

CZECH LITERATURE STUDIES

JIŘÍ TRÁVNÍČEK

# A Nation of Bookworms?



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## **A Nation of Bookworms?**

The Czechs as Readers: Reading in Times of Civilizational Fatigue

**Jiří Trávníček**

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Josef Jungmann (portrait by Antonín Machek) (source: [https://cs.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soubor:Anton%C3%ADn\\_Machek\\_-\\_Portrait\\_of\\_Josef\\_Jungmann.jpg](https://cs.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soubor:Anton%C3%ADn_Machek_-_Portrait_of_Josef_Jungmann.jpg))

Editorial office of the encyclopedia *Ottův slovník naučný* (litography by Josef Roubalík) (source: [https://cs.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soubor:Redakce\\_Ottova\\_slovníku\\_naučného\\_1891\\_Roubalík.png](https://cs.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soubor:Redakce_Ottova_slovníku_naučného_1891_Roubalík.png))

Interwar Czechoslovakia (1930) – map of language distribution (source: [https://cs.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soubor:Czechoslovakia\\_1930\\_linguistic\\_map\\_-\\_created\\_2008-10-30\\_ES.svg](https://cs.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soubor:Czechoslovakia_1930_linguistic_map_-_created_2008-10-30_ES.svg))

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Public library in Otrokovice after the floods in 1997 (source: author's archive)

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Book fair in Havlíčkův Brod (source: [https://cs.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soubor:Book\\_Fair\\_2014\\_Havl%C3%AD%C4%8Dk%C5%AFv\\_Brod.jpg](https://cs.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soubor:Book_Fair_2014_Havl%C3%AD%C4%8Dk%C5%AFv_Brod.jpg))

Hans Christian Andersen Night (Albrechtice 2016) (source: author's archive)

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Alena Mornštajnová, one of the most widely read Czech authors today (source: author's archive)

*The Egg and I* – cover of the first Czech edition in 1947 (source: author's archive)

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The eyetracking method, which detects eye movement on the page (source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/be/Eyetrackingtech.jpg>)

Cover of the English edition of Gabriel Zaid's *Los demasiados libros* (2003)(source: author's archive)

# Introduction

Here at the outset there's nothing for it but to start off with some thought-provoking quote. I shall entrust this task to my favourite Jewish-Polish-American prose writer Isaac Bashevis Singer: "Many writers say they write only for themselves. They are hypocrites. If men would stay on an island, all alone, and they knew that nobody would ever publish anything they wrote, they would write nothing. When you write, the reader is always there."

## CZECH SELF-STEREOTYPES

There are plenty of nations that describe themselves as "a nation of readers". The Czechs are no exception. It is all part of their mythology about themselves, according to which they are also a nation of musicians, hikers, do-it-yourselfers, gardeners and weekend-cottagers. Combining all these self-stereotypes, we are left with a very Central European *Biedermeier* character, who spends his Saturday digging in the garden at his cottage somewhere by a river and then makes a cup of coffee in the afternoon and sits down in a (home-made) armchair and has a nice read before getting together with a bunch of friends round a camp fire to play guitar and have a sing-song. Yes, this is romanticism, but the homely kind that's nicely under control and not too boisterous. In a word, Central European *Gemütlichkeit*.

## STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Although mythology and self-mythology have their unmistakable charm, this book is going to attempt something rather different – to go beyond them and perhaps even against them. Our aim will be to reveal Czech reading culture from the broadest possible perspective. We shall begin on a rather general note with a chapter on reading culture – what it is and what its boundaries are. We will then turn to Czech reading culture, examining it first from a historical perspective and then from a present-day standpoint. This will be followed by a focus upon the domestic discourse on reading and readership over approximately the last 10–15 years and then a quantitative perspective (with statistics from four representative surveys) and a qualitative one (with narrators' depositions and readers' life-stories from research in the 2009–2015 period). The next section aims to present a comparison of Czech reading culture with those of others, on the basis *inter alia* of statistical data. In conclusion we give the floor to those involved in the creation of everything to do with books and reading and indeed to its co-creators and some of those who reflect upon it. All this is to be brought to a summarizing conclusion in which we would like to reflect the current state of reading culture in general both in this country and elsewhere. Here we shall be asking whether reading nowadays needs some new mission, and if so, what this should be.

## ON A RATHER PERSONAL NOTE

The author of this book is by profession a literary scholar. He studied at a time when academic freedoms in his country were being suppressed, and tuition was for the most part contaminated by ideology. That is one reason why at the time he tended towards structuralism – a defensive position of sorts, which also provided the security of firm ground beneath his feet – after all a piece of work such as a language structure is something quite unassailable, though it was perhaps more a case of securing his own position against possible

external attacks on works, primarily of an ideological nature. By the late 1980s, before the Communist era had come to an end, this security started to wear thin, as a work cannot merely be legitimized by defending it against whatever it essentially is not. A positive legitimization must also be found. And here the author of this book came to the conclusion that literature is a relational entity, i.e. that its identity only emerges in communication. In other words: every work requires two people – an author and a reader. You cannot have one without the other, as Singer confirms above. In this respect structuralism did not offer any solid ground beneath our feet, as in its view the reader has a really bad reputation – both because he comes from the outside and because at best he presents himself as someone who merely has a duty to implement what the structure of the work has prescribed for him. He has no personal initiative, let alone any context of his own. Moreover, a further uncertainty arose at this point: Are not all the “semantic dramas” involved in poetic and narrative structures, no matter how intellectually clever and captivating they are, rather artificial dramas? Are they not just comfortable speculation from a text-centric ivory tower? After all should we not move on to the dramas offered by communication itself, bringing us much closer to the empirical reader, i.e. seek him out and obtain his testimony directly? And where such testimonies do not exist, at least examine indirect ones, i.e. open ourselves up to the social dimension of literature, which alone provides a view of literature as a whole and in its entirety.

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age phenomena and those created by the digital revolution), Roger Chartier (for his methodological input particularly with regard to historical research into readership), Miha Kovač (for his reflections on the book market), Albert Manguel (for the engaging way he wrote his *A History of Reading*), Anne Mangen (for her thorough, empirically-based research into e-reading), Vít Richter (for always reliably providing the organizational and technical underpinnings for our four joint statistical surveys), Jonathan Rose (for making the connection between social history and the history of reading), Stanisław Siekierski (who considered reading in its cultural context and as a cultural technique that partly supplements standards and partly works against them), Erich Schön (who convincingly considered the turn of the 18th and the 19th centuries to be a great mental watershed period in our civilization, particularly as a result of the proliferation of reading), Shafquat Towheed (for his initiative on the editorial front, as well as in the Reading Experience Database project), Maryanne Wolf (who has made a marvellous connection between neurological findings and the “soft” sciences, while her conception of writing is also an inspiration for personal projects), and there are several others too.

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# Reading culture

In this chapter we would like to define the term reading culture – what it is and what its boundaries are.<sup>1</sup> It will be useful to look at reading culture from two standpoints – the synchronic (systematic) and the diachronic, particularly in order to avoid the excessively presentistic vision to which our times have succumbed. The digital revolution (and the social and cultural changes it has brought about) is often described from this standpoint alone, particularly with regard to the technical opportunities involved, while audiences (and their reactions) are taken into account far less, and the historical reflections, i.e. their orientation on a time axis, even less.<sup>2</sup>

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1 This part is based to a large extent on the author's introductory chapters in his book *Kulturní vetřelec. Dějiny čtení - kalendárium* (Brno: Host, 2020).

2 Selected literature on reading culture: Alfred Clemens Baumgärtner (ed.), *Lesen. Ein Handbuch* (Hamburg: Verlag für Buchmarkt-Forschung, 1974), pp. 523-642; Petra Bohnsack - Hans-Friedrich Foltin (eds.), *Lesekultur. Populäre Lesestoffe von Gutenberg bis zum Internet* (Marburg: Universitätsbibliothek, 1999); Janusz Dunin, *Pismo zmienia świat. Czytanie, lektura, czytelnictwo* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1998), pp. 189-197; Anna Dymmel, "Kultura czytelnicza - teoria i praktyka." In Anna Dymmel, - Sebastian Dawid Kotuła - Artur Znajomski (eds.), *Kultura czytelnicza i informacyjna - teoria i praktyka. Wybrane zagadnienia* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curii-Skłodowskiej, 2015), pp. 9-59; Hartmut Eggert - Christine Garbe, *Literarische Sozialisation* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2003), pp. 19 and further; William A. Johnson, *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 3-16; Rudolf Lesňák, *Horizonty čitateľskej kultúry* (Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ, 1991), pp. 10-71; János Riesz - Hans-Walter Schmidt-Hannisa (eds.), *Lesekulturen. Reading Cultures* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 7-12; Gerhard Schmidtchen, *Lesekultur in Deutschland. Ergebnisse repräsentative Buchmarktstudien für den Börseverein des Deutschen Buchhandels* (Frankfurt am Main: Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels, 1968); Erich Schön,

## THE CONCEPT OF THE WHOLE

Let us start with a conceptual purge using the *reading as a media skill / reading as a value system / reading culture* triad. The key term of the first element is competence (the capacity to read, its practical implementation and technical skill), the second element involves cultivation of values (preferences, selection and the ability to interpret and evaluate); and it is only in the light of the third element that we are able to see both the first and the second within their network of relations and determinants (keyword: motivation, reason, context). I read because I am able (*reading as a media skill*), I read because I want to (*reading as a value system*) and I read because I am part of a particular network of relations and premises (*reading culture*). Reading culture places reading as a media skill and reading as a value system within appropriate socio-cultural frameworks and historically underpins them. The reading perspective cannot get by without the writing perspective, but in sharp contrast the writing perspective need not take account of the reading perspective. At least that is what we have become accustomed to. In other words, the perspective of the author and the work only optionally anticipate a reader – and only when this is recognized as being appropriate, and for the most part only in the case of a participant in literary operation (reviews, polemics and so forth). On the other hand the reader's perspective (i.e. the reception) contains within itself both the work and its author, as reading always entails reading *something*, behind which there is always *someone*. Hence it is only the reader who makes out a final account of the communication. This is succinctly expressed by Czech writer Ludvík Vaculík: "I do not write because of the readers, but it is written for them,"<sup>3</sup> meaning something like "from the standpoint of the author the reader need not be present, but from the standpoint of literary communication, the reader plays an irreplaceable role, which cannot be neglected."

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"'Lesekultur' - Einige historische Klärungen." In: Cornelia Rosebrock (ed.), *Lesen im Medienzeitalter* (Weinheim - München: Juventa, 1995), pp. 137-164.

3 Ludvík Vaculík, *Hodiny klavíru* (Brno: Atlantis, 2007), p. 83.



In other words, each of the three main parties involved in communication (potentially) has something to do with the other two. For example the author is the originator of the text destined for the reader, the text always has its author, as well as its addressee, but it is only when a text is taken up by a reader that we can be sure the communicational potential has become the communicational reality, i.e. that it has been realized and the intention has become the deed. The problem, from the standpoint of history in particular, is how to record the given linguistic potential in its state of communicational reality, i.e. how to clearly allocate it as a social action. We often find ourselves with a lack of evidence, i.e. there are no traces to indicate the behaviour of readers at any given time.

## WHO IS INCLUDED IN READING CULTURE?

The internal experience of reading (just like the author's internal experience of writing) remains difficult to detect, so Robert Darnton believes that we should focus our efforts on reconstructing the social context of reading,<sup>4</sup> which according to Polish bibliologist Irena Socha is of a dual nature. The first aspect might be called the *socio-demographic profile* (sex/gender, age, social status, education, place of residence), and the second the *reference community*, comprising our profession, social ties, interests and value preferences.<sup>5</sup> All of this should warn us away from creating some kind of fuzzy reading, as in the example of deconstruction (particularly in the case of Paul de Man),<sup>6</sup> or post-structuralism (in the case of Roland Barthes).<sup>7</sup> There

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4 Robert Darnton, *The Case for Books. Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), p. 203.

5 Irena Socha, "Lektura - przekaz, komunikacja czy relacja?" In Anna Żbikowska-Migoń - Marta Skalska Złat (eds.), *Encyklopedia książki* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2017), pp. 99-113.

6 Primarily in the book *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven - London: Yale University Press, 1979).

7 Primarily in the book *The Pleasure of the Text*, transl. by Robert Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975 [1973]).

is no such thing, even at the synchronic level, let alone the diachronic level (i.e. from a historical perspective).

Hence if the existence of two social contexts is a constitutive part of reading then we will not be able to do without those who engage as protagonists in the contexts in question, i.e. the readers. A reader is not a voluntaristic usurper of the semantic purity of a text, i.e. its violator. Then again, readers are not just marionettes carrying out the text's instructions. The space that they inhabit might be called *contingent freedom*. This is appositely expressed by Martyn Lyons: readers create their own meanings, but they do not just create them entirely of their own volition. They "are not passive or docile".<sup>8</sup> British cultural historian Jonathan Rose has put it differently, when he states that those who examine the historical development of reading are compelled to express "a general dissatisfaction with the Frankfurt School, *marxisant* criticism, all of which tended to treat the ordinary reader as the passive victim of mass culture or capitalism or the discourse of patriarchy".<sup>9</sup>

The question is *who* to include in reading culture. It was previously believed that only those who read serious literature could be included, because only such literature is capable of adopting a non-specialist (i.e. an aesthetic) stance. However, the precarious nature of this definition has become increasingly evident – fiction can also be read quite pragmatically for special-interest purposes, i.e. in order to obtain information (e.g. in historical and war novels); poetry that has been imposed on a school pupil as compulsory reading material thereby goes beyond merely adopting a non-specialist stance. It is an educational tool. A counterpart of this stance is the statement that reading culture ought to just include readers who are known to only turn to reading material in their leisure time and for enjoyment. This

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8 Martyn Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 6.

9 Jonathan Rose, "The History of Education as the History of Reading," *History of Education* 3 (2007), nos. 4-5, p. 602; online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00467600701496922?journalCode=thed20> [accessed 2020-04-01].

standpoint is just a somewhat broader version of the previous one, but even here the problem arises of whether or not we are actually capable of clearly distinguishing between what we read pragmatically and what we do not. And can this generally be established for all social groups? There are genres that clearly capitalize on the fuzziness of this boundary – such as the historical novel and fictionalized biographies. At the time the statistical surveys were carried out, active participants in reading culture included anyone who met certain set criteria – e.g. if they read a book a year, half year, month, fortnight, week etc). Here we abandon the criteria of *belles lettres* (serious literature) and the character of the reading (in one's leisure time). We should consider all members of the population in question aged six upwards, though we would stress that this only applies to fully literate cultures. Why? Because in communities where reading is a key competence fostered by (compulsory) school attendance, we are *de facto* all readers. Each one of us is dependent upon the written word.

## READING CULTURES

Statistics and qualitative findings clearly confirm that there is a women's reading culture and a men's reading culture, which differ from each other fundamentally, primarily in the intensity of the reading (which is higher for women) and perhaps also in their appreciation of fiction (which is again higher for women). They also confirm that they differ in their age cohort – e.g. in the present-day Czech population (and elsewhere), reading decreases significantly in middle age. It also differs in terms of reference communities – so that IT middle managers read one thing in one way, while humanities lecturers at universities or grammar school pupils read something else in a different way. Each community of this kind takes something different for granted, and in terms of reading culture, a network of different texts is involved. In other words, the prerequisites of group identity are by and large not transferable outside the group in question.

There are also certain national formulas involved here which have been created historically and culturally – for example, in terms of the number of books read per year the level for the entire Czech population corresponds to the level of people with higher education aged 40+ in the Polish population. The Scandinavian countries have a far better-developed approach to public libraries, while they do not have such a sharp division between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” literature. Hence it is more likely for them to review detective stories in their dailies and magazines, just as it is for them to espouse such literature, as it does not bear such a social stigma. The proliferation of e-books among Americans is considerably greater than it is in Western Europe, while the United Kingdom acts as a kind of intermediate zone between the two cultures. Europe itself is largely under the sway of a north-south polarity, with the highest reading rates in Scandinavia and the lowest in the south (e.g. Portugal, Greece and Malta). In Canada there is a large difference between Anglophone and Francophone cultures – with the former standing out for its much higher reading rate. There again in Israel a difference arises between various types of Jewish immigrants, with the strongest reading group comprising immigrants from Europe and old established settlers (*Yishuv*). In Hungary (as in Poland) there is a great contrast in reading habits between the urban and the rural populations. In the USA books are bought mostly by older people, while in the Czech Republic mostly by the middle-aged. Research has even been carried out into the “cultural honesty” of individual nations, i.e. how (un)willingly they admit that they have not read particular books, especially those in the canon. The French came out worst while the Americans fared best.<sup>10</sup> This reveals another variable in any particular culture: a kind of reading snobbery coefficient.

One way or another a pluralistic conception of reading culture (i.e. as reading cultures) provides a good safeguard both from above and

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10 See Heinz Steinberg, “Books and readers as subject of research in Europe and America,” *International Social Science Journal* 24 (1972), no. 4, pp. 744–755.