

“I don’t know why this most horrible part comes up to me now...”. A Framework for Linking Textual Dimensions of Child Sexual Abuse Fiction to Reader Responses

R. L. Victoria Pöhls, Aleksandra Milenović, Ailise Bulfin

University College Dublin & Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics / University College Dublin / University College Dublin

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Abstract: In this paper we propose four intratextual dimensions of fiction depicting child sexual abuse (CSA) which influence how readers respond to such works: the centrality, explicitness, victim/survivor-centredness and accuracy of the CSA depiction. To test this framework empirically, we analysed a subset of the ReLEL dataset of Croatian readers’ memorable reading experiences in which they spontaneously discussed CSA fiction. We examined how the dimensions influenced 1) whether and how readers mentioned CSA in their recollections, 2) whether and which emotions and 3) reflections were elicited, and 4) whether and how readers connected to the victim/survivor, bystander, and perpetrator characters. The following findings are key: firstly, the manner in which readers of fiction refer to CSA depends on the centrality and explicitness of the issue within the fiction; secondly, the complexity of the victim/survivor character has a notable impact on the emotions evoked; thirdly, the fiction can prompt readers to reflect on CSA in the real-world and this is influenced by the centrality of CSA in the narrative as well as its frequency and narrative position; fourthly, the focaliser(s) of the

narrative are key to understanding readers' connections to victim/survivor, bystander, and perpetrator characters, and readers connect more often with complex victim/survivor characters. These findings could be of particular significance to authors creating CSA fiction who aim to elicit or avoid certain effects on readers. Furthermore, the framework and results could be useful for researchers studying the impact of fictional depictions of other marginalised or underrepresented groups.

Keywords: representation of child sexual abuse, empirical literary studies, novels about child sexual abuse, audience response studies, social attitudes to child sexual abuse, narrative perspective, victim/survivor characterization, emotional engagement, reflective engagement

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA)¹ is a significant social problem, with current estimates suggesting that one-in-eight children worldwide are affected (Sanjeevi et al. 2018), and one-in-five children in the EU ('Proposal for a regulation' 2022).² However, the issue remains insufficiently addressed both in the media and everyday conversations, with a "culture of silence" still existing ('A Vision To Zero' 2025: 4-5). When CSA is discussed, misconceptions about its prevalence, harm and long-term effects, about victim/survivor

¹ There is no universally accepted definition of CSA. We use the definition in Hand (2025: 19): "unwanted sexual experiences in childhood'- whether this included physical contact or was a non-contact sexual abuse (which could include exposure to a person's body, imagery, pornography or on-line content)".

² It is notable, however, that CSA is underreported universally, and this underreporting may be more pronounced in regions with weaker legal frameworks, due to specific cultural factors, or lack of adequate data collection systems.

characteristics, and the type and reasons of perpetrators are prominent (Cromer and Goldsmith 2010; Glina et al. 2022). In addition, public understanding of the trauma-responses and coping mechanisms of people with lived experience of CSA (hereafter: CSA victim/survivors) is lacking (Bulfin et al. forthcoming). Both social avoidance and entrenched misconceptions harm the wellbeing of victim/survivors and hinder prevention efforts (Hailes et al. 2019).

In this context we asked: could representations of CSA encountered in (fictional) books counter the social avoidance and even help contest some of the 'CSA myths'? Some existing research suggests a positive answer: Self-selected reading, and to a greater extent *fiction* reading, has been hypothesised and shown to ease engagement with 'difficult topics' (Koopman et al. 2012 for depictions of rape; Menninghaus et al. 2017 for the enjoyment of negative emotions in art reception). The present study therefore explores the potential of CSA representations encountered in fictional literature – 'CSA fiction' – to counteract public reluctance to engage with the issue of CSA, to foster an (emotional) connection to victim/survivor characters, and to possibly even challenge some of the misconceptions. We also considered whether certain types of representation in CSA fiction – for example, stereotypes about victim/survivors or perpetrators – could potentially reinforce misconceptions.

To answer these questions, we used the dataset 'Remembering Literature in Everyday Life' (ReLEL), which provides us with recollections of memorable reading experiences of 1005 non-professional Croatian readers. Readers self-selected 3–5 works they had read fully at least once in any period of their life; about 70% of readers' choices were fictional works – for example, literary classics

and recent bestsellers, and about 30% were non-fiction (Škopljanać et al 2025). We focused on the responses in which readers chose to discuss contemporary CSA fiction. As respondents were not asked to discuss or avoid any topic during their interview, this data allows us to examine whether fiction depicting CSA is vividly remembered, whether or not the representation of CSA was an important aspect for the readers, and to see how readers naturally talk about CSA. In an exploratory fashion, we can thus study unbiased and unprompted responses to these works – in terms of emotions, reflections, or connections to victim/survivor characters evoked by the reading.

We hypothesized that readers' responses are not entirely idiosyncratic, but instead are connected to the way CSA is presented in the fictional works. More precisely, we expected responses to vary based on four 'dimensions of representation': the centrality of CSA in the narrative; the explicitness of the depiction of CSA; the victim/survivor-centredness of the depiction; and the accuracy of the depiction, including its engagement with CSA myths (see section 4). Therefore, following thematic analysis of the readers' responses to the CSA fiction, we attempted to connect the types of reader response to the different types of literary representation along the four dimensions. This is the first time such an approach has been taken to the analysis of fiction depicting CSA.

2. Method of analysis

To arrive at the sub-corpus of fiction depicting CSA from the ReLEL dataset, the CSAREps and ReLEL teams³ worked to identify relevant

³ We would like to thank Caroline Dunne and Giulia Scapin from the CSAREps team for reading some of the fiction, and Lovro Škopljanać, Velna Rončević, and Luka Ostojić from the ReLEL team for their support, including translating interviews and discussing results. CSAREps refers to the

texts in English and Croatian, adhering to inclusion criteria for both the texts (see section 3.2) and readers' responses (3.3). The CSAREps team read all the texts to check that they met the textual inclusion criteria, and analysed the way CSA is portrayed (see section 4). The ReLEL team translated (excerpts of) the relevant reader responses and added responses in which a keyword search using the Croatian terms for 'child sexual abuse', 'rape', and 'molestation' showed results.⁴ The CSAREps team checked they met the reader inclusion criteria, coded all responses qualitatively, and analysed them using a mixed-methods approach.

We combined a theory-driven and data-driven approach to coding and analysis (Kuckartz 2019). Our theory-driven codes were informed by our familiarity with the scholarship on CSA, the expertise of the CSAREps project's experts-by-experience advisory board,⁵ and our previous research examining audience responses to CSA fiction in terms of its personal impact on viewers and their engagement with CSA myths (Bulfin et al. forthcoming; Pöhls et al. 2025). Further data-driven codes were developed by the authors following an initial read-through of the responses. We then performed a qualitative content analysis with the software MAXQDA 24. Three rounds of codebook refinement were undertaken alongside three tests of intercoder agreement (as measured by MAXQDA's integrated comparison feature of coded segments at a minimum overlap of 65%), which

European Research Council-funded 'Investigating Fictional Representations of Child Sexual Abuse' project, www.csa-in-fiction.com.

⁴ Despite this thorough approach, the sub-corpus might not be exhaustive and CSA may be represented in other texts within the wider corpus.

⁵ We would like to thank members of our advisory board for their valuable feedback.

reached a satisfactory level of 75% after coding 25% of the dataset jointly.⁶

3. Corpus: methods of inclusion and exclusion

3.1. The ReLEL dataset

In semi-structured interviews (28 minutes on average, with the ReLEL team), readers selected 3-5 main texts that they had read in full, remembered well, were impressed by or thought were important for themselves or others. They were then asked to summarize each text and describe their engagement with it in relation to their emotions, motivations to read, deep impressions and memorable parts; some questions about their general reading experience followed (For the interview questions see: <https://zenodo.org/records/10785192>).

3.2. The CSA fiction texts

To be included as ‘CSA fiction’ in our analysis, texts needed to fulfil at least one of three criteria: CSA is present within the narrative; or it is based on a real-life occurrence of CSA (e.g., *Room*) (Bethune 2007); or transmedial versions of the narrative (film, TV series) explicitly or implicitly depict CSA (e.g., *The Handmaid’s Tale*) – as recollections of these (story)worlds might overlap in respondents’ memories. All non-English language texts had an English translation which we used for analysis, except for *Sjeme Tame* which was analysed in Croatian by co-author Aleksandra Milenović. The final CSA fiction sub-corpus consisted of 27 Texts (see Table 1). 11 texts were mentioned by multiple readers, while the remaining 59% were mentioned only once. It is worth noting that 69.7% of texts in the full ReLEL dataset were mentioned only once, while CSA fiction like *The Kite Runner* and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* are two of 66 books that were

⁶ The codebook can be accessed here: <https://osf.io/d6h9k/overview>

mentioned 10 or more times, showing that some CSA fiction was frequently mentioned. Furthermore, *Crime and Punishment*, which fits the textual inclusion criteria, was the most frequently discussed text in the dataset; however, in line with our contemporary remit, our analysis focused on responses to 20th and 21st-century texts.

Table 1
Number of readers, titles, authors and years of publication of selected CSA fiction texts from ReLEL dataset

No. of readers discussing work	Title of CSA fiction (in English translation if existent)	Author	Year of publication
19	<i>The Kite Runner</i>	Khaled Hosseini	2003
14	<i>The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo</i>	Stieg Larsson	2005
8	<i>Dark Mother Earth</i>	Kristian Novak	2013
8	<i>Lolita</i>	Vladimir Nabokov	1955
7	<i>Zoo Station: The Story of Christiane F.</i>	Christiane Vera Felscherinow	1978
5	<i>Game of Thrones</i>	George R. R. Martin	1996
5	<i>Memoirs of a Geisha</i>	Arthur Golden	1997
5	<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	Margaret Atwood	1985
4	<i>2666</i>	Roberto Bolaño	2004
2	<i>The Institute</i>	Stephen King	2019
2	<i>Hopeless</i>	Colleen Hoover	2012

1	<i>Sjeme Tame</i>	Iva Kolega	2018
1	<i>A Little Life</i>	Hanya Yanagihara	2015
1	<i>Gerald's Game</i>	Stephen King	1992
1	<i>Interview with the Vampire</i>	Anne Rice	1976
1	<i>It</i>	Stephen King	1986
1	<i>My Dark Vanessa: A Novel</i>	Kate Elizabeth Russell	2020
1	<i>Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia</i>	Jean Sasson	1992
1	<i>Room</i>	Emma Donoghue	2010
1	<i>The Consequences of Love</i>	Sulaiman S.M.Y. Addonia	2008
1	<i>The God of Small Things</i>	Arundhati Roy	1997
1	<i>The Lovely Bones</i>	Alice Sebold	2002
1	<i>Shelter</i>	Harlan Coben	2011
1	<i>Home</i>	Harlan Coben	2016
1	<i>Bared to you</i>	Sylvia Day	2012
1	<i>The Beast</i>	Anders Roslund & Borge Hellstrom	2004
1	<i>The Owl Always Hunts at Night</i>	Samuel Bjørk	2016

The CSAREps team assigned the texts to one or more genres: literary fiction and issues fiction were most frequent (37.04% each), followed

by crime (29.63%), horror (22.22%), other genres, romance/erotica and young adult (11.11% each) and we included (fictional) memoirs (7.41%). 66.67% of the texts were published in the 21st century and many of the earlier texts are long-running serials (*Game of Thrones*), or have been adapted into new mediums (*Gerald's Game*, *Interview with the Vampire*, *Lolita*), thus potentially remaining contemporary to readers (Antonini et al. 2024).

We also recorded the types of abuse presented in the CSA fiction corpus, with many works including multiple types. Child sexual exploitation (CSE) was the most frequently featured type of abuse (in 51.85% of the texts); followed by intrafamilial abuse (40.74%); child abduction (25.93%); and abuse perpetrated by someone in the child's close circle; stranger abuse; or the child being held in captivity (22.22% each). Less frequently depicted were institutional abuse (11.11%) and clerical and non-recent abuse (3.7%). While types of abuse can differ between nations and timepoints (Ferragut et al., 2021) multiple sources concur that between 70-92% of children know their abuser (Council of Europe, n.d.; Australian Bureau 2016; Finkelhor & Shattuck, 2012). Thus stranger abuse, and probably also CSE and bunker/captivity narratives are overrepresented in these texts, and even when intrafamilial or close-circle abuse are shown, it is often in conjunction with these rarer forms of abuse. The frequency of these rarer forms in fiction could amplify misconceptions about how most children experience CSA. The corpus, despite being contemporary, also contains very few depictions of online CSA/CSE which is rising drastically. To keep our later findings on readers' responses in perspective, it is also important to note that many of these texts also depicted other difficult life experiences, such as drug abuse or forced migration.

Examining the representation of victim/survivors' gender reveals an overrepresentation of male victim/survivors in the CSA fiction compared to real-world prevalence data. Male victim/survivors are depicted in 57.7% of the fictional texts, while female victim/survivors are represented in 84.6% (Figure 1), suggesting a 1.47-fold increased likelihood of girls being victimised. In reality, studies consistently suggest that girls are 1.9 to 2.2 times more likely to experience CSA (Barth et al. 2013). While the overrepresentation of boys as victim/survivors in fiction could contribute to enhanced awareness, stigma reduction, and better efforts to support male victim/survivors, it could also distort readers' understanding of who is most at risk.

The representation of perpetrators' gender in the CSA fiction was largely accurate vis-à-vis real-world prevalence for female perpetrators: 11.11% female in the fiction versus 10% in reality (Ferragut et al. 2021). Male perpetrators were slightly overrepresented as they were present in every text. The concomitant absence of female perpetrators operating alone could reinforce the prevailing myth that CSA is invariably perpetrated (also) by males.

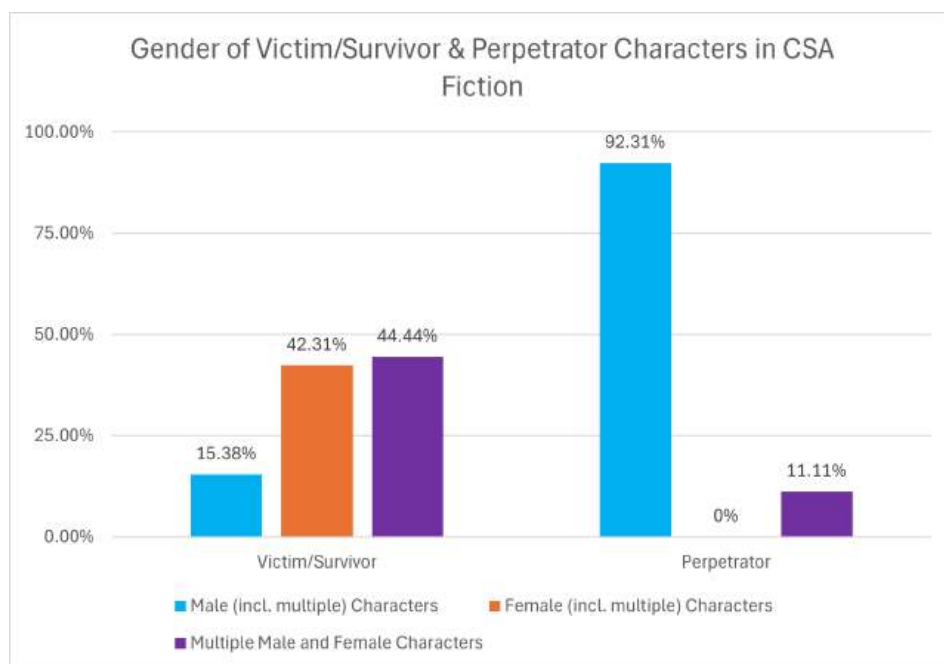


Figure 1: Gender distribution of victim/survivor and perpetrator characters across the CSA fiction texts

3.3. The readers

Responses were included when readers selected a CSA fiction text as one of their 3-5 memorable texts, even when they did not explicitly discuss the representation of CSA in their interview. Responses were also included if readers mentioned a CSA fiction text in passing - with reference to CSA, general violence, or their own reaction to the text (e.g., feeling bad while reading) - even if the text was not one of their 3-5 most memorable texts.

Our sample comprised 89 readers total (8.8% of the full ReLEL dataset) and as 6 readers referred to two CSA texts in their interview, we worked with a total of 95 responses. Of those, 6 responses mentioned the CSA text in passing while discussing other texts, while

89 responses discussed the CSA text in some detail. The subsample of readers who discussed CSA texts was similar to the overall ReLEL dataset in terms of age (mean = 44.17 years, range = 20–76); education level (3.16% PhD, 61.05% graduate school, 34.74% secondary school, 1.05% elementary school); and frequent self-reported reading, around 30 books on average per year.

One major difference from the complete dataset was the even larger proportion of women among CSA fiction readers (88.42%) compared to the full ReLEL dataset (69.6%). This suggests that CSA fiction is part of the larger trend where fiction is read more often by female readers (Jabbar and Warraich 2022), and particularly that which features sexual violence (Vicary and Fraley, 2010). While 29.4% of recollected fiction in the ReLEL dataset was read by minors, the proportion of CSA-related fiction read by this age group was notably lower at 19.32%. Comparable levels of reading were observed during young adulthood (ages 18–25), with 25.07% of all recollected fiction and 26.14% of CSA fiction consumed within this age range. This is in line with our findings that CSA content is often seen as unsuitable for children – regardless of the way it is depicted and/or the genre of the text (Bulfin et al. forthcoming) – and therefore not often included in stories for children (Mills 2018), though it recurs in young adult fiction (Bulfin 2021; Oelmann 1991). That more than 45% of the CSA fiction was remembered from readings below 25 years-of-age, suggests the potentially strong impact that fictional representations of CSA can have, as young readers – having less real-world experience – are more likely to have their views and beliefs informed by fiction (Adams 2020).

4. Textual dimensions shaping reader responses

Fictional representations can significantly impact beliefs about societal issues and attitudes towards others, particularly for people with limited awareness of an issue or contact with affected individuals (Fontes and Pino-Juste, 2021; Jones et al., 2023). As people without personal knowledge or experience of CSA tend to avoid the issue, we hypothesised that CSA fiction can potentially be highly informative and meaningful, but also misleading and harmful to general views on CSA and victim/survivors.

However, the aspects of fictional representations responsible for these potential effects on general audiences have not yet been studied. We therefore propose four theoretical dimensions that we expected to be key in shaping reader responses to fictional depictions of child sexual abuse: 1) *Centrality of the CSA depiction* in relation to the whole work; 2) *Explicitness of CSA* in terms of both naming and depiction; 3) *Victim/survivor-centredness of the depiction*; and 4) *Accuracy of the depiction of CSA*, especially with regard to misconceptions and 'CSA myths'.

In this section, we put forward specific propositions regarding the effect of each dimension on reader responses and then test these in the following sections using our sample of 95 responses to CSA fiction. The categorization of each CSA fiction text in our corpus under these four dimensions can be found on Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/d6h9k/>

4.1. Centrality

When an issue is prominently depicted within a text it is likely to make more of an impact on readers. To determine and operationalize the centrality of CSA within the texts in our corpus, we used 1) an **overall**

rating of centrality where texts could lie on a spectrum from CSA being: a) the *central or main topic* (as is often the case for issues fiction), b) *pivotal to plot or character development*, c) *world-building* in that CSA (only or mainly) adds to the bleakness or violence of the storyworld, or d) *non-central*.

In addition, we recorded 2) **CSA occurrence over the course of the work**, and differentiated between it being a theme: a) *throughout – revealed early* (roughly in the first third of the narrative), b) *throughout – revealed later*, c) *intermittently* (e.g., isolated abuse scenes that occur at multiple points in the narrative), d) *seldom – at a key moment* (e.g., as a reveal explaining criminal or other behaviour), or e) *seldom – incidental*.

Lastly, we recorded 3) **CSA co-occurrence with other types of violence**, or whether CSA was an isolated incidence of violent crime in an otherwise nonviolent environment, making a distinction between CSA as: a) the *only violent crime* depicted, b) *CSA co-occurring with other violence directed at the victim-survivor* (adverse childhood experiences and/or violence later in life), c) *CSA co-occurring with violence against other characters*, or d) *CSA co-occurring with other difficult issues/potentially traumatic events*.

We expected that greater centrality, sustainedness, and singularity of CSA in a representation will link directly to its prominence in readers' responses. This, we hypothesized, will manifest in increased references to CSA as a recurrent theme, or as a particularly memorable aspect, or as a subject which prompts emotion or reflection in readers.

4.2. Explicitness

The use of appropriate terms is one of ten established criteria for good quality journalistic reporting on CSA (see Döring and Walter 2020, NQC 3), which aim at supporting a solution-focused discussion on this important topic. Research on the impact of media reports also stresses that using appropriate terms in relation to victim/survivors, perpetrators, and the crime enhances reader-perceived adequacy of news reports and facilitates understanding of the issue (Döring and Walter 2025, 910-917); that terms and descriptions used reflect the underlying understanding of the issue (as historical surveys show, Bingham 2019); and that distancing text features (such as passive voice) obscure perpetrator responsibility and foster victim blaming (Bohner 2001). While there is, to our knowledge, no comparable research linking the way CSA is depicted in *fiction* to the impact on readers' perceptions of the issue, we hypothesize that similar mechanisms are at play.

When operationalizing 'explicitness' in fiction, we focused on 1) the **naming of the issue of child sexual abuse** itself, distinguishing between it being: a) *explicitly named*, b) referred to *implicitly by depiction of the abuse*, or c) *normalised* by the terms and descriptions used (e.g., calling it a form of love, or using a term like 'prostitution', which implies that the abuse is a form of sex work and hence a legal or tolerated profession); and 2) the **graphic depiction of CSA scenes**, distinguishing between it being: a) *explicitly depicted multiple times*, b) *explicitly depicted once*, c) *reported* (but not 'shown'), or d) *implicit or hinted at*, but not made explicit.

Considering the diverse ways readers process metaphorical language and implicit reference (cf. Scapin 2023), we hypothesize that readers

will more readily comprehend and recall that a work depicts CSA if CSA is explicitly named and represented. In contrast to a depiction in which CSA is normalised, this type of representation is more likely to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of CSA as a grave crime with potentially severe consequences for the victim/survivor. The explicit articulation of the issue and demonstration of CSA, either through direct expression or through reporting, is likely to result in a reduction of victim blaming and the engendering of more empathic responses. Conversely, responses that normalise CSA are anticipated to result in the downplaying of consequences and a diminished comprehension of victim/survivors' trauma responses and coping mechanisms.

4.3. Victim/survivor-centred perspective

In an approach that seeks to actively listen to people with lived experience of child sexual abuse we discussed with our experts-by-experience advisory board what would make a representation victim/survivor-centred in their opinion. The discussion revealed that elements beyond the textual representation – such as authors' purpose, their objective of preventing re-traumatisation and dispelling CSA myths, and their intention to present a non-sensationalist account – are crucial factors in determining the degree to which a representation is perceived as survivor-centred. The role of paratextual information, which is routinely sought out by (some) readers to make sense of their reading experience, should therefore be a focus of further research.⁷ Here, we focus on operationalizing the intra-textual dimensions that might engender a holistic connection

⁷ In the interviews, the ReLEL team asked about respondents' background knowledge regarding the author. In our subset only a few readers had related knowledge, e.g. if the authors were politically or socially engaged.

with the victim/survivor perspective in readers, as this was prioritised by our board.

We identified three related textual aspects that may impact readers' responses: 1) the **focaliser and perspective** from which the narrative is told: a) *victim/survivor - child perspective*, b) *victim/survivor - adult perspective*, c) *bystander*, d) *far-away bystander* not belonging to the victim/survivors' close circle, or e) *perpetrator*.

In addition, we identified 2) the **complexity of the victim/survivor character** and differentiated between: a) *round* characters that are complex in their cognitive and/or emotional portrayal, undergo development, and show multiple facets of their character, and b) *flat* characters about whom not much more than their experience of CSA is known.

We also surveyed the fiction for 3) the **depicted impact of CSA**, including bodily sensations, emotions, victim/survivors' resilience, their coping strategies, their trauma (responses), including self-harm, the (difficulty of) disclosure, the continued impact on their life, death by suicide or death by murder, as well as noting if no impacts were described. We operationalised these as: a) *not showing any impact*, b) *showing some kinds of impact* (1-3 of the above mentioned), or c) *showing many kinds of impact* (more than three kinds).

We hypothesise that focalisation will impact on how readers connect with characters. Experiencing events from the perspective of the victim/survivor focaliser is most likely to evoke other-oriented emotions (sympathy, compassion, etc.) towards victim/survivors and other-oriented cognition (problem awareness, problem-solving

thoughts) regarding them. As other-oriented cognition in this case often involves evaluating bystander behaviour and previous research has found a tendency to blend with bystander characters even in a case where the main character was a victim/survivor (Pöhls et al. 2025), we expect that both depictions with a victim/survivor focaliser and those with a bystander focaliser will also evoke connections to bystander characters. Perpetrator focalisation may prompt perspectival alignment with the perpetrator, creating a connection between the reader and the character (or even the people they represent) which might lead to normalizing responses regarding child sexual abuse.

We expect that the complexity of victim/survivor characters will amplify these responses: round victim/survivor characters could elicit more emotional reactions, including deeper other-oriented reactions (e.g. not only pity), while flat characterisation may inhibit emotional reactions and connections to the victim/survivor character.

Narratives showing different kinds of CSA impact could help foster understanding of CSA as an event with prolonged consequences in general and the impact(s) depicted in particular. Such narratives could potentially encourage readers to reflect on trauma responses, thereby facilitating a shift in perspective in which some socially undesirable behaviour is understood as a consequence of trauma that could result in a less critical evaluation of the victim/survivor.

4.4. Accuracy of CSA depiction

It is widely accepted that literary fiction can promote understanding and reduce stigma towards those who are 'different', improve social attitudes through perspective-taking, and educate the general public

about support behaviours (Chung & Slater 2013; Chapple et al. 2021; Pöhls et al. 2025). This has been demonstrated for certain marginalised groups such as autistic people (Jones et al. 2023). The extent to which these prosocial effects occur is likely contingent upon the representation's accuracy.

Accurate fiction can trigger reflections on (Pöhls et al. 2025) or form a starting point for conversation on (Bulfin et al. forthcoming) 'difficult' social topics. Alternatively, inaccurate representations can perpetuate negative stereotypes (Kearney et al. 2019), and reinforce erroneous beliefs about societal issues (Bulfin et al. forthcoming). Due to unconscious availability heuristics, whereby individuals form assumptions based on prior, salient (vicarious) experiences (Tversky and Kahnemann 1973), dramatic or memorable fictional cases could affect beliefs about prevalence - for example, leading people to overestimate the number of CSA cases involving captivity.

We therefore analysed whether the CSA fiction in our corpus, 1) *accepts or endorses erroneous beliefs regarding CSA*; 2) *challenges misconceptions about CSA*; or 3) *refers to unusual or statistically infrequent CSA, or to circumstances/events that are often connected to CSA myths or misconceptions, but without endorsing them*.

We expect that reading CSA fiction that endorses erroneous beliefs will be correlated with readers accepting some of these, while reading CSA fiction referring to myths or misconceptions without endorsing them may lead to similar but smaller effects. Conversely, if CSA myths are challenged by the depiction, we expect that they might be recognised as false after reading. Testing the results of these

hypotheses on myth acceptance/refutation is beyond the scope of this study, however, and will be undertaken in future work.

5. RQ1: How and how frequently is CSA mentioned?

5.1. Overview of CSA mentions in response to the fiction for the dataset

The prevailing societal reluctance to discuss child sexual abuse was reflected to a certain extent in the ReLEL dataset. Given that this was a relatively brief interview conducted in public spaces, it was perhaps not surprising that respondents did not disclose personal experiences of sexual violence in childhood (Croatian prevalence statistics show that 8.5-13.7% of people experience CSA (Popović 2018)). However, the interviewers reported that participants were willing to discuss other challenging subjects, including death, grief, war, mental health and sexuality, in relation to their own or acquaintances' experiences, suggesting that CSA remains a particularly taboo topic (McRobert, 2022).

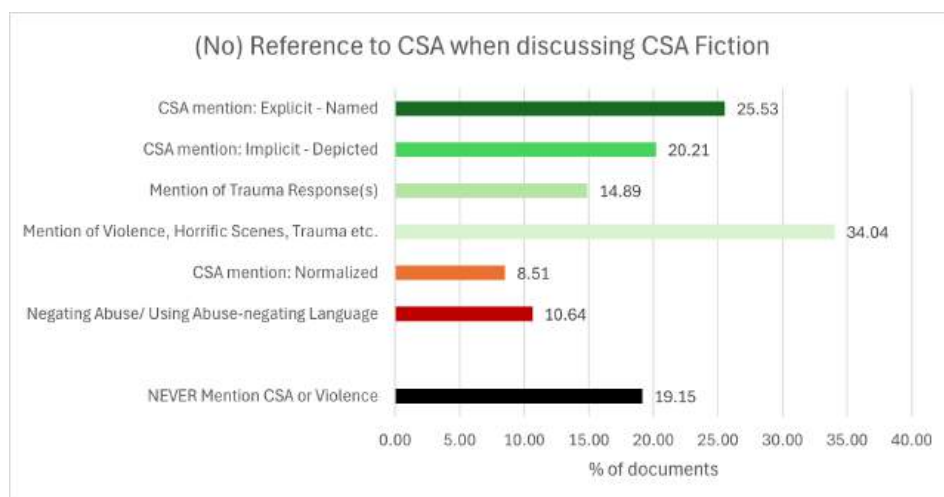


Figure 2: List of types of references readers make to CSA in their responses and percentages of responses including each reference type. Except for those not mentioning CSA or violence, these are nonexclusive.

The question of whether respondents mentioned CSA in relation to the books they chose cannot be answered in a simple dichotomous manner (Figure 2 & Table 2). In most recollections (34.04%), respondents referred to violence, horrific scenes, or trauma in a general way that could include the CSA depiction, but could also – as many works depicted CSA along with other traumatic events – refer solely to those other events. While 25.53% of responses mentioned CSA explicitly, it was also often mentioned implicitly or hinted at (20.21%), or characters’ trauma responses were referred to (14.89%), showing that these respondents engaged with the (impact of) the abuse depictions of their own accord and unprompted by the interviewers. However, not everyone mentioning CSA directly did so in a trauma-informed or victim/survivor-centred way: some responses normalised the abuse (8.51%), and others denied that CSA took place

(despite evidence to the contrary) or used language that indicated they misunderstood or minimised its harmful impact (10.64%).

Table 2:

Examples of the ways in which readers mention CSA

Subcodes: CSA Mention	Example reader responses from CSA fiction subsample
CSA mention: Explicit - Named	Well, perhaps that situation of rape , unfortunately. That abuse of minors . (R416: <i>Dark Mother Earth</i>)
CSA mention: Implicit - Depicted	Not because of these elements for which we know Lolita and what is in general... What is the whole center of the book . (R629: <i>Lolita</i>)
Mention of Trauma Response(s)	[...] their relationship and that, I mean, what they went through, how she managed, I mean, because he had nightmares and all that , how she managed to actually cure him of all that, in quotes, for him get rid of it in the end. (R862: <i>Crossfire</i>)
Mention of Violence, Horrific Scenes, Trauma, etc.	I mean, I remember the really shocking parts, descriptions, events , but now I remember the characters very poorly. (R559: 2666)
CSA mention:	It's about the same thing, actually

Normalized	several stories, but it follows a boy who is also from Afghanistan, abused, there are a few disturbing scenes described, but again normal for that area. (R940: <i>The Kite Runner</i>)
Negating Abuse/ Using Abuse-negating Language	So, there's a part about when she is bending or when she's actually kind of seducing him with her body in some way. And then for me it was so, well, she's not that innocent, like. So, like, you cannot have it black and white, that situation. Of course, I'm not excusing him because he like fell in love with her, but so on the other hand, it's a fact that everyone has their own side, every story has two sides. That is, a medal has two sides. (R121: <i>Lolita</i>)

Respondents frequently referred to CSA in multiple ways during their interviews (therefore the above-mentioned response types were non-exclusive) and patterns of linguistic politeness, likely due to the perceived sensitivity of the topic, were observed (see also Table 2). Some respondents transitioned from less to more explicit language across the interview. For example, R416 initially described the relationship between an abusive football coach and the boy victim/survivor as “let's say [...] interesting”, but towards the conclusion of the interview, explicitly referred to “that situation of rape [...] that abuse of minors” as something that had remained in her memory, showing that *Dark Mother Earth* had caused her to reflect on the issue. Additionally, respondents offered excuses for broaching

CSA in the interviews or exhibited hesitations when speaking about it. This suggests they experience considerable reluctance and difficulties in discussing CSA.

Furthermore, in nearly a fifth of responses (19.15%), CSA (or even possible references to it) did not come up at all and in more than a quarter of recollections (27.08%) it was not mentioned in the initial summary of the narrative. This suggests that CSA was not perceived as a main theme by these respondents or that they were unwilling to discuss it.

5.2. How are the mentions of CSA connected to the fictional dimensions of the work?

As hypothesised (see section 4.1), we found a clear link between our **overall rating of centrality** and the frequency with which CSA was (explicitly) named by respondents (Figure 3).

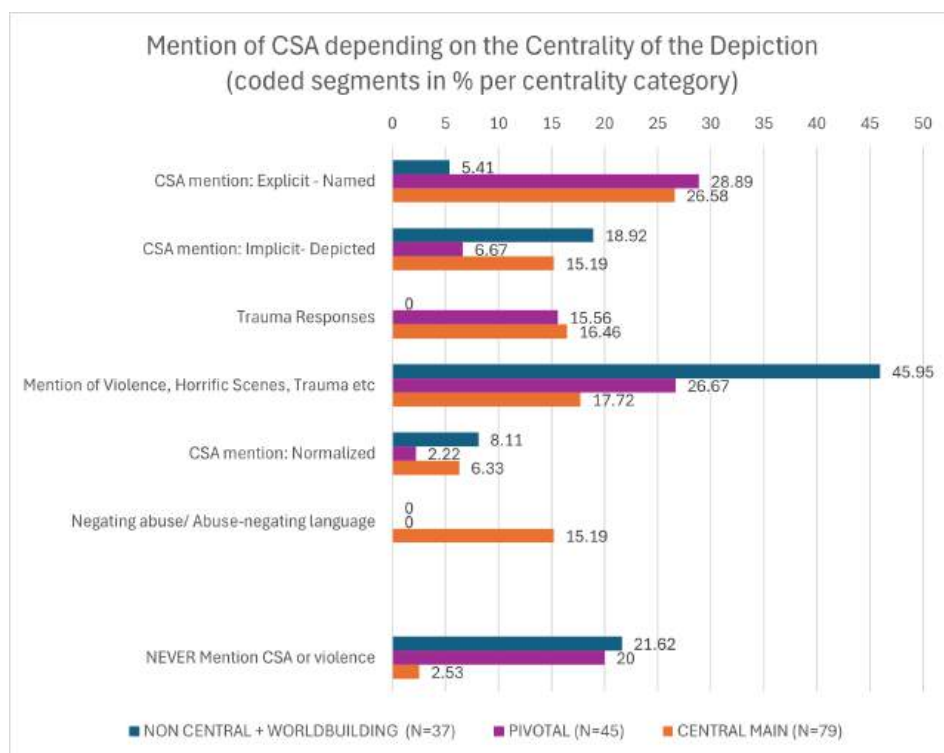


Figure 3: References readers made to CSA in their responses in relation to the 'overall centrality' rating of the text. (% of all responses which refer to CSA in the respective way per centrality category)

In response to CSA fiction in which CSA was merely a non-central topic or world-building element (world-building set), respondents referred to CSA explicitly in only 5.41% of mentions. This figure is significantly lower than in the responses to fiction where CSA was pivotal (pivotal set; 28.89%) or central (central set; 26.58%). Instead, in the world-building set, CSA was not distinguished within mentions of other horrific events (45.95%), or mentioned in an implicit way (18.92%). Such non-direct referrals were less prevalent in responses to the central or pivotal sets. If CSA was central in a work, it was rarely

omitted entirely (only 2.53%), while fiction in the pivotal and world-building sets had many respondents focusing on other themes.

Notably, trauma responses or the impact on the victim/survivor or bystander characters were only discussed when CSA was central or pivotal to the narrative. This suggests that if CSA is employed solely as a world-building tool to highlight the negative aspects of a storyworld, such as violence or injustice, it fails to direct attention towards the impact of CSA on the lives of victims/survivors and bystanders.

The normalising and negating responses require further analysis to ascertain their relationship to characteristics of the representation: We hypothesised that respondents' references to CSA would mirror the **naming of the issue of CSA** in the text (see section 4.2) - and for texts that normalize CSA, we expected to see more abuse-normalizing and abuse-negating language.

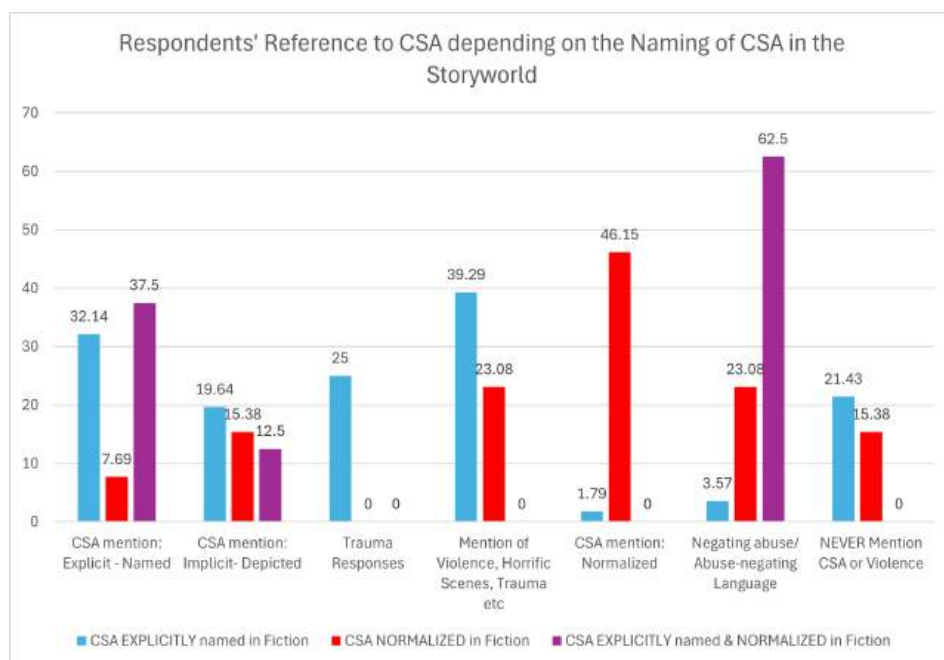


Figure 4: References readers made to CSA in their responses in relation to the naming of CSA in the text, in percentages of responses including this reference. Except for those not mentioning CSA or violence, these are nonexclusive.

A clear link was found between fiction that referred to CSA in a normalising manner and normalising mentions by respondents (Figure 4). While explicit textual mentions of CSA largely elicited either encompassing referrals to violence (39.29%) or explicit referrals to CSA (32.14%) and rarely evoked normalizing responses (1.79%) nor abuse-negating language (3.57%), normalising textual depictions were most likely to evoke normalising language in respondents' references to CSA (46.15%).

A striking similarity between the respondents' language and textual descriptions is revealed upon closer examination. Almost all

normalising responses were in reaction to CSA fiction which normalises CSA, albeit in different ways according to their respective storyworlds. In *Interview with the Vampire*, CSA is normalised as a component of vampirism as focalised by the perpetrator, and the abusive adult vampire-child victim relationships which mirror real-world CSA are romanticized and eroticized. One respondent mentions the scenes of “feeding” as particularly memorable, but does not go beyond the term used in the storyworld or reflect on its significance, indicating that she did not link it to real-world abuse. *Memoirs of a Geisha* and *Zoo Station* depict CSA as a conventional real-world social practice. Although it is focalised by the victim/survivor, *Memoirs* normalises CSA by conveying it as a non-recent cultural tradition, allowing readers to view it as a “geisha lifestyle” (R765, R978) rather than recognising it as child sexual exploitation. Although described as exploitative, in *Zoo Station* CSA is portrayed as a common experience for marginalised youth in West-Berlin during the 1970s, which leads to its normalisation in the eyes of readers, who fail to single it out for condemnation.

While depictions that normalise CSA regularly provoked abuse-negating responses as we had hypothesised (23.08%), negations are even more frequent in response to works that both normalize *and* explicitly name CSA (62.5%), such as *Lolita*. Five out of eight responses to *Lolita* negated CSA: it is called “love between an older man and a minor girl” (R806) and twelve-year-old Dolores is described as “entering into some sexual relations” (R401) with the perpetrator - the unreliable focalising character Humbert - as if it was her choice. What can be understood here is that respondents are well aware of the literary facts: She is a child, he is not, they engage in sexual acts. But the abusive nature of this is not recognised or acknowledged; instead,

harmful CSA myths are corroborated and victim blaming takes place (see also Table 2). These respondents seem to have been influenced by Nabokov's literary depiction of perpetrator strategies, such as the use of elaborate rationalisations of CSA, as James Phelan surmises (Phelan 2007: 232). Negating abuse could be respondents' way to continue to share the perspective of the "interesting" (R370, R717) focaliser, the perpetrator Humbert, with whom they have been invited to connect; in these instances, respondents do not seem to have realised that the text also ultimately invites them to distance themselves from his views.

Unreliable narration may also have contributed to the abuse-negating responses to fictional works with a victim/survivor character as focaliser, such as *Memoirs of a Geisha* and *My Dark Vanessa*, where the protagonist uses protective denial to cope with her abuse and only over time gains clarity and language to recognize and name the abusive nature of her experience.

It can be concluded that the centrality of CSA in fictional representations is positively correlated with its presence in readers' responses, whereas representations where CSA is solely employed for world-building elicit less explicit references and, within the scope of our dataset, no reflections on the impact of CSA on victim/survivors and bystanders. The language employed to refer to CSA is crucial, with explicit textual language most successfully evoking explicit language in the responses and normalising textual language evoking normalising responses (and to a lesser extent abuse-negating responses), and a combination of normalising and explicit language in the fiction evoking abuse-negating responses (and to a much lesser extent explicit naming of CSA).

6. RQ2: What kinds of emotions are evoked by CSA fiction?

6.1. Overview of emotional responses in the dataset

Our CSA fiction corpus depicts many forms of child sexual abuse (and other difficult life events), and – as we hypothesised – strong emotions are evident in readers’ responses. Emotions were mentioned in 84.21% of responses and in response to 88.89% of the texts. We coded the emotions inductively and included aesthetic emotions (AEs) such as liking (Schindler et al. 2017). The positive AE we designated Interested/Engaged was mentioned in the most readers’ responses, followed by Sadness, Liking, Impression/Affected (a mixed AE indicating a deep effect), Shocked/Shook up and Disgust/Nauseous (Figure 5).

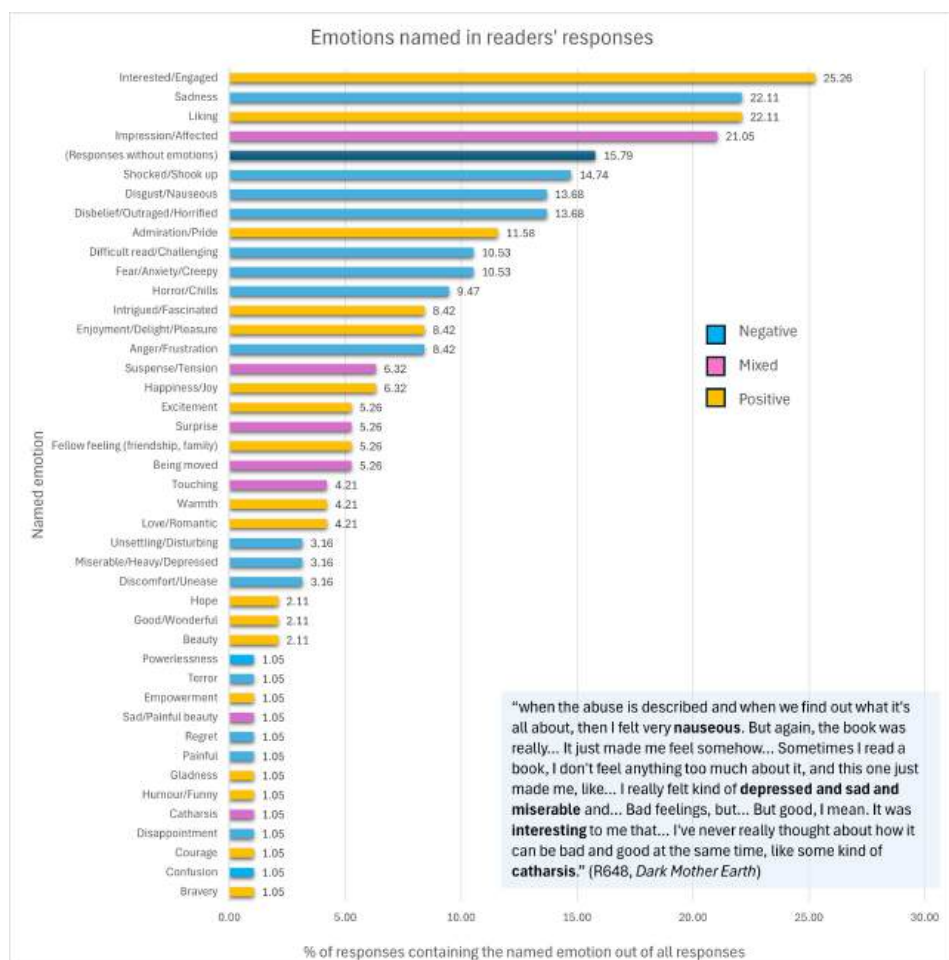


Figure 5: Emotions named in readers' responses (% of responses containing the named emotion out of all responses)

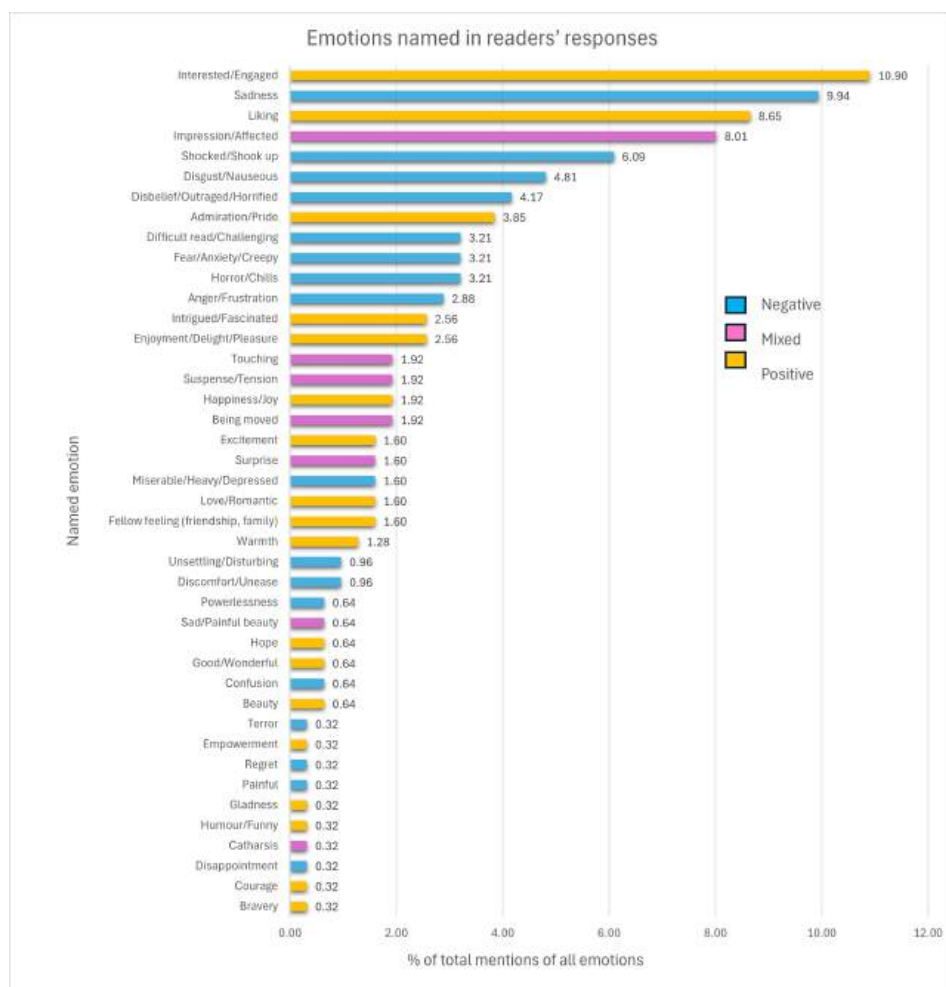


Figure 6: Emotions named in readers' responses (% of total mentions of all emotions)

Overall, 43.59% of all mentions of emotion referenced negatively valenced emotions, 40.06% referenced positive and 16.35% referenced mixed (Figure 6 shows the emotions mentioned most frequently overall). The relatively high number of negative emotional reactions likely derives from the difficult material encountered in the CSA fiction. The co-occurrence of these negative emotions with

positive and mixed AEs points to the ameliorating effect of AEs on the potential distress experienced when strong negative emotions like shock and disgust are evoked during reading. This is in line with Menninghaus et al.'s (2017) distancing-embracing explanatory model for the enjoyment of negative emotions in art reception, which stresses the role of interplays of positive and negative emotions and concomitant mixed emotions in making the (reading) experience bearable and even pleasurable. The excerpt shown in Figure 5 from R648's response to a striking abuse scene in *Dark Mother Earth* evinces several key negative emotions evoked by abuse depictions and suggests they were ameliorated by the mixed AE Catharsis.

Within the overall ReLEL dataset, emotions were mentioned in 95% of responses and were negative in 50% of these, meaning that our sub-corpus of CSA fiction evoked emotions in fewer responses (84.21%) – possibly due to the relative lack of cues for positive emotions in these difficult texts. For example, our rate of negative emotions differs from Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo's (2019) findings on a corpus of popular texts in which they observed many more positive reactions than negative. In addition, within the CSA-fiction responses which mentioned an emotion, more include a negative emotion (60.00%) than in the ReLEL dataset (50%), which again may relate to the difficult material. Furthermore, comparing negative emotion distribution in the CSA fiction and ReLEL dataset (using a preliminary ReLEL study on negative emotions, Škopljanač 2022) shows that the CSA fiction provoked stronger negative emotional reactions of shock, disgust and outrage, including visceral bodily reactions; but this was tempered by the presence of positive AEs. While Schindler et al. (2017) hold that readers tend to eschew fiction which evokes intense negative emotions, our findings confirm Škopljanač's (2022) that what

he refers to as ‘bibliotraumatic’ emotions in reading are both memorable and can be embraced by readers.

As well as coding each mention of an emotion, we also coded what the emotion was evoked by – from general comments to specific accounts of the emotion’s stimulus (Figure 7).

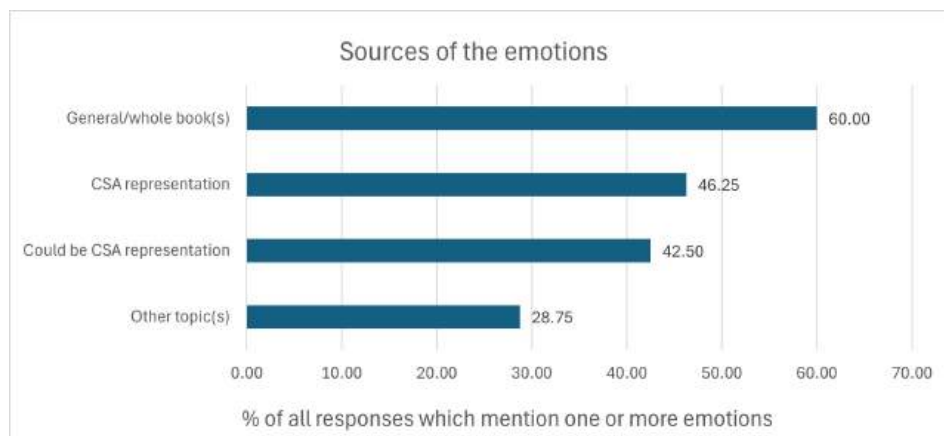


Figure 7: Sources of the emotions (% of all responses which mention one or more emotions)

The latter were divided into cases where the emotion was explicitly evoked by the CSA representation, where it could relate to the CSA representation, and where the stimulus was other topics (e.g., war or drug abuse) (see Table 3). We found that at least one emotion was evoked by the CSA depiction in 46.25% of all responses where an emotion was named. Representative responses show readers’ shock and sadness at the actions of abusive parents, but also fascination with a perpetrator’s perspective (Table 3). As Figure 7 demonstrates, many of the emotional reactions in the CSA-fiction responses do or

could stem from the CSA representations; and this could also be a factor in a respondent's emotional response to the whole book.

Table 3

Example reader responses for sources of the emotions and for the 'Deep Impact' and 'Memorable Parts' questions

Stimulus of the emotion	Example reader responses from CSA fiction subsample
General/Whole Book(s)	[I]t's interestingly written, I mean once you pick it up you can't put it down. (R722: <i>The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo</i>) It doesn't end well. It's very sad. (R039: <i>The God of Small Things</i>)
CSA Representation	The book shook me because... Because I can't believe that such things exist in the 21st century, that parents sexually abuse their children. (R239: <i>Sjeme Tame</i>) Well, also some kind of excitement. Sadness, when they sell her, disappointment. And in the end she's happy, so joy. (R726: <i>Memoirs of a Geisha</i>) I found that concept interesting, that of a pedophile, that is, from the perspective of a pedophile. (R370: <i>Lolita</i>)
Could be CSA Representation	Because it was about a child, so that particularly shook me... (R940: <i>The Kite Runner</i>)
Other Topics	[E]ven somehow a, a kind of disgust, so to speak. I don't know how to express it more softly. So it's just very uncomfortable for me to read about all these things concerning addiction. (R246: <i>Zoo Station</i>)

'Deep Impact' Question	Jesus Christ, now we are stranded at this terrible part. The first thing that comes to my mind is one of the descriptions of those victims, those girls who perished ... I don't know why that most horrible part comes up to me now, of the whole book, but well, there you go. (R065: 2666)
'Memorable Parts' Question	[I]t's a striking scene for me ... how this young man is raped by his peers... (R709: <i>The Kite Runner</i>)

The distribution of emotions evoked specifically by the CSA depictions also differed from that of the full set of CSA-fiction responses (and even more so from the wider ReLEL dataset (where comparison is possible)). As Table 4 shows, the strong, visceral negative emotions of disgust and horror play a larger role in the responses evoked by the CSA depictions, while interest and liking are less prominent, speaking to a strong repugnance for this brutal crime against children.

Table 4

Distribution of most frequent emotions directly evoked by the CSA representations versus distribution of emotions in the full CSA fiction subsample

Named emotion	Distribution of most frequent emotions directly evoked by the CSA depictions	Distribution of emotions in the full CSA fiction subsample (% of total mentions of emotion)
Disgust/Nauseous	13.04%	4.81%

Impression/Affected	9.78%	8.01%
Interested/Engaged	8.70%	10.90%
Horror/Chills	7.61%	3.21%
Sadness	6.52%	9.94%
Shocked/Shook up	6.52%	6.09%
Disbelief/Outraged/ Horrificed	5.43%	4.17%
Liking	4.35%	8.65%

Furthermore, respondents frequently mentioned the CSA depictions when specifically asked if any part of the text made a deep impression on them and/or was particularly memorable. The CSA depiction was a factor or possible factor in 60.04% of responses to the deep impression question and in 54.05% of responses to the particularly memorable question, with the experience of reading an explicit abuse depiction often remaining vividly in the respondent's mind (see Table 3).

6.2. How are readers' emotions connected to the fictional dimensions?

We hypothesised that there would be differences in emotional reactions to the CSA fiction according to the **overall centrality of CSA** in the narrative (see section 4.1). We found, as might be expected, that more emotional reactions are evoked by the CSA depictions in narratives where CSA is the central theme (51.11%) or pivotal to

events/characters (45.83%) compared to when it is a world-building element (8.00%; Figure 8).

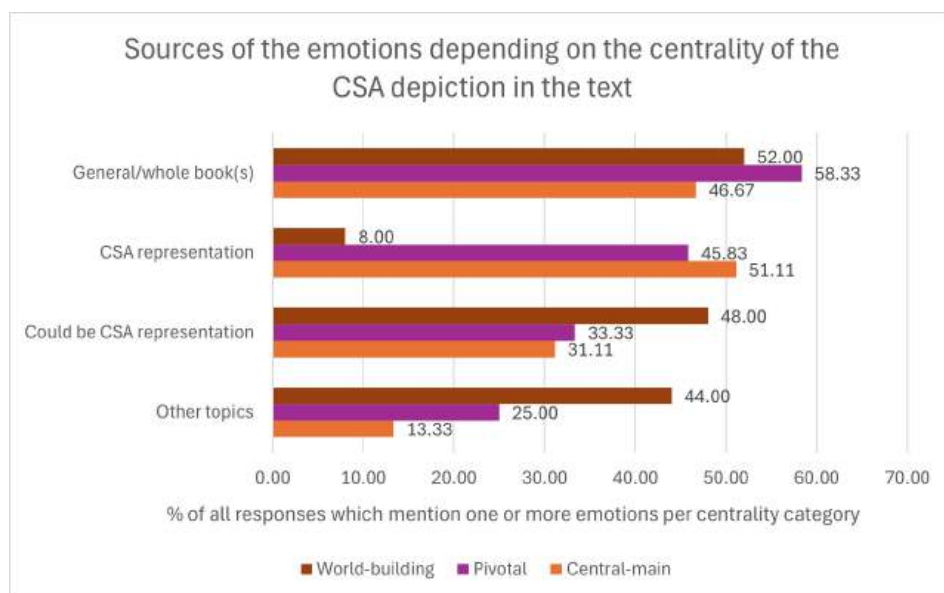


Figure 8: Sources of the emotions depending on the centrality of the CSA depiction in the text (% of all responses which mention one or more emotions per centrality category)

This suggests that shallow, passing depictions of CSA used to intensify storyworld bleakness (e.g., *The Institute*) allow readers to bypass the typically strong emotions it evokes. Frequently encountering such CSA depictions – for example, within the crime or horror genres – could potentially lead to desensitised or fatalistic responses to the issue. Unexpectedly, we did not find patterns of difference in emotional valence or distribution for the different types of CSA narrative centrality – likely because the world-building texts depicted other difficult topics, such as femicide (2666) or addiction (*Zoo Station*).

We also hypothesised that there would be differences in emotional reactions to the CSA fiction according to the **complexity of the victim/survivor character** (see section 4.3). We found that emotion is evoked by the CSA depiction more often for round characters (42.30%) than for flat (23.53%), indicating that facile or stereotyped depictions of victim/survivors can impede readers' connections (Figure 9). Round characters also produced slightly more negative (10.76%) and slightly fewer positive (9.62%) emotions, possibly implying the emotional burden of engaging with a more plausible or relatable character who is experiencing abuse (Figure 10).

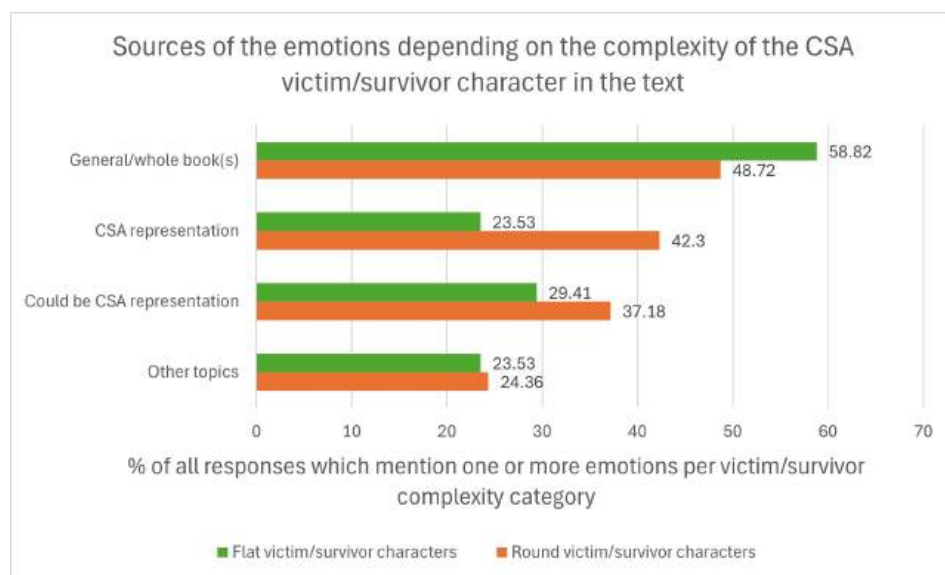


Figure 9: Sources of the emotions depending on the complexity of the CSA victim/survivor character in the text (% of all responses which mention one or more emotions per victim/survivor complexity category)

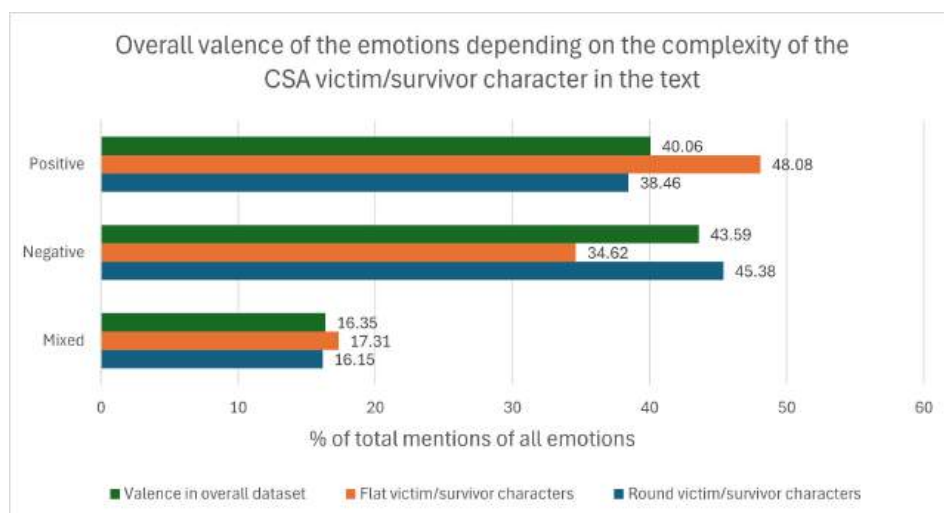


Figure 10: Overall valence of the emotions depending on the complexity of the CSA victim/survivor character in the text (% of total mentions of all emotions)

Finally, texts with flat characters seem to evoke more suspense and enjoyment emotions (Figure 11) – possibly because this set of texts includes several crime novels and thrillers – while texts with round characters engender more sadness, disgust and horror. Overall, the difference in the distribution of the emotions confirms that the complexity of the victim/survivor character affects readers' emotional responses to the text.

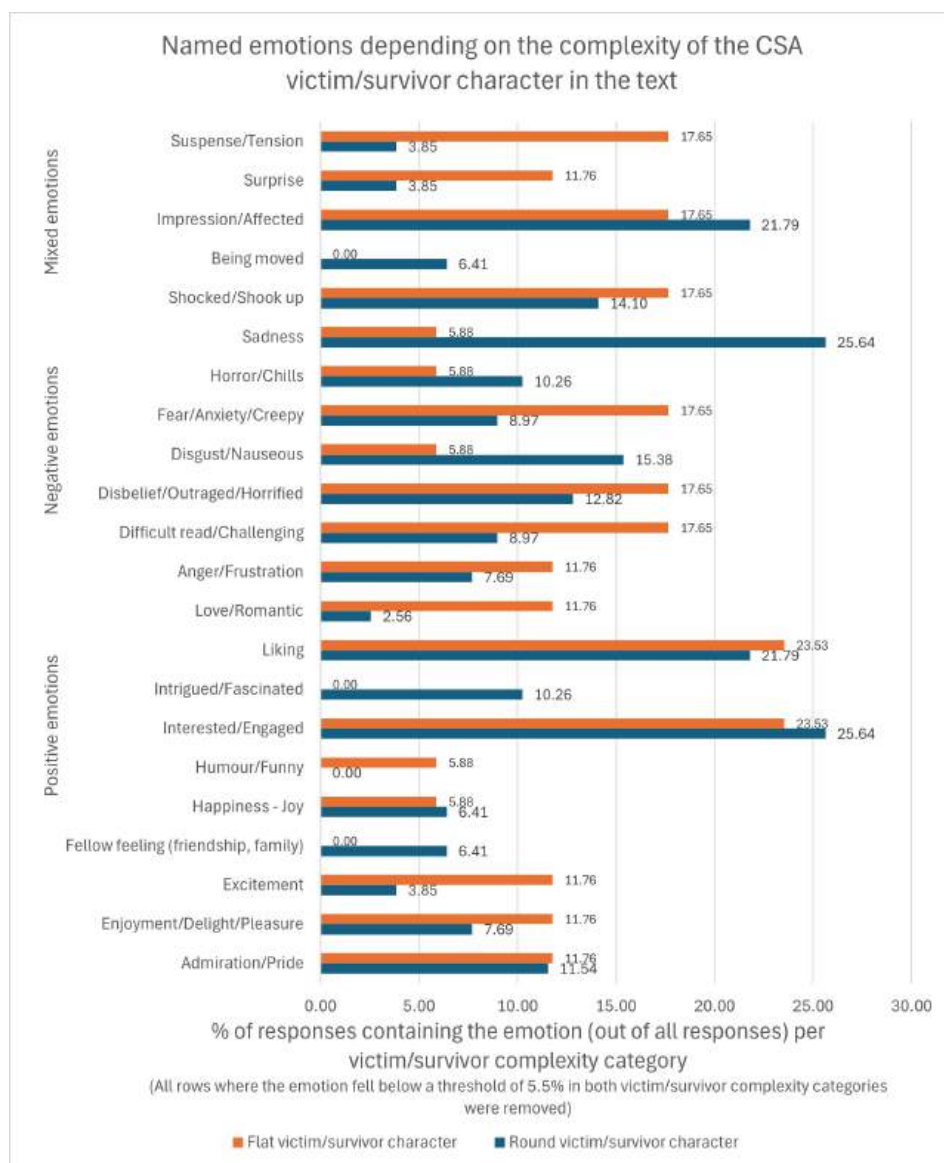


Figure 11: Named emotions depending on the complexity of the CSA victim/survivor character in the text (% of responses containing the emotion (out of all responses) per victim/survivor complexity category)

7. RQ3: Which kinds of reflections are elicited by the CSA fiction?

7.1. Overview of reflections elicited for the dataset

In discussing the fiction, respondents frequently (in 60% of cases) shared reflections that went beyond the confines of the storyworld, pertaining to insights or realizations regarding the real world gained through their engagement with the narratives. Their reflections concern human psychology, one's own or other societies, oneself, and morals and values (Figure 12).

In 25.26% of responses, these reflections, realizations, or learnings were directly connected to child sexual abuse. Compared to non-CSA-related reflections, they were more concerned with human psychology (especially trauma, resilience and development, human wickedness and the banality of evil) as well as oneself, personal life situations, and choices (Figure 12). At the same time, CSA-related reflections were less connected to the societal level, suggesting that the depictions did not frequently evoke thinking about CSA as a problem to be addressed by society as a whole. For some readers reflecting on society, depictions set in a remote time or place (e.g., *The Kite Runner*; *Memoirs of a Geisha*) elicited distancing responses – such as CSA being “normal for the area” (R940) – that might imply the misconception that CSA is intrinsic to certain regions while uncommon in one's own sphere. Depictions set geographically close to Croatian readers (*Dark Mother Earth*; *Sjeme Tame*), on the other hand, elicited reflections on CSA prevalence in one's own society.

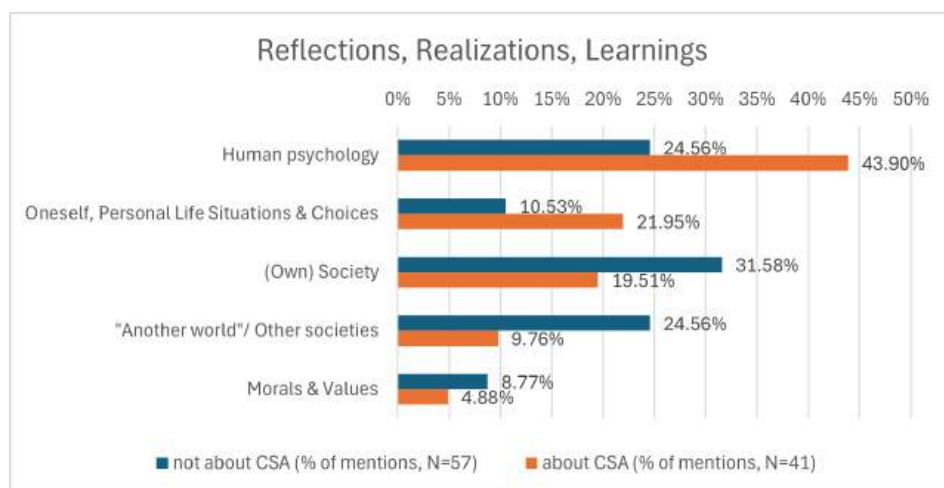


Figure 12: Subjects that were reflected on by readers. Percentage of mentions depending on whether reflections, realizations, or learnings were in relation to CSA (57 mentions) or not (41 mentions).

Overall, we found prosocial reflections that pointed to a raised awareness regarding the prevalence of CSA and its potentially traumatic impact on victim/survivors, realizations of bystander difficulties and importance, as well as refutations of common misconceptions about CSA, victim/survivors and perpetrators. For example, one respondent realised after reading *The Consequences of Love* that perpetrators do not fit a specific national, racial, or religious profile (R900). However, some responses did demonstrate CSA myth acceptance, as illustrated by the suggestion that there might be acceptable reasons for becoming a perpetrator (R629, R806) or that the victim/survivor could have 'asked for it' (see section 5.2).

7.2. Which fictional dimensions influenced the number and types of reflections?

We found that the **overall centrality of CSA** (see section 4.1) in the narrative did significantly impact the quantity of realizations and learnings related to CSA (Figure 13). When CSA was central to the narrative, it elicited one or more reflections in 35.56% of respondents, in 25% of respondents when it was pivotal to plot or character, and in only 7.41% of respondents in the non-central/world-building set. While this may not be particularly surprising, it provides robust support for the claim that readers' cognitive engagement with the subject of CSA can be facilitated through fiction in which it is a key focus.

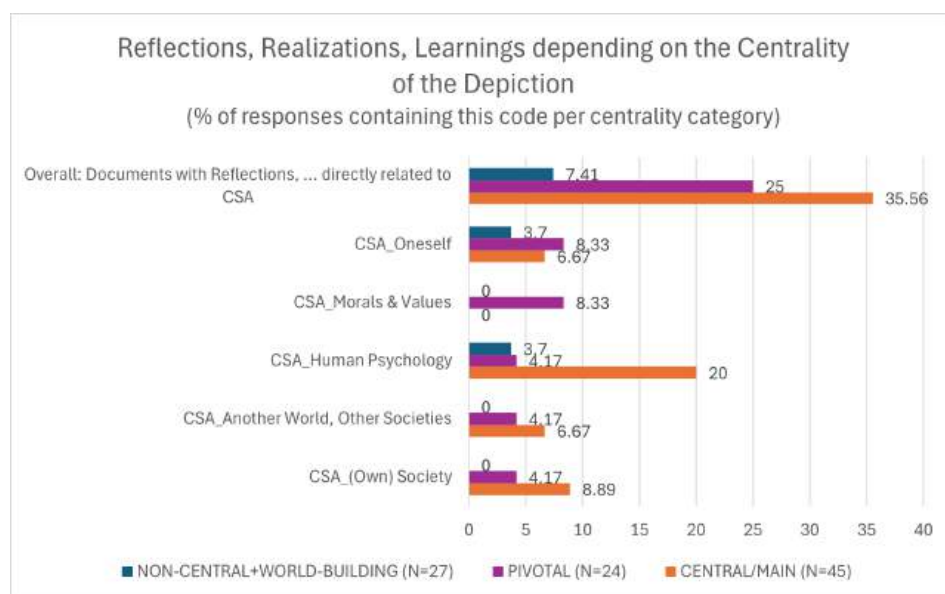


Figure 13: Subject of reflections made by readers in relation to CSA and their percentage coverage based on overall centrality of CSA in the texts they are discussing.

Subsequently, we explored whether the type of **CSA occurrence in the novel** – its frequency and the point in the narrative when it is first

mentioned – also influenced responses. Of all reflections related to CSA, most (52.8%) occurred in response to narratives where CSA was thematised early on and then throughout the narrative. 34.6% of reflections were evoked for narratives where CSA occurred seldomly, but at key points of the story, and only 13.3% of reflections were mentioned in response to stories where CSA was thematised later, but then throughout the rest of the narrative (for examples of reflections, see Figure 14). When CSA was seldom and incidental, or appeared intermittently, it evoked no reflections related to CSA at all. This suggests that it is not only the overall centrality or frequency of a topic that increases its saliency for readers, but also its narrative position, with early or key mentions of CSA prompting more reflections.

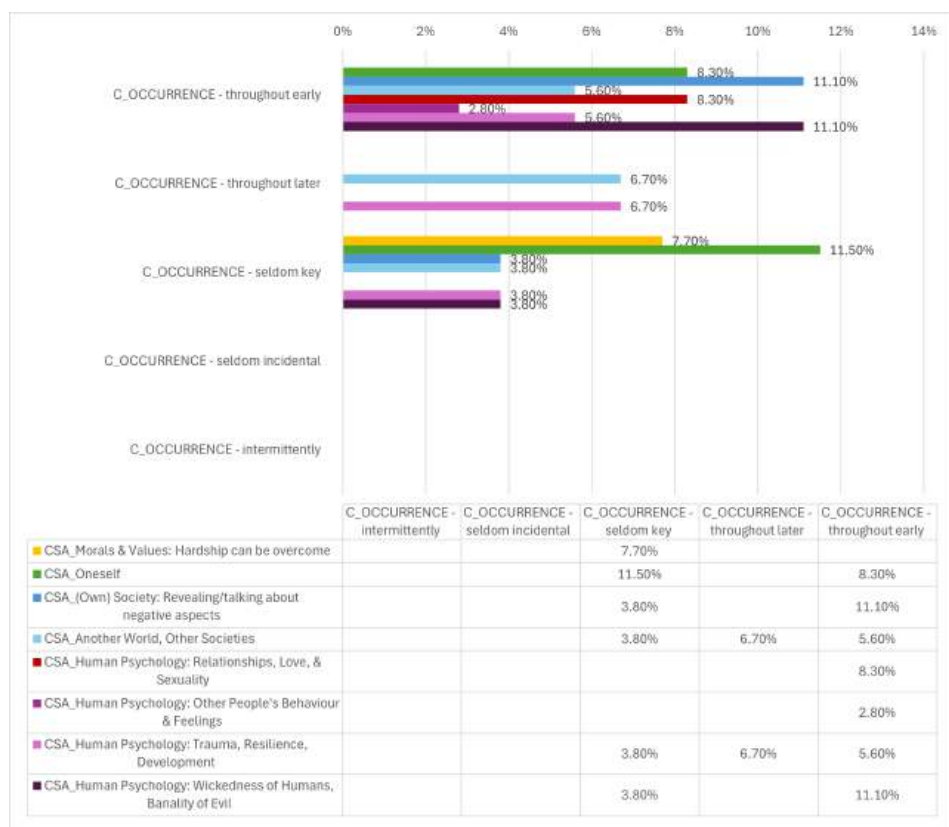


Figure 14: Subject of reflections made by readers in relation to CSA and their percentage coverage based on the CSA occurrence over the course of the texts.

8. RQ4: Do readers show connections to victim/survivor (and other) characters?

8.1. Overview of the connections to characters for the dataset

In light of victim/survivors' testimonies of feeling rejected or shamed when disclosing child sexual abuse (Cunnington & Clark 2022), we explored the extent to which readers can establish a spontaneous connection to victim/survivor characters depicted in the CSA fiction. Reiterating the guidance from the project's advisory board of experts-

by-experience, the preferable type of readers' connection to victim/survivors would be a holistic engagement with these characters and 'walking with them', while also recognizing that their experience of CSA might continue to impact their life without being the defining aspect. This type of full empathic connection contrasts to partial connections which recognise either the victim/survivor's strength or the harm inflicted on them. While partial connections to the victim/survivor are preferable to no connections in terms of countering social avoidance, they can be reductive.

In the analysis, we adopted an inclusive approach in which 'connection' could entail sympathetic, admiring, attentive, empathetic, and perspective-taking responses (Webber et al. 2022) and registered if respondents demonstrated a broad connection to the whole character; a partial connection recognising the strength; or a partial connection recognising the suffering of the victim/survivor character (see Table 5). Combining these codes allows us to also see how many respondents showed both types of partial connections, and thus had a more complex recognition of the victim/survivor experience, and how many of those who formed a broad connection to the whole character also recognized their CSA experience. We see this latter type of connection as coming closest to a holistic engagement with victim/survivor characters, and use the term 'holistic' to refer to it in following sections.

Table 5

Examples of the three non-exclusive types of connection with victim/survivor characters.

Subcodes: Connection to	Code Definition	Example Reader Responses from CSA	% of Read
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Victim/Survivor Character		Fiction Subsample	ers
Broad Connection to Victim/Survivor Character	Seeing the 'wholeness' of the character; referring to the character in general	It was even more interesting for me to actually read about what happened in the life of a young fifteen-year-old girl (R246: <i>Zoo Station</i>)	3%
Partial Connection to Victim/Survivor Character: Recognizing Harm	Specifically connecting with the character through recognizing the harm inflicted and adverse effects of CSA	And there's a very moving scene where this boy is raped and broken by a young man and he completely changes in the sense that he withdraws into himself (R160: <i>The Kite Runner</i>)	20%
Partial Connection to Victim/Survivor Character: Recognizing Strength	Specifically connecting with the character through admiration for their character, actions, growth, and/or resilience.	Well, that boy Hassan was somehow specific in himself, because of his sincerity and devotion to him and he never looked at anything calculated or with any bad intentions (R937: <i>The Kite Runner</i>)	19%

While previous research on audience responses to a film depicting CSA (Bulfin et al. forthcoming) found that very few general audience viewers (partially) connected with the victim/survivor character, here we saw a different response pattern with the different types of connection emerging in 37.09% of readers' responses. This higher number of connections might arise from the retrospective nature of the interviews: Self-selecting texts one has read some time ago might favour those where the respondent could (partially) connect with the fictional character.

Readers' partial connections through the recognition of harm or the recognition of strength were almost equivalent in frequency (20% and

19% respectively), diverging from previous research showing a focus on harm in responses to a text featuring a child victim/survivor focaliser and a deceased adult victim/survivor focaliser (Pöhls et al. 2025). This underscores that the type of connection likely to be formed may depend on dimensions of the fictional work such as the focaliser (see below). More complex or holistic connections were quite rare in our dataset: 7.29% of respondents connected to both aspects of harm and strength, and all of the 3% that showed a broad connection to the whole character also acknowledged at least one aspect of victimhood or survivorship.

In addition, 7.2% of respondents also connected to bystander characters. Most of these - four who read *The Kite Runner*, one who read *Sjeme Tame* - observed the bystander character's failure to intervene in the CSA, took their perspective, but condemned their inaction, and commented on its long-term effects on the bystander character: "There was a very difficult situation, also where violence was involved and where basically, he should have helped, which any person would reflexively react to help [...] And that's probably where [because of] fear [he] failed and simply-, but it haunted him through life somehow afterwards" (R993, *The Kite Runner*). These reflections on two texts depicting non-supportive bystander characters could potentially foster better bystander behaviour in the real world by setting a negative example that people strive to avoid. In contrast, fiction with a positive bystander exemplar has been demonstrated to elicit connections from a greater number of participants (Pöhls et al. 2025), but further research is needed to determine whether negative versus positive bystander characters have comparable or differing impact on readers' attitudes, intentions, or behaviour.

Few respondents (5%) connected to the perpetrator character - all in response to *Lolita*. 75% of these comments showed that these readers shared the Humbert character's perspective - one even found him "close to me" (R717). Some acknowledged that "there should be disgust", but they did not feel it and that the perpetrator character "tried [...] as much as possible [...] to resist those urges" (R370), pointing to a significant degree of emotional and cognitive alignment with him, despite their qualifications that they were not justifying him (R370, R121, R717). These responses endorse De Jonge et al.'s (2022) theory that - owing to their fictionality - perpetrator characters permit readers' moral disengagement, allowing readers to connect with Humbert as a character even as they explicitly recognised the abuse. As described in section 5.2, sharing the perpetrators' perspective can have further consequences: most readers who connected with this character engaged in negating language about CSA.

8.2. How are the connections to characters related to the fictional dimensions of the work?

The dimensions we hypothesised would relate with readers' connections to the victim/survivor character are: **1) complexity of the victim/survivor, 2) impacts of CSA depicted, and 3) focalisation** (section 4.3). We found that **the complexity of the victim/survivor character** was most important for facilitating connections to that character. In our dataset, connection with the victim/survivor character only occurred in response to complex, round characters; flat victim/survivor characters (e.g. in 2666) elicited no connections. This suggests that complexity of victim/survivor representation is a prerequisite for readers' connections with these characters, one which sensationalised representations may not afford.

The type of connection – holistic, partial recognizing strength, or partial recognizing harm – strongly depended on the **kinds and multitude of impacts** depicted in the specific text. If many impacts were depicted, most responses showed partial connections recognizing strength (25.8%), or harm (21.2%), and 4.5% showed holistic connections. In contrast, if fewer impacts were depicted, partial connections recognizing harm were more prevalent (41.7%), those recognizing strength much less so (8.3%), and holistic connections were non-existent. If no abuse impacts were depicted, connections with victim/survivors rarely occurred, and equally recognised harm or strength (both 5.9%). Thus, while depictions showing some or many kinds of impact elicited nearly an equal percentage of connections overall (41.7% and 39.4%, respectively), recognizing holistic victim/survivors or their strength seems to be a response that depends on the representation of a multitude of impacts.

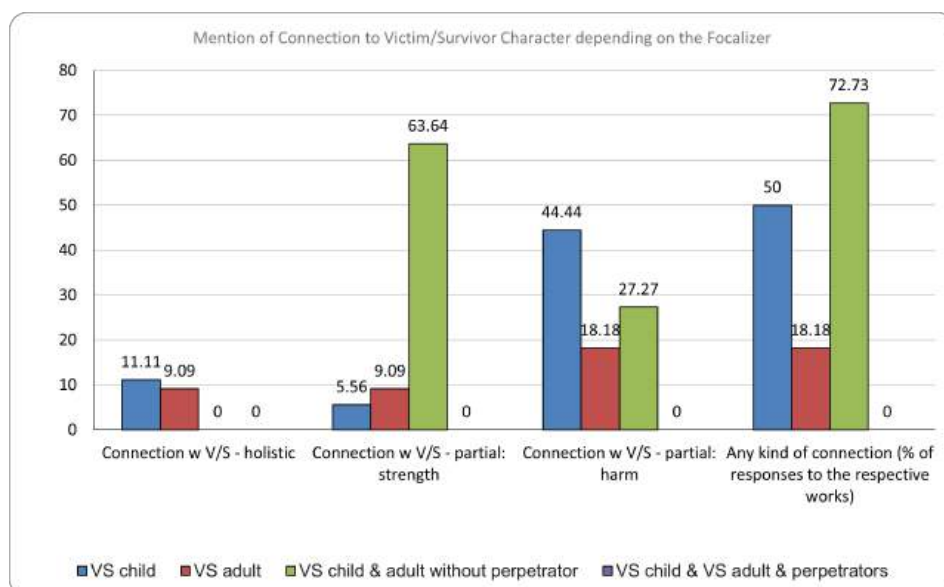


Figure 15: Distribution of connections to victim/survivor characters based on the focalizer of the texts.

Different patterns of connections emerged depending on which **character(s) focalised the text**. The fictional depictions were grouped according to the following types of focalisation: a) child victim/survivor (only, or in conjunction with a bystander), b) adult victim/survivor, c) a mixture of adult and child victim/survivors (only, or in conjunction with bystanders), or d) a mixture of adult and child victim/survivors and also a perpetrator (see Figure 15).

Fictional representations that contained both an adult and child victim/survivor focaliser elicited most connections overall to the victim/survivor characters (72.73%), followed by those with a child focaliser (50%). In our dataset, holistic connections with victim/survivors only appeared when the focaliser was a child or adult victim/survivor. In these cases, the time that readers spent ‘in the

shoes' of these characters might have helped them to form more holistic connections. Multi-focalised depictions containing a perpetrator focaliser did not elicit any connections to the victim/survivor characters.

Partial connections based on the harm done to victim/survivors were most likely to be elicited in response to stories with child victim/survivor focalisers (44.44%), but also frequently for adult victim/survivor focalisers (18.18%) and multifocalised depictions (27.27%). A connection based on the harm might be more readily formed when readers encounter a vulnerable focaliser to whom CSA happens in the present and not in retrospect. Partial connections based on the victim/survivors' strength were most likely to appear when the story was focalised by an adult and a child victim/survivor character. Possibly, this contrast might have highlighted the strength it took the victim/survivor to live with the experience of CSA.

Some texts focalised by victim/survivors also produced connections with bystander characters (adult: 9.1%, child: 16.7%), while some bystander focalised texts also produced partial connections to the victim/survivors. This accords with Pöhls et al.'s (2025) findings wherein readers' connections fluctuated between the victim/survivor and bystander characters. We found no connection to any character in narratives focalised solely by a distant bystander, suggesting that a level of narrative involvement is necessary for connection.

The only text that elicited a connection with the perpetrator was *Lolita*, which is focalised solely by the perpetrator. Other multifocalised narratives included perpetrator character focalisers, but did not elicit connections to them. However, the inclusion of a

perpetrator focaliser may have blocked connections with victim/survivor characters (see above). On the other hand, not all readers of *Lolita* connected to the perpetrator – 20% partially connected with the victim/survivor Dolores by recognizing the harm she experienced.

9. Discussion

In this paper we proposed that four intratextual dimensions of fiction depicting child sexual abuse would influence how readers responded to these works. Using the ReLEL dataset of Croatian readers, we empirically tested these hypotheses and raised the following key insights.

In a context where CSA is a difficult subject to discuss, there were clear variations in how readers referred to the issue. The largest proportion of readers referred to general acts of violence, followed by those mentioning CSA explicitly, then implicitly, and then in the context of traumatic responses. A notable proportion did not mention CSA at all, or negated its harm or normalised it. Readers were more likely to mention CSA when it was central to the text or pivotal to its characters, compared to when it was used as a world-building device. Normalizing and negating responses were more likely when texts did not name CSA explicitly and used normalizing or negating language to describe CSA.

Overall, the valence of readers' emotional responses to CSA fiction was both positive and negative; as the difficult topic caused negative, visceral emotions but was ameliorated by an enjoyable reading experience. Almost half of all readers' emotional responses were caused specifically by the CSA depiction, and this proportion

increased when the depiction of CSA was central or pivotal within the narrative. Readers' emotional responses also varied depending on complexity of the victim/survivor character, with round victim/survivor characters evoking greater and more nuanced emotional reactions, compared to flat characters. As emotions are a key element in our understanding of and relation to others, it suggests that texts with simplistic victim/survivor characters can inhibit real-world understanding of victim/survivors, while complex portrayals of victim/survivors can promote a nuanced understanding of them.

A quarter of all readers made reflections related to CSA, which shows that reading fiction about CSA can stimulate real-world contemplation of the issue. We found prosocial reflections suggesting raised awareness of CSA's prevalence and traumatic consequences, and refutations of common misconceptions about CSA. The reflections pertained more to individual psychology than wider society, suggesting that CSA may be perceived more as an individual issue rather than requiring collective, societal-level solutions. CSA's centrality within, its frequency throughout a narrative, and a mention of it at an early position or a key moment within the narrative elevated the frequency of reflections associated with it.

Finally, we found preliminary evidence for victim/survivor-centred readings as just over a third of readers made connections to victim survivor/characters, focusing on their strength or the harm inflicted on them, but with few making holistic connections. These multifaceted connections to victim/survivors outnumbered those with bystander or perpetrator characters – these latter mostly evincing disapproval of the (inactive) bystanders and fascination with

the perpetrator character. The manner of depicting the victim/survivor character was found to be significant for the formation of connections: complexity (as opposed to 'flatness') of victim/survivor characters was a prerequisite for establishing a connection to them, and the utilisation of victim/survivor focalisation, as well as the depiction of a high number of CSA impacts was found to increase the likelihood of reader connections.

This research raises several questions and avenues for future work. The categorization of CSA fiction according to the four dimensions requires further development into a full framework, through adding more CSA fiction, more raters, and more reader responses. The ReLEL dataset is a treasure trove of possible research avenues, but our future research will also entail consolidating our theoretical dimensions with reader responses from different cultures as well as undertaking studies where readers are asked directly about their responses to CSA depictions rather than recollecting CSA fiction spontaneously. Studies asking victim/survivors about their responses to CSA fiction are also a priority.

Author contributions:

R. L. Victoria Pöhls (corresponding author): conceptualization, data curation, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, review & editing

Aleksandra Milenović: data curation, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, review & editing

Ailise Bulfin: investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, review & editing, funding acquisition

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Data availability: The categorization of each CSA fiction text under the four dimensions and the codebook can be found on Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/d6h9k/>

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