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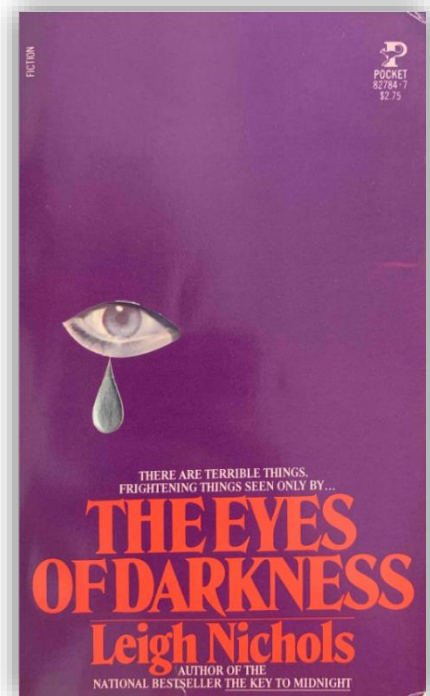
English Literature and Culture

The Power of Reader-Response: A Study of Dean Koontz' *The Eyes of Darkness* in relation to the Corona Pandemic

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## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, during the periods of total lockdown, many people's interest in reading increased. There are various reasons for this increase. Some found themselves with more free time during quarantine; others turned to books for advice and consolidation, and some just wanted to escape their own realities (The Guardian "Research"). An article in *The Guardian* explained that from "29 April to 1 May, the nation has (also) increased the amount of time it spends reading books from around 3.5 hours per week, to six" (The Guardian "Research"). This specific research was based on the UK only; but it can be said for certain that there was a global increase in reading, as e-book demands "exploded" in February of 2020 (Guren 8). Yet, it was not only the reading of literature that increased but also the reading of online articles and social media posts. The internet became one of the safest ways to stay connected to family and friends. For at least the first few weeks of the pandemic, it was one of the main resources of information for many people. This had both positive and negative effects on people. Research has shown that "those who used the internet for communication reported a lower depression score and better life satisfaction, while those using the internet for information access reported lower life satisfaction scores" (Wallinheimo 2).

Much information available on the internet was speculative in nature, plainly wrong, or even made up by conspiracy theorists who saw an opportunity to spread their theories. The beginning of the lockdown was a time of uncertainty where many people were vulnerable and quick to believe whatever information they would find. This is what Karen Douglas, in her research on psychological factors that motivate people to believe in conspiracy, describes as "epistemic motives". In an interview with the *American Psychological Association*, she says:

I guess in a nutshell, epistemic motives really just refer to the need for knowledge and certainty and I guess the motive or desire to have information. And when something

major happens, when a big event happens, people naturally want to know why that happened. They want an explanation and they want to know the truth.

On the search for answers, having a false truth is sometimes easier to some than having no information at all which is why, especially during the lockdown period, false information and conspiracy theories spread easily and reached wide audiences quickly.

One of many conspiracies that were popular at the beginning of the pandemic, was started through a reader-response to Dean Koontz's novel *The Eyes of Darkness*. Certain readers of this "pulp" science-fiction thriller claimed that Koontz had prophesized the current pandemic in his novel, which had been first published in 1981. Koontz's story contains a subplot in which a virus by the name "Wuhan 400" surfaces and spreads. Many recent readers who responded to the book published their responses online, some arguing explicitly that Koontz had prophesized the pandemic; others claiming that novel only briefly mentioned the virus and as such had nothing to do with the current global pandemic. Yet the conspiracy theory about Koontz's prophetic abilities became so popular that major news outlets published articles about the novel, sensationally suggesting that Koontz had predicted the virus. This conspiracy theory was only one of many internet conspiracies that emerged during the pandemic and contributed to a rise of Anti-Asian xenophobia and racism that increased as a result of all the conspiracies claiming that China had created the Coronavirus as a biological weapon.

This thesis investigates how Koontz' novel could be so drastically misinterpreted and examines what impact reader responses have on our daily lives. Chapter 1 includes a detailed analysis of different reader-response theories and will investigate the ways in which literary scholars have defined the relationship between text and reader. Chapter 2 contains a critical discussion of my own reader-response as well as an analysis of several online reader-responses that represent different interpretive communities. Lastly, Chapter 3 will explore in detail the

effects of reader-responses and conspiracy theories during the pandemic, with a closer focus on the anti-Asian xenophobia and racism that arose, to prove that reader-responses can have drastic real-life consequences.

## CHAPTER I: What is reader-response theory?

“Literary works are like Sleeping Beauty. They need to be loved into life.”

- Norman Holland (*Nature*)

Reader Response theory gained increasing importance in the mid-1960s, primarily through the works of Stanley Fish (1938-), Norman Holland (1927-2017) and Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007). Although less talked about, Louise Rosenblatt (1904-2005) was an early pioneer in the movement. Her book *Literature as Exploration* (1995) has remained influential in both theoretical and educational contexts. The reader-response movement was primarily represented in the United States and in Germany. Although the idea of reader-response theory slightly changed with each critic, the main argument made by all the different theorists has remained the same, namely, that a text is not complete without a reader. In reader-response theory, the entire reading process and everything that plays a role in the construction of the literary work is considered to play a key role in the production of textual meaning. This includes the reader, reading contexts, the signs on the page and to a certain extent the author and the author’s context.

### a. General Overview

Reader-Response criticism, as the name suggests, essentially deals with analysing responses that readers create to a given text. It is argued that those responses are created through the identity of an individual, who in turn is influenced by the societal values dominant at the time, so that the reader’s response is to some extent a social construct. Marjorie Godlin Roemer writes that: “reader-response theory puts its emphasis on what occurs in the transaction between reader and text” (911). Roemer suggests that reader-response theory is about what happens when reader and text come together. Reader-response theorists analyse not only the readers’

response, but also the process that leads to that response, the act of interpreting a text, and adding imagination and creativity to fill the gaps that the author has left.

The idea of “transaction” that Roemer mentions originated in Rosenblatt’s *Literature as Exploration*; she was the first scholar to use the term to describe what happens between the signs on the page and the reader in the process of constructing textual meaning. In her transactive criticism she demonstrates that both text and reader are essential in the creation of the literary work. In this regard, reader-response theory is clearly disparate from other literary theories such as New Criticism, in which critics have renounced the authority of the reader and author, to prove that all meaning is contained within the structure of the text.

New Criticism is a formalist literary movement that emerged in the 1920s; it was first named in 1941 by John Crowe Ransom in his *New Criticism*. New Criticism rests on the English literary critic I.A. Richards’ “practical criticism,” in which he introduced the technique of close reading to unlock the potential meaning of a text. Whereas before it was believed that the historical context and biography of the author are important to the meaning of the text, the New Critics believe that all meaning of the text is kept in its structure and form, that the text is self-sufficient. In 1946, William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley published their article “The Intentional Fallacy” in which they introduced the terms “intentional fallacy” and “affective fallacy.” In simple terms, “Intentional fallacy” is the rejection of the idea that the author has any intent in his work and the argument that a text should not be read in relation to its author (“Affective Fallacy” *Britannica*). “Affective fallacy,” argues that a text should not be evaluated through its emotional effects on the reader (“Affective Fallacy” *Britannica*). Evidently, New Critics firmly reject the idea that author or reader play any role in the interpretation of the text, as this would suggest that the text is not complete in itself (Schryer).

Reflecting on Richards, it is often said that he guided the way for New Criticism with his research and his close reading technique. Be that as it may, he did do the same for reader-response theory, as he was amongst the first to conduct a form of reader-response criticism. Richards conducted an experiment, that was published in his book *Practical Criticism* (1929), in which he made his students read poems, without giving them the names of the authors or any additional background information on author or text. His goal was for the students to focus on the poem itself and find meaning in the words on the page. By having students write down how they experienced the reading, and then analysing those responses, he was essentially conducting a form of reader-response criticism. Although the core arguments of Reader-Response Criticism and New Criticism speak against each other, not every New Critic strictly argues that only the text holds value. Likewise, not every Reader-Response Critic believes that it is only the reader who is responsible for the production of meaning. The next few sections will go into detail about the different reader-response theories to compare the different arguments and lay down a theoretical background for chapter 2.

#### b. Norman Holland and Stanley Fish

The following two sections discuss the most significant contributions in reader-response criticism. To give a visual representation of my understanding of each theory, I have included schemas, which visualize the essential arguments in an organized manner. To start off, Norman Holland's theory, as presented in *The Nature of Literary Response: Five Readers Reading* (2011), is very useful in getting an insight into what approach he takes on reader-response theory. Holland was an American literary critic who approached reader-response theory through psychoanalysis, which is why he is mostly regarded as a psychoanalytic literary critic. In his essay "Why this is Transference Nor Am I out of It" (1982), Holland explains why he



combines psychoanalysis with literary criticism: “Psychoanalysis has nothing, nothing whatsoever, to tell us about literature per se. But psychoanalysis, particularly in its theories of character, has a great deal to tell us about people engaged in literature, either writing it or reading it or being portrayed in it” (qtd. in Freund 31). Holland analyses reader-responses through psychoanalysis and tries to examine why a reader responds to a text in the way they do and in what way this response is affected by personal experiences. He argues that the text stops being a “fixed entity” and instead becomes an experience, which is different for every reader (Holland, *Nature* x).

In addition, he argues that, during this reading experience, emotions and life-experiences play an important role in the construction of meaning. There are certain recurring terms in Holland’s criticism that are crucial to his idea of reader-response theory, namely: “personality,” “identity” and “interpretation.” Personality and identity have a similar meaning; to fully understand what those concepts mean, it is useful to examine their definitions. Personality is defined as “the [...] behavior that comprises an individual’s unique adjustment to life, including major traits, interests, drives, values, self-concept, abilities, and emotional patterns” (*apa dictionary*). Similarly, “*identity*” is said to be “an individual’s sense of self defined by a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person, [...]” (*apa dictionary*). What can be drawn from those explanations is that personality describes the action that leads to or creates an individual’s identity, it is the behaviour of a person. Identity is what sticks with an individual, it is a set of characteristics that make the person unique, different from other individuals in society. Holland used both terms interchangeably and so will I, as both essentially describe the same idea.

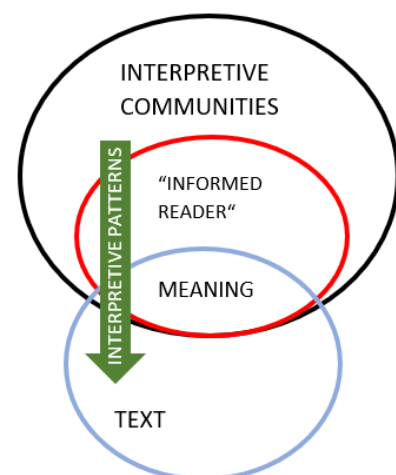
This leads to what I have identified to be his main research question in *Five Readers Reading*: “How does personality or society, filtered through personality, affect our interpretation of events?” (Holland, *Nature* xiii). The phrase “society, filtered through

personality” indicates that identity is always influenced by the society that an individual lives in. Consequently, social influences on the individual play a major role in the reading process as well; an individual’s identity cannot be viewed as separate from their surrounding environment. According to Holland, the reading process begins with the author, who fulfils his psychological dynamics through creating the text, as writers create by transforming unconscious wishes from childhood. The process ends with the reader who responds to the text and uses it “to re-create his own characteristic psychological processes” (Holland, *Nature* 40). Consequently, the text “almost vanishes in the astonishing variability of different readers’ re-creation of it” (Holland, *Nature* 13).

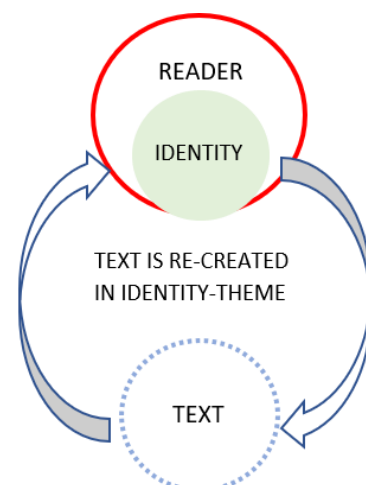
Similar to the idea of the text disappearing, Holland believes that the transformation of fantasy happens in the reader’s mind or the creative relation between reader and work, not in the text (Holland, *Nature* 18-19, 117). Stories do not “mean,”; rather, it is readers that ascribe meanings to the words that make up stories. Yet, a reader can only give words the meanings that he identifies with those words (Holland, *Nature* 43). As a conclusion, it is impossible to read a text without having that reading influenced by the individual’s identity, as even the most essential part of the reading process such as the production of meaning comes down to how an individual relates to a word, emotionally or through past experiences (Holland, *Nature* 123). For this reason, Holland believes that “literary response expresses not the text alone but the reader’s re-creation of the text within his identity theme” (Holland, *Nature* 131).

Stanley Fish is often mentioned in relation to Holland, as both, along with Wolfgang Iser, are thought of as the leading figures in the movement. Fish is an American literary critic who researches reader-response through a broader lens, arguing that it is not the reader or the text but rather “interpretive communities” that create the meaning of a text. He further explains his idea of interpretive communities in his book of essays *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980). In the introduction to the book, he claims that

his strategy was to challenge the common idea in New Criticism that the text is, in comparison to author and reader, the only thing that is “indisputably there and stable” (Fish 2). Whereas Holland argues that a text is not a “fixed entity,” Fish states that the text is a “stable entity” but that it is not the container of meaning. Furthermore, Holland lays more importance on the reader whereas Fish attributes joint responsibility to reader and text for producing the meaning, which he perceives as “an event rather than an entity” (3). Fish perceives the meaning as something that happens between the reader and the text and that the reader’s response is not “to the meaning; it *is* the meaning”. Therefore, meaning does not exist as something separate from the text or the reader.



To make clear what Fish means by his concept of interpretive communities, it is worth noting what Fish has to say about “interpretive strategies” and what he means when he refers to “the reader.” Firstly, Fish lays great focus on interpretive strategies and their role in the creation of meaning: “Interpretive strategies are not put into execution after reading; they are the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape, making them rather than, [...], arising from them” (168). Fish argues that the formal patterns of a text are there, but only because of the interpretive model that “has called them into being” (173). Therefore, interpretation occurs not while the text is read but influences the reading beforehand; the reading is already lead into a certain direction before it has even begun. Secondly, Fish’s “reader” is an idealized reader, an “informed reader.” To be an informed reader, one presupposes three attributes, that is, competence in the language that the text is in (1), semantic knowledge (2) and lastly, literary competence (3), meaning knowledge on literature including genres, literary discourse, and literary devices (48).



As stated by Fish, it is the reader “who ‘makes’ literature”; however, the reader is not free but part of a community “whose assumptions about literature determine the kind of attention he pays and thus the kind of literature ‘he’ ‘makes’” (11). Although it is the reader who creates meaning through interpretation, the patterns of reading are predetermined by the communities to which the individual reader belongs. Consequently, it can be said that the act of interpretation, as well as the resulting meaning, are also a product of those communities. Interpretive communities are not fixed, and individuals do not remain in one community only; rather, they move from one community to another. For Fish, literature can never not be about community: “Literature, I argue, is the product of a way of reading, of a community agreement about what will count as literature, which leads the members of the community [...] to create literature” (97). Consequently, readers and the meanings they produce are the product of the community in which they find themselves. Therefore, meanings are not subjective, as they are not produced by one individual but by a larger group of readers (14).

In *Return of the Reader*, Elizabeth Freund presents a different perspective on what “interpretive communities” mean or represent. She meticulously analyses some of the different reader-response theories, including Fish’s. In chapter 4, Freund writes: “By ‘interpretive communities’ Fish does not mean a collective of individuals but a bundle of strategies or norms of interpretation that we hold in common, and which regulate the way we think and perceive” (107). From what she describes, an interpretive community is not a large group of individuals, but rather a set of strategies or norms of interpretation. Either way, it comes down to the idea that the reader’s way of reading is controlled in some way or another, whether that is through the people around him or through certain sets of rules that those people have determined. This is the most prominent difference in Holland and Fish’s criticism, as Holland focuses on individual’s identities, whereas Fish focuses on entire communities; Holland regards reader responses as individual and unique whereas Fish thinks of them as “communal” (Freund 107).

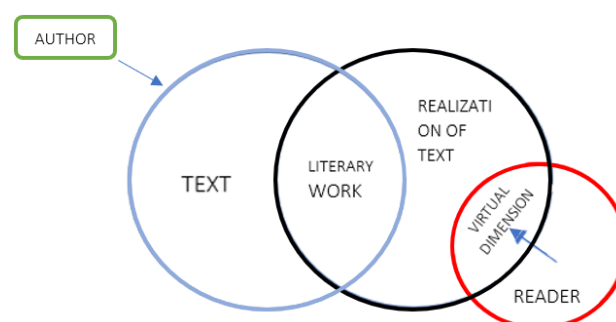
A problem that is perhaps better responded to in Fish's than in Holland's writing is the potential struggle that someone might have in understanding why a text has no authority although it is obviously present. Fish communicates that although a text is something physical, an object, it is not really anything unless it is met by a reader. He describes the objectivity of a text as an illusion, "an illusion of self-sufficiency and completeness" (Fish 43). This might seem contradictory to what Fish later states: "the world of the text, is already ordered and filled with significances and what the reader is required to do is get them out" (94). Although he argues that the text is not self-contained or complete; he states that there is *something* in the text before it is read. Accordingly, there must be some significance in the formal structures of a text from which the reader produces meaning, which reinforces the idea that both reader and text are reliant on each other to exist (94). However, Fish also argues that it is "the structure of the reader's experience rather than any structures available on the page that should be the object of description" (152). His explanation is that the structure of the text can be explained through dictionaries, grammars, and histories, but that this would provide unlimited possibilities for meaning. Therefore, only an individual can produce a coherent meaning of a text as they make logic of the structures by deciding "about what is intended," which changes the focus from interpretive communities to the individual. His contradictory statements reveal the complexity of reader response, as although his different ideas are contradictory, they cannot be denied. It cannot be argued that it is either text or reader, individual or community that creates meaning as all of them are equally involved in producing the meaning (163).

Furthermore, it is important to note that Fish's criticism is all about the details of the reading process. This can be seen by the terminology that he uses and his focus on the timing of certain actions. He insists that the reader does not "extract" meaning but that he actively "produces" it. He also says that the meaning is not produced by "encoded forms" but "by interpretive strategies that call forms into being" (173). The text needs a reader to produce its

meaning and the reader relies on the structural patterns of a text to guide his interpretation, which he reaffirms by stating: “There always is a text but what is in it can change, and therefore at no level is it independent of and prior to interpretation” (272). As can be seen by this quote, Fish focuses to a great extent on the timing of the certain actions that happen in the reading process. Interpretation does not happen after reading but it already influences the reading before it begins, and the text has some significance before the reader extracts meaning from it. Unlike Holland, Fish truly focuses on the technical aspects; what is happening at what specific point in time and what happens between the textual structures and the reader during the reading process.

### c. Wolfgang Iser and Louise Rosenblatt

This section of the chapter focuses on Wolfgang Iser and Louise Rosenblatt. To begin with, German literary critic Wolfgang Iser’s essay “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach” (1972) will be scrutinized. Although this specific essay is not as widely recognized as some of his other works like *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (1974) and *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), it still gives a great overview of his ideas on reader-response. Additionally, it provides a new perspective and argues new points that have not yet been mentioned in Holland’s and Fish’s criticism. To visualize his theory and facilitate the understanding of what is about to come, his main argument will be presented through a schema:



Iser suggests that there is a difference between the text, the literary work, and the realization of the text. The literary work is more than the text, he states, as the text needs to be realized first, by the reader, through its patterns. Like Fish, Iser believes that the structure of the text helps the reader produce the text. More importantly, he has a name for what is created when reader and text meet. Unlike Fish and Holland, he does not name whatever happens between the reader and the text “meaning” but the “literary work,” which according to him cannot be pinpointed but remains virtual. The literary work has two poles, an artistic and an aesthetic one, the artistic one refers to what the author has created and the aesthetic to what the reader has realized (Iser 279). Now that it has been established what stands in the middle of the schema, the author, the reader and what goes into the reading experience are left to be discussed.

As alleged by Iser, texts are structured in such a way that they leave enough room for the reader to use their creative imagination. Otherwise, if a text gives the reader too much or too little room for active participation, it becomes boring (280). Readers are able to participate in the making of the literary work by using their creative imagination to complete the text, so to speak. As a result, they are actively involved in the process of making meanings; reading becomes an experience to them, and the “reality” of the text might become the reality of the reader during the reading process, despite it being very different from the “real” world of the reader (283). This creates a new textual layer, “the virtual dimension of the text.” That virtual dimension is neither text nor imagination of the reader but the result of both coming together (284). Seeing that there are gaps in the text, which can be filled through any creative input, the text is “inexhaustible,” as there are unlimited possibilities of how to interpret the text (285). This attributes agency to the text as the “potential text is so much richer than any of its individual realizations” (285).

The last idea that is brought forward in Iser's essay was inspired by Georges Poulet. The idea is that during the reading process, a reader is confronted with whatever is going on in the text. Subsequently, the reader is confronted with two versions of themselves, as Iser writes: "the alien 'me' and the real, virtual 'me'" (298). During the reading, the reader thinks thoughts that were uttered by someone else, either by a fictional character from the story or by the author. While those thoughts are read, the reader utters those words in his mind, although they were produced by someone else, and they belong to "another mental world." In that moment, the reader disappears as he thinks someone else's thoughts. This is what Poulet refers to when he writes: "Whenever I read, I mentally pronounce an I, and the I which I pronounce is not myself" (qtd in Iser 297). This is an important contribution as it shows that although the reader is doing something to the text, the text also influences the reader. This reinforces the idea that text and reader are not separate from each other during the reading experience.

Finally, Louise Rosenblatt's theory needs to be discussed. She was an American professor and literary critic who was amongst the first to publish her thoughts on reader-response in her book *Literature as Exploration*, in which she takes the social approach to literature. Her main thesis in the book is that a literary work is both social and aesthetic, and although both are "*distinguishable*, they are actually *inseparable*," meaning a book can be a form of enjoyment but it can also have social effects and social origins (23). What Rosenblatt is mostly known for is her "transactive criticism," in which she describes the process of reading as a transaction between the text and the reader. Many critics, amongst which are Holland and Fish, have used the word transaction to refer to what is going on between text and reader; however, only rarely has anyone acknowledged Rosenblatt in relation to that term. In general, Rosenblatt has not received as much recognition for her work in the past, which, as Davis has speculated, is because Rosenblatt was a woman writing in a male dominated field and because



her theory was “enmeshed” in pedagogy, which had a “low status” in critical theory at the time (Davis 72).

To delve further into her theory, Rosenblatt describes the transaction as a “spiraling, nonlinear, continuously reciprocal influence of reader and text in the making of meaning” (Rosenblatt, Preface). The meaning she claims, “happens” during the transaction between the reader and the signs on the page. Whereas Fish argues that the reader’s response *is* the meaning and that, therefore, it cannot be separated from the text or reader, Rosenblatt argues that it cannot be separated from text or reader but that the meaning *is* the poem. That leaves three different theories: Fish argues that text and reader coming together creates the meaning; Iser argues that text and reader coming together produces the literary work and Rosenblatt suggests that reader and “signs on the page” produce the poem. Holland argues that the text is recreated through the reader, but there is no third dimension created. When reading Rosenblatt’s preface, it becomes evident how similar her ideas are to Iser’s, especially when she writes: “[m]y insistence that there is no poem, no literary work, unless there has been an aesthetic reading has sometimes been making the personal reading an end in itself” (Preface). Notably, she speaks of a literary work and the aesthetic aspect of the reading process. She reveals what she terms “aesthetic reading” in the following quote: “To produce a poem or play, the reader must broaden the scope of attention to include the personal, affective aura and associations surrounding the words evoked and must focus on – experience, live through – the moods, scenes, situations being created during the transaction” (Preface). Consequently, her ideas can be compared to Iser’s as he also thinks that the literary work has an aesthetic pole which is necessary for its creation.

Because Rosenblatt was a professor of education, much of her research is dedicated towards other teachers and professors. Her main goal was to find out what role literature plays for students and what effect it has on life:

The human experience that literature presents is primary. For them (the majority of readers) the formal elements of the work – style and structure, rhythmic flow - function only as a part of the total literary experience. The reader seeks to participate in another's vision – to reap knowledge of the world, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain insights that will make his own life more comprehensible. (7)

According to what Rosenblatt maintains in this quote, the reader participates in another's vision, which is similar to what Iser wrote in his essay about the reader thinking someone else's thoughts. She mentions that readers read to make more sense out of their own life. This is not so much about the reading process, but about what motivation a reader has for reading, which is going to be important for the second chapter of this thesis. However, what will be important for now, is Rosenblatt's view of the relation between reader and text:

Terms such as *the reader*, *the student*, *the literary work* have appeared in the preceding pages. Actually, these terms are somewhat misleading, though convenient, fictions. There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual readers of the potential millions of individual literary works. A novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. The literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text: the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings. Out of this complex process emerges a more or less organized imaginative experience. (24)

Rosenblatt believes that a literary work is an individual experience, and that there are potentially millions of individual literary works, meaning that a literary work is not a fixed entity but changes with each of its readers. As is the common belief in reader-response theory,

she also argues that a text is nothing but lines on paper until the reader makes sense of the words on the page. She believes that the reading experience, is an imaginative experience. Furthermore, she expresses that words are “signs for things and ideas,” only when a child can link an image and a sound to that sign, it becomes a word (25). To her, there are three elements: signs, sounds and the reader who links both and thus creates a word. Noticeable is also the fact that she argues that the individual “infuses intellectual and emotional meaning” into the text, as it shows that she like Holland, acknowledges the psychological aspects that play a role during the reading process (24). In this quote, it becomes apparent, that unlike any of the other critics, she does not only focus on one aspect, but rather combines what has been said by all of them, even though her book was published before the later influential reader-response theories by Holland, Fish and Iser.

As previously mentioned, Holland argues that the reader “recreates the text in his own identity theme” (Holland, *Nature* 131). Likewise, Rosenblatt writes: “the beginning reader draws on past experience of life and language to elicit meaning from the printed words, and it is possible to see how through these words he reorganizes past experience to attain new understanding” (25). The difference in both statements is that Holland argues that the text is recreated through past experiences and an identity theme whereas Rosenblatt argues that past experiences are reorganized through the text. While both agree that past experiences play a role in the reading process, Holland believes that they influence the interpretation of the text whereas Rosenblatt believes that it is the text that influences the way the reader thinks about past experiences. What she does with this statement is support her overall argument that there is a transaction between text and reader, that neither text nor reader stand on their own but that they both rely on each other to make sense. She describes this as the “two-way, reciprocal relation” between the text and the reader and it is in that transaction that the literary work exists (27).

Lastly, Rosenblatt also recognizes the social aspect of reader-response when she argues: “Just as the personality and concerns of the reader are largely socially patterned, so the literary work, like language itself, is a social product” (28). She continues by writing: “[y]et ultimately any literary work gains its significance from the way in which the minds and emotions of particular readers respond to the linguistic stimuli offered by the text” (28). What she has to say about reader-response being a “social product” sounds oddly familiar to what Fish claims in his theory when he writes that the meaning of a text is produced by interpretive communities (28). Rosenblatt’s criticism serves as a conclusion to this section of the chapter as her theory includes most of the different aspects that have been mentioned by the other critics in the previous sections.

#### d. Synthesis

Now that the different theories have been studied and illustrated, the points in which they overlap or contradict each other as well as their potential flaws become visible. There are two major concerns that have been brought up in relation to Fish’s theory. Firstly, Fish argues that it is neither text nor reader that construct the meaning but rather interpretive communities. What this essentially does is that “the reader and the text disappear, along with reader-response theory as a viable perspective” (qtd. in Beach 107). Because Fish does not acknowledge the agency of reader or text, he denies the central agents of reader-response theory which defeats the purpose of his argument. Fish undoubtedly believes that the reader has some function in the process but taking his words literally, it can be quite confusing why someone who argues that the reader does not create meaning is one of the leading figures in the reader-response movement. The second criticism that has been addressed to his theory is that a reader is never part of only one interpretive community. An example that Beach gives for this criticism is that readers can agree with two different interpretations of a text, which means that a reader is “moving between two communities” (Beach 107). However, a reader is usually moving

between an unknown number of communities which, according to Beach, “makes the whole notion pointless” (Beach 107). It also proves that at one point, it is the reader who decides which structural patterns from which interpretive community to follow, even if this is a subconscious decision. Fact is that the reader plays some part in the formation of meaning and by not acknowledging this, Fish discredits his own argument.

Moving on from Fish, there is an idea mentioned by Elizabeth Freund, which was not yet mentioned in relation to any of the critics, but which might be important:

prior to the text-reader interaction there was an interaction between the author and the social and historical norms of his environment. Literary texts are thus acts of communication whose purpose is to reformulate existing thought-systems in order to bring about ‘the imaginary correction of deficient realities. (85)

This quote brings forward two important ideas. Firstly, there is an interaction between author and context that goes into the creation of the text. Secondly, literature is a form of communication which keeps thought systems alive and makes them be reformulated over time which each new reader. Taking into account the historical context that has influenced the author before he writes the text, seems equally as important as taking into consideration the context and the identity of the reader.

Most research that has been conducted in reader-response theory was done on students. For example, Fish analysed the reactions of the students regarding the text without giving them the name of the author. Although this is a great method to obtain unbiased, genuine reader-responses, this is not true to natural circumstances in which reader and text meet. Not every reader is a student and readers usually know who the author of a book is before they start reading, which already influences their reading and sometimes changes how they feel about a book or what they expect from the book. Therefore, the ideas mentioned by the reader-response

theorists are great “in theory”, but as the next chapter will show, these are ideas cannot always be applied to online reader-responses or reader-responses that were not conducted in a research setting.

In summary, when the reader is confronted with the text, its structure and signals, they interpret the text and fill in the gaps that are left by the author with their imagination. As a result, there is a communication between the text and the reader, as the reader invests in the text, and the text in the reader by giving him a leading structure. The reader’s comprehension, as well as his act of interpreting a text, are influenced by his identity and past experiences as well as by his historical, social, and cultural context. Similarly, the author is influenced by his historical, social, and cultural context as well as his identity and his experiences, which he brings into the text when writing it. The outcome of a reading is never the same, as no two people interpret and bring the same imagination to a text. Iser summarizes it well: “two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The ‘stars’ in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable” (287). The text is neither a container of meaning nor a fixed entity, it has certain fixed points but as Iser suggests, it is up to the reader to combine the dots and make up a story. It seems inevitable to argue that a reader is always influenced by his environment, as this is what happens in societies, people are not isolated living beings, they are always, in some way or another, influenced by the society that they live in. Accordingly, interpretive communities certainly influence the reading, but it is the reader’s identity who makes the choices, and which fills in the gaps that are left by the author. As Rosenblatt argues, what happens between reader and text is a transaction. Reading is an active process which needs both text and reader to produce a literary work. Now that I have explored and clearly defined the most important ideas from each theory, chapter 2 will attempt to apply those ideas

to the analysis of reader-responses that were made to the novel *The Eyes of Darkness* by Dean Koontz.

## CHAPTER II: Analysis of Reader-Responses to *The Eyes of Darkness*

The first section of this chapter will introduce the author and the text and will examine the genre and the contexts in which *The Eyes of Darkness* was published and in which it regained attention in 2020. The second section will reflect on my own response to the novel and examine why I responded to the novel in the way I did and what influenced my reading process. As a last step, different online reader-responses that represent different reading communities will be analysed and compared as this will allow a general perception on how the novel is received worldwide, what effects specific reading communities have on the reception of the book, and what effects they cause, which I will elaborate on in chapter 3.

### a. Author, Context and Genre

This part of the chapter will consider the author of the novel and the contexts in which the book has been published and read. These circumstances will become important in section b. as it has an influence on the reading experience of certain readers. Dean Ray Koontz is a Catholic American author who specializes in science fiction writing. According to himself, Catholicism plays an important role in his personal life and in his work. In an interview given to *World Over* (2018), Koontz shares his personal life story, which includes his childhood experience of growing up with an abusive, alcoholic father. He explains that he found happiness and escape in books, which he would borrow from the library, as books were not common in his childhood household. Later in life, he met his wife and embraced the Catholic faith through her. He notes that his faith is what sparked his interest in science fiction writing, he even claims that: “Science is another route to God” (*World Over*). With this specific attitude towards modern life, Koontz has combined science and spirituality in many of his books. He has written over 76 short stories as well as over 100 novels, of which fourteen have been bestsellers. Many of his earlier books were so-called pulp thrillers written under various pen names, including the novel discussed in



this chapter. In the interview with *World Over*, Koontz explains that he began publishing under pennames at the beginning of this career because he was told that his books would sell better this way. However, he regretted this choice later in life. Together with his wife, he bought back the rights to most of his books and re-released them under his own name. This explains why *The Eyes of Darkness* was re-released in 1988, after it had been published under the pen name Leigh Nichols in 1981. After having compared both versions, the most notable difference between the two editions is the change in the name and the origin of the virus discussed in the story. Whereas the 1981 version mentions a virus by the name of “Gorki-400,” which originates in Russia, the 1988 edition mentions a virus called “Wuhan-400,” which originates in China.

This change is what sparked the social media outburst surrounding the book in February 2020, in the context of the ongoing Corona-virus pandemic. The virus in the 1988-edition originates in a lab outside the city of Wuhan. It is described as a man made “weapon,” which only contaminates humans and has a kill-rate of a hundred percent (Leigh, 181). Currently, the Coronavirus is also said to have originated in the city of Wuhan. Apart from this similarity, both viruses are nothing alike. Sars-Covid-19 can also affect other living beings and it does not have a kill-rate of a hundred percent. Yet, the similarity in their origin was the reason why the book gained so much interest from readers and the critical public at the beginning of the Corona outbreak in the winter of 2019. When Koontz was asked about this controversy surrounding his book, in an interview conducted by *LiveTalksLa* (April 2020), he explained why the book suddenly gained so much attention:

My reputation as a prognosticator is greatly exaggerated on social media, considering that I don't even know...I can't even predict what I'm going to have for dinner tonight. So, you know what happened, somebody married a page from another book (and married it) to a page from [*The*] *Eyes of Darkness*, and I did not predict 2020 would be a pandemic. And *The Eyes of Darkness* is not about a pandemic. It does have a virus in

it, it is called “Wuhan-400” and that’s simply because when I was researching, I found that there’s a biological warfare that happened in China outside Wuhan and it made perfect sense to say that this troublesome virus had come from there. So, it’s a miracle incidence, it’s not prognosticated.

The book that Koontz refers to in his response is called *End of Days* (2009) by author and self-declared psychic Silvia Browne (1936-2013). In this book, she writes that “In around 2020 a severe pneumonia-like illness will spread throughout the globe, attacking the lungs and the bronchial tubes and resisting all known treatments” (312). As can be seen from this quotation, her description is closer to the Coronavirus than the virus described in *The Eyes of Darkness*. Having excerpts from both books combined into one image, as seen in figure 1, makes it easier to believe that both excerpts are from the same book:

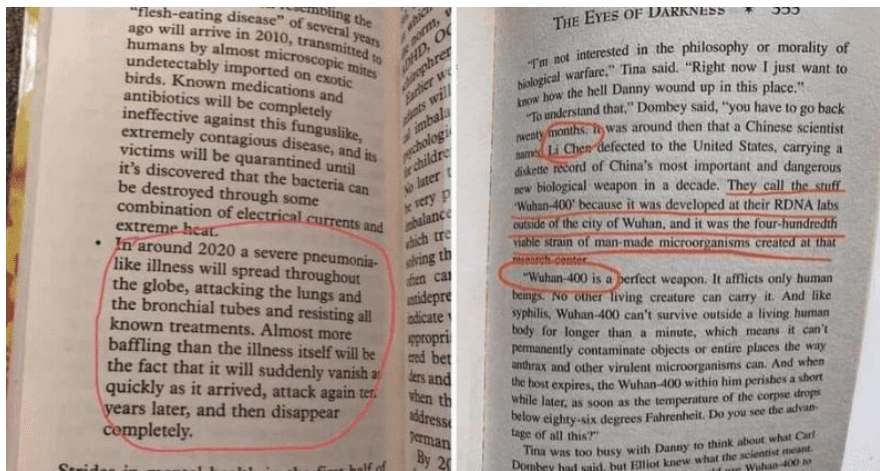


Figure 1: <https://scoop.upworthy.com/netizens-believe-coronavirus-predicted-by-sylvia-browne-dean-koontz>

This is essentially what convinced many people online, as well as the sensation press, that Koontz had prophesized the current pandemic. However, it is noticeable that it is mostly people already interested in conspiracy theories surrounding the pandemic who show interest in this internet hoax, and less so people that have read the book. Taking these passages out of context makes it easier for conspiracy-theorists to use them as “evidence” that the Coronavirus

was man-made, and designed to be used as a biological weapon, which is a widely believed theory amongst this reading community. Through this phenomenon, an ambiguity in reader-response theory is brought up, namely, if it is the reader that influences the text or if it is the text that influences the reader. This is a paradox in reader-response theory, as the reader creates the text but at the same time the text guides the reader with what it offers to them. This means that conspiracy theorists can project their conspiracies onto the book because the text presents the necessary structures and words on the page that allow this interpretation to develop. Having briefly explored the personal life of the author, as well as the context in which the book became recently public again, I will explain more about the literary genre of the novel as most of the reader's lack of familiarity with the genre is what caused negative responses to the novel.

*The Eyes of Darkness* is a crossover of many different genres within science fiction. Because of the action-based plot and the romance that is included in the first few chapters, it has elements of the pulp SF thrillers that became famous in the late 1920s, through the first science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories*, established by Hugo Gernsback (Tymn 45). In the late 1930s, specifically in 1937, a new magazine was put on the market under the direction of John W. Campbell who expected "greater sophistication of style and technique" of his writers (46). Many science fiction stories from that time included elements of psychology, philosophy, and politics, which is something that is also represented in Koontz's novel as the story includes an 8-year-old child being held captive by the government for them to test out a biological weapon on him (46). This storyline raises political concerns but also psychological and philosophical questions. It is also a remark on the development of military weapons under the Reagan administration within American politics at the time, as this novel was written during the Cold War, which was a time in which biological weapons were given more attention: "With the Cold War escalating, the obvious question within government was whether the USSR posed a biological weapons threat to which the West, particularly the United States, should respond

by having an offensive capability” (Guillemin 95). At the time of the Cold War, the United States were in constant suspicion of the Soviet Union as they were so knowledgeable in nuclear weapons, which raised the suspicion that they might also be secretly specializing in biological weapons. This might also be why Koontz’ first version of the novel contained a Russian virus and was only later changed to a Chinese one.

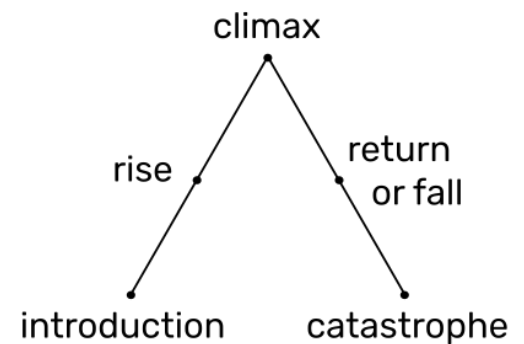
In “Science Fiction: A Brief History and Review of Criticism,” Marschal B. Tymnes writes that “while pre-war science fiction had concentrated on the technical wonders suggested by scientific advances, writers in the post-World War II period began to examine the human consequences of these advances and the fear that we might become the victims of our own creations” (46). This latter point made by Tymnes is another characteristic of Koontz’s novel, as the virus in the story is man-made, and Danny falls victim of it. Koontz clearly alludes to the potential dangers of scientific developments, especially in the field of biological weapons.

As can be seen from this short overview of the science fiction genre, Koontz includes many of the different fiction genres into *The Eyes of Darkness*, which is important to mention as this has an influence on how many of the readers responded to the book. Key moments in the story, such as Danny being used for testing by the government, the brand naming, the sexist aspect of the novel or the telekinesis have been criticized by readers for various reasons. Some found the idea of child exploitation too sinister; others disliked the brand naming as it made the novel superficial and again others voiced negative opinions about the gender roles in this story. Knowing that those aspects of the novel are true to its genre, shows that Koontz wrote a novel that is directed towards a specific interpretive community. This novel was written specifically for SF readers, accordingly, readers that are familiar with the pulp fiction genre responded to the novel more positively than other readers did. Readers that dislike SF or are not familiar with it will have higher chances of disliking Koontz’ novel as it represents everything that SF stands for. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that many of the

responses to the novel are negative, as the readers that it attracted through the online outburst are not necessarily SF readers.

### b. Analysing My Own Reader Response

The following section will include a short summary and an overview of the plot structure, following “Freytag’s pyramid.” Freytag’s pyramid is a dramatic structure that was initially developed to analyse dramatic plots (Freytag *Technique*). More generally, it can also be used to describe the plot structure of novels. The pyramid describes five stages: Exposition (Introduction), Rise of Action, Climax, Return or Fall and Catastrophe (resolution).



The exposition, or “the opening part” of the story, introduces “the main characters and their situation, often by

Figure  
2[https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Dramatic\\_structure](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Dramatic_structure)

reference to preceding events” (*ODLT*). In Koontz’s novel, Tina Evans is introduced as the protagonist of the story. The introductory chapters provide the key information about Tina’s life story and personality. She is a middle aged, divorced woman, who had been living together with her son Danny until he supposedly died in an accident. After that traumatic incident, she lives alone in her house, with occasional visits from her housekeeper Vivian. She is an ex-show girl who now works in the Las Vegas show business, organizing her own shows. At the outset of the story, Tina supposedly sees the ghost of her dead son Danny in a stranger’s car. This is a reference to subsequent events; for much of the story Tina is looking for her son, as she suspects that he is not dead but abducted. The exposition stage of the novel is rather long, as the rise of the action does not begin until chapter 15.

Although there are several hints at a rising action earlier, for example when Tina is described experiencing paranormal activity in her house, especially when she finds a message

in Danny's room that reads "Not Dead," the "rising action" progresses rather slow. It is not until "Part Two," chapter 15, that Tina goes on exploring what truly happened to her son. Until that point, more of her personal life is exposed and other characters are introduced to the story, such as her new lover Elliot and her ex-husband Michael. The following chapters of the novel go into more detail about her failed marriage and the situation with her ex-husband as well as her experiences in the dating scene. The chapters leading up to the actual rise of action are merely a representation of her romantic relationship with Elliot, including the occasional occurrence of paranormal experiences, which cements the novel thematically within the pulp fiction category.

What I would describe as the actual rising action is when Tina and Elliot are being followed by undercover agents who dislike the fact that Tina is suspicious about the truth concerning Danny's supposed death, this begins in Chapter 15. Most of the rising action consists of Tina and Elliot running away and escaping death on numerous occasions. On their journey, they are accompanied by a supernatural force, which helps them out and guides them towards Danny. As is explained during the falling action, after Tina and her son are reunited, this supernatural force was Danny himself, who gained supernatural powers after being experimented upon as a lab rat by military scientists, which again, is a common theme in early 1980's SF. These scientists worked on Danny because he had been infected with a dangerous virus, which was imported from China (as stated in the 1988 edition of the novel) and unintentionally spread by a scientist who contaminated himself with the virus while experimenting on it. On the day that Danny was infected, he was on a hike in the mountains with a group of other children and some trained professionals. His group came across a man, the scientist that carried the virus, and they were all infected and died shortly after, except for Danny. Danny was immune to the virus, which is why he was kept at a secret military base to be experimented on. In these experiments, Danny was re-infected with the virus multiple times,

to test out how many times he would be able to combat it. He is close to death when he is found by his mother and Elliot.

The moment mother and son meet again is the climax of the story, as all rising action leads up to this specific moment. This foregrounds the genre of the novel, as pulp fiction draws on emotions of characters and readers and is softer than hard SF which primarily focuses on technological developments whereas soft science fiction focuses more on where technology may lead us in the future (Berner). All actions after the moment of mother and son meeting describe the falling action.

Because the rising action takes up most of the story, the falling action is in the form of two chapters. The falling action consists of Tina and Elliot preparing to leave the secret military base with Danny. What comes last is the “catastrophe” or “resolution,” simply termed, the ending. The ending is the last action that happens, which is that the undercover agents that were chasing Tina and Elliot have caught up with them at the base and plan on killing both. However, Danny intervenes and destroys their helicopter with his supernatural abilities, most probably killing them. The very ending suggests that although Tina is glad to have found her son, she is also worried about the future and his newly gained abilities, which she is seemingly afraid of.

Now that the plot has been discussed, and it has been established that the novel conforms to the standard story-telling structure of a pulp SF thriller, I will reflect on my own response to the book. As a guide, I will structure my response according to the five different response processes that have been delineated based on Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading literature (Beach 61). The first one of the processes is “engaging” and it focuses on how I, as the reader, “empathize or identify with the text” (52). I sympathize with the main character Tina in many ways, mainly through my own life experiences. What I mean by this is that I can relate to her in some respects, for example through her reoccurring nightmares, the

paranoia that she experiences when alone at home as well as her fear of gaining weight. These details I relate to because those are the ones I chose to focus on. My analysis of my own reading is confirmed by the following quote which Holland wrote in his essay “Unity Identity Text Self”:

The unity we find in literary texts is impregnated with the identity that finds that unity. This is simply to say that my reading of a certain literary work will differ from yours or his or hers. As readers, each of us will bring different kinds of external information to bear. Each will seek out the themes that concern him. Each will have different ways of making the text into an experience with a coherence and significance that satisfies. (816)

What Holland writes in this quote is what can be seen in my reading of the text. I point out what I mostly relate to because I seek to make my reading experience satisfactory. Another reader will focus on different aspects of Tina’s character, the ones they can personally relate to. I enjoyed the reading or was “satisfied” with the reading, partly because the text offered the necessary structures to do so, but mostly because I satisfied my own expectations by seeking out the themes from the text that I relate to the most.

The second reading process is that of “Construction – entering into and creating alternative worlds, conceptualizing characters, events, settings” (Beach 52). The third process is named “imaging-creating visual images” (52). Not much can be said about the second and the third process as it is difficult to put into words how I have imagined the different characters and events. However, one thing that is worth mentioning is a particular scene that I had imagined, and which is crucial to my overall understanding of the book. This scene happens in chapter 37, right after Tina and Elliot lock a guard in the closet. In that scene they express their love for each other and kiss. Personally, I found this scene “cringe-worthy.” Yet, scenes like



these are a staple in pulp fiction, which relies heavily on romance and adventure to forward the plot (Tymn 45). Because I am able to differentiate between the different genres of SF, I can recognize that I prefer other SF genres to pulp fiction but that it is not the novel itself that I dislike. Another similar aspect of the story which personally bothered me, and again, has something to do with the genre and not particularly the novel itself, was the change in Tina's agency. In the rising action of the plot, she is described as being single, successful and powerful. However, once she meets Elliot, she seems to lose all her agency as she is now relying on him to survive. He becomes the powerful, protective masculine figure whereas she becomes more passive and lets him do "the dirty work". Nonetheless, this is not surprising as sexism is common in pulp fiction: "the superficial sexism of pulp sf merely masks the deeper, more politically progressive energies (invisibly) at work (Attebery, "Science" 138)." (qtd. in "Fascism" 140).

The reason why this played a role in my reading experience is because I am not an experienced reader of the genre, which means that I was not familiar with the characteristics of pulp fiction. Considering this, I went into the reading of the book with different expectations and found some aspects of it odd and unfamiliar which negatively affected my overall response to the book. The last two reading processes are "Connecting - relating to one's autobiographical experience to the current text" and "Evaluation/reflecting - judging the quality of one's experience with a text." However, examples of how I relate autobiographical experience to the text has already been mentioned in regard to the first point, which is why I will not further elaborate too much on that stage.

Having reflected on the various stages of the reading experience, as outlined by Rosenblatt's theory, I will now judge the quality of my reading experience of Koontz's text. I enjoyed the reading during the first chapters, because I could personally relate to the protagonist introduced in the exposition stage of the story. However, once the narrative turned

into a typical pulp SF-adventure story, during the rising action stage of its plot, I could no longer relate to the text as much because I was comparatively unfamiliar with the genre conventions that govern this kind of popular storytelling and more familiar with other genres of SF.

It must also be mentioned that I began my research of the reader responses during the Corona pandemic while I was about halfway through the book in terms of my personal reading experience. Reading other reader's responses certainly influenced my reading experience of the later chapter, as other reader's opinions of the book were always on my mind. For example, one reader had pointed out that it was too coincidental that all of Tina's obstacles that she encountered on her way were solved through Danny. After I had read this comment, I could not help but notice the many coincidences in the plot as well. In hindsight, the other readers' responses affected my understanding of the book in a negative way. This relates back to what was discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis: that no reading is ever the same, not even by the same person; my reading experience changed after reading other readers' responses.

In addition, I was, like many readers, intrigued by the mention of a virus by the name of "Wuhan-400". I discovered this book through the online discussions about it, which is why my reading was influenced before the reading had even started. My first reaction to the novel was confusion, as I was not quite sure how a novel that was supposed to be about a pandemic would start out with a mother looking for her dead son. However, it turned out that I really enjoyed reading the beginning and it was only towards the middle that I began not enjoying the story as much. Therefore, the Corona pandemic context in which my reading took place, did only really affect the expectations I brought into the reading but not really my overall response to the book. It is certainly what led me to read the novel in the first place, but it did not make me dislike or like the novel in a specific way, which is why would say that my reading context did not influence me as much as it did other readers.

Something that might have influenced unconsciously was my experience as a literature student and my research on the novel. Because I'm a literature student, I am familiar with different reading techniques and the different lenses through which one can read a novel. Since I am trained to do this for University, I might have been unconsciously applying different reading techniques to my reading of the novel. Furthermore, it was always in the back of my mind to think about how I felt about different scenes in the story as I knew that I would be writing a personal reader-response. I did not simply read the novel for entertainment, I had a specific reason for reading it, which influenced the way I considered certain passages in the novel and I would argue that it made me reflect more deeply on certain aspects in the novel such as the sexism, which I might not have realised as much if I did not do research on the novel and especially my own response to it. Now that I have analysed my own response, I will examine other reader-responses to see how they relate to the theories discussed in chapter 1.

### c. Analysing Online Reader-Responses

The reader-response theories analysed in chapter 1, mostly focussed on the interpretive community of students. In my research, I compare responses from different reading communities to get a general view of how readers experienced their reading of Koontz's novel. I found this necessary because today the book is often linked to the Coronavirus, which is something that concerns people from all over the world and currently dominates any response to the text. Therefore, it is necessary to explore how people from various reading communities constructed the literary work.

It is important to point out that students and "informed readers" read a text differently than other readers do, as they are taught different reading techniques and usually read a text with another goal in mind than for example readers that read books for fun. Therefore, it is

important to note this difference in the research target, as it contributes to the difference in results that this research project develops. Moreover, the responses selected for this research project are not taken from people that have agreed to participate in an experiment. Holland explains that one of the drawbacks of his method of research is that students might alter their responses because they know that they are communicating them to a professor who looks at their responses through the lens of psychoanalysis, which might be threatening to them (62). There is no risk of that happening here, as the responses have been published on the Internet and were not written specifically to be analysed in the context of this thesis. Notably, having access to the Internet plays an important role in this research. Back in the 1970s, when reader-response theory was at its peak, the internet had been invented. Yet, it was not until 1993 that it was made accessible to the public (Popular Mechanics). Today, much of what is read is encountered online. Therefore, it is appropriate to take reader-responses from the internet as this is a common way for readers to share their reactions. Lastly, having responses available online allows for a greater insight into how responses change over time, which is why I chose to include responses from before and after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, for which I have determined the month of February in 2020 as this was the time that the virus had spread to Europe and the online discussions surrounding this novel began.

When critically exploring the selected reader-responses, I found that all the responses were somewhat unique; but they were often similar in the argument they presented about the overall meaning of the story. The earliest reader-response I was able to find was posted on Amazon, as a customer review, in 1999 (by a user named “that guy”). It reads:

Dean Koontz is a writer that ignores plot and interest, the ending was weak and stupidly easy. The beginning had promise, but then the book looked if he had forgotten deadline and had to write the rest all in one hour, using plot devices as a omnipotent benefactor

and to save the plot by bringing up the redeeming social value of experimenting on small children (as he did in *Door To December*). it was terrible and sadistic.

The reader claims that Koontz, as a writer, is not interested in a coherent plot structure or “interest,” which I understand as the reader’s interest in the story. As there are some typographical errors and the sentences are not very clear, I am guessing that this reader is not an “informed” reader, as they understand the plot inaccurately. What the reader describes as “an omnipotent benefactor,” is Danny’s supernatural powers that are used to solve every obstacle that Tina and Elliot encounter. The reader claims that Koontz gives Danny’s character supernatural powers to “redeem” himself from writing about a child that is used for experiments. According to the reader, having that element in there, is “terrible and sadistic.” Since I have not encountered any other reader-responses that labelled this book “sadistic,” or complained about having a child mistreated for scientific purposes, I would argue that this interpretation is influenced by the reader’s peculiar reading context, rather than an identifiable interpretive community. The use of such a strong term as “sadistic,” suggests this reader finds any representation of cruelty towards children unacceptable in fiction, no matter what the context or purpose of this representation is exactly.

The following reader-response was also posted in the review section on Amazon in 2014:

I very much enjoy some of Koontz' work. This is not one of Koontz' best novels. Plot is simplistic and character development very one dimensional. While the premise is somewhat interesting, the execution disappoints. The "poltergeist" element and "evil government using children for science" messages explored in a very clichéd fashion. The relationship/chemistry between the two protagonists is stilted and cardboard like at best. Not up to some of Koontz' later work. There is a great deal of potential in Danny,

the protagonist's son, but any opportunity to explore the intricacies of the treatment impact on Danny's brain and abilities is thwarted in favor of a limiting sci-fi/thriller/political commentary narrative. (2014)

As can be read in the response of this reader, they have already read some of Koontz's books and also seem to be familiar with the sci-fi-thriller genre and pulp-political narratives. This reader seemingly has all the attributes of Fish's "informed reader," as they seem to have semantic knowledge, literary competence as well as knowledge of the popular genre conventions that structure Koontz's novel. One question that came to mind when reading this response was why, if readers and communities create texts, does this reader dislike the text? If readers are the sole creators of the text, would they not create something they like? But what this question shows is that, in contrary to what Fish and Holland have claimed, the text is not just "an illusion" of self-sufficiency, it must have some agency. Otherwise, if the reader was able to fully project meaning on to the text, they would probably end up liking what they had created. This is confirmed when the reader claims that there is the potential for Danny's character to develop and become more present during the plot. According to the reader, the text or rather the author failed to elaborate on Danny's character. This is clearly not something that the reader has agency to do, but only the text has the power to do. A reader can have expectations, for example expectations concerning the specific plot stages. Readers might have expectations to the falling action, how they wish a story ends for example but if the necessary structure and the expected content that provides opportunity to satisfy these expectations is not presented, then there is not much the reader can do and they will ultimately be disappointed from their reading experience.

The next response, written by someone called F. James, was the first one to be written in the context of the Corona virus pandemic in April of 2020:

Dreadful. Utter trite. A real struggle to continue with this book, but like most readers I wanted to get to the prediction of the corona virus from Wuhan, known in this book as Wuhan 400. Scratch beneath the superficial she's a beautiful ex-showgirl who is hugely successful ... he's a rich attorney ex - military intelligence with a Mercedes and a private jet (brands name dropping is important) and you find a story that CBBC would be embarrassed to produce for a bunch of 12-year-olds. I'm sure those who survive Covid 19 will be looking forward to the power of telekinesis that Danny experiences after repeated infection. Glad I only wasted a couple of quid on this terrible book.

The first thing to note is that this reader only continued reading the book to learn about the "prediction of the corona virus." This indicates the reader's interpretation was influenced by the interpretive community of the conspiracy theorists that had already developed around the novel. Even though there is no proof that the reader is a conspiracy theorist, they are most definitely interested in the conspiracy, otherwise they would not have had continued the reading solely to find the mention of the virus in the book. The disappointment of finding out that the virus in the book is nothing like the coronavirus might have influenced the negative experience that the reader here describes. Key terms that the reader uses to define their reading experience are "superficial" and "dreadful."

Furthermore, they describe the book as an embarrassment and mock the idea of telekinesis resulting from repeated infection with the virus. This distinctly shows two things, that this reader is not a fan of SF and that their reading is highly influenced by the Corona pandemic. As Susan Stone Blackburn observes in her "Science-Fiction Studies, "Most SF theory resist a serious study of psience fiction; either it is openly hostile to conceptions of psi or its mappings are opaque to matters of interest in psience fiction, which speculates about the nature of mind, not about the material universe" (242). Although even science fiction critics refuse to seriously study psience fiction, telekinesis and telepathy are fundamental features of

American science fiction and are commonly featured in SF novels and movies. Because the reader mocks that element in the novel, it is obvious that they are not familiar with that type of SF, or the genre in general. But the reader might also mock the idea of telekinesis in relation to the virus because they read the novel in the context of a pandemic. Since the reader lives in the reality of a pandemic caused by a virus, they know that it is highly unlikely to develop telekinesis after having been infected by the virus. Therefore, it is their current real-life experience of living through an ongoing pandemic that makes them dislike the narrative in which the subplot of the escaped virus turns out to have very little bearing on the current Covid-19 situation.

Furthermore, the reader comments on the brand-naming, which contributes to their notion that the characters are “superficial.” This negative response to the inclusion of brand-names in the text can be explained as the result of the reader’s thwarted expectations concerning the style of the narrative; but it may again signal the reader’s unfamiliarity with the genre conventions of the pulp adventure novel. As a distinct genre of paperback fiction, pulp fiction was printed on cheap paper made from wood pulp, hence the name, which made it cheap and therefore accessible to a wider audience. Pulp fiction made the reading of fiction available to anyone, which is why it is often considered as “cheap literature” with “no literary value” (“Pulp Fiction”). Product placement and advertising is a common characteristic of the fiction genre:

However, in that these motifs of the brands referred to in these novels take on the narrative capacity to tell stories about the characters, they demonstrate the way in which product placement in fiction has the potential to draw on two mutually reinforcing registers of persuasion –advertising strategy and narrative strategy– that promote consumer desire. Because the use of brands contributes to the realism of the fictive world, acts to flesh out the identities of the characters that consume them, and



establishes realms of shared experience between protagonists and the implied reader, they normalize characters' consumer identities and practices. (Bullen 506)

As described in this quote, brand-naming is a tool used in fiction to draw the fictional world closer to that of the reader, it offers shared experience between the readers and the fictional characters. It is a plus that it works as advertising and in favour of the brands, but that is not the primary reason why product placement is prevalent in popular fiction. The main reason is to make the fictional world described in the story more familiar. Fans of the pulp fiction genre might appreciate this characteristic of the book as it is true to the genre, but readers who are not familiar with this type of writing might dislike this feature and perceive it as "superficial."

The next reader whose response will be analysed finds Dean Koontz's *The Eyes of Darkness* "unbelievable":

This book has a story line which lost me because it was not believable. The reader obviously needs to be prepared to "suspend reality" in this type of book and accept that impossible things can happen. However, the whole trip undertaken by the main characters was beyond all belief. Very lazy writing to rely on magical things happening all the time to avoid any real attempt at a plot. Avoid.

Like many other readers, this reader's response to the book is a negative one. The reader felt like the story was "not believable." One might wonder why multiple readers felt disappointed about a science-fiction novel being unrealistic. A reader of science fiction novels would expect any such story to contain "unrealistic" elements, as SF stories often portray possible future developments in science, technology and human society, not the current realities. Where SF differentiates itself from Fantasy most clearly, is that certain so-called fantastic aspects of the text in fact can be presented realistically, but this does not have to be the case. Avid readers of SF will be prepared to suspend disbelief for the duration of their reading experience.

Allan Hazlett and Christy Mag Uidhir write that “[t]o call a fiction unrealistic, in the ordinary sense, is often to assert or concede some kind of criticism of it”; to understand why the reader might feel this way, I will further explore Hazlett and Uidhir’s theory (33). Comparing *The Eyes of Darkness* to a film that they analyse in their essay “Unrealistic Fictions,” *The Eyes of Darkness* would count as a “realistic fiction that describes unlikely events” which is realistic not because it depicts “something likely or even (physically) possible, but in its depiction of its characters, in their reactions to the new technology, and simply in the appearance of the people and places depicted” in the story (34). They continue by writing: “Second, there seem to be realistic fictions, depicting or describing unlikely events, which are not unrealistic because they depict those events as unlikely” (34). Accordingly, it cannot be argued that *The Eyes of Darkness* is “unrealistic” as whatever happens in the story is depicted as unlikely. What the reader specifically criticises it that Elliot and Tina’s struggles on their journey are magically solved, this seems “unbelievable” to the reader. However, the narrative does not depict what happens on Tina and Elliot’s journey as “likely.” Even Tina and Elliot cannot believe what is happening; to them, Danny’s supernatural abilities are “unlikely,” which is why they initially refuse to believe that it is him doing the paranormal activities. Therefore, the narrative is not unrealistic as such, as it does not attempt to convince the reader that what happens in the story is realistic.

I believe the reader’s real problem with the narrative is that they find it unbelievable in the sense that it is unrealistic in the context in which the reader lives. As Hakemulder points out, quoting Gardner and Zola: “readers perceive story plots as cause-effect scenarios and that exposure to such scenarios may affect their real-world beliefs and their expectations about consequences of certain behaviours” (194). Many readers respond to the dialogue, the action, and its consequence to the overall plot in such a way that it leads to reflection on their own lives and the key contexts in which it is lived. Although fictions might take place on another

planet, or in another time, the events that take place can be similar to events in the real world. Therefore, moral lessons can be gained from reading fiction, as Hakemulder's research has shown. This idea is reflected also in Mikkonen's "Can Fiction become Fact?" Mikkonen quotes Gerrig, who explains that:

[o]n the one hand, it is expected of fiction that it include lessons to be extracted in regard to the real world. It has been shown in various psychological experiments how fictional information is incorporated into long-term memory structures, with no essential difference from the mental processing of facts, or how fictional information becomes part of the body of information wielding influence on a person's everyday judgments.  
(295)

Readers apply lessons that they learn through fictional scenarios to their real-world knowledge. In a sense, lessons that they learn in fictional settings are remembered like real-life experiences. In *The Eyes of Darkness*, no lessons that could be used in real-life can be learned, as the characters do not face any real consequences for running away from the powerful and dangerous government agents that pursue them. Elliot and Tina are running from undercover agents and are trying to uncover the truth about their son; realistically, they would have been killed in the narrative, as they are only two people against an entire government organisation determined to keep a secret. However, nothing happens to them; they are not even injured after running for days. Additionally, Danny is only an eight-year-old child, who has been reinfected numerous times with a deadly disease. Yet, the only consequence of this is that he develops telekinesis, which is a side-effect that is not likely to be accepted as realistic. There is no moral lesson from this text to be gained, not even that biological weapons are bad, since the consequence of the biological weapon is telekinesis, which is not necessarily a bad consequence. What it does provide, is emotions and a sentimental climax which is representative of its genre. Nonetheless, the novel does not provide valuable information that

can be incorporated into “long-term memory structures,” the novel fails for members of this specific interpretive community as it does not have any moral value for those readers.

#### d. Reader-Response theory and Reader-Responses

As a conclusion to this section of chapter 2, it is necessary to reflect on the theories examined in chapter 1, to analyse how they have helped in my analysis of the reader-responses to Koontz’s novel. Having analysed four different reader-responses that I claim represent the different interpretive communities responding to *The Eyes of Darkness* that I was able to find on the Internet, it is visible that the general response is a negative one. The majority of the readers, independent of which timeframe, disliked the novel for some reason or another. All the responses, including mine, were clearly influenced by the reader’s individual identity, as each response reflects specific identity themes of the reader. But in contrast to what Holland claims, the text does not disappear, and it does not vanish “in the astonishing variability of different readers’ re-creation of it,” as many readers have recreated the text in a similar way (Holland, *Nature* 13). Yet, it must be mentioned that Holland was concerned with poems and literary short stories when arguing his point, which shows that although his theory can be applied to those type of texts, it is difficult to apply them to the genre of pulp SF-adventure fiction.

A theory that has been proven to be more successful in this research is Fish’s theory of interpretive communities. He attributes joint responsibility to text and reader, which is necessary as shown by my analysis of reader responses above. Additionally, his main idea of interpretive communities takes a central role in my analysis, as I have categorized the different responses to this book according to the different interpretive communities. The two major interpretive communities that I was able to identify are conspiracy theorists, which I will further study in chapter 3, and constant readers of Koontz, which are separated into fans and people

who read his books despite their claim that they dislike the author. As can be seen by this categorization, I choose to use the term “interpretive communities” broadly.

To reiterate, “interpretive communities” describe groups of people who use the same interpretive strategies. The way in which I use the term is to see what influenced an interpretation, for example, many people read the book through the conspiracy theory. I consider this an interpretive strategy, which is why I have identified those readers to be part of the same interpretive community. Nonetheless, as I have stated in chapter 1, readers are part of many different interpretive communities. Since it is impossible to identify every single community that each reader is a part of, I chose to focus on the one that was most obvious in their response. Furthermore, Fish states that the reading is influenced by the reader’s interpretation before the reading has even begun. This is illustrated by the readers that only read the book in order to investigate the conspiracy theory surrounding this book. All of the readers that claim to have read this book in order to find out more about the conspiracy theory were ultimately disappointed in the novel, as the narrative is not about a pandemic. This shows that the reading was doomed to be negative even before the reading began and secondly, it shows that the text has just as much agency as the reader, otherwise the reader would have just projected their expectations on to the text and would have been satisfied with their reading. However, this does not work as the text does not offer structures that support such a reading.

Earlier, Iser was quoted writing: “the text is ‘inexhaustible’, [...], the potential text is so much richer than any of its individual realizations” (285). This idea was not represented in my analysis of the reader-responses. If anything, the reader-responses proved the opposite. Although I would agree that poems for example are comparatively “inexhaustible,” *The Eyes of Darkness* is not. This is proven by the responses of the readers, as their interpretation of the text did not vary majorly. However, this is also because the narrative does not leave much room for creativity and interpretation and does not have many “gaps” that can be filled. The narrative

is pretty much laid out “cut and dried” as Iser likes to phrase it. Descriptions and actions in the narrative are very detailed, leaving little room for interpretation. Nothing is insinuated or implied, rather it is explained straight away, which makes the reading very one sided as the reader is faced with so much information but has so little creative input in the formation of this literary work, which stays true to the SF genre as “SF is distinctly formulaic” (Samuelson 191). “Formulaic” simply means that the novel gives every information and is “exhaustive” in a sense, as it lays out the story and does not require the reader to think much, which is also the reason why many people like reading SF. Therefore, it can be argued that although Iser’s ideas make sense in theory, they cannot be applied to the analysis of the reader-responses chosen in this research.

Lastly, I will reflect on Louise Rosenblatt’s theory of transaction. Something that she mentioned, quoted in chapter 1, was that “[t]he reader seeks to participate in another’s vision – to reap knowledge of the world, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain insights that will make his own life more comprehensible” (7). This is shown in the different responses, particularly in the ones from the reader’s that went into the reading hoping to find out more about the virus in the book. My theory is that most readers in 2020 were hoping to find guidance from the book. They were looking for insights that would make their life more comprehensible as Rosenblatt explains. However, since the virus in the novel and the way the characters acted as a response to it, were so very different from the reader’s reality, their experience was disappointing to them and not fulfilling their needs and expectations.

As Rosenblatt wrote: “[t]he reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of the past, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition” (30). Even though the novel was published at the outset of the 1980s, every reader will read any text in the context of their own place and time, with “questions, anxieties, and interests that come into existence because of (their) own particular places in history”

(McCormick 201). Therefore, the needs that the reader brings to the text are influenced by the reader's anxieties from their own time. Which is why most responses from after February 2020 were influenced by the reader's experience with the Coronavirus, whereas responses from before that time focused on other things, which were mostly influenced by the reader's identity such as the reader's experience with Koontz' other works.

Overall, the scholarly theories concerning the creation of meaning that were discussed in chapter 1 guided my analysis of the reader-responses. The only discrepancies that emerged were due to the different genres that were the research target in the different theories. As mentioned before, all of the theorists discussed in the previous chapter focus on readers' potential responses to poems and literary short stories, whereas I analysed responses to a sensational work of pulp fiction. It is necessary to point out this difference as poems leave more room for creative interpretation whereas the novel that I chose is very descriptive and detailed and leaves less possibility for interpretation. As a result, the transaction between the text and the reader is limited, as the reader is only left to read the words on the page and imagine the different scenarios in his mind, less so engage with the words creatively. In that sense, the reader can mostly consume the literary work but not take part in actively creating it.

### CHAPTER III: The Power of Reader-Response in the Digital Age of Corona

This last chapter further explores the world-wide effects that recent online reader-responses to *The Eyes of Darkness* have had. What had initially inspired me to do this research was the online outburst surrounding this book. An excerpt of this book had been put online, which sparked the conspiracy theory that Koontz had prophesized the Coronavirus pandemic back in 1981. Not only the twitter community picked this up but even major news outlets from around the world gained interest in this story. The conspiracy theory surrounding this novel is important to my critical investigation into reader-response theory and practice, as it was essentially started by a specific reader's response posted online. This shows the power and effects that a single reader's response can have in the digital age. To further investigate this topic, I will explore five online articles from famous news outlets, from different countries, in order to show how fast the conspiracy, spread across the globe and what effects it had. What this chapter will show is that reader responses were able to create the meaning of this literary work, independently from the textual structures that the novel provided as what people think what the book represents is much different from what the text offers. Therefore, this chapter shows a situation in which the readers are more powerful than the text, which coincides with some of the claims made in chapter 1 that the reader, rather than the text, is the one creating the literary work. Even though I claimed at the end of chapter 2 that readers passively consumed the story and did not take part in creating the text, conspiracy theorists were able to alter the meaning of the story as they made the novel out to be something that it is clearly not. How they were able to achieve this, and the consequences of their actions will be explored in this chapter.



### a. Extrapolation and the News

Before focusing on the dissemination of the conspiracy theory through news outlets, it is important to focus on what sparked the conspiracy concerning this novel in the first place. As previously mentioned, *The Eyes of Darkness* gained increasing attention after a reader had posted an excerpt online, stating that Dean Koontz had prophesized the Coronavirus pandemic. Chapter one mentions that Koontz laughed off the idea that he had predicted the virus, stating that he could not even predict what he would have for dinner that night. He blamed all of the fuss on that one picture that was put online marrying a page from his book and Browne's *End of Days*. However, the author's explanation as to why certain people are calling him a prognosticator is not the whole story.

Koontz may not have *predicted* or *prophesized* the pandemic, but he has certainly *extrapolated* it. In order to clear up any confusion, I will include definitions from different dictionaries, which provide me with the most suitable definition for each term. According to *The Penguin English Dictionary*, "prediction" is defined "as a statement of what will or is likely to happen in the future, a forecast". Similarly, "a prophecy" is also a prediction but in religious settings: "A prediction of the future that is generally held to be divinely inspired; the gift of being able to make prophecies" (*Chambers Dictionary of the Unexplained*). Extrapolation is equally a form of prediction, but the way in which it is done makes the greatest difference. Extrapolation means "to predict by projecting past experience" (*Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*).

In the interview with *World Over*, quoted from earlier, Koontz explains that he found out about a historical case of biological warfare that happened in China, while doing research for his book. Therefore, it made sense to him to claim that the virus in his novel had come from there. After investigating what historical event he might refer to, I found that, in the 1940s,

Japan had attacked China multiple times using biological weapons, including plague infected fleas and germ-infected wheat, which they would throw from planes onto Chinese grounds. As a response, China conducted more research on vaccines for biological weapons as a precautionary measure (“China Biological Chronology” 21). As can be seen, even the origin of the virus has a logical explanation and is not an act of prophecy or a random prediction, but rather a case of extrapolation.

A CNN article (2020) on this matter states: “In a tweet that has since been widely shared, someone said that Koontz had predicted the coronavirus outbreak based on a screenshot of a page in the book. But to say that Koontz saw all this coming is a bit of a stretch. A novel is a work of fiction, after all.” The last sentence of this quotation is quite ambiguous. It is unclear why fiction is brought up in relation to prediction by saying that the author could not have predicted the Coronavirus because the novel is fictional. Extrapolation is very common in prose fiction, especially in the genres of Speculative- and Science Fiction:

SF distorts realism in other traditional ways, as well, such as satire or allegory, but the method of distortion most characteristic of SF, and especially hard SF, is extrapolation, a process uniting science, realism and fantasy in highly specific ways. Shared with and to some extent drawn from science and futurology, extrapolation is primarily used in SF for world-building and forecasting. (N. Samuelson 195)

As can be seen, extrapolation or as it is commonly called “prediction” is common in SF. In fact, one of the major scholarly publications in the field of SF studies is called *Extrapolation*. There are numerous other authors who have been said to have extrapolated specific social and scientific developments in their books that later proved to have become reality with much greater accuracy than Koontz’s notion of a virus being imported from Wuhan. For example, in 1898, Morgan Robertson wrote the novel *Futility*, in which a large ship of the name Titan,

crashes into an iceberg and sinks, not having enough lifeboats for all its passengers. This text is widely recognized to have “predicted” the crash of the Titanic, which occurred 14 years later in the exact circumstances. However, it was never as widely known and discussed as the conspiracy theory surrounding *The Eyes of Darkness*, even though Robertson’s extrapolation was much more specific and accurate.

It has been established that the virus in Koontz’s novel is not very similar to the Coronavirus. Yet what differentiates this conspiracy from the one about *Futility* is that it was shared online, which really made a difference in terms of its dissemination and readers’ engagement with the theory. The next section will explore five different posts from news outlets around the world.

A Google search for “Dean Koontz The Eyes of Darkness” leads to almost 600.000 results. When scrolling through the search results, it is visible that it is mostly news outlets writing about the book commenting on how it did or did not predict the Coronavirus. Important to mention is also that the 600.000 results do not include the results of non-English-language news outlets reporting on the subject. This shows the huge impact that this story has had, as it travelled around the globe, convincing people that the virus must be a manmade weapon. Because it was supposedly predicted as early as 1981, conspiracy theorists consider it must be true. Obviously, not every individual reading Koontz’s novel will respond in this way, but as chapter 2 has shown, various readers have done so with great impact on the media representation of this work of pulp fiction. When looking for online news articles, it becomes obvious that the conspiracy even made it outside the United States, as it was discussed in Europe and India. For this analysis, I chose articles from France, Germany, Italy, the UK, and the US. The reason why I looked for articles specifically from those countries is because those

are the languages I can read, which is necessary to compare them. However, the conspiracy was spread to more countries than only those five.

The news outlets that I took the articles from are *CNN News*, *Tagesschau 1*, *20minutes*, *La Repubblica* and *The Guardian*. Each of them is amongst the best-known news outlets in their countries, which shows that this conspiracy theory was not only covered by small news outlets but also amongst more serious, more popular ones. Oddly enough, the Italian news channel *La Repubblica* was the first of these five channels to report on the story on February 20, 2020. The four other outlets only released their articles in March the same year. Whereas the French article in *20minutes*, the *CNN* and the Italian article in *La Repubblica* solely focus on Koontz's novel, the German article mentions the book only briefly, warning about the danger of conspiracy theories; *The Guardian* compares Koontz's story to other SF novels and movies. The French, the Italian and the *CNN* article are similar in structure as they all mention the famous passage from the novel on page 302, the one which surfaced online at the beginning of the pandemic. They then go on to state the differences between the viruses, namely the difference in incubation time, the difference in percentage of the kill rate and that the virus in the book only affects humans, unlike the Coronavirus, which also affects animals. Additionally, the three articles mention that the virus was initially named "Gorki-400," as "evidence" that he did not predict the virus. However, the name of the virus was changed in 1988, which means that this detail does not discredit the conspiracy theory.

All of the articles, except for the *CNN* article, clearly state that Koontz did not predict the coronavirus. Yet, all the articles have their headlines indicate that the novel predicted the Coronavirus. This is because headlines should be intriguing so that the reader wants to find out whether the book really did predict the pandemic or not. In the *CNN* article, the novel is only briefly mentioned at the beginning. The article goes on to compare it to other films and novels

that have been said to have predicted the corona virus. The headline of the article is: “Fewer Dreams: Did author Dean Koontz really predict coronavirus?” This headline leaves room for interpretation and the article remains neutral about the answer to that question. Some of the other articles clearly state that Koontz did not predict the novel. Yet these contain ambiguous headlines that suggest otherwise, such as this one: “*Coronavirus, la curiosa coincidenza del libro del 1981 che già parlava di un virus di Wuhan*” (La Repubblica). This translates to: “Coronavirus, the strange coincidence of a book from 1981 which had already mentioned a virus from Wuhan,” suggesting that Koontz might have predicted the virus (my own translation). The first thing people usually read in a newspaper is the headline; sometimes the headline is the only thing they read. Therefore, readers who fail to read the full article may get the false impression that the novel predicted the Coronavirus, which is what they then remember. In that way, the media coverage contributed to the success of the conspiracy theory, even if the theory was debunked in most of the articles.

The marketing of the novel has had a major influence on the reader responses to *Eyes of Darkness*, as it pointed out in many of the reader-responses found on Amazon. The title under which the book is marketed on Amazon reads: “*The Eyes of Darkness: A gripping suspense thriller that predicted a global danger... (English Edition).*” On Ebay, a seller has the book marketed under the description: “*Eyes of Darkness Dean Koontz OUTBREAK PREDICTIONS.*” Similarly, on a Luxembourgish book-selling website *Ernster*, the description of the book reads: “*Hat Dean Koontz in diesem Thriller aus dem Jahr 1981 den Ausbruch des Coronavirus vorausgesagt?*” This translates to: “Did Dean Koontz predict the outbreak of the Coronavirus with this thriller from 1981?” Such headlines suggest that it could have done so, with the clear intent to sell more books. Obviously, the book has not predicted the outbreak. Therefore, the marketing is misleading and partially provides false information. This is especially true on Amazon, as it clearly states on there that it did predict a global danger. Some

readers were lured into buying the book solely because of this description and were disappointed at what they would find in the book. One reader, going by the username “Q1st” wrote: “Amazon – I feel cheated. Shameful deceptive advertising by Amazon to encourage to buy this book by suggesting that it predicts COVID-19. The text has been changed from the original version to Wuhan. The book is utter tripe anyway.” Another reader, by the name of “Nittynoo,” wrote: “Drawn into this by false advertisement on the front cover...it had nothing to do with corona virus. The only mention was a virus created by the Chinese and that was 20 pages from the end. This had no resemblance to its false advertising on the front cover.” Readers that were tricked by the marketing of the book were obviously disappointed to find out that the book has nothing to do with the current virus. This might have influenced their reading of the novel in a negative way. Even so, the marketing helped spread the conspiracy even faster, bringing the book to the third place on Amazon’s charts in March 2020, only little time after the Coronavirus even emerged, which shows that the conspiracy theory thrived in the uncertainty that people felt during the first few months of the pandemic (foxbusiness).

#### b. The Danger of Conspiracy Theory

To investigate the different conspiracy theories surrounding this novel, it is necessary to understand the definition of conspiracy theory. In the introduction to the book *»Truth« and Fiction: Conspiracy Theories in Eastern European Culture and Literature* by Beganović et al., conspiracy theorists are said to imply “that actions or utterances are not simply performed straightforwardly; instead, real or relevant interests are concealed “behind” them” (9). A simple example for this definition would be one of the conspiracy theories surrounding the Coronavirus vaccine, where some conspiracists believe that the vaccine has not been developed to cure the virus but to inject a microchip under the pretence that it is a vaccine, for the government to control its citizens. Accordingly, conspiracists do not believe that the vaccine

has the purpose that they have been told it has but that there is another, real reason why it has been invented and is widely encouraged. According to Shadi Shahsavari, et al. “Conspiracy theories (along with rumors and other stories told as true) circulate rapidly when access to trustworthy information is low, when trust in accessible information and its sources is low, when high-quality information is hard to come by, or a combination of these factors” (282). This has proven to be accurate in this case as there was little information available to the public at the beginning of the pandemic. Not much was known about the virus, its exact origin, the exact symptoms, whether it was curable, etc. As governments could only provide limited information at the beginning of the pandemic, many individuals turned to the Internet for information, advice and most importantly consolidation. As it was advised to stay quarantined, the Internet and especially social media platforms became the main possibility to stay connected to other people. As such, it was not difficult to come by one or the other conspiracy that was making the rounds online. Over the last two years, countless conspiracy theories have arisen around the virus. Yet, they can be narrowed down to the five most famous ones which include: 5G causing the Coronavirus, Bill Gates planting microchips in people through the vaccine, the Coronavirus being used as a bioweapon by the Chinese government, Covid being imported into China by the US military and Covid not existing at all.

In regard to *The Eyes of Darkness*, there are three different conspiracy theories at hand. The first one would be the most obvious one, which is that it was not a mere coincidence that Koontz called the virus Wuhan-400 in the 1988 edition; and that he prophesized the coronavirus as early as 1981, in the first edition. This is also the line of reasoning that most newspaper articles follow when they say that Koontz *did not* predict the Coronavirus. The second and the third concern the same thing but are slightly different and they exist separately from the book, in relation to the pandemic in general. They are not discussed at all in the newspaper in relation to the book, but they are widely discussed on social media. Firstly, there

is a conspiracy theory claiming that the Chinese government developed the Coronavirus as biological weapon and that it was then either on purpose or accidentally leaked from a biological lab near Wuhan. This theory is encouraged in the 1988 edition of Koontz's novel, as in this edition the virus is created in a lab outside the city of Wuhan to be used as a biological weapon. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Koontz wrote the book before this conspiracy theory surfaced. Therefore, the author cannot be said to take an active part in the spread of this theory, only the readers of his novel do by spreading their understanding of the text.

In the second conspiracy theory it is believed that the Chinese government developed the virus as a biological weapon, but that it was imported from China by the US military. The idea that the US military was involved in the importation of the virus was even reinforced by a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson by the name Zhao Lijian who published the following statement on his twitter account:

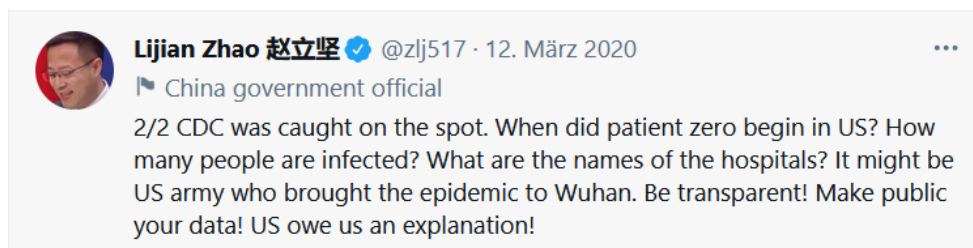


Figure1

[https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1238111898828066823?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etwetembed%7Cwterm%5E1238111898828066823%7Cwqr%5E%7Cwcon%5Es1\\_c10&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.straitstimes.com%2Fasia%2Ffast-asia%2Fus-military-may-have-brought](https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1238111898828066823?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etwetembed%7Cwterm%5E1238111898828066823%7Cwqr%5E%7Cwcon%5Es1_c10&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.straitstimes.com%2Fasia%2Ffast-asia%2Fus-military-may-have-brought)

The twitter post that Lijlan Zhao made, reinforcing the conspiracy theory that the US military imported the virus, is only a response to the conspiracy theory that China created the virus. Although investigating conspiracy theories might not be more than a hobby to some, they can be dangerous as there is often an underlying reason as to why they were created in the first place. Conspiracy theories can be used to manipulate the people that believe them, so that people might grow a dislike towards one community or the other.



The effects that this has had during the pandemic is that many people grew to dislike Asians, to the extent of open racism being expressed towards Asians of various nationalities in America and Europe. This pernicious effect of the spread of the corona conspiracy is to be seen across the world now; however, the next section will only look at evidence from the US, as *The Eyes of Darkness* is an American novel and the last conspiracy mentioned particularly affects the US. As established, Anti-Asian xenophobia became visible in many countries but especially in the US. A journal article titled “Anti-Asian Xenophobia and Asian American COVID-19 Disparities” states that “From March 19, 2020, to May 13, 2020, more than 1700 anti-Asian hate incidents were documented across the United States” (1371). Even so, it must be mentioned that hate crimes against the Asian community is not a new trend as the US has a long history of racism against Asians. According to Gover et al., this intolerance towards Asian people started from the moment Asians arrived in the US in the late 1700s which became aggravated through the tong wars that started in the 1850’s, the opium and slave girl traffic as well as the gambling that was associated with Chinese immigrants (Gover 649, Reynolds 617). On the belief that Asian people were a danger to American culture, the Chinese Exclusion Act was introduced in 1882, banning Chinese immigration and prohibiting them from becoming citizens.

“Yellow Peril” is a metaphor that alludes to “the danger” that Americans thought Asians posed to their country, they saw Asian as a threat to their Western Civilization (Tchen 15). Yellow Peril means yellow threat or danger, hinting at Asians through the colour yellow which is often used in racist manner to describe the complexion of Asian people. The colour yellow is used to portray them as different and abnormal as “Yellow has never been pure and absolute but always part of a spectral hybrid of imputed phenotypes” (Tchen 15). A Yellow Peril was used as a form of institutional racism, being portrayed on covers of books and newspapers as a yellow octopus:



Figure 10. *The United States Marines*, vol. 1, no. 3 (New York: Magazine Enterprises, 1943). Government Comics Collection, Love Library, University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Courtesy of Richard Graham.



Figure 1. Illustrator Erich Schilling published some 1,500 drawings with the Munich-based satirical magazine *Simplicissimus* between 1907–1944. He was known for his modernist art deco style. This illustration predated the Anti-Soviet Pact signed by Germany and Japan in 1936. Erich Schilling, "The Japanese 'Brain Trust,'" *Simplicissimus*, v. 39, n. 44 (January 27, 1935), cover. Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

Figure 2&3 Tchen, Wei and Yeats, Dylan. *Yellow Peril! An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*  
[3https://www.lettere.uniroma1.it/sites/default/files/2997/John%20Kuo%20Wei%20Tchen%20et%20al.%20C%20Yellow%20peril%21%20-%20an%20archive%20of%20anti-Asian%20fear%20-%20%282014%29.pdf](https://www.lettere.uniroma1.it/sites/default/files/2997/John%20Kuo%20Wei%20Tchen%20et%20al.%20C%20Yellow%20peril%21%20-%20an%20archive%20of%20anti-Asian%20fear%20-%20%282014%29.pdf)

During World-War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order that all people of Japanese descent should be held in concentration camps (Gover 652). Although the Xenophobia and the racism against Asian people in the US goes on less obviously as in the 1900s it is still very much prominent and merely increased through the pandemic. Only recently, Donald Trump was sued over a tweet that he had posted in March 2020, calling the Coronavirus “China-Virus.” This tweet



Figure  
[4https://www.google.com/search?q=coronavirus+xenophobia&client=firefox-b-d&sxsrf=ALeKk025vobX5H1DDITF\\_XzyuM8COey0yw:1622309119707&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjP0q62tO\\_wAhUPrqQKHQxNCssQ\\_AUoAnoECAEQBA&biw=864&bih=422#imgrc=0ckT\\_HErom8QcM](https://www.google.com/search?q=coronavirus+xenophobia&client=firefox-b-d&sxsrf=ALeKk025vobX5H1DDITF_XzyuM8COey0yw:1622309119707&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjP0q62tO_wAhUPrqQKHQxNCssQ_AUoAnoECAEQBA&biw=864&bih=422#imgrc=0ckT_HErom8QcM)

is said to have reinforced the negative feelings towards the Asian community. In “Anti-Asian

Hate Crime During the Covid-19 Pandemic,” Gover et al write: “One of the most horrific examples of COVID-19-related hate crimes occurred on March 14<sup>th</sup> at a Sam’s Club in Midland, TX, when a perpetrator attacked a family from Myanmar, stabbing three victims including a 2-year-old girl and a 6-year-old boy. (Aziz, 2020)” (qtd. in Gover 659). As can be seen, these attacks went way beyond the verbal and online hate.

This shows one of the motivations that conspiracy theorists might have had in spreading the theory. Conspiracy theories are dangerous as they convince people of something that cannot be certainly known as the truth. Such theories, especially in this case, fuel hate and motivate their believers to take action. Conspiracy theories are often used as excuses for violence, and usually reinforce feelings and opinions that are already there. Along with the xenophobia and racism, the distrust in the American government increased as well because of the theory that the virus was imported by the US military. For people that believe in this theory, the novel only increased their doubts in the American government, as in the story, the American government further tests the virus on a child to see its effects. Which suggests that the American government is corrupt as they themselves conduct research on and experiment with biological weapons.

The Anti-Asian movement is just one of many effects of the conspiracy theories that emerged and are still in effect during the Coronavirus pandemic. It is important to look at the effect of conspiracy theories as it truly shows the power that reader-responses have in our lives. Reader-response theory is an important contribution in literary theory, but it also explains why we interpret texts the way we do and, in this case, how it was possible for this misinterpretation to spread and cause such effects. If anything, the conspiracy about Koontz’ novel has really shown the importance and capability of reader-response in the modern digital world.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to determine why Koontz' novel came to be so popular for having predicted the coronavirus even though most readers have responded to those allegations saying that it did not. The second aim was to study the effects of reader-response particularly during the coronavirus pandemic. In chapter 1, reader-response theory was analysed as this was necessary to be able to critically examine the different reader responses in chapter 2. Analysing the different theories helps understand the relation between text and reader and to highlight the importance of the reader in the production of meaning. In chapter 2, the novel was analysed, this included a short introduction of the author and the genre of the novel, as those two aspects had a major influence on the reader-responses and my analysis of them. Thereafter, different responses to the novel were examined and it was cleared up how the conspiracy about the novel came to be so popular. The last chapter explored the wider effects of the reader-responses posted online to gauge the extent to which readers' responses to *The Eyes of Darkness* played a role in broader Corona contexts.

Individual as well as communal reader-responses can have major effects on the reading public's understanding of a novel and that novel's subsequent impact on broader socio-cultural events. This is especially true in the digital age where information is spread rapidly, often incorrectly and without any direct repercussions for the often-anonymous writer. In this specific case, one reader of Koontz's novel *The Eyes of Darkness* posted a passage of the book online, this passage was taken out of context and was used by different interpretive communities for their own purposes. As shown by evidence, the reader-responses to Koontz's novel took on a life of their own, changing the meaning of the novel and allowing others to use the novel as corroboration for different conspiracy theories, especially the one that claims that China has created the corona virus as a biological weapon. This is possible because both text and reader have agency in the reading process as proven by the reader-response criticism in

chapter 1. Both rely on each other to exist, without the text, the reader would not exist, and the text needs a reader to unlock its meaning. In this case study, the readers took agency over the text by taking some passages out of context and interpreting them independently of the rest of the novel, which resulted in a social media outburst and the spread of misinformation. This emphasizes the importance of the reader and reader-response theory as it shows that reader-response theory is still relevant today, not only in literary theory but also in life.

This can be seen by the consequences of the reader-responses posted to this novel, as they gained increasing attention by interpretive communities such as conspiracy theorists which then used the novel as their tool to convince people that Koontz's novel is evidence for whatever theory they wanted to promote. Consequently, the novel, or what the conspiracy theorists made of it, fuelled anti-Asian and xenophobia as well as the idea the American government is participating in the research and transportation of biological weapons.

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