"All my characters die": Bibliotrauma in memories of literature
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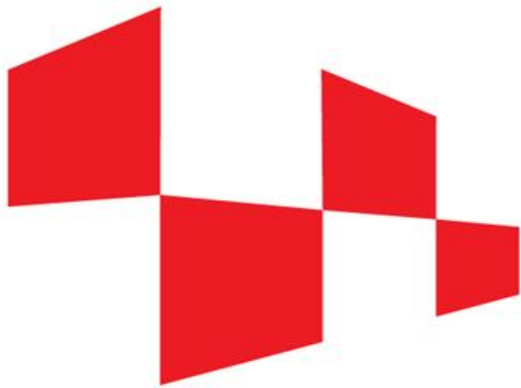
Presentation data
(144h of audio recordings):

Participants: 260 adult Croatians
- female: 177 (68%)
- male: 83 (32%)
- age: youngest 18, oldest 87 (average: 40)
- educational level: 6 (2%) elementary school; 66 (25%) high school; 178 (69%) college or university diploma; 10 (4%) PhD
- literary titles read per year 27 on average (median: 15)

Semi-structured interview:
A) – Preparation:
Please recall at least three, and at most five, works of literature that you have read in their entirety at least once in any period of your life...
B) – Questions on textual meaning and/or content (work):
...
4) Did the work evoke any memorable feeling or emotion for you?
C) – Questions on text and paratext (text):
…
D) – Questions on reading circumstances (book):
…
E) – Conclusion:
...
14) Do you remember ever feeling bad while reading the books you discussed (or some others)?

Emotions in general:
Recollections of literary works: 944 (3.6 on average)
Literary texts discussed: 826 (3.2 on average)
Literary authors discussed: 612 (2.4 avg on average)

- only about 80 recollections contained no meaningful response to Q4 (about „memorable feeling or emotion")
- conversely, 92% (864 out of 944) of recollections elicited some general emotional memory in response to Q4
- only two readers in the 260 participant sample recalled no emotional memories at all

Negative emotions:
Anger, Disgust, Sadness, Fear (Plutchik), as well as others reported by the participants

Plutchik's circumplex model
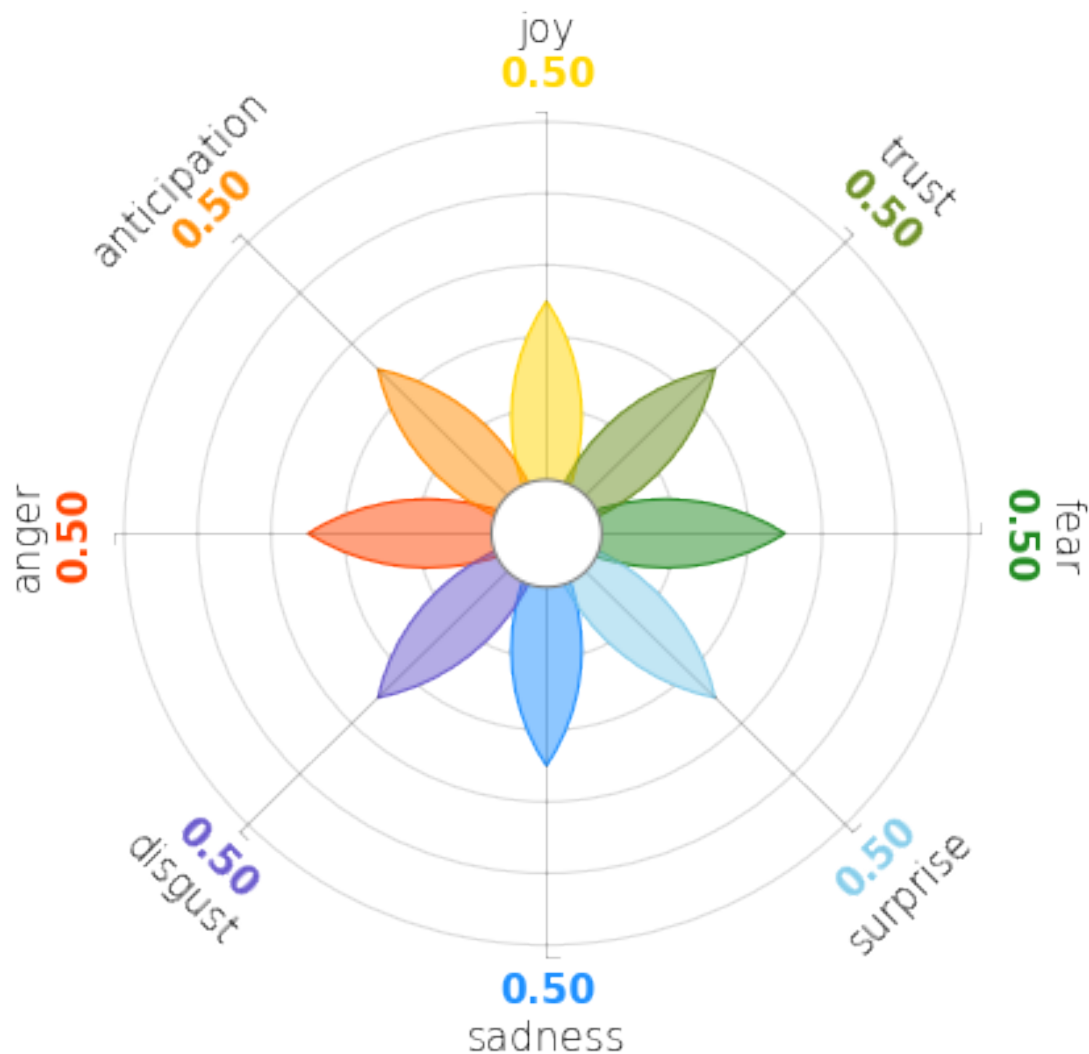
*Images created with *PyPlutchik*; Semeraro A, Vilella S, Ruffo G (2021)

- 104 participants (40%) mentioned at least one of the emotions below without being asked specifically about negative emotions (Q4)
- 167 participants (64%) mentioned at least one of the emotions below while being asked specifically about negative emotions (Q14)
- a total of 200 participants (77%) mentioned at least one of the emotions below while discussing their memories of 282 texts (140 female (70%) and 60 male (30%))

Negative emotion	Question 4	Question 14	Total
Annoyance	2	6	8
Anger	39	19	**58**
Rage	9	3	12
Apprehension	22	5	27
Fear	27	37	**64**
Terror	11	6	17
Pensiveness	4	2	6
Sadness	102	77	**179**
Grief	7	1	8
Boredom	2	3	5
Disgust	15	10	**25**
Loathing	6	2	8

Negative emotions from the study in Plutchik's circumplex model
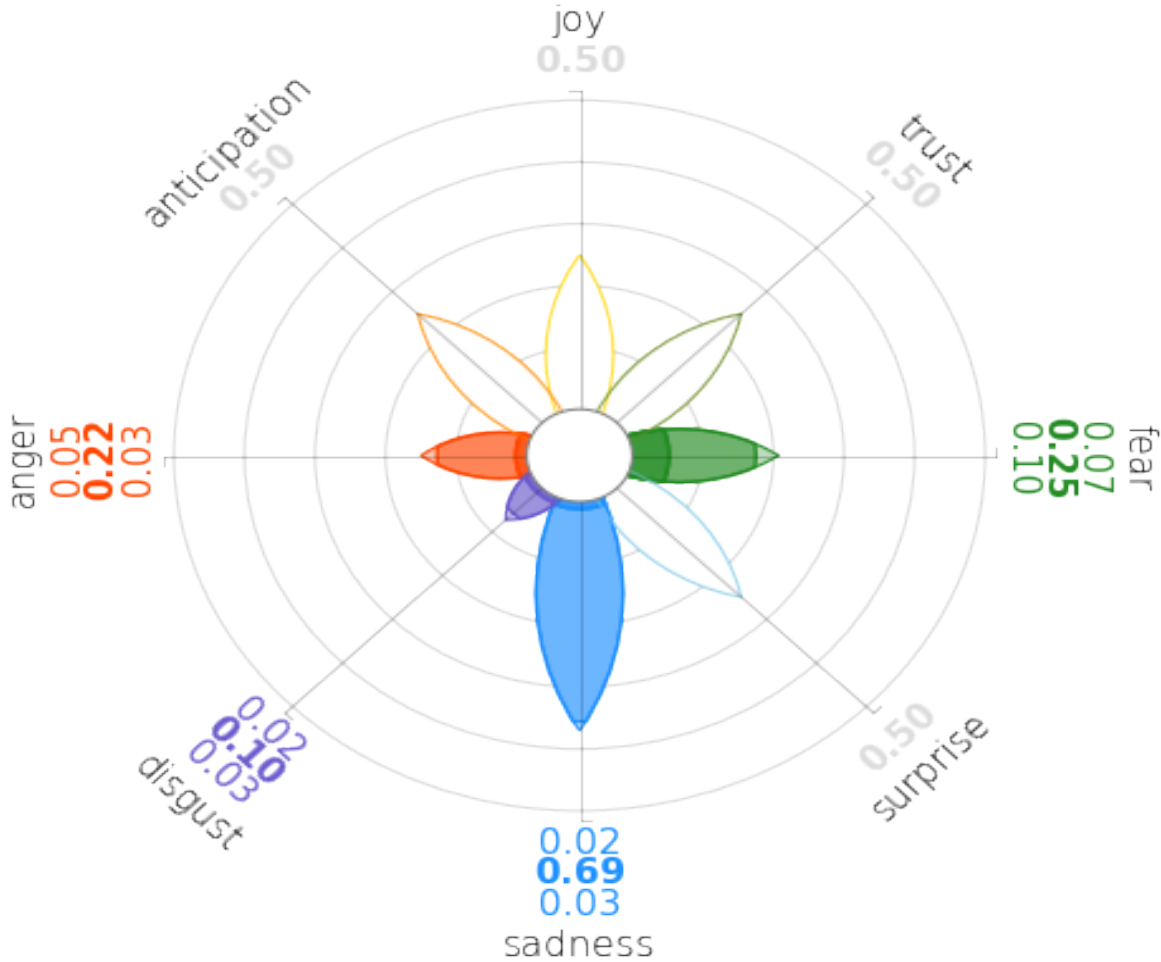
- the texts which were remembered most often in connection to negative emotions were also the ones remembered most often in general, as illustrated by the top four (translated from Croatian):

Anna Karenina   **Negative recollections: 10 [1] General recollections: 14 [2]**
Note: two readers' memories excluded because of overlap
R68 F, 24 'pain, sadness, self-recognition, gloominess'
R102 F, 30 'annoying tragedy at the end; disagreeable denouement which was too tragic and should have ended differently'
R122 F, 69 'fear of the complications caused by infidelity; understanding and cautiousness about Anna's situation'
<u>R194 F, 20</u> <u>'sadness and frustration caused by the events; did not make the reading experience negative, it was just the opposite'</u>
R200 F, 27 'sadness after she died'
R203 F, 49 'joy, calm; later frustration, unease, sadness'
<u>R214 F, 62</u> <u>'frustrated by the sad ending so I took part in a short story contest in which I rewrote it as a happy end'</u>
R252 M, 28 'anxiety, sadness'

Crime and Punishment   **Negative recollections: 8 [2] General recollections: 27 [1]**

R18 F, 29 'off-putting'
R21 M, 33 'nausea and disgust caused by the living conditions of the protagonist'
<u>R65 F, 48</u> <u>'a plethora of emotions, but no warm ones: anger, rage, sadness; understanding for the protagonist and his mad act'</u>
R130 F, 26 'disturbingly similar to the mental state of a person I know'
R152 F, 30 'all the books under discussion provoke melancholy and they deal with being unable to communicate and find a way out of a problematic situation'
R203 F, 49 'despair, fear, redemption'
R241 F, 20 'melancholy, anxiety'
<u>R252 M, 28</u> <u>'nervous, eerie, afraid, anxious; the city bears down on him'</u>

The Lord of the Rings   **Negative recollections: 8 [2] General recollections: 9 [5]**
Note: two readers' memories excluded because of overlap
R18 F, 29 'fear'
<u>R57 F, 31</u> <u>'it's alright to feel sad while reading'</u>
R64 F, 28 'I felt either sad or bored, the latter while doing required reading'
R98 F, 26 'generally felt good, mixed with awe, wonder, sometimes sadness'
R149 F, 36 'sometimes I got mad, sometimes I got sad'
<u>R171 F, 30</u> <u>'frustrated because it was difficult to keep track of the narrative and the lexicon'</u>

My Brilliant Friend   **Negative recollections: 7 [3] General recollections: 14 [2]**
Note: one reader's memory excluded because of overlap
<u>R10 F, 31</u> <u>'hapiness, sadness, exhilaration because of the beauty, questioning my own relationships and friendships'</u>
R22 F, 37 'melancholy, pensiveness, sadness'
R29 F, 33 'a difficult book, but that experience is not negative'
R124 F, 38 'varied: a feeling of injustice, compassion, sadness'
R160 F, 29 'shocking episodes and a toxic pattern of friendship'
<u>R182 F, 36</u> <u>'nostalgic for Naples, angry because of gender inequality'</u>

- Thomas Beebee's broader definition of bibliotrauma involves the trifecta of:
a) inducement of psychic trauma through literature;
b) the incitement/amplification of unexamined negative emotions by literary texts;
c) damage to social and political fabric wrought by a literary work.

- Rita Felski's concept of "attachment" (*Hooked*, 2020) focuses on extra-textual ways in which readers attach themselves to books (both as an artifact and as their idea of a text)

Other negative emotions:

Heading	Description	Count
1	'unpleasant' (disturbing, off-putting, frustrating)	**89**
2	'critical' (towards the text and/or author)	1
3	'despairing' (gloominess)	7
6	'longing' (melancholy, nostalgia)	**27**
7	'overwhelmed' (text causes cognitive and/or affective overload)	6
8	'shocked'	13
9	'nauseous' (malaise)	11

Other positive emotions:

Heading	Description	Count
4	'pity' (including self-pity)	2
5	'empathy' (compassion)	**20**
0	'admiration'	2
0	'anticipation'	1
0	'serenity'	1
0	'joy'	13

Conclusions:

I) Non-professional readers hold diverse opinions on what constitutes negative emotions, as well as what their connection to literature should be, for instance:

A – avoiding:

'books are not meant for that' (R211);

'I don't remember many negative emotions in these books, or otherwise they wouldn't be my favorite books' (R240);

'I usually don't read negative books, instead I choose self-help and educational books' (R231);

B – balancing:

'I don't read it when I'm in a bad mood because I know it will sour my mood even further' (R51);

'I feel them, but that is all right; I always know what the narrative is going to be like before I start reading, so I don't read disturbing books if I don't feel ready and stable enough' (R195);

'I don't separate books from reality, the characters are like real people so they cause real emotions; I don't seek sad books, but I don't run away from them, either' (R213);

C – seeking:

'I regularly feel negative emotions, and that is the reason why I read, because I want the book to cause it' (R246);

'negative feelings are a sign that the book is good because it leads to catharsis' (R151);

'we are all focused on the nice things, and we don't want and don't know how to deal with problems, so that's why we should read such difficult books, as well' (R247)

II) Negative emotions do appear during literary reading and are well remembered later. Their incidence is somewhere between 40% and 65% of all emotional memories of literary texts, or roughly half of all those deemed important by the readeers. The most common ones recognized by the readers correspond well to the primary emotions identified by Plutchik (underlined), headed by sadness, and followed by a general sense of unpleasantness, fear, anger, longing, disgust, shock, malaise, and so on.

III) Negative emotions about literary texts are remembered as a complex mixture of emotions which are usually embraced by the readers. They seem to coalesce as long-term episodic memories which sometimes exhibit specific types of attachment, and often consist of a bibliotraumatic "core" (sometimes overlaid with a eudaimonic "outer layer"). All this in turn leads to the conclusion that negative emotions determine a significant part of the readers' general experience of literature.