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Confined to Care: Reading Autofiction During the Covid-19 Lockdowns

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This article draws on a study conducted in the last half of 2020, into the ways in which pandemic has affected the habits of readers in Denmark and the UK. Here we focus on just one phenomenon to emerge from that study: the popularity amongst Danish parents of fictions that address and enact the very situation of care in which they have found themselves. With the recent Danish novel, Olga Ravn's *Mit Arbejde* in focus, we suggest that this literary representation of a new mother's cyclical relation to time has helped readers process their own lockdown experience. Our case rests, however, less on the mimetic relation of the novel to life, than on the point that even when the novel suggests this correspondence, reading itself involves a certain forward movement, as well as the making of time for oneself.



Introduction

This article¹ draws on a series of interviews conducted with Danish novel readers during 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic was forcing workers, students, and parents to stay at home.² When we set out to interview readers in this setting, our main hypothesis was that people living through the pandemic lockdowns had more time than usual to read. We wondered whether we'd hear from readers who had turned, as the first media reports suggested they might, to the long-delayed consumption of long or classic novels.³ We also expected to hear more about the reported upturn in the reading of novels relevant to the crisis, such as Camus's *The Plague*.⁴ While we did find people in both these categories, our focus here is on one significant subset of readers whose situation was different: parents of young children, whose free time was limited rather than expanded by the closing down of public life and institutions, and whose reading practices correlated to their experiences of care giving and the time it takes in a more complex way.⁵

This comes out in the case of one of the novels that many of the readers we spoke to had read: Olga Ravn's *Mit arbejde* (in English: *My Work*). This novel appeared to widespread acclaim in September 2020, around the time many of our interviews were held. In this setting, Danish readers turned to *My Work* hot off the press and with great enjoyment. This novel is not as obviously concerned as many that became pandemic "hits" with plague or contagion. Nor was it written as a deliberate reflection on the events of 2020. Composed over several years, *My Work* details Ravn's experiences of

¹ This article was written with financial support from the Carlsberg Foundation.

² These interviews were part of a larger project, focused on the reading of novels during the periods of lockdown and furlough connected to the Covid-19 pandemic in both Denmark and the UK. All names here have been anonymized. For the longer results of that study and a description of the methodology behind it see Ben Davies, Christina Lupton, and Johanne Gormsen Schmidt, *Reading Novels During the Covid-19 Pandemic* (OUP, 2022).

³ In the UK, physical book sales rose by 6% in the week prior to the first national lockdown, paperback fiction sales increased by 35% week on week, and Waterstones reported a 400% increase of online sales week on week. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/23/britons-are-reading-more-in-lockdown-says-survey-for-world-book-night> & <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-52048582>. For advice about long reads see: 'The Best Long Books to Read During Lockdown-What, Only 800 Pages?', *The Times*, 20 April 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-best-long-books-to-read-during-lockdown-what-only-800-pages-tg7cwlj2> or Shannon Carlin, '18 Really, Really, Really Long Books You Finally Have Time to Read'. *Refinery29*, 23 March 2020, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/03/9581961/long-books-to-read-in-quarantine>.

⁴ See, for instance: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/november/books-that-shaped-2020.html>.

⁵ The study "Lockdown Reading" consisted of 860 surveys in Denmark and the UK. 84% of our British respondents and 86% of the Danish were female. We did follow-up interviews with 68 people lasting between 30 and 80 minutes. These focused on people who noted changes to what or when or how they were reading during the pandemic; people experiencing a resurgence in their reading or people who now found reading difficult. The Danish interviews took place online and in person, at the end of November and beginning of December 2020. The results of this study appear in Davies, Lupton, and Schmidt, *Reading Novels During the Covid-19 Pandemic* (OUP, 2022).

pregnancy and her journey through the first winter of being at home with her infant son. One reader we spoke to, Vanja, refers to it as ‘a book of isolation,’ emphasizing the story as one of a mother stuck with her child, unable to leave him. Dyveke, another we interviewed, calls it a ‘scary book,’ a portrait of motherhood as an existentially traumatic condition as well as an account of this one parent’s particular pathologies and impossibly high ideals. But for many in Denmark, the book, with its ambivalent relation to motherhood and its complex, non-linear representation of time, paired well with the experience of lockdown.

My Work, which is now slated for UK publication, is not the only fiction of this kind. It belongs to – and is in conversation with – a group of recent novels candid about the daily grind of parenting. Many of these are already well-received in English – and many were also chosen as pandemic reading. Adam, for instance, read Karl Ove Knausgård’s *My Struggle* on top of his heavy childcare duties in 2020 because, he explained, it ‘deals with a life with children, or being parents of young children, concretely in this text. So, it gives me the experience of reading someone who understands what I’m fighting with.’ *My Struggle* and *My Work* belong along with Rachel Cusk’s *A Life’s Work* (2001), Jenny Offill’s *Dept. of Speculation* (2014), Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015), and Kate Zambreno’s *To Write as if Already Dead* (2021) to a cluster of first-person narratives that absorb and reflect the challenges of taking care of young children at home.⁶ These novels are also a subset of what we have come to know as autofiction – narratives that blend elements of fiction (literary language, plot, and intertext) with details from a real author’s real life. Part of the self-referential appeal of these works is that they reveal a writer in the process of writing the book we are now reading.

Because of this, these texts also tend to be candid in their representation of parenting as something that limits opportunities for work, self-care and, particularly, for bookish endeavor. Their authors detail days spent at home that can feel small and confounding. ‘Everyday life,’ writes Knausgård notoriously of his time on parental leave, becomes ‘something I endured, not a thing I enjoyed, nor something that was meaningful or that made me happy [...]. I always longed to be away from it. So the life I led was not my own’ (67). Life caring for a small child, Ravn and Cusk confirm, seems almost by definition to confound any sense of progress. In *A Life’s Work*, Cusk, for instance, describes the first years of parenting as impossible to reconcile with more teleological imperatives, including those of narration itself. Standing in the kitchen where she spends her days with her infant daughter, she notes how ‘time hangs heavy on us and I find that I am

⁶ The oldest novel on this list, *A Life’s Work*, has held its appeal: it was reissued in English in May 2019 and again in May 2021; it first appeared in Danish in early 2021.

waiting, waiting for her days to pass, trying to meet the bare qualification of life which is for her to have existed in time' (138). Ravn writes in *My Work* in similar terms of the formless, continuous presence that days with her baby take: 'this single, separate time, all these strolls with the pram folded up to one lapse, a flick through the space, rolling across the rotating planet' (417).⁷

Although these are not works about domestic life during the Covid-19 pandemic, they represent what the lockdowns of 2020 felt like for many who did write about them directly. Zadie Smith, for instance, wrote in her 2020 essay collection *Intimations* of days that had become characterized by a need to move through and fill time. But Smith wrote of her life in New York. In the Scandinavian setting, long periods of paid parental leave, and long summer of childcare are anyway a feature of most parents' normal life. As the cases of *My Work* and *My Struggle* suggest, parents in this setting were perhaps better prepared than most to anticipate the feeling of being confined to care while wanting to read or write.

Our inquiry in this article is into the appeal of narratives which record and reflect on the challenges of that situation, to readers who found themselves in a situation similar to that of their narrators in 2020. Did autofictions about parenting provide parents with something other than a mirror? Perhaps, as Adam's account of reading Knausgård suggests, novels about parenting were bound to appeal to parents living through the pandemic as reflections of their own lives. Perhaps having one's own situation mirrored in fiction is always a form of solace – even when the structures that life and the novel share are harder to affirm? Although fictions describing long periods of paid parental leave are hardly universal in their realism, the pandemic made them more so. But to what extent, we want to ask, does reading about one's own situation relieve or mitigate the challenge of that situation? Our larger ambition in this piece is to use our Danish case-study to suggest that the consumption of novels of confinement in 2020 did more than simply reinforce the mood or setting in which they were written. As a fiction that became resonant with the locked-down life of young families, *My Work* also suggested the sense in which writing and reading remained extraneous to the events it represented. While novels like *My Work* and *My Struggle* describe the repetitive labor of childcare, their pandemic reception suggests that time gets made for and through reading in ways that are more complicated than the simple alignment of setting and subject matter suggests.

⁷ All translation by the authors of this article. The English translation of the novel will appear in 2023. The original Danish reads: 'denne ene, særskilte tid, alle disse ture med vognen lagt sammen til ét forløb, et svirp gennem rummet, trillende over den roterende planet.'

This point is nicely exemplified in a cartoon by the Danish illustrator Line Jensen. When Denmark closed down schools and daycares in spring 2020, Jensen was quick to capture the experience of furloughed families in her Covid-19 diary, which was published by the Danish newspaper *Politiken*. Her illustration from day five of this first lockdown portrays the artist seeking to draw something while two screaming, half-naked children sit on her knee, their arms raised in agitation or excitement. This meta-commentary on the situation in which the diary is produced is accompanied by the line: ‘Those who say that now is the time for absorption and reading should shut up. Right now.’⁸ The illustration thus draws attention to the very specific confrontation of work and family life that the Covid-19 lockdowns prompted. The supplement to the story told in Line Jensen’s diary, however, is that many parents did read (or draw, or work, or write) more than usual in 2020. Despite the demands of children, or because of them, Jensen’s picture got drawn, and the novels got read. This operation of bootstrapping contemplative time from a situation in which there appears to be none complicates many books’ diagnoses of their own exclusion from the overcrowded day.

1. Writing Confinement

In the novels we are focusing on, the two meanings of confinement, as entrapment, and as gestation and birth, intertwine. Parents writing since the Covid-19 outbreak have made a point of this overlap between the kinds of domestic confinement entailed by pregnancy, birth, and parenting, and the claustrophobia of the lockdown situation. This becomes explicit, for instance, in Zambreno’s *To Write as if Already Dead*, a text written during lockdown but published in June 2021, a good year after the highpoint of the Covid-19 pandemic in New York, the setting for its culminating scenes. The project ends with a narrator absorbed in the care of a three-year-old and about to give birth to her next child. But it begins earlier, with this narrator’s efforts to research and write a book about Hervé Guibert’s *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*. The narrator undertakes this work while thwarted by childcare, the precarity of her institutional position, and the intrusive presence of her own unwell body. Early in *To Write as if Already Dead*, the narrator attends a conference in London, where she is to present on Guibert’s struggles to write while dying of AIDS. But she finds herself having to calm her daughter down ‘by nursing her in the museum restaurant’s narrow bathroom stall, her standing up between my legs on the toilet’ (8). Her struggle to find time to think about Guibert – to read his life and archive in the larger public sense her undertaking requires – has its constraints even before the new ones of the pandemic and a second pregnancy arrive.

⁸ ‘De, der siger, at nu er det tid til at fordybe sig og læse bøger, de skal tie stille. Lige nu.’

Now: 'I have at most 15 minutes to write this passage. This passage will not be great literature. It will announce, perhaps – I existed today. I survived. An hour a day if I am lucky. A clear hour if I am very lucky. Leo is coughing in her sleep as my staccato accompaniment' (87). Zambreno's second pregnancy and extreme fear of catching Covid-19 during the deadliest phase of its US outbreak compound that feeling of lack rather than introducing it. She describes confinement as doubled by the forces that keep her stationary and starved of solitude: 'Such a doubling to this confinement. The loop of time. The extreme heat keeps me inside as well. I collapse on the couch. Stomach cleaving in two' (140). A page later, she adds: 'Still there is something beautiful to this dailiness. Every day is the same. Every day is Leo, all day. An hour or two of thinking about Guibert stretched out' (141).

The Danish poet Mads Mygind also links the experiences of becoming a parent and living through Covid-19 in his long autobiographical poem *Inkubationstid* (in English: *Incubation Time*), which was issued directly in April 2020 on eReolen – the Danish public libraries' nationwide service of electronic books, audiobooks, and podcasts, which grew enormous in popularity under 2020 lockdowns. Mygind's poem describes the first days of his baby's life coinciding with the pandemic's arrival in Denmark. Lingering in the maternity ward at Skejby Hospital, the new father listens to the hospital staff whispering in the hallway about 'patient 0' and an infectious doctor in another ward; he listens to helicopters landing on the roof day and night with suspected new cases of infection being brought to Skejby in that early phase of hospitalizations. The new parents' days are marked by counting and sitting and waiting: for updated infection rates, for symptoms to show on their own bodies, for the incubation time to be over – without knowing how long that wait will be. The time of the health crisis and the time with the baby coincide:

the only confirmed disease carrier is isolated
 but the doctors fear that it has already spread.
 I sit down in the armchair and look out at the parking lot at Skejby
 while the ice cubes in a jug of red juice melt
 I rock Albert, he is just as long as my forearm
 he will soon be asleep, he twitches in the incipient sleep
 every minute is a shock.⁹

⁹ 'den eneste bekræftede smittebærer er isoleret / men lægerne frygter at det allerede har spredt sig. / Jeg sætter mig i lænestolen og kigger ud over parkeringspladsen på Skejby / mens isterningerne i en kande rød saft smelter / jeg vugger Albert, han er lige så lang som min underarm / han sover snart, han spjætter i den begyndende søvn / hvert minut er et chok' <https://ereolen.dk/tema/digter-mads-mygind-om-blive-far-under-coronakrisen>.

The time in this scene is a time for caring, for babies and for patients; it is a slow time of melting ice cubes; a time in which the present moment is intensely felt.

Unlike Zambreno and Mygind, Ravn did not write her book about parenting under the sign of the pandemic. Yet an extract of *My Work* appeared in English before the novel's release in September, in the Covid-19 anthology, *Tools for Extinction* (2020). Ravn's contribution, which appears under the title "Bottle versus Breast," makes parental leave a prism through which to view the issues of parenting at home that millions experienced when schools and daycares closed in 2020 and 2021. In this extract and the novel from which it is taken, Ravn not only describes the new parent's immersion in a peculiarly cyclical kind of time: she also enacts this. *A Life's Work*, *Dept. of Speculation*, *The Argonauts* and *My Struggle* are all precursors to Ravn's investment in performing a certain circularity of time. In the introduction to *A Life's Work*, Cusk invokes 'a period in which time seemed to go round in circles rather than in any chronological order, and which I have tried to capture in themes rather than by the forgotten procession of its days' (9). The resulting narrative cycles through her daughter's first year of life in chapters structured by topic rather than sequence or age. Nelson, too, is keen to confound in practical terms the idea that narrative must be linear. *The Argonauts* makes a fact of her son's existence even as it also carries us through the years in which he was conceived and born. The present time of her text, in which she is writing with her body hooked up to a milk pump, expressing milk for a baby who she must leave in order to work, offsets the drama of this as a story about his coming into being. *Dept. of Speculation* deploys its own mechanism for this performance of slowness: Offill's beautifully crafted sentences relay the work of painful days in which no progress seems possible.

Of all these texts invested in the way narrative can defy progress, teleological or historical, Ravn's *My Work* is the latest and most explicit. The novel is presented as a box of disordered papers, which the narrator appears to have sorted. The manuscript produced in this process has 13 beginnings, 28 continuations, and 9 endings, and includes poetry, short scraps, and longer essays, all of which are attributed to the character Anna, a Danish writer who has spent her maternity leave in Sweden looking after a baby while her partner works. Under these conditions, she has struggled to write, or even to leave her son for the short snatches of time she spends in a local cafe. At the novel's end, Anna is about to give birth again. It seems now that everything is on the verge of starting over. In the last passage, time begins to run backwards, as if pointing back to the beginning: 'The fetus feels, with every day it grows, older than me, more viable, like an age-old, wise god who guides me. When it's born, I know, this age will

fall off day by day like a skin' (420).¹⁰ This final loop announces the novel's deliberately cyclical structure.

Ravn's refusal to designate one passage as the beginning of her novel and another as the ending seems like an act of opposition to the idea of narrative progression. This connects her work to prominent philosophical arguments for the non-linear conception of time. Traditionally, many of these have been made in the realm of feminist scholarship. Julia Kristeva's 1979 essay "Women's Time," for instance, was formative in describing a tension between days characterized by devotion and routine and what she sees as the male imperatives of narrative and history. Motherhood, for Kristeva, is a 'slow, difficult, and delightful apprenticeship in attentiveness, gentleness, forgetting oneself' (31). Yet there are two central female figures in Kristeva's essay – the mother and the female writer – and the challenge is to reconcile them. Women want to write, and they want to give voice to a female experience that has been excluded from the public discourse and hidden in the private sphere: 'the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, second sex' (32). Kristeva's answer is that writing from such a space involves thinking differently about time, validating the forms of slowness, repetition, and even backwardness that are traditionally antithetical to patriarchal narrative. This line of argument has endured and been revived well in recent years by scholars for whom slow research, slow food, good aging, and youth culture have all suggested important zones of recalcitrance when it comes to the modern pressures for movement, speed, and productivity. More specifically, queer theory has supported a whole range of reasons for refusing the imperatives of futurity, maturity, and progress that seem essential to straight literature or art or film.

Some of these arguments within queer theory invoke books quite explicitly as media conducive to the slowing down or skewing the time of capitalist production. Carolyn Dinshaw, for instance, celebrates the nineteenth-century readers of medieval texts who pick them up as ways of fashioning queer lives for themselves. She draws on the work of the philosopher Michel Serres to suggest that certain modes of reading work against the standard measurements of progress. Dinshaw is interested in 'forms of desirous, embodied being that are out of sync with the ordinarily linear measurements of everyday life, that engage heterogeneous temporalities or that precipitate out of time altogether' (4). Beth Freeman's *Beside You in Time*, makes

¹⁰ 'Fosteret opleves, for hver dag det vokser, ældre end mig, mere livsdueligt, som en ældgammel, vis gud, der guider mig. Når det fødes, ved jeg, vil denne alder falde bort dag for dag som en hud'.

a similar case in even more embodied terms for the kinds of affective connection possible in nineteenth-century America because of groups and bodies that set themselves up against the linear imperatives of forward movement and economic productivity.

Recent theorists have also emphasized in this spirit the non-linear temporality defining many experiences of modern life. In *Enduring Time*, psychologist Lisa Baraitser claims that ‘modern time itself contains within it obdurate strands of the anachronistic; of slowed, stilled or stuck time’ (6). This involves, for instance, the long-term destruction of the biosphere, the indefinite storing up of certain sections of the population in prisons, and the intergenerational waiting for political action in South Africa and among Palestinians. The affective experience of time as contourless and directionless for those in these situations – ‘an elongated interval that neither develops nor unfolds’ (166) – disturbs the linear and goal-oriented logic that has traditionally characterized Western civilization. But it also, Baraitser argues, has the potential to support new forms of human relation. ‘I am drawn,’ she writes, ‘to temporal tropes that are linked together by an apparent lack of dynamism or movement to investigate the potential for transcending the immanence of our own historical moment in precisely the places that it looks simply impossible to happen, and to understand this transcendence in terms of something I’m calling “care”’ (14). Stuck or suspended time, as Baraitser calls it, allows ‘one life to unfurl in relation to another’ (79). As imminent climate catastrophe threatens to make historical time stop, our so-called end times might, according to Baraitser, give way to a ‘making present’ (183). Despite her focus on crisis, Baraitser ends on a somewhat hopeful note on care and commonality: “‘Care without ending” paradoxically relies on the capacity to stay in relation to an elongated present’ (183).

Together with Laura Salisbury, Baraitser relates this idea of our current time of crisis *and* a time for caring more specifically to pressing issues of health care. In a 2020 interview, she explains that Covid-19 has only emphasized what twenty-first century temporality already had in store for us: ‘One thing that is striking about what happened when many parts of the world shut down due to COVID-19 was that this happened in an historical period that one could already describe as having entered into “standby” for many’ (Kemmer, Kühn, and Weber, 23). Baraitser thus draws a parallel between the very concrete ‘stuckness’ that many have experienced under Covid-19 lockdowns and a more general experience of non-linear temporality, which she relates to those suffering from long-term states such as economic disadvantage and climate change. In Baraitser’s view, the conditions of life on a burned-out planet may be more generous

than those of prosperity and growth to the temporal register on which care work has always quietly operated – through patience, duration, and repetition.¹¹

This care work, Baraitser asserts, is not opposed to art's work. Like Kristeva, Baraitser questions the traditional idea that artistic creation must be separated from domestic labor. Taking note of Kristeva's relating 'creative time' to childbearing as an act of creation, Baraitser finds inspiration in the performance artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Her "Manifesto For Maintenance Art 1969!" sets the stage for the presentation of ordinary, routine, maintenance activities such as childcare *as* works of art. Though critical of the avantgarde movement's fantasies about being the progressive spearhead of history, Ukeles's project is itself motivated by an avantgarde ambition in so far as it seeks to close the gap between everyday life and art. Her manifesto states in capital letters: 'MY WORKING WILL BE THE WORK' (124).

To interpret Ravn or Cusk or Knausgård in light of these theoretical arguments for the temporality of care seems a relatively straightforward task. The role of literary criticism as it is conventionally practiced would be to show how these novels break with old habits of narration in favor of stories slower, more circular, and more supportive of human relations. Even if they complain about the burdens of parenting, these fictions invite the reader, a close reading could show, into forms of circularity and excess that become constructive – and in so doing, they perform that alchemy of making work into art. Even the title of Ravn's novel, *My Work*, seems to articulate the intention of bringing together the everyday experience of parenting as a form of labor with the slow and circular performance of literary work. As literary critics, we are supportive of and tempted by these readings. Yet, in working more sociologically with the activity of reading during the pandemic, we also want to reckon with what readers in our study told us about the consumption of novels – and with the fact that reading about 'slow' time does not always fit – at least not simply – into the affirmative experience of it.

2. The Reader's Slowness

So let us go back for a moment to those Danish parents we spoke to about reading Ravn's *My Work* under conditions enforced by the pandemic. In these conversations,

¹¹ Lisa Baraitser and Laura Salisbury find in the suspended time revealed by the pandemic the opportunity for devoting a 'care-ful attention to' care in a wider sense; to finally start caring about care and contemplating how it comes to matter socially (Baraitser and Salisbury 2020: 29). Today's capitalist society, Nancy Fraser claims, neglects social reproduction at great costs (Fraser 2016). These costs have become mercilessly visible during the pandemic. The structural neglect of care work has been criticized from several quarters, for instance in *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (Verso 2020), which was written by The Care Collective, formed in 2017, in direct response to the governments' catastrophic handling of the Covid-19 outbreak in the UK and the US in the face of an already overloaded and undermanned hospital service system.

readers described in various terms the therapeutic value of the narrative. Nina, a retired midwife who found herself reading Ravn together with Danish authors Tove Ditlevsen and Dy Plambeck, whose works also deal with family life, motherhood, and mental health, endorsed the power of exposing the more complex aspects of parenthood: 'I know from a professional point of view that parenthood is not always rosy from the moment the child arrives, and I just think it is good that this is expressed in language.' Vanja, not yet a parent, read Ravn in this mood of precipitous caution about becoming a parent. Planning to make her partner read *My Work* before ever considering having children, she asked him to 'imagine that I will react exactly like her, or worse, and that he has to be able to cope with that, and if he cannot, he has to drop it.' Reading *My Work* in this setting made her think, not only of the ambivalent ways she might respond to motherhood, but about the struggles of her friends with young children: 'All my friends have children by now, and I really feel that in a way I understand their reality much more clearly. It really, really touched me.'

Vanja also experienced relief and a new taste for reading when she turned to *My Work*, where the highly contemporary subject matter marked a release from her sense that she should be using lockdown to read canonical and older works:

I've always thought that I had to be up to date with the heaviest literary history before I could allow myself to start reading contemporary stuff. This was a way to spare yourself from reading all those heavy classics with which you don't necessarily connect and just jump directly into what really is relevant to you. It's a completely new experience to be part of the reading experience in real time. While I sit reading *My Work* by Olga Ravn, it runs amok on social media, and then you listen to a podcast that deals with it. It's a cool way to dive deeper into a work, as opposed to if it had been of no current interest.

Many Danish readers clearly felt hailed by these lively conversations on social media and online platforms that were spawned by the release of *My Work*, some of which Ravn herself participated in. When we interviewed the university student Hanna, she still hadn't started reading *My Work*, though she wanted to, but Ravn's account of locked down life was inspiring her own: together with her friends, for instance, she experimented with using the vegetable dyes Ravn publicized on social media:

I've kept up a lot with... I mean, Olga Ravn, it's kind of been a corona activity to talk about Olga Ravn. Even my... not just people studying literary stuff. It is as if we've all collectively been extra interested in Olga Ravn right now. And I've also tried natural

dying like all the others, so [...]. Everybody follows her on Instagram. And then it's just completely normal, I sense, in my circle, when you meet and drink coffee, then you're like, 'hey, did you notice Olga Ravn, she just talked about this'

This immediate relation of Ravn to the lives of readers seemed, as Vanja also suggests, to boost *My Work's* local popularity. Adam, reading Knausgård as a male author infinitely attentive to the minute of daily life while he himself struggled to care for two preschoolers, also welcomed such immediate loops of self-reference. Although Adam found himself so stressed at the point when society first locked down that he had to drop reading, he ended up reading many books in 2020. He spoke explicitly of appreciating the way Knausgård writes in long and contemplative form about small situations very similar to the one in which he found himself reading his volumes of *My Struggle*.

While Knausgård's novels have been international hits, and his struggles as a parent and author read as universal in their appeal, it's worth noting here that Adam read them in their native Scandinavian setting. In Denmark, as we have already suggested, the eleven months of paid parental leave mean that the experience of being at home with small children is built into most people's experience of raising a family. Although it is still mothers who take most of this leave, fathers take, on average, a bit more than a month of that paid leave – and this is likely to increase in the years to come: eleven weeks of the *barsel* period have now been earmarked by Danish law as being for the second parent.¹² When *barsel* ends, the ten-month-old baby generally starts state-run and subsidized daycare and both parents resume work – but public workplaces in Denmark offer both parents six weeks of paid vacation annually plus two paid *omsorgsdage* (which literally translates 'care days') per child per year. Arguably, this means that the twofold self-realization that Kristeva ascribes to the mother is built into the model of the Danish system, with people encouraged to devote time to parenting in the same years that they establish themselves professionally.

The importance of parental leave to even the very committed professional or artist's life, means that Danes tend to be better practiced in the act of combining work, parenting, and an activity like reading than most European citizens. For instance, one of many activities offered by the state to new parents in Denmark is *barsel* reading groups. These groups are free services and typically organized by local public churches, libraries or reading associations such as 'Læseforeningen' in collaboration with so-called *barsel* houses. Sometimes, writers are invited into a conversation with the group. Some groups

¹² Marie Hohnen, 'Far tager lidt mere barsel - men udviklingen går langsomt', *Danmarks Statistik* 4 May 2020, <https://www.dst.dk/da/Statistik/nyheder-analyser-publ/bagtal/2020/2020-05-04-far-tager-lidt-mere-barsel>.

concentrate specifically on works about parenting and are therapeutically oriented, e.g. in prevention of postpartum depression. But overall, the concept is simply that a group of parents meet up regularly to discuss all kinds of works, from Kafka to contemporary Danish literature, while their infants lie, crawl, sleep, breastfeed etc. around them. ‘I’d like to create a room where it’s safe to bring your baby (and everything that comes with a baby!)’, a moderator of one of these groups writes, ‘and at the same time build a community around something that’s not related to mashed vegetables and diaper brands.’¹³ Under lockdown, online *barsel* reading groups were offered tailor-made for the pandemic situation of recent parents.

This institutional structure seems to acknowledge what most authors writing from within that space of parental leave suggest, which is that reading and the time it takes is a crucial and desirable supplement to the story they tell. Perhaps surprisingly, it is also that sustained reading that becomes harder to explain in its compatibility with childcare than the writing that appears self-evidently before us. In *A Life’s Work*, Cusk complains about the lack of literary material on pregnancy and mothering but also refers quietly to a number of literary works that she has read in her search for advice and assistance. *The Argonauts*, where Nelson refers often to her limited time for writing, displays the ample background reading she has done for this text in notes to other authors, presented in the margins of each page. *To Write As if Already Dead* makes reading – the desperate attempt to carve out even the shortest moments to read Guibert amid care work, pregnancy malaise, and quarantine fatigue – the very center of Zambreno’s narrative. Her book ends in a dreamlike setting where she is brought food and clean laundry: time seems to be restored to the project with its completion.

Ravn ups the stakes of this fantasy of having time for reading even further by making the time her narrator has found for reading the structural precondition of her novel. The real premise of *My Work* as a bunch of disordered papers that have been reordered is that the narrator has sat down with the fictional character Anna’s papers, worked through them, and given them the narrative direction that Anna’s original immersion in motherhood lacked. *My Work* shares with Doris Lessing’s feminist classic, *The Golden Notebook*, the idea that while the busy parent may be able to write in partitioned and scrambled ways, the work of her ordering through those notes must come afterwards, through contemplative time given back to the story as reading. In *My Work*, the scraps Anna wrote in the first months of parenting are processed by the narrator, alongside the many readings of other mothers’ writings on motherhood that Ravn references, in

¹³ Anna Chris Thompson, ‘Barselslæsegruppe’, *Annas blog*, <https://annasbogblog.wordpress.com/barselslaesegruppe/>. Original text: ‘Jeg vil gerne skabe et rum, hvor man trygt kan tage sin baby med (og alt hvad en baby medfører!) og samtidig skabe et fællesskab omkring noget, der ikke relaterer sig til grøntsagsmos eller blemærker.’

a reading space that forms the limits of her parenting narrative. The novel feels lifted from the crowded kitchen table in the first sleep deprived months of parenthood by the time this reading takes.

In this context, reading appears to have its own economy, one that is never entirely within the circular economy of domestic life, the ‘stuck’ time of care. We might think here of the provocative claim Zadie Smith makes in *Intimations*, which is that when it comes to the parent working from home, filling her time: ‘there is no great difference between novels and banana bread. They are just both something to do’ (24). If we follow this line of thought, there is no real reason to distinguish between the activity of writing and the more repetitive activities associated with childcare. Nappy changing, cleaning, rocking a child to sleep, sweeping a driveway, helping a child cut out shapes from colored paper – all these would function as things to do in time. And all might be seen more constructively as offsetting the manically forward-driven activity of those living under late capitalism, whereby work and travel and consumption tend to happen under pressure, and at a speed that makes them difficult to compute. Yet the spirit in which time-starved parents keep doing something, which can include writing, is not necessarily productive of the time of care that Baraitser advocates. Smith’s essay becomes a case in point for the idea that hyperactivity and stuckness might become two sides of the same coin, with both indicating a general feeling of the carer having a deficit rather than a surplus of time.

In this setting, it is reading, not writing, that breaks the spell of the overfull day. In 2020, reading took place and amidst family life when parents leaned against the wall of the children’s room with the eyes fixed on the phone’s e-book, when they sat down on the sly in the garden and blocked out the noise of squealing children on the trampoline, and when they stole reading hours for themselves late at night between childcare, homeschooling, work, and sleep. It also took place as parents listened to audiobooks, whose flexibility was highly valued by many of our readers under lockdown. Especially in crowded homes, Danish readers reported, putting on the headphones to listen to a narrated novel became a way to establish a momentary room of one’s own that didn’t disturb the other family members by taking up actual space. Ella, a mother very pressed for time as someone self-employed with a booming business under lockdown, for instance, responded to the crowded setting by listening to audiobooks at double speed. ‘The books were really a sheet anchor,’ she reflects. ‘It’s difficult. You can’t say “I had never gotten through without.” You can’t say so, but I don’t think I would have. Because they were like a home away from home, if you know what I mean?’ Maja, the mother of three schoolboys, found herself clinging to audiobooks as a mental refuge when stuck at home and overloaded with care work tasks:

But of course, I've read more, and I've prioritized it. And I've thought, like [...] 'Hey, I deserve this piece of chocolate.' 'Hey, I really do deserve an hour of audiobook now.' That's how I feel. I'm allowed to do that. [...] I have to say that some of those weeks in the spring when I had to deal with these three unruly boys at home, and where I tried to homeschool them. And the youngest he had to go to the mini-SFO [Danish preschool]. Oh, I could get tired of it. So, when there was a lunch break, I said: 'Do what you want. I don't care. I listen to audiobooks. Tell me if the house is on fire.' I really think it's been a treat for me.

The messy co-existence of family life, professional work, domestic activity, and these moments of reading characterized many parents' experience of quarantine, indicating practices of dividing up time so that a small quota of it is reserved for oneself.

For almost all the readers we spoke to, reading novels supplemented in some way the routines of care they were caught up in. As our interviewees describe it, even reading about cycles of care introduced an occasion for pause. Dyveke, for instance, argues that what she valued most in Knausgård was, first and foremost, a recognition of these kinds of mental and temporal partitioning that comes with domestic duty:

He works a lot with a span between something extremely intimate and ordinary, that is to say, he describes how he takes the kids to the shower, and then takes them to kindergarten and everything, which is completely like my life. [...] There is the everyday life and then an extremely generous horizon and all this theory [...]. To be allowed to engage with something that speaks wildly to the brain, but also talks about how to make it work when you are [...] in a small apartment. [...] That doubleness in wanting the intimate and being completely wrapped up in your children [...] while at the same time being a bit of a mental escapist. You can decide to get up early in the morning just to read or try to go to bed early because you just have to get through 200 pages, or whatever. I've recognized myself in that. And it fits this time perfectly, where ambitions can't really be outward facing.

Knausgård allowed Dyveke to recognize in even the most packed day the potential for a contemplative margin. This may seem somewhat ironic, given that the narrator of *My Struggle* seems to speak against this potentiality. Yet the novel's evidence for the constructive separation of repetitive care work from stimulating mental work lies in its reading, not its writing. Knausgård's 'struggle' and its solution may be ubiquitous to modern life, but Dyveke has felt it more intensely during the pandemic.

Adam, who sees reading as a 'meditative' endeavor, also pinpoints the way the consumption of novels drew him away from the routines of pandemic life. His emphasis

falls on the longer-term conversation he feels himself to be in when reading Knausgård, a sustained form of engagement that offsets the daily cycles of work on the home front:

I can use it [Knausgård] to take up some of those perspectives and reflections and look at my own everyday life with children. And that, I think, is enriching. [...] I actually think that, in a life situation characterized by corona and an everyday life with work and young children, literature can somehow maintain a longer, deeper conversation or reflection. Because honestly, I don't have that with my friends at the moment. This is partly because of corona, but also partly because of a busy everyday life. I don't even have that with my wife because there's food to be made, clothes and diapers to be changed and so on. [...] Whereas what a heavy book is able to do, really, is perhaps to keep focus and to maintain the deeper conversation over time.

Adam found that the broad scope and long-term perspective he gained through reading novels became more important to him during the pandemic where his daily routine has been so relentless. It may be true, as Zadie Smith claims, that writing as an activity would count here alongside baking and childcare as something to fill time; but in Adam's account, reading seems vitally different: it is an activity that returns the gift of temporal perspective.

3. The linearity of narrative

We began by talking about novels of confinement as performances of circular or 'stuck' time, affirmations of that form of temporality and its political potential to offset the time of progress, production, and forward movement. But as objects for reading, even novels like *My Work* are invested diegetically in the passing of time, and in the parent or carer's need for narrative progress. Cusk and Ravn seek what Adam calls 'the deeper conversation over time,' a sense of contemplative endeavor that would offset the circular experience of parental care represented in *A Life's Work* and *My Work*. These novels function as reports on their authors *reading* the literary history of motherhood. But in neither case does the activity of reading about confinement appear quite in Smith's terms as 'something to do.' Rather, it involves sense-making, a way of putting narrative pieces together, of making sequences, of curating relations. Writers are also readers of their own drafts, involved in a process of revising and shaping their textual material for which a commitment to stuckness or circularity is not an obvious model. Ravn, Knausgård, Cusk, Nelson, Offill and Zambreno all reflect on their own reports of being stuck in time but they also all restructure that experience as narrative. In other

words, to write and read about getting stuck in time does not necessarily involve staying stuck.

The readers we spoke to who felt that autofictions describing domestic confinement might still appeal as linear narratives are not, in other words, necessarily misreading this material; or reinserting telos or linearity where it is unwanted. Many accounts of the kinds of care work the pandemic involved also function, in the end, as narrative. One example here is Rachel Clarke's *Breathtaking*, a non-fiction account of Clarke's work on the frontlines of an NHS hospital in 2020. While this work is pitched more as embedded journalism than autofiction, it resembles in some ways the novels mentioned above in its candor about its own scene of composition. Clarke is a doctor working long hours during the pandemic as a palliative care ward. Her own chances to write are often limited, she tells us, to moments late at night when her family is sleeping: these are the hours in which she writes what we are now reading. This sense of the text being written breathlessly, live streamed from a life in which there is so much carework to be done, and no opportunity to stop and reflect on it, is at odds, however, with the way the text is organized as a story: we follow the fate of Boris Johnson as prime minister; we follow the illness and recovery of one man who has unluckily fallen ill and spent many months in intensive care. It is with his recovery that *Breathtaking* ends. Clarke's market-savvy approach raises the question of whether making a narrative out of a life of repetitive practice does violence to the forms of feminist and queer time that many have advocated. Does the appealing and forward-moving narrative arc of *Breathtaking* belie or simply complicate Clarke's claim to be stuck in the time of the trenches?

If we go back to *My Work*, we might ask similar questions of a text that seems wedded to the representation of non-progressive time as well as invested in that through its own forward movement. Here the patchwork and cyclic composition of the novel is due in part to the inclusion of poetry alongside prose. Ravn is an esteemed poet and translator of poetry in Denmark, where her debut as a writer of prose has come relatively late in her career, and *My Work* uses poetry to deliver up crystallized glimpses of the confined condition; perceptive and self-reflective extracts that allow us to revisit the storyline from a new angle. The novel's blow-by-blow account of an exhausting and traumatic birth is followed, for instance, by a poem capturing a moment when the new mother lies in her hospital bed with a view to a patio through the window:

the patio
 at the hospital
 with its green and brown squares
 a playing child in the sun out there

in white in ecstasy she
 turns somersaults
 four shapes in coats
 sit smoking in the chairs
 half hidden behind a hedge

[...]

the patio in the window
 like a painting
 I want to go into it

is there a child

who is it that has birthed (33-4)¹⁴

The poem swivels towards Ravn's own childhood even as it imagines the life to come of the newborn infant: its lines allow past and future orientations to coexist. The fact that the poem points in these different directions does not, however, exclude it from being read as a more conventional life-narrative involving growth and development.

The same might be argued of Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*, in which the arrival of the child seems to give the text narrative form. Offill's novel begins with short, poetic passages; flashes of memory organized in a long chain of pleasurable free association. But these passages become less related by pure metonymy and more bound together by sequence as *The Dept. of Speculation* unfolds. Even though the arrangement of the words on the page remains that of small passages scattered randomly, the novel builds up as a sequence of distinct, chronological events: a meeting with partner and father-to-be, pregnancy, life with a small child, and a partner's infidelity carry us towards that point of family reunion. Though Offill writes about endless walks in the street with a crying baby and the challenges of being stuck with a toddler in a Brooklyn apartment, the novel itself is not endless or stuck; it has a beginning and an ending, and it moves forwards in time.

Ravn's novel progresses in similar ways. The opening scene of *My Work*, having "First beginning" as its headline, is easily enough taken as *the* beginning. This allows

¹⁴ 'atriumgården / på hospitalet / med sine grønne og brune felter / et legende barn i solen derude / i hvidt i ekstase hun / slår vejrmøller / fire skikkelser i kitler / sidder og ryger i stolene / halvt skjult bag en hæk // [...] atriumgården i vinduet / som et maleri / jeg vil ind i det // er der et barn // hvem er det der har født'

for the fact that things change over the course of the narrative, from one beginning to the next. For instance, the conflict initially staged between being a mother and being a writer is later refuted: ‘This old, obdurate idea that the child destroys the book and vice versa. I have to get away from this’ (357).¹⁵ The fact that Anna gradually works her way past this idea and the anxiety it entails makes the birth of her second child feel like a fresh promise. When Dyveke described her experience of reading the novel, she sensed this progression, noting her own change in response: ‘During reading I at some point thought: “No, no, no, she kills the baby, she kills the baby,” and she didn’t.’ On the last pages, with Anna’s ‘papers, neatly arranged and read through’ in her bag, the narrator looks back on the experience of becoming a mother and addresses her past self: ‘Rather than form, you were time’ (419).¹⁶

The novel is only able to give voice to this experience because of the distance it has covered. It has been three years since the birth of Anna’s first child, and it is from this point in time that the narrator speaks to Anna, the ‘you,’ about her earlier phase of confinement. *My Work* is no simple life writing in this sense. The mother’s fictional name, Anna, is not Ravn’s. Her relation to the narrator is difficult to pin down; it is vague and shifting. Sometimes they seem interchangeable, but they are not the same. This non-coincidence of narrator, character, and writer is central to the novel’s processing of what it means to care for an infant. The splitting of the experience into two versions that look alike but do not overlap motivates the novel’s movement and makes room in a crowded life for self-reflection. *My Work* does not transmit the experience of caring for an infant *in medias res* but conveys from a hard-won point of reflection the long hard slog of making sense of that experience.

The connections between the experience of time in households under lockdown, and Baraitser’s idea of stuckness are striking. But when people use novels to process this kind of experience, they are also processing time. Our interviews taught us that when reading is used as a coping strategy in a confined setting, linearity remains important. In the accounts we heard, it is reading that allows parents to emerge from the space of domestic time and to breathe the air of reflection. When Baraitser ties stuck time and care work together, she suggests a time for caring that is circular, repetitious, and devotional; opposed in this dyad to linearity and progression. The texts we’ve discussed here support this sense that there might be something circular or ‘stuck’ about texts invested in the representation of care. Reading, however, complicates the question of time and care and how they are related. When readers in 2020 thought about their own

¹⁵ ‘Denne gamle, forstokkede idé om, at barnet udsletter bogen og omvendt. Jeg skal væk herfra.’

¹⁶ ‘papirerne, indordnede og gennemlæst’; ‘Frem for en form, var du nærmere tid’.

confined situation, and made sense of it through novel reading, their practice entailed an interest in fictions that represented the new limits of their lives. In this act of turning to books, readers retained, however, a sense of their reading as a way of making progress; of moving through time even as so much about their days felt circular.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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