

**The “dissolving margins” of Elena Ferrante and the Neapolitan Novels: A cognitive approach to fictionality, authorial intentionality, and autofictional reading strategies**

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### **The “dissolving margins” of Elena Ferrante and the Neapolitan Novels**

A Cognitive Approach to Fictionality, Authorial Intentionality, and Autofictional Reading  
Strategies

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Using Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan novels as case study, this article presents a cognitive approach to fictionality and authorial intention using Text World Theory and Mind-Modelling. It investigates two forms of ontological distortion: readers’ (mis)classification of the novels’ genre (as autofiction or autobiography) and the problem posed by the author’s pseudonymic identity. The analysis has three parts: first, I conduct a Text World analysis of the novels’ syntactic/stylistic similarities to autobiography and, in doing so, reveal its ontological structure; second, I consider the ontological liminality of narration and the ways in which readers build an authorial mind-model of Ferrante; thirdly, I explore the assessment of critics and/as readers of the text’s fictionality and the impact of Ferrante’s pseudonym on perceptions of authorial intentionality and the authorial mind-model. Ultimately, I argue that a cognitive approach offers greatest insight into readers’ interpretations of authors and of fictionality.

**Keywords:** Author, Authorial Intentionality, Autofiction, Cognitive Narratology, Cognitive Stylistics, Elena Ferrante, Fictionality, Mind-Modelling, Pseudonym, Text World Theory.

## **Introduction**

In Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*, the first novel in the Neapolitan Quartet, the narrator describes what her friend Lila reportedly calls a sensation of “dissolving margins” in which “the outlines of people and things suddenly dissolved, disappeared” (Ferrante 2012, p. 89).<sup>1</sup> For Lila, such episodes are experienced as psychic disturbances, yet the concept might equally designate the blur or indeterminacy of fictionality that characterizes the reception of, publicity for, and reporting on both the author Elena Ferrante and her Neapolitan novels. Briggs (2015), for instance, writes about her experience of reading the Neapolitan novels: “The usual distance between fiction and life collapses when you read Ferrante” (no pagination). In this article, I investigate two forms of ontological distortion: the (mis)classification of the novels’ genre by readers and the problem posed by the author’s pseudonymic identity. I explore the dissolving margins between fictionality and referentiality in reception or, in other words, how readers identify, navigate, and even confuse or reject the intended fictionality or referentiality of a work – intended, that is, by authors and/or publishers and marked as such through, for instance, textual features, paratextual framing, or extratextual signals. Against the grain of most narrative inquiries into fictionality, I adopt a cognitive approach, arguing that such an approach offers the greatest insight into how readers form their interpretative judgments and experience fictional texts and their authors as vicariously real.

## **Narrative Inquiry and Fictionality**

In contemporary narrative theory, there exist three predominant approaches to fictionality: semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic/rhetorical (Gorman, 2005; Schaeffer, 2012; Zetterberg Gjerlevsen, 2016). Herein, I provide an overview of these approaches, critically evaluating each. In doing so, I demonstrate that there is as yet no comprehensive account of fictionality that adequately captures the experience of readers.

Semantic approaches primarily ground the fact-fiction distinction in the ontological status of subject matter (e.g., assessing the truthfulness of propositions). Such accounts are underwritten by analytic philosophy and modal logic and often associated with Possible Worlds Theory (cf. Pavel, 1986; Ryan, 1991; Ronen, 1994; Doležel, 1998). The value of semantic and Possible Worlds approaches lies in their recognition of different narrative ontologies as well as in the decoupling of fictionality as concept from a narrow understanding of fiction as literary work (Zetterberg Gjerlevsen, 2016). Semantic approaches thus allow a broader sense of fictionality as invention and imagination. The approach, however, also entails shortcomings. Schaeffer (2012) suggests that texts with hybrid ontologies, such as counterfactual fiction and autofiction, pose challenges because the semantic account is too “segregationist” (Pavel, 1986, pp. 11–17; cited in Schaeffer, 2012). Werth (1999), in fact, makes a similar point, when he writes, “it is assumed to be possible to distinguish between propositions and non propositions, i.e. to decide which expressions are capable of bearing a truth-value and what that truth value might be” (p. 196). The problem with such an assumption, according to Werth (1999), is that it is founded on the belief that “reference is a straightforward matter of being able to designate the extension of a constant ‘in the world’” (1996, p. 196). In both semantic and Possible Worlds thinking, the question of referential or

fictional positioning is thus shifted into the symbolic domain; as Walsh (2007) criticizes, this “allows the language of fiction to be literal contingently, on the basis of what it is possible to infer from the text” (p. 15). More significantly, because of this shift, semantic approaches fall short in capturing the experientiality of what seems fictional or real for readers (Schaeffer, 2012). Indeed, in his outline of frameworks that might account for the cognitive processes of reading, Stockwell (2002) finds Possible Worlds Theory not fit for purpose precisely because it “is a formal logic set, not a cognitive array of knowledge. This means that possible worlds theory has little to say about the worlds of literary reading” (p. 93).<sup>2</sup>

The syntactic approach has been called “text-focused” (Klauk & Köppe, 2014; Fludernik, 2018, p. 71) because of the attention paid to textual features as indicators of fictionality (cf. Hamburger, 1973; Banfield, 1982; Cohn, 1999). Although some critics insist that such features are “the *differentia specifica* of narrative fiction” – as Banfield (1983, p. 258; original emphasis) claims for the representation of consciousness – others instead note that they are characteristic and only “optional” (Genette, 1993, p. 83). Syntactic approaches are appealing because they enable analysts to identify elements that might signal to readers how texts should be interpreted. Conversely, these signals have been widely critiqued for their unreliability. As Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh (2016) write, “[n]o technique is found in all fiction and/or only in fiction, even though *within certain cultural and historical contexts* certain textual features can become strong conventional indices of fictive communicative intent” (p. 66; original emphasis). Narratologists have sought to negotiate the unreliability of signposts by reconceiving of them as “narrative techniques associated with fictionality” (Hatavara & Mildorf, 2017, p. 67) or fictionalizing strategies embedded at a local level within texts categorized as non-fiction overall (Iversen & Nielsen, 2016; Phelan, 2016). From a cognitive perspective, any rigid equation of textual signposts with fiction is too essentialist because: firstly, not all texts can be clearly defined as either fact *or* fiction; and secondly, to

equate text features so absolutely neglects the possibility that authors might deliberately mislead readers and that readers might misinterpret or ignore such signposts.

Finally, the pragmatic or rhetorical approach bases its treatment of fictionality within a communication model originally designed for oral communication (cf. Searle, 1975; Walsh, 2007; Nielsen et al., 2015; Phelan, 2017). In this view, “there is no necessary homology of form and function, and techniques follow from communicative purposes, not the other way around” (Nielsen et al., 2015, pp. 66–67). That is, textual features are produced by speakers/writers for hearers/readers to recognize. Fictionality is consequently a “contextual assumption” (Walsh, 2007, p. 30) of authorial intentionality. As Phelan (2017) explains, “*someone intentionally signaling* distinguishes fictionality from lying [...]. Unlike liars, users of fictionality want their audiences to recognize their departures from the realm of the actual” (p. 235; original emphasis). The focus on the act of communication within the rhetorical approach is advantageous since it highlights that texts are used by people in the world. However, the emphasis on fictionality as an interpretative supposition raises the question of *how* readers conceptualize the intentions of discourse producers. This “underrating of the reception side in the communicative process” (Wilderkamp, van Montfoort, & van Ruiswijk, 1980, p. 554) has been cited as a problem with pragmatic approaches since their inception and is, furthermore, the motivation behind adding situational context into the account (Wilderkamp et al., 1980, pp. 550–552).

In summary, these approaches each offer valuable contributions to the study of fictionality: the liberation of the concept of fictionality from the strictly fictional (e.g., the literary work), the mapping of narrative ontologies, recognition of users and uses of fictionality in communicative interaction, and the contextual potential of textual features as signposts. However, no approach distinguishes itself as sufficient in accounting for the

cognitive processes involved in interpretations of fictionality nor of the resultant experiential impact of such appraisals. A cognitive approach to fictionality is therefore urgently needed.

### **Foundations for a Cognitive Approach to Fictionality**

In a debate article considering interconnections and divergences between the unnatural (rhetorical) approach to fictionality<sup>3</sup> and a potential cognitive approach, Nielsen claims that cognitive approaches have exhibited a “neglect of, and indifference to, what is specifically fictional about literary and fictional narratives” (Kukkonen & Nielsen, 2018, pp. 475–476). Kukkonen rejoins by acknowledging that it is rare to find an “explicit theorization about how the fictional quality of the texts [...] affects cognitive processes differently from nonfictional texts” (Kukkonen & Nielsen, 2018, p. 478). Kukkonen highlights the widely held belief, across the cognitive sciences and cognitive literary studies, that the same mental processes that are in force in everyday life also apply in literary reading (cf. Stockwell 2002; Herman 2013). Indeed, functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) shows overlapping activation patterns in the brain when responding to factual or fictional cues (Abraham, von Cramon, & Schubotz, 2008; Altmann, Borhn, Lubrich, Menninghaus, & Jacobs, 2014). However, Nielsen’s assertion that critics working in cognitive paradigms are indifferent to fictionality is an overstatement. Whilst fictionality is seldom addressed *per se*, the processes and experiences of mental representation, imagination, and emotional response that occur when engaging with both fictional and non-fictional discourse are central to work in cognitive narratology (Herman 2002), cognitive stylistics/poetics (Stockwell, 2002, 2009; Gavins & Steen, 2003; Gavins, 2007), and empirical reader response studies (Gerrig, 1993; Gerrig & Rapp, 2004; Whiteley, 2010, 2011; Whiteley & Canning, 2017). A cognitive account that

explicitly engages with fictionality is, admittedly though, in an embryonic state. In this section, I discuss significant precursors and empirical findings.

Iser's *The Fictive and the Imaginary* (1993) is a proto-cognitive discussion of fictionality (Gibbons 2014; Kukkonen & Nielsen, 2018).<sup>4</sup> His approach shares affinities with pre-existing approaches through attention to imaginative world-building (semantic), textual elements (syntactic), and intentionality (pragmatic). Iser advocates a triadic model, involving three ontologies: the real, the fictive, and the imaginary. He claims that textual features are not in and of themselves signposts of fictionality, but often signal through convention (Iser, 1993, p. 11) and are selected by authors and partly used by readers to deduce intentionality and fictionality (pp. 6, 12). Texts, therefore, serve to “provide the medium through which [the imaginary] emerges” (p. 2). Any fictionalizing act “stimulates attitudes toward an unreal world” (p. 20) – the imaginary. In the imaginary, including where the fictive world resembles the real world, “the world represented is bracketed” off from reality but construed by readers “as if it were real” (p. 15; original emphasis). Fictionality in this view is a cognitive attitude on the part of readers, based on textual features and their interpretation of author intentionality. Furthermore, the relationship between real, fictive, and imaginary is dynamic; just as real-world experiences influence details of the imaginary world, fictional experiences can impact real-world judgments.

The exceptionality of fiction, what Iser (1993) sees as “bracketing off” (p. 13), is evidenced in empirical research. Altmann et al. (2014) showed real readers a series of short narratives but manipulated the preliminary information about whether a text was ‘real’ or ‘invented’. Their results suggest that whilst reading both fiction and non-fiction necessitates generating mental representations, the process is not identical: “reading facts seems to elicit mental simulation processes basically regarding actions and their outcomes, reading fiction appears to initiate simulation processes especially concerning the motives behind an action



and thereby the protagonist's mind" (Altmann et al., 2014, p. 27). Readers therefore create mental representations regardless, but in imagining fictional worlds their emotional and empathetic responses are more actively engaged. Yang and Xue (2014) gathered electroencephalogram (EEG) data using text comprehension tasks. Participants were presented with a sentence in which the initial clause introduced characters (e.g., 'Harry Potter was talking with Hermione') and a subsequent clause added another character who was either compatible or incompatible (e.g., 'suddenly Lord Voldemort appeared' vs. 'suddenly Colin Powell appeared'). The data suggests that inconsistency in ontological conditions is easily detected. This is also the case for clashes between different fictional worlds though differentiating reality from fiction "is easier than distinguishing fiction from fiction" (Yang & Xue, 2015, p. 170).

Wilderkamp et al. (1980) published perhaps the earliest empirical study on fictionality. Their questionnaire yielded interesting results. Formulaic sentences, such as 'Once upon a time', are not "a sufficient guarantee of fictionality" (Wilderkamp et al., 1980, p. 561); they cue fictionality but readers withhold judgment to see what follows. In terms of text-based markers generally, readers with more prior reading experience are more likely to interpret textual features as signposts of fictionality. This shows that fictionality judgments are contextually situated and readers' existing knowledge and literary competencies influence their appraisal. Whilst references to mythical beings ('dwarves') appear to necessarily entail fictionality, the opposite is not the case for nouns with referentiality ('Amsterdam') since readers can accept these as fictional when assigned a new fictional context (e.g., there is an Amsterdam in an invented country). The researchers explain this by arguing for the importance of the internal consistency of worlds. Ultimately, Wilderkamp, van Montfoort, and van Ruiswijk (1980) conclude that the "role of the receiver in the communication process thus involves the interaction between pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic features" (p. 552).

The empirical studies discussed in this section suggest that readers construct mental representations. There is empirical evidence for world ontologies (the differentiation and importance of consistency), the potentiality of signposts, and the contextual situation of the communication – all of which also featured in Iser’s thinking. As such, it is important to maintain these within a cognitive approach to fictionality.

### **The Cognitive Approach: Text World Theory and Mind-Modelling**

Building on previous work (Gibbons, 2014), I propose a cognitive approach to fictionality using Text World Theory (Werth, 1999; Gavins, 2007).<sup>5</sup> Whilst Possible Worlds Theory is a model of logic, Text World Theory is a cognitive account of discourse processing, developed from cognitive science and refined through reader-response research. Text World Theory is ideal because it complements Iser’s emphasis on the imaginary and the previously discussed empirical evidence that people create mental representations when processing language. Such imagined mental representations are *text-worlds*. Each text-world is distinguished based on “essential differences” of “ontological status” (Gavins, 2007, p. 76). Text-worlds are populated by *enactors*, a term used instead of character to allow for multiple versions (such as past-selves). Deictic patterns in texts are *world-building*, generating the parameters of text-worlds by signifying time, space/location, and the people and objects therein. Readers “project” into these text-worlds, taking an imagined “cognitive stance” (Duchan, Bruder, & Hewitt, 1995; Whiteley, 2011). Changes to the parameters as well as negation and modality cause *world-switches*, generating new ontologically distinct text-worlds. Within text-worlds, *function advancers* progress the narrative, for example through actions, and are usually associated with verb phrases. In contradistinction, the *discourse-world* represents the real-

world context in which *participants*, who bring with them existing knowledge, engage in communication. The discourse-world is *split* in most written communication, with participants separated in space and time. Diagrams are often, though not always, used to visually map the ontological structure of text-worlds and to show the relation of text-worlds to each other and to the discourse-world. World-builders are usually named in diagrams whilst function-advancing propositions are represented with arrows.

The fictionality or ontological status of text-worlds is, I argue, cognitively assigned by readers. Understanding fictionality and ontology as attributes of worlds formed through cognitive appraisals enables an explanation (and, indeed, acknowledges the possibility) of readers forming fictionality judgments of a text that differ to the intentions of an author. Indeed, in arguing for the benefits of Text World Theory, Werth highlights the Theory's foundational belief that "discourses are 'world-building ventures', and that even the 'actual world', also known as 'reality' (part of what constitutes the discourse world), is a mental construct. This means that there is no principled, logical difference between the actual world and imaginative and speculative text worlds" (Werth, 1999, p. 263). Fictionality judgments are therefore based on contextually situated interpretations of textual features and world-building information along with interpretations of authorial intentionality. Werth (1999) says as much in his explanation that truth-assessments are a two-part process: "calculating the truth or probability of the propositions in the text" through recourse to relevant extratextual knowledge and "modifying that calculation in terms of the reliability and the claims of the speaker" (p. 211).

The purported import of authorial intentionality on fictionality judgment makes a cognitively informed framework even more essential. The question of the author has historically plagued literary and narratological criticism. Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946), amongst others, dismiss authorial intentionality as immaterial and unavailable. Contrastingly,

Booth (1983) seeks to account for the author's centrality in interpretation by postulating the "implied author" whilst Irvin (2006) revises authorial intentionality as a *hypothetical* intentionalism as a means of acknowledging that intentionality is, inevitably, constructed by readers. Burke (2008) ultimately resigns that although "authorial subjectivity is theoretically unassimilable, it cannot be practically circumvented" (p. 183). From a cognitive perspective, as Stockwell (2016) argues, readers "treat literary works as having some sort of access to authorial lives" (p. 149).<sup>6</sup> Whilst intentionality is seen as central to fictionality judgments then (most notably in pragmatic/rhetorical accounts), it too must be regarded as a cognitive process of assessment in order to account for reader responses and to resolve the issue of theoretical availability raised by Burke.

Cognitive models such as Theory of Mind offer insight into the human ability to attribute mental states to others (for a summary, see Leslie, 2001). Theory of mind has been used to account for how readers construct the minds of characters (Zunshine, 2006; Stockwell, 2009). Stockwell (2016) has additionally made the case that "[a]uthorial intention is a cognitive model, built and enriched by the reader" (p. 160). He articulates:

The real-world relationship that lies between actuality and fictionality is, of course, the author-reader relationship, and this brings us back to a resolution of the key issue within authorial intention: in both fictional and actual encounters, we assume intentionality and can then model a hypothetical intention on the basis of that presumption. (Stockwell, 2016, pp. 152–153.)

Cognitive processes of mind-modelling are therefore the foundation of interpretive judgments about authorial intention. Stockwell argues that readers derive a "preferred reading" (Stockwell, 2013, pp. 268–269, 2016, p. 154) from their authorial mind-model. This preferred

reading includes a stance on fictionality, amongst other elements. For instance, elsewhere I have considered the significance of authorial mind-models as part of readers' ethical responses to texts (Gibbons, 2019; cf. Stockwell, 2013).

Text World Theory and mind-modelling are principally suited to the analysis of fictionality for three reasons: first, Text World Theory is a text-driven approach which, in its attention to textual features, can consider potential signposts of fictionality; second, it provides rigorous ontological mapping of imagined text-worlds; and third, it is context-sensitive and therefore, complemented by mind-modelling, its recognition of the shared act of communication includes consideration of authorial production and intentionality alongside reader response. I now put this cognitive approach to fictionality into practice and, in doing so, evidence the value of the critical synthesis of Text World Theory and mind-modelling offered herein.

### **Dissolving Margins in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels**

Italian author Elena Ferrante's first novel appeared in 1992 and was subsequently published in English in 2005. The Neapolitan quartet has, particularly, received critical acclaim: the second book, *The Story of A New Name*, was shortlisted for the American Best Translated Book Award in 2014; the final book, *The Story of the Lost Child*, was a *New York Times Book Review* best book of 2015, a finalist for the Italian Strega Prize the same year, and nominated for the Man Booker International Prize in 2016. As with written discourse generally, the discourse-worlds of the Neapolitan novels are split, with Elena Ferrante and her readers separated in space and time. With regards to *My Brilliant Friend*, Elena Ferrante as author-participant wrote the book prior to its 2012 publication, thus there is an inevitable

delay between the author-participant's writing and reader-participants' reception; I, for instance, read the book in 2018.

Paratextual framing is often cited as an important signpost of fictionality (Walsh, 2007, p. 45) even though it "may be ambiguous and not all-decisive" (Nielsen et al., 2015, p. 67). The front cover of the English translation of Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* features the description "Book One of the Neapolitan Novels", a phrase repeated on each subsequent book (with the number in the series altered, as appropriate).<sup>7</sup> The copyright page bears the disclaimer, "This is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously". Each book also includes an 'Index of Characters'. The paratext of Ferrante's novels therefore clearly signals fictionality. Nonetheless, readers and critics often read an autobiographical trace in the Neapolitan novels: Mallick speaks of the "semi-autobiographical novels of Elena Ferrante and Karl Ove Knausgaard" (Mallick, 2015); Cummins lists Ferrante alongside Rachel Cusk, Ben Lerner, and Knausgaard as "writers grouped under autofiction's umbrella" (Cummins, 2018); McCleen pronounces that "two of the critical darlings and bestsellers" of contemporary autofiction are "Karl Ove Knausgaards' *My Struggle* series and Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan saga" (McCleen, 2018); and Jensen (2018) argues, "[w]riters such as [Rachel] Cusk, Karl Ove Knausgaard and Elena Ferrante, for example, draw upon the temporal demands of multivolume autofictions to induce readers to consider at great length the extraordinary power of words, ideas, images and everyday events" (p. 76).

Whilst "there is no single definition of autofiction" (Dyx, 2018, p. 3), it is generally understood as a genre descriptor for literary works featuring the author and focusing on events from the author's life that are nevertheless (to lesser or greater extents) fictionalized. Autofiction is, therefore, a hybrid literary form, which sits at the intersection between autobiography and fiction. In his attempt to define autobiography, Lejeune (1989) undertook

what has since become a highly influential comparative linguistic mapping of autobiography and fiction. His insights are particularly useful for a cognitive approach to fictionality since he claims to consider texts “from the position of the reader” (Lejeune, 1989, p. 4). In contrast, “starting from within the mind of the author” – that is, a mind that cannot be known – “poses a problem” (p. 4). Ultimately, the key features of texts that offer readers what Lejeune calls “an autobiographical pact” (in contrast to a “fictional pact”) are: the self-identicalness of author, narrator, and protagonist; the subject matter’s focus on an individual life; and the adoption of retrospective point of view (p. 4). Lejeune does not use the term ‘autofiction’, though he suggests that such texts would entail a “phantasmatic pact” (see also Gibbons, 2018) and wonders: “Can the hero of a novel declared as such have the same name as the author?” (Lejeune, 1989, p. 18). Building on Lejeune’s thinking, Genette (1993) studies the voice dynamics of autofiction, contending that the relationship is: syntactic between narrator and character, through the use of first-person homodiegetic narration; semantic between author and character in that the “author [is] responsible for the acts of his hero”; and pragmatic between author and narrator, since this “symbolizes the author’s serious commitment with regard to the narrative” (p. 78). Lejeune’s and Genette’s accounts of stylistic features which mark a text as autobiographical or autofictional are valuable since they can be used to ascertain whether Ferrante’s novels appear textually similar to autobiography. If so, style could be a significant factor in readers’ and critics’ categorizations of the Neapolitan quartet as autofictional and/or autobiographical.

My analysis is structured in three parts, moving outwards from text to context. Firstly, it utilizes Text World Theory’s analytical power in conducting a text-driven investigation of potential signposts of fictionality or referentiality in the Neapolitan Quartet. As part of this, it specifically considers the ontology of the generated Text World structures and the syntactic voice relations between narrator and character. The analysis then begins to link text with

context by secondly, considering the ontological liminality of narration and the ways in which readers build an authorial mind-model and use extra-textual discourse-world knowledge across semantic and pragmatic voice relations to connect character and narrator with author. Thirdly and finally, the analysis considers the responses of critics as readers to the fictionality of the text and the impact of Elena Ferrante's pseudonym on assessments of authorial intentionality and the authorial mind-model.

### *Dissolving Fictionality*

The prologue of *My Brilliant Friend* begins: "This morning Rino telephoned. I thought he wanted money again and I was ready to say no. But that was not the reason for the phone call: his mother was gone" (Ferrante, 2012, p. 19). In these opening lines, a first-person narrator is immediately introduced. The initial text-world is empty because no other information about the narratorial situation is given (Gavins, 2007, p. 133). This is therefore presented in grey in Figure 1. Readers are peripherally aware of this world because the use of *I* implies a communicative context. The adverbial "This morning", past-tense narration, and internal focalization present an immediate world-switch. All subsequent text-worlds therefore temporally precede the act of narration and are epistemic in nature. The fixed focalization means that readers project into the narrator's cognitive stance to experience the text from her point of view (Gavins, 2007, pp. 131–135). The retrospective narration here generates a "split self" (Lakoff, 1996; Emmott, 2002), whereby readers distinguish between two enactors of the narrator: the narrating-*I* and the past-tense experiencing-*I* (Cohn, 1978). Whilst signposts of fictionality or referentiality are not absolute, the initial style of the prologue does contain formal features associated with autobiography: retrospective narration is used (Lejeune, 1989, p. 4) and there is a correspondence between narrator and character.



“@@ Insert Figure 1 approximately here”

Figure 1: Text-World Diagram for opening to *My Brilliant Friend* (Ferrante, 2012, p. 19)

The second text-world encapsulates Rino and the narrator on the telephone but the thought presentation causes another world-switch. A chain of world-switches subsequently occur, resulting from the boulomaic verb ‘wanted’, the hypotheticality of ‘I was ready’, and the (hypothetical) direct speech ‘no’. Subsequently, the anaphoric reference of ‘that was not the reason for the phone call’ foregrounds the previous text-worlds in which Rino ‘wanted money’. The syntactic negation, though, causes what Gavins (2007) calls a “world-repair” (pp. 141–142) in which Rino’s motives are negated (shown by the dashed text-world encapsulating the relevant prior text-worlds). These text-worlds increasingly represent the event from the narrator’s perspective, as she considers Rino’s motives and her possible reactions. However, since this is introduced by homodiegetic direct thought (‘I thought he wanted...’), the reader is not afforded privileged access to Rino’s consciousness.

In Text World terms, this is related to *accessibility* (Werth, 1999; Gavins, 2007). Gavins explains:

Our mental representations of enactors in the text-world are, of course, based on our experience of real people in the real world, and we expect both types of entities to have the same emotions, reactions, abilities, and general behaviour. However, we also retain our understanding of text-world enactors as entities outside the ontological parameters of our real world. Not only are we unable to question or negotiate directly with enactors who are confined to the text-world level, but our knowledge of their backgrounds and personalities is similarly limited to information provided in the text. (Gavins, 2007, p. 78.)

The ontological gap between participants and enactors motivates the distinction between *participant-accessibility* and *character/enactor-accessibility*: whilst the “hopes and beliefs and speculations [of characters/enactors] are reported by way of the discourse, they are inaccessible to the participants in the sense that since characters are not participants, they are not bound by the principles of the discourse” (Werth, 1999, p. 189). Accessibility, in turn, connects to judgments of reliability since participants can more easily assess other participant’s beliefs (precisely like readers judging authorial intentionality) than those of enactors, which are only true or reliable relative to the text-world. The modal text-worlds of Rino’s motivations (as imagined by the narrator) are therefore enactor-accessible and the narrator’s homodiegetic direct thought presentation fits with the stylistic features of non-fiction.

Finally, the semantic negation in ‘his mother was gone’, like all negation, has a foregrounding effect which produces a negative text-world (Werth, 1999; Hidalgo Downing, 2000; Gavins, 2007): Readers must imagine the mother in the negative text-world in order to understand her disappearance from the world in which Rino and the narrator are communicating. At this point, therefore, Rino’s mother is a “lacuna”, a concept Stockwell develops from gestalt perception to explain objects that are experienced by readers as felt absences. Lacunae create resonant effects, and as such Rino’s mother has an “aura of significance” (Stockwell, 2009, p. 18; cf. McLoughlin, 2013, 2016, 2019). A page later, the narrator elaborates, “Rino’s mother is named Rafaella Cerullo, but everyone has always called her Lina. Not me, I’ve never used either her first name or her last. To me, for more than sixty years, she’s been Lila” (Ferrante, 2012, p. 19).

The stylistic likeness of *My Brilliant Friend* to autobiography starts to diminish here, at least following Lejeune’s principles since he suggests that the subject of autobiography “must be *primarily* individual life” (Lejeune, 1989, p. 4; original emphasis). As the title of Book

One implies, the Neapolitan Quartet tells the entwined stories of both the narrator *and* Lila. Nevertheless, the focalization (mostly) remains fixed with the narrator: Lila's experiences are typically mediated using reporting clauses to interject (e.g., "Lila told us" (Ferrante, 2012, p. 84), "Lila told me" (p. 131), "according to Lila" (pp. 170, 171)). When first describing Lila's impression of "dissolving margins", for example, the narrator prefaces: "The term isn't mine, she always used it. She said that on those occasions the outlines of people and things suddenly dissolved..." (Ferrante, 2012, p. 89). As Figure 2 depicts, this indirect speech enables readers to project into an epistemic text-world of Lila's experience, encouraged by the temporal shift in 'on those occasions'. A notable exception occurs in the third book, *Those Who Leave and Those who Stay*, when Lila first confides to the narrator about her distressing experience of dissolving margins (although apparently she doesn't use the term until later (Ferrante, 2015, p. 175)). Reporting clauses – such as "she realized" (Ferrante, 2014, p. 128), "she thought" (p. 129) – do repeatedly interject but the stylistic presentation of Lila's account oscillates, using direct speech and thought as well as free indirect and free direct forms (e.g., "maybe it would shatter the child, yes, it would shatter him like a plastic puppet" (p. 129), "No, no, enough, in the past she had done it for different reasons" (p. 130), "Ah, Lina Cerulla, you are beyond correction" (p. 163)), which will, albeit fluctuatingly, prompt readers to project into Lila's cognitive stance, generating insight into Lila's consciousness. Nevertheless, text-world architecture shows that this imaginative alignment is the product of world-switches that, once again, stem from narratorial description; in Figure 2, for instance, into Lila's perspective and into a negative-world caused by 'dissolved'. Reporting clauses thus emphasize that Lila told this to the narrator who (re-)presents it in narration. Despite the Neapolitan Quartet telling both Lila's and the narrator's life stories, the stylistic presentation emphasizes that Lila's experiences are relayed in enactor-accessible text-worlds. This, therefore, would not necessarily problematize an autobiographical reading.

“@@ Insert Figure 2 approximately here”

Figure 2: Text-World Diagram for “She said that on those occasions...” (Ferrante, 2012, p. 89)

This brief Text World analysis provides insight into readers’ imaginative and emotional engagements: because the text allows readers to project into text-worlds that give insight into both the narrator’s and Lila’s experiences, they are also likely to emotionally engage with both of these characters. In terms of fictionality, Lila’s centrality in the story is, according to Lejeune, atypical of autobiography; nevertheless, the narrator-character correlation and retrospective homodiegetic narration are characteristic. Text World analysis thus starts to show why readers might interpret the Neapolitan Quartet autofictionally. However, a crucial stylistic component of autofiction is the correlation between not just protagonist and narrator, but also author. Consequently, in the next section, I reflect on how readers conceptualize authors and explore the semantic and pragmatic voice relations that connect character and narrator with author.

### *Dissolving Authorship*

In a 1991 letter to her publisher, Elena Ferrante claims, “I believe that books, once they are written, have no need of their authors” (Ferrante, 2016, p. 15).<sup>8</sup> Ferrante is an elusive, mysterious figure who refuses to appear publically and responds to interviews only in writing. Stockwell (2016) suggests that mind-models of authors “start off with a rough template of person-ness, and then the patterns of the text drive that model” (p. 151). This process of building a mind-model relates to what social psychologists call “impression formation” (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990, p. 1). Impression formation is initially “category-based”, using easily available information that activates social meanings (such as physical features, roles, stereotypes), and is subsequently fine-tuned or debunked based on “attribute-

orientated” information which increments people’s individual traits. Gavins (2007) asserts that even if the author-participant is not familiar in real life, “the gender-specificity of their name, their title (if any), and even whether their name is popular in contemporary society or not, can affect how we perceive and evaluate our co-participant and the language they produce” (p. 27). The exemplary features Gavins suggests are category-based, and will enable readers to begin building an authorial mind-model. Elena Ferrante is female (or so her name suggests) and her bio, as published on the Neapolitan novel covers, informs readers that she was “born in Naples”. In the novel’s themselves – both in the ‘Index of Characters’ and throughout the Quartet – the narrator is identified as ‘Elena Greco’. Genette (1993, p. 79), Lejeune (1989), and Cohn (1999, pp. 123–124) see the author-narrator relation as the most important voice-dynamic separating autobiography from fiction. Whilst the surname ‘Greco’ (in its distinctness from ‘Ferrante’) disrupts the unity of author-narrator-character, the forename ‘Elena’ is shared. As such, Elena Ferrante’s forename, gender, and birthplace connect with the setting and narrator-character of the Neapolitan novels, and therefore still permit (at least partially) an autobiographical or autofictional reading, encouraging readers to conceptually associate the narrator with their mind-model for the author.

Interestingly, in *My Brilliant Friend*’s prologue, the narrator is only named – by Rino in conversation – as “Elena” (Ferrante, 2012, p. 19), at the end of which she confesses that it is in reaction to Lila’s disappearance that she “turned on the computer and began to write – all the details of our story, everything that remained in my memory” (p. 23). The prologue therefore does not make textually explicit the difference in surname between the narrator and Ferrante and also frames Elena’s and Lila’s interconnected life stories as the narrator’s autobiographical memories. Moreover, there are frequent metatextual references to writing throughout the Quartet. For instance, in *Those who Leave and Those who Stay*, the narrator reflects:

For weeks now I've been writing at a good pace, without wasting time rereading. If Lila was alive—I imagine as I sip my coffee and look out at the Po, bumping against the piers of the Principessa Isabella bridge—she won't be able to resist, she'll come and poke around in my computer, she'll read... (Ferrante, 2014, p. 29.)

Such metatextual comments, furthermore, feature immediate and proximal deictics, such as the present tense employed in 'I imagine as I sip my coffee', suggesting that the act of writing is simultaneous to the text-world of narration. The effect is to position the narration as autodiegetic writing and enhance the illusion that the narrator Elena is the writer of the Neapolitan Quartet. This complicates issues of ontology and accessibility.

The concept of accessibility comes to Text World Theory from Possible Worlds Theory (Werth, 1999, p. 70; Gavins, 2007, p. 12) wherein it was concerned with the "relative closeness" of worlds (Lewis, 1973; cited in Werth, 1999, p. 70). The illusion of narrator-Elena as the real author makes the text-world of narration feel closer to the reader's reality and problematizes readers' felt sense of accessibility. When analyzing a parenting manual called *The Baby Whisperer*, Gavins (2007, pp. 74–80) argues that the first-person narration of the author Tracy Hogg produces participant-accessible text-worlds that readers expect to be true and reliable whilst entities nominated by Hogg (even those which represent real-people such as the parents in Hogg's case studies) exist in enactor-accessible text-worlds. Tracy Hogg as narrator of *The Baby Whisperer* and Elena Greco as narrator of the Neapolitan Quarter are both text-world enactors, likewise represented through *I*-narration. The only difference, therefore, in ontology and accessibility is whether these *Is* are text-world counterparts of discourse-world author-participants. Indeed, Lanser (2005) argues that "*I*-narrative taunts us with the possibility that the 'I' of the fiction has some relation with the

author's 'I'" (p. 207). It thus allows for referfictional ambiguity so that readers can "oscillate" between interpretive stances. Narration, therefore, needs to be recognized in Text World Theory and in studies of fictionality as a liminal ontological space whilst the concept of accessibility is inadequate because it is entirely dependent on fictionality assessments.

Characteristic of autofiction (Gibbons, 2018), there are numerous references to authorship in the Neapolitan novels, which may further encourage readers to connect narrating character Elena with an authorial mind-model of Ferrante. Elena even writes autofiction. Initially, in *The Story of a New Name*, she relays her act of writing a third-person autobiographical account of an early sexual experience (Ferrante, 2013, p. 433) which she subsequently refers to as "a novel" (p. 345) and, by the end of the book, it is published as such. In the final book, *The Story of the Lost Child*, the narrator produces "*a new novel by Elena Greco, a story set in an unknown Naples*" (Ferrante, 2015, p. 270; original italics) based on her life experience growing up in a poor neighbourhood and which a journalist apparently reads "as a sort of autobiography" (p. 259). This is followed years later with a book whose title – "*A Friendship*" – echoes that of Book 1 of the Neapolitan novels – *My Brilliant Friend* – and that the narrator describes as telling "concisely, with the necessary disguises, the story of our lives" (Ferrante, 2015, p. 465). The Naples setting of Elena Greco's writing enhances the parallels between the narrator and the author Elena Ferrante. Additionally, the repeated references to autobiographical fictions foreground the concept to readers, prompting them in turn to revisit their authorial mind-model – in particular, Ferrante's preferred stance on fictionality. Readers will have different interpretations of the novels' fictionality but for some readers, the significance given to autofiction in the Neapolitan Quartet will enable an interpretation of the fictional story of the narrator as an account of Ferrante's life.

Lejeune reflects on what causes readers to correlate author-narrator-character when the names differ:

In the case of the fictitious name (i.e. different from that of the author) given to a character who tells his life story, the reader has reason to think that the story lived by the character is precisely that of the author: by cross-checking with other texts, or by delving into external news items, or even by reading the narrative whose fictional appearance rings false... (Lejeune, 1989, pp. 12–13.)

The metatextual elements I discuss above are text-internal and part of the latter process; features of the text give the reader cause to rethink fictionality/referentiality. The other two processes identified by Lejeune entail the reader drawing on extratextual discourse-world knowledge. All of these, which go beyond initial or immediate category-based impressions in order to connect the narrating-character to the author, entail attribute-oriented individuating impression formation to refine the authorial mind-model. Segnini (2017) does exactly this, noting that Elena Greco “shares several biographical traits with ‘Ferrante’” (p.110). The similarity is “not only her first name, but also her Neapolitan upbringing, her background as a Greek scholar, and her career as a novelist” (p.110). In making these connections, Segnini conceptually maps the textual details of narrator-character Elena Greco with extra-textual knowledge of author Elena Ferrante. Based on correlating the narrator-character with the author, in the process developing her mind-model of the author, Segnini subsequently suggests that these correspondences give the novels a “strong sense of authenticity” (p. 111).

Using the concept of impression formation, this section has explored the cognitive processes readers use when they mind-model authors as well as the way in which they map traits belonging to narrator-characters with those known, extra-textually, about the author in



order to interpret the Neapolitan novels as, at least partially, autobiographical. In Segnini's discussion, this seems strongly influenced by a "biographical impulse" (see Dow, 2016).

### *Dissolving Intentionality*

Commenting on her own reading of the Neapolitan novels, Bojar states:

I am one of the many readers who have gleaned insights into my own life from reading Ferrante's books. The arc of the narrator's life in the Neapolitan Quartet generally corresponds with mine, with the tremendous social/cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s affecting my life as it did the lives of Ferrante's characters. I was born in September 1944, a month later than Lila and Elena. Until recently, I was convinced that Ferrante was a real woman born in 1944 because throughout the Neapolitan Quartet she had an unerring sense of what was happening in the world at each stage of Lila and Elena's lives. (Bojar, 2018, p. 16).

Bojar's sense of having developed psychological insights is in keeping with Theory of Mind and empirical evidence that fiction engages social, empathetic reasoning (Oatley, 1999). Her identification with characters Elena and Lila suggests that she experienced what Kuiken, Miall, and Sikora (2004) call 'self-implication' and 'expressive enactment' which include "blurred boundaries between oneself" and characters, and "feelings in response to situations and events in the text" (p. 171). Additionally, Bojar's emphasis on '1944' as not only her own, Elena's, and Lila's birth year but also Ferrante's, indicates that she has incremented imagined events from the novel and from her discourse-world knowledge and personal experiences of the 60s and 70s into her mind-model of Elena Ferrante.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that

Bojar engages in multiple identity mappings: of herself with characters, characters with novelist, and novelist with herself. As such, in Bojar's case, the felt authenticity or autofictionality of the Neapolitan novels is a conceptual conflation not only of author-narrator-character voice dynamics, as in Lejeune's and Genette's theorizations, but of author-narrator-character-reader identifications. Furthermore, the external realism of narrative details – the correlation between events in the Neapolitan Quartet and, for instance, the real “social/cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s” – appears to have boosted Bojar's emotional engagement, in turn making the novels *feel* ‘real’ (cf. Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008, p. 268).

When Bojar (2018) confesses “[u]ntil recently, I was convinced that Ferrante was a real woman...” (p. 16), she is referring to the realization that ‘Elena Ferrante’ is a pseudonym. Pseudonyms pose problems for assessing authorial intentionality, precisely because they obscure information about authors. Ryan (2011) describes the complication of a pseudonym as a “thorny matter” and resultantly contends that implied authorship – by extension, intentionality – must be treated as “a reader construct highly dependent on contextual features” (p. 44). Moreover, the very awareness that ‘Elena Ferrante’ is a pseudonym will alter readers’ mind-models including their assessments of authorial intentionality and fictionality, and consequently their experience of the novels. For example, commenting on the Neapolitan Novels, Darwin writes:

...the narrator is more of a neutral observer of the much more interesting, evasive and irresistible main character. Maybe Ferrante doesn't care to share herself with her readers because then we would want to find Lila too. Or maybe she is Lila. In any case, I find it hard to believe that whoever Ferrante really is, this all did not happen. (Darwin, 2016, no pagination)

Darwin construes semantic author-character relations here, despite the onomastic distinctness between Ferrante and Lila. This appears to be the product of two interrelated factors. The first is Lila's 'evasive' character. Indeed, the previous Text World analysis revealed Lila as a lacuna or felt absence, making the character more attractive ('interesting', 'irresistible') to readers (cf. Stockwell, 2009). The second factor is Ferrante's pseudonym, which makes the correlation between author and character names irrelevant because readers do not know the real author's name. Darwin integrates her knowledge that Ferrante is using a pseudonym, and therefore desires anonymity, into her mind-model of the author and, by conceptually mapping this onto Lila's desire to disappear in the Neapolitan novels, interprets a connection between Ferrante and Lila. This accentuates her appraisal of the Quartet as autobiographical/autofictional, wherein Lila is a text-world counterpart of the author.

Ferrante and her publisher's insistence on protecting the author's identity caused speculation in the media as well as amongst critics and readers. A host of qualitative and quantitative text analyses (often using corpus software) have investigated Ferrante's identity by comparing the language of the Neapolitan novels to those of other Italian writers. These studies resoundingly conclude that the Neapolitan novels are probably written by Domenico Starnone (Genilloud & Roten, 2016; Expert System, 2017; Tuzzi & Cortelazzo, 2018a; and the eight analyses collected in Tuzzi & Cortelazzo, 2018b). The revelation has proved challenging for many readers. As Bojar (2018) notes, "devoted readers have long considered this an impossibility [...] because of the authenticity of her rendering of female experience" (p. 26). The pseudonym and the representation of female subjectivity in the Neapolitan novels lead readers to model the author as female, a characteristic they subsequently find difficult to repair or overwrite. Bojar's report of her own and other readers' refusal to engage with the idea of Ferrante as a man demonstrates the difficulty. In this instance, where the new information – that Ferrante is probably a man – challenges easy recategorisation, readers'

impression of or mind-model for Ferrante must be reassembled in what Fiske and Neuberg call a “piecemeal” fashion (1990, p. 8).

In 2016, Gatti supposedly exposed Ferrante’s real identity, claiming that “real estate and financial records point to Anita Raja, a Rome-based translator”. He continues, “Raja, who is married to the Neapolitan writer Domenico Starnone, is known to have had a relationship with Ferrante’s publishing house for many years as a translator of German literature” (Gatti, 2016, no pagination). Based on this and not satisfied with the idea of Ferrante as a man in real-life, Bojar (2018) discloses that she believes the Neapolitan Quartet are the result of joint authorship and the biographical details of Starnone’s Neapolitan background motivate her “guess” that “Starnone is the principal author” (p. 33). She additionally finds support for this interpretation by pointing to the thematization of authorial collaboration in the novels (p. 30).

The responses of critics and/as readers discussed in this section of the analysis suggest that readers’ perceptions of the external realism of the novels and their own self-implication and expressive enactment can make fictions feel more real and thus influence judgments of fictionality. Pseudonymic authorship problematizes the question of authorial intentionality and resultantly means that, because readers cannot take for granted the category-based biographical details gleaned from their initial impressions of the author, the process of (re)building the authorial mind-model becomes increasingly individuated and piecemeal. Readers consequently appear to draw on any available attributes, including the author’s desire for anonymity.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have pioneered a cognitive approach to fictionality and authorial intentionality. Using Text World Theory and mind-modelling enables a text-driven and context-sensitive analysis. This is important because readers' assessments are formed through a combination of paratextual and textual features, extra-textual and situational knowledge, and their own emotional engagements with narrative. I applied the approach to Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet, a fitting test case precisely because the fictionality is complicated and controversial. Ferrante's pseudonymic authorship obscures assessments of intentionality, leading readers to form impressions of the author through a piecemeal assemblage of individual traits.

Many Ferrante readers reject or negotiate the paratextual signals of fiction, instead reading the text autofictionally. The case of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels therefore suggests that autofiction is not only a literary genre, but also a reading strategy. Wilderkamp, van Montfoort, and van Ruiswijk assert:

like the producer, [the reader] is 'allowed' to deviate from the standard rules and norms. It is therefore conceivable that a text or sentence is received differently from the intentions of the author, for instance under the influence of a certain lack of information concerning production strategies or situational conditions of production; lack of knowledge of interpretation strategies, a 'creative' contribution of the receiver as well as the situational conditions of reception can have the same effect. (Wilderkamp et al., 1980, p. 552).

My analysis shows that a cognitive approach, using Text World Theory and mind-modelling, traces how readers form their interpretive judgments of fictionality and intentionality. The

cognitive unpinning of the analysis means that this is possible regardless of whether readers' appraisals accord with their interpretation of an author's preferred stance.

Although many readers' experiences of the Neapolitan Quartet's fictionality (or, indeed, autofictionality) are contrary to paratextual signals, Ferrante's pseudonymity is itself a cultivation of ontological distortion. Emre (2018) speaks of Ferrante's anonymity as "an expressive strategy" with a deliberate "style and goals" (no pagination) whilst Bakopoulos (2016) writes that although "Ferrante does not call her work autofiction, she has noted that the Neapolitan novels stem from a complicated friendship she experienced but will not say more than that" (p. 400). In *The Story of the Lost Child*, Elena even reports, "Eh, [Lila] said once, what a fuss for a name: famous or not, it's only a ribbon tied around a sack randomly filled with blood, flesh, words, shit, and petty thoughts" (Ferrante, 2015, p. 455). As Bojar's comments above demonstrate, an author's name does matter to readers since it forms part of readers' initial category-based impression formation upon which they build an authorial mind-model and which, in turn, impacts assessments of fictionality and readers' emotional engagement.

At the end of the Neapolitan Quartet, the narrator muses: "Unlike stories, real life, when it has passed, inclines towards obscurity, not clarity" (Ferrante, 2015, p. 473). On the contrary, the fictionality of Ferrante's stories is obscure with many stylistic features encouraging or acting as potential signposts of autobiography. Likewise, Ferrante's use of a pseudonym obscures rather than illuminates. It is perhaps, therefore, telling that in Lila's experience of 'dissolving margins', "people, even more than things, lost their boundaries and overflowed into shapelessness" (Ferrante, 2013, p. 355). Despite the temptation to think of the borderlines between fictionality and referentiality as clear-cut and unflinching, and even though the distinction does have experiential consequences for readers, Elena Ferrante appears to court autofictional enigma. Ultimately, with little 'true' or 'verifiable' biographical

information about Ferrante to draw on, readers have only the Neapolitan novels and Ferrante's oeuvre with which to form their impressions of the author and of fictionality. Elena, a potential text-world counterpart of the author, identifies her role in narrating her own and Lila's lives, writing: "I who have written for months and months and months to give her a form whose boundaries won't dissolve" (Ferrante, 2015, p. 466). In fact, it isn't that the boundaries of 'Elena Ferrante' and the Neapolitan Quartet have dissolved; rather, they are yet to solidify.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Frequent references to the concept of ‘dissolving margins’ occur (and recur) throughout the Neapolitan Quartet: in *My Brilliant Friend* (2012, pp. 89, 90, 176–177, 180, 265); *The Story of a New Name* (2013, p. 355), *Those who Leave and Those who Stay* (2014, pp. 106, 128, 155, 167), and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015, pp. 175–176, 215, 371, 466).

<sup>2</sup> Resultantly, Stockwell adapts Possible Worlds Theory into what he calls “discourse worlds” (2002, pp. 91–104).

<sup>3</sup> It is unusual to find reference to an unnatural approach to fictionality in the literature. Henrik Skov Nielsen works with unnatural narratology and the rhetorical approach to fictionality. Unnatural fictionality is consequently affiliated, in many ways, with the rhetorical approach.

<sup>4</sup> My argument for Iser (1993) as a predecessor of the cognitive approach is even stronger when one notes that he draws on the cognitive framework figure and ground, developed from visual perception (throughout, though particularly see pp. 7, 17).

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Text World Theory terms explained here come from Werth (1999) and Gavins (2007) who provide detailed overviews of the framework.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, this is also the case for some critics: Bojar (2018) – in speaking about her own encounter with Elena Ferrante and the Neapolitan novels – admits, “I have tried to suppress the impulse to extract a biographical core from Ferrante’s novels, but the desire persists” (p. 33).

<sup>7</sup> For analysis of Ferrante’s covers, see Segnini (2017).

<sup>8</sup> Many, though not all, of the letters published in Ferrante’s non-fiction collection *Frantumaglia* were sent to the publisher or are in fact categorized as “unsent”. It therefore



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becomes a matter of trust as to whether readers believe that these letters pre-existed *Frantumaglia* or whether they were written specifically for the volume.

<sup>9</sup> To the best of my knowledge, Ferrante's birth year is not provided in her official bio and therefore must be Bojar's interpretive assumption.