

Marnie Hensler

Border Crossing and Reader Reception in the Works of Bernardine Evaristo

A Close and Distant Reading Approach

Master's Thesis

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**Border Crossing and Reader Reception in Bernardine Evaristo's
The Emperor's Babe (2001), *Mr. Loverman* (2013) and *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) –
A Close and Distant Reading Approach**

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“The truth is that good literature about anything can be enjoyed by all kinds of people.
Literature transcends all perceived differences and barriers. It’s partly the point of it”

(Evaristo, Foreword to *Re:Thinking ‘Diversity’ in Publishing*)

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I. Border-Crossing Fiction

The influence of fiction on a reader's personal life and social cognition has been of interest to academia ever since the beginnings of reader-response criticism and the cognitive turn of the 1980s. Literature, after all, has the power to “serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (Cixous 879). Reader response and reception theorists, cognitive literary critics and empirical receptionists have thus been trying to empirically explain the transformative, subversive powers of literature.

In order to prove literature's subversive, border-crossing powers, academia has turned to both quantitative and qualitative methods. Through distant reading and the empirical study of reader reception data, scholars empirically measure the effects of a literary work on the reader. Through close reading and the traditional hermeneutic study of literature, scholars look into the influence of a work's narrative techniques on reader reception. To properly understand the subversive powers of literature, research needs to look at both textual and reader variables since neither textual devices nor reader attributes exclusively define a reader's emotional engagement with and her¹ transportation into a literary work (Fernandez-Quintanilla 142).

This paper uses both distant and close reading methods to analyse reader reception of Bernardine Evaristo's works *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), *Mr. Loverman* (2013) and her Booker Award winning publication *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019). Through experimental form and style, approachable characters and humorous style of writing, Evaristo successfully draws the contemporary reader into the story world and educates her on the constructedness of cognitive borders and social categorizations (i.e., sex, gender, age, race, class etc.). After the reader crosses the border into the story world, she follows the individual journeys of the fictional characters with the help of mind-reading and narrative empathy and leaves the story world with “differences in cognitive processing” followed by effects on “cognition, perception and action” (Nünning 120).

To empirically analyse the educational, border-crossing effect of a literary work that reaches beyond the reading experience, this paper uses reception data from Goodreads in the form of reader profile information and reviews on *The Emperor's Babe*, *Mr. Loverman* and *Girl, Woman, Other*. After a theoretical introduction to the historic development of the academic interest in both border and (empirical) reception studies,

¹ For practicability and simplification purposes, this paper will refer to the reader as female, which naturally also includes all genders.