning memory and not paused to ask how credibly Christopher recounts specific days, details, and dialogue that belong to the past. She has, however, registered that Christopher is intelligent concerning mathematics, logic, and science and that he seems to be autistic. Moreover, page 5 states that “I am writing a murder mystery novel” in the present continuous tense. From this, the book seems to be a work in progress. When Christopher writes about a day at school the reader imagines that it happened recently, which makes it easier for him to retell it faithfully than if it happened many years ago. The memory moment on page 96 therefore expands the reader’s understanding of Christopher as a reminiscing narrator, and she understands that a good memory is an advantage when one writes a novel that has autobiographical traits. At this point, his curious memory also adds an interesting and positive layer of complexity to Christopher as a character with Asperger Syndrome.

#### **4.2 Other memory phenomena in *The Curious Incident***

So far it has been established that Christopher Boone’s memory is like a film, a literary memory phenomenon which is related to the Asperger Syndrome.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, concerning episodic and semantic memory, real-life memory phenomena are further negotiated in the novel. Episodic memory involves “conscious recollection of the past”, while semantic memory functions more as an automatic, efficient, logical, and organized mass storage device of knowledge (Eysenck 114, 116). When someone reminisces about the past and looks back to specific moments in life, episodic memory is highly activated. When facts and knowledge

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<sup>10</sup> Gavin Bollard (2007) shares interestingly about his personal experience with Asperger’s and memory on his blog about living with Asperger Syndrome.



are retrieved rather than personal experience one makes use of the semantic memory system. Dermot M. Bowler, John M. Gardiner, and Sarah J. Grice have conducted a study to investigate the relationship between episodic and semantic memory with adults who have Asperger Syndrome. They found that people with Asperger's tend to rely more on knowing than remembering (301). In light of this, it is interesting to consider the way in which semantic and episodic memory come across in *The Curious Incident*. The character narrator seems to map as much knowledge, facts, and patterns onto his individual episodic memories as possible. Christopher pays much attention to facts and what people look like, say, and do on a surface level. However, he pays very little attention to the complexity of the ways in which people communicate. Christopher is rarely able to intuitively interpret what meaning outer factors carry and this affects how he presents his memories. He has to confer with his explicit knowledge (semantic memory) and previous experiences (episodic memory) to infer what is going on between the lines, so that he can understand people's moods, intentions, or feelings. Christopher conducts a "search" through his memory film to

know how to act in difficult situations when I don't know what to do. For example, if people say things which don't make sense, like, 'See you later, alligator,' or 'You'll catch your death in that,' I do a **Search** and see if I have ever heard someone say this before (97).

In life, memory has a significant role as a guide and reference point for future reactions, choices, thoughts, understanding, and feelings. Memory is meant to fulfil this role automatically. It is striking that a process which is normally automatic seems to be conscious and perhaps also manual with Christopher. His Asperger Syndrome somehow operates by its own set of rules pertaining to memory in everyday life.

Next, there is a conflict in the novel between Christopher's sensitive memory encoding and the way his reports of dramatic situations are still confident and accurate. The reader is initially led to believe that what Christopher says about his memory is true. After all, Christopher hates lies and is not, according to himself, able to lie. As Chapter 2 argued, moments that are particularly dramatic or contribute important new information are often characterized by longer stretches of quoted dialogue between characters. In *Never Let Me Go*, the excursion where Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth go to see the stranded boat is an example of this same technique. In *The Curious Incident*, there is plenty of dialogue when Christopher's father discovers that Christopher has found the letters from his mother and when his father subsequently admits that *he* was the one who killed the dog (Haddon 142-152). Dialogue is also central when Christopher reunites with his mother in London, although he is in a

completely unfamiliar place and situation (Haddon 233-241). In *Never Let Me Go*, the boat excursion exemplifies how the reader is willing to suspend disbelief although Kathy H. contradicts her own forgetfulness. In *The Curious Incident*, however, the psychological perspective of memory encoding is more relevant, since Christopher's memory works differently from Kathy's. Christopher's memory is opposite from what Baddeley asserts as normal. He remembers variations of routines and safe situations well, yet forgets to remember or fails to encode information properly when dramatic and unusual situations arise. He becomes unwell, uncomfortable, and scared, which interrupts him from encoding and remembering. In *The Curious Incident*, then, the reader suspends disbelief in dramatic situations with dialogues that Christopher is not supposed to remember properly, since the situation causes sensory overload or anxiety.

To consider the chronology of the novel, the idea of situations where Christopher's memory is not functioning well is introduced quite late. This excludes memory from being an issue to the reader during previously stressful moments that are vividly described, such as the detailed dialogue between himself and his father when Christopher finds out that his mother is still alive (Haddon 142-144). However, the reader can assume that the final trip to London is Christopher's most daring and brave achievement, where new places and crowds of people in tight places are common features of public transport. As such, despite the fact that the protagonist has weak moments, the reader continues to trust his dedication to truthfully recounting events as they were experienced by him. She "suspend[s] disbelief about the narrator's memory" again (Mullan, *How Novels Work* 49). Notwithstanding this weakness connected to challenging situations, the reader never doubts Christopher's ability to remember facts and knowledge. He demonstrates that he is trustworthy in this respect when he is able to remember the right address to where his mother lives in London and finds her house. Numbers stick easily in his memory, which is also why Christopher always uses numerals rather than spelling out numbers in the novel.

### **4.3 Memory and self-reflexivity in *The Curious Incident***

Memory is linked to meta-fiction in a much stronger sense in *The Curious Incident* than in *Never Let Me Go*, where Kathy is more a traditional story-teller than a self-proclaimed author. Not many pages pass before the reader is told that "[t]his is a murder mystery novel. Siobhan said that I should write something I would want to read myself" (5). The rest of this short chapter is dedicated to explaining that Christopher does not like "proper novels", but that detective novels are nice. Christopher seems to have a preference for the detective story

because of its appeal as a puzzle that needs to be solved and because of its underlying methodical and logical principles. These traits echo his personality type and his interests. Importantly, Christopher states that “I find it hard to imagine things which did not happen to me” (5) and that he cannot tell lies (24) as a part of the novel project. Christopher regularly embeds meta-fictional comments such as these. They usually involve the ways in which he constructs the novel and how he occasionally brings the novel to Siobhan, his teacher, for feedback and corrections.

By means of the meta-fiction, Christopher is established as an autistic boy who embarks on a personal novel project, not just merely as a narrator. As such, the novel comes across as a work-in-progress narrative where many aspects of his memory system are involved: working memory, autobiographical memory, episodic memory, and semantic memory. This is evident from the way in which Christopher narrates interchangeably between past tense and present tense. Simplified, he relies on episodic memory to tell about how the detective work and the mystery of his mother progress, and on semantic memory to share his knowledge of maths and science in the present tense. The novel-writing also becomes a means for Christopher to make sense of the world and construct an identity for himself (Gilbert 252). Through linking the past and the present in what turns out to be not only a detective project, but an identity project, Christopher’s autobiographical memory is activated.

One of the ever-present qualities of literary characters that James Phelan finds essential is the synthetic aspect, which reminds the reader that character is an artificial construct (*Reading People, Reading Plots* 2). Christopher’s self-conscious reminiscence and meta-fictional comments about his own writing of the book represent a double self-reflexivity which greatly foregrounds his synthetic and artificial quality. Yet the self-reflexivity also contributes to Christopher coming across as a strong and convincing character narrator. Self-reflexivity simultaneously engages the reader to see Christopher as a trustworthy narrator who takes his novel project seriously and who makes his memory available to scrutiny. Therefore, however much the illusion that Christopher could be a real person is broken at such instances, self-conscious reminiscence and meta-fiction are very well integrated into the concept of Christopher as an autistic narrator.

Additionally, *The Curious Incident* has a very convincing setting and novel world. Christopher lives in what seems to be the reader’s own contemporary society through references to real places in England such as Swindon (57), real incidents such as the case of the “Cottingley Fairies” (111), real magazines and columnists (78), and an authentic illustration of the London Underground Bakerloo Line (214). In sum, neither the memory nor

the recurring meta-fiction that foreground the synthetic aspect of character jeopardizes Christopher's complexity or credibility as a character. The powerful "possible person" illusion persists so boldly that it turns into an "actual person" illusion, since Christopher keeps enforcing the impression that he is an actual author.

#### **4.4 Christopher's character effect and credibility**

During the first hundred pages, the reader learns a lot about what kind of person, character, and narrator Christopher is, which creates a strong character effect and makes him come across as a possible person (Bal 119, 126-127). He is from the start portrayed as a teenager who relates to other people with difficulty and who has a need for stability, order, logic, and predictability. Christopher loves maths and science and argues that "the mind is just a complicated machine" (146). Because this makes Christopher's whole world view logical and argumentative, it also affects his style of narration to a large degree. Stephan Freißmann skilfully analyses this aspect of *The Curious Incident*. Christopher's literal-mindedness and lack of interest in people is evident from how he avoids complete metaphors (but is fine with comparisons and similes), closes ambiguities, and reports in a matter-of-fact-like manner (Freißmann 400). As such, the narrative style characterizes Christopher as much as what he states explicitly about himself. He reports without much contemplation beyond his own perspective and writes long sentences that echo the monotonous voice of someone with autism. Bill Greenwell points out that Christopher makes use of a fairly limited vocabulary. Especially when he reports conversations there is little variation from "And I said" and then "And she said" (Greenwell 281-282). In addition, Christopher includes different lists in the novel that characterize his love for structure as well as images and drawings which illustrate accurately what he wants to convey. Truly, "Christopher's peculiar indigenoussness is as much fictional device as medical condition" (Mullan, *How Novels Work* 51). The first-person narrative allows Haddon to explore autism and character in compelling narrative ways that have not been attempted previously (Greenwell 272). Christopher's narrative style offers a reading experience and a character encounter that stands out among other novels where autism is central.

With regard to credibility, however, the reader cannot determine whether Christopher represents a possible teenager with Asperger Syndrome merely by comparing him with her Asperger Syndrome-free self. In that regard, Shannon R. Wooden reports that "some autistic people responding to the book disagree that Haddon's fictional presentation of the experience of autism perfectly aligns with theirs" (283). Nevertheless, people with autism experience

very individual effects of their disorder, and Wooden argues that Christopher displays important traits from the diagnostic criteria for Autistic Disorder (283). Ultimately, the reader looks for consistency and coherence in Haddon's literary representation of an autistic teenager rather than for a flawless portrait that perfectly corresponds to reality.

The reader's conviction of Christopher's credibility is also due to whom Christopher chooses as his implied reader. The novel indirectly addresses readers who do not have Asperger's. Christopher consistently explains his way of thinking when he interchangeably tells in retrospect about the detective work and his excursion to London, and when he writes about himself in the present tense chapters. This convinces a reader who is unfamiliar with the Asperger Syndrome that Christopher is intelligent and reliable, although his narrative style testifies that he is evidently ignorant of fellow characters' perspectives and that he has a "pedantic attention to detail" (Freißmann 399-400). In addition, the Asperger Syndrome makes Christopher a character who is both similar and dissimilar to the reader. This dynamic is positive to the character effect because it makes the character complex and interesting (Bal 114). Wooden, who made medical students read *The Curious Incident* from a medical point of view, asserts that

readers are drawn, despite their differences, towards a relationship of identification with the narrator; in Christopher's case, this relationship engenders [...] students' kind observations of our basic similarities as human beings. Christopher is bizarre, charming, and thoroughly rendered through his own words; having Asperger's makes him process and present his world in unconventional ways (284).

Wooden's and Bal's views suggest that characters that have a mixture of differences and similarities with the reader are engaging. It corresponds to the way in which people relate to one another in real life: sometimes, fellow human beings confirm the pre-supposed while at other times they break with conventions and that which is familiar.

#### **4.5 Unreliability in *The Curious Incident***

In *The Curious Incident*, memory is not a source of unreliability to the same extent as in *Never Let Me Go*. The Asperger Syndrome needs closer consideration in that respect. Phelan's taxonomy is again useful: Christopher typically under-reads, and sometimes misreads, situations when he tries to apply logical rules and principles to human beings and relationships (Phelan, *Living to Tell About it* 50). For example, he draws the conclusion that because his father killed Wellington, who is a dog, he is also likely to kill again and might even kill his own son (152-153). In another instance, Christopher accuses people of being lazy

when they do not remember details or glance over a field instead of taking in all the small details of the environment around them (174). Here, the reader constructs a different version than the narrator and pardons Christopher for not completely understanding how other people reason and think.

Christopher shows remarkable self-awareness in situations where he is able to calm down and control his behaviour, but lacks self-awareness on other levels. The reader quickly becomes familiar with the manners in which Christopher under-regards situations when he interacts with other people. A moment which illustrates this kind of unreliability in Christopher most directly is when he has spent a few days with his mother and her partner Roger angrily exclaims: “You think you’re so fucking clever, don’t you? Don’t you ever, ever think about other people for one second, eh?” (252). It confirms what the reader has gained a good sense of, namely that Christopher easily gets very caught up in his own coping with the environment and in his own hobbies, preferences, and mind-set. As a result, there is no room for considering what other people need or how they feel. No wonder that the Greek word from which “autism” is derived “literally means ‘self’ [and that t]he etymological root offers quite a good grasp of [...] autism as an extreme form of self-centredness” (Freißmann 396). Christopher shows awareness of an audience when he moves the complicated maths tasks of his final A-level test to the appendix of the novel. Nevertheless, the narrator of *The Curious Incident* is very engrossed in his own opinions, point-of-view, and life. Still, he is charming and unintentionally funny despite the fact that “this will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them” (10). His self-centeredness may cause an unreliable narrative, but not disinterested and unentertained readers.

John Mullan suggests, as he does with Kathy in *Never Let Me Go*, that Christopher should be deemed an inadequate rather than an unreliable narrator even though “inadequate narrator” is not yet a critically established term. The reason for this is that Christopher is, “however uncomprehending, [...] entirely trustworthy” (*How Novels Work* 50). Several of James Phelan’s categories for unreliability in *Living to Tell about It* correspond to such a notion because they somehow reflect the innocence and lack of personal insight of the narrator (50-51). In fact, many situations in *The Curious Incident* seem to be based on restricted character narration rather than unreliable character narration (Phelan, *ibid* 80). When Phelan discusses young Frankie from *Angela’s Ashes*, there is a likeness to the autistic Christopher:

With naïve narrators [...] the most common restriction will be to the axis of facts, characters, and events, and that restricted narration will most commonly be reliable. But the authorial communication will depend on the audience interpreting and perhaps even evaluating the naïve narrator's report in ways that the narrator would never even attempt (ibid 80).

Christopher's memory does indeed make his reporting of facts, characters, and events reliable. He reports faithfully about when he talks to Mrs Alexander, about when he finds the letters from his mother, and about his trip to London, but he does not comment or interpret what happens to him. The reader does not reject and reconstruct Christopher's account because it is unreliable at these instances. Rather, she accepts and supplements the account with her own inferences and interpretations since it is merely restricted (Phelan, ibid 50-51). Consequently, the plot-driven parts of *The Curious Incident* correspond to restricted, not unreliable, narration.

Stephan Freißmann also finds Phelan's taxonomy useful in describing Christopher as a narrator who under-reads and misreports,<sup>11</sup> and similarly favours another classification of him than directly unreliable (401). Freißmann suggests that Christopher is a "limited narrator", since "his report is honest but his perspective and his knowledge are severely limited in comparison with ordinary persons" (396). Similarly, Wooden asserts that *The Curious Incident* "experiments with an unreliable narrator or, more accurately, one with limited narrative ability" (278). Incidentally, Freißmann's and Wooden's emphasis on Christopher's limitedness corresponds well to a notion of inadequate narration. Inadequate narrators are unintentionally unreliable and display different lacks, such as a lack of knowledge, insight, or ability to interpret events and memories correctly.

Another argument which supports the idea that Christopher is indeed an inadequate narrator is that Christopher's unreliability is of a kind that the reader sympathises with. His inadequacy is ascribed to the Asperger Syndrome rather than to a consciously deceptive personal trait. Christopher cannot help misunderstanding other human beings' emotions, intentions, and moods since the few aspects he does understand are learnt cognitively and manually rather than socially and intuitively. In the end, the novel has what Phelan calls bonding unreliability rather than estranging unreliability, which allows Christopher to be both a credible and an inadequate character narrator at the same time (*Narrative* 223-224). The

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<sup>11</sup> Freißmann does not give examples of what Christopher's «misreporting» consists of. In fact, it seems as a slip on Freißmann's part to claim that Christopher misreports events and facts, since he is utterly dedicated to telling the truth and wants to be accurate. The novel does not invite the reader to question Christopher's reporting, but to question his ability to interpret the facts and events which he presents.

reader is not distanced from the narrator but experiences closeness and identification with him because of his innocence and dedication to truth.

In fact, the frequent filling-in-the-gaps activity that results from Christopher's restricted narration is an important part of the reader's engagement with the novel. Mullan believes that "requiring the reader to fill in these gaps allows for a tragicomic intuition of character's feelings that a more adequate narrator could not invite" (*How Novels Work* 50). For example, the reader understands the frustration and effort of Christopher's parents better than Christopher does himself. The reader is also quickest to infer that Christopher's mother is still alive when Christopher finds her letters (Freißmann 412). She can also speculate that Christopher's father had a relationship with Mrs Shears, since the latter spent so much time in their house after Mr Shears ran away with Christopher's mother. As such, the reader is just as involved in the detective work of the novel to resolve what happened to the dog and to Christopher's mother as Christopher is. Christopher provides the clues, but is not always able to interpret them or to make sense of them as quickly as the Asperger-Syndrome-free reader might be. The reader also sees the (tragi)comic aspect of many situations, although Christopher does not. Christopher's inadequacy, therefore, is in fact projected in a way that creates suspense, involvement, and sympathy on the part of the reader.

## 4.6 Conclusion

Memory is significant in *The Curious Incident* because it informs Christopher's credibility as a narrator and as a character. His good memory justifies the detailed retrospective accounts in the novel, which makes the narrator stand out as a much more credible narrator in terms of faithfully retelling the past than many other character narrators. At the same time, the novel's memory phenomena are complex enough to involve paradoxes and creative literary twists such as Christopher's "filmographic" way of remembering (Bollard, "The Aspie Memory") and a manually controlled memory. His Asperger Syndrome yields a novel that largely relies on restricted narration, which encourages the reader to actively interpret and engage herself in Christopher's accounts. In *Never Let Me Go*, reader involvement is evoked by means of Kathy's subjective and anachronistic notions of time and reminiscence. They incite the reader to work on the retrospective memory puzzle of the novel and make sense of Kathy's life.

Memory and the literary character are significantly interrelated in prose fiction because they exist by means of one another. Every literary character implicitly has a memory, just as memories are always associated with a literary character. Fictions of memory like



*Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident* lift the character narrator's memory out of the shadows and into the light. In these novels, the mechanisms of memory and the interrelationship between memory and character are made explicit and available to the reader. Clearly, the memories of character narrators Kathy H. and Christopher Boone are central components of their diverse character portraits. Kathy is deeply engaged with the memories pertaining to her own life story, which closely connect with her current situation as a clone who is soon to fulfill her predestined and final purpose in life – to donate her vital organs to patients. For Christopher Boone, his memory is a source of pride and knowledge for its accuracy and capacity – and for its usefulness in autobiographical novel-writing. Memory has a central place in these novels because of the characters' self-conscious reminiscence, which transforms remembering into an object of direct scrutiny and commentary.

Additionally, these fictions of memory exemplify both that memory phenomena in prose fiction reflect remembering as it appears in reality (Erlil & Nünning 280) and that they also go beyond these realistic limits through specifically literary techniques and effects (Neumann 334). Concerning the latter, *Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident* are examples of how literary memory phenomena might enrich narratives with interesting complexity and contribute with artfulness and originality. Literary memory phenomena also impact narratives because of the way they typically bring suspense and boost the plot development by means of detailed dialogue.

Memory is often a source of unreliability in prose fiction, which has consequences for the literary character and for the reader experience. Self-conscious reminiscence in *Never Let Me Go* initiates a comprehensive negotiation of unreliability pertaining to memory and ultimately asks whether veracity is at all a possible or a desirable result of reminiscence. Freeman's idea that memory is a device for meaning and identity rather than for accuracy and truth opens up a space where *Never Let Me Go* gains authenticity and impact as a fiction of memory. In a different vein, memory is a source of reliability and accuracy in an out-of-the-ordinary way in *The Curious Incident*. This is justified by Christopher Boone's Asperger Syndrome, which more often than not makes memory encoding and the memory retrieval process very extensive and precise. In the end, however, Christopher self-reflexively invites the reader to question the infallibility of his memory, since stress and unpredictability make his reliable "memory bank" halt like an overworked computer.

Complex memory phenomena in prose fiction do not inhibit characters from being believable but rather enhance their character effect and contribute a credible character portrait. They often strike the right balance between elements of realism and literary aesthetics which

leave space for the reader's imagination. Mieke Bal critically comments E. M. Forster's distinction between round and flat characters in that respect. She is convinced that to only value round (complex, surprising, and sympathetic) characters is in the end narrow-minded and exclusionary, because what a "character as analogue to humans loses in appeal, it gains in literary excitement. [An author's] masterpiece is much more fascinating when allowed to play with its paper people than when reduced to realist, moralist norms" (Bal 115). She further states that entire genres which are not psychological at the core "thus remain excluded from observation or aesthetic appreciation because all their characters are 'flat'" (ibid). Bal's assertion is highly valid, especially when it comes to literary pleasure in general. Nonetheless, believable characters are indisputably attractive to the reader and make the most lasting impact as well-wrought literary people. This does not mean that literary characters which are mostly flat should not be valued. However, flat characters clearly function in different ways than believable characters do within a work of prose fiction, with other kinds of reader responses and appreciations as a result.

Finally, the validity of the believable character is evident in *Never Let Me Go* and *The Curious Incident*. The novels display psychological traits through the ways in which self-conscious reminiscence is connected to memory phenomena with psychological outlets. Themes of remembering and identity go hand in hand with the believable character in such fictions of memory. Kathy H. and Christopher Boone would be failures as flat characters in their respective novels, but make a lasting impression as believable and remembering character narrators: their mélange of strengths, weaknesses, human resemblance, and literary originality makes them particularly vivid and alive in the reader's imagination.

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