



Tattoos Tell Stories: Children's Literature Tattoos as a Form of Life Narrative

Marjolein Breems

Tilburg University

Abstract

Tattoos and children's literature seem to have little in common, but they come together in the form of children's literature tattoos, which I argue in this article to be a new form of life narrative. A lot of literary tattoos are inspired by children's literature such as the *Harry Potter*-series and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Despite being inspired by a literary work, the tattoos function as personal memoirs of childhood as well as a reflection of the tattooees' hopes for the future and who they want to become. I empirically study these children's literature tattoos as life narratives by combining three data sets: blogs with personal stories related to literary tattoos, an online questionnaire about the meaning of children's literature tattoos for tattooees themselves, and semi-structured interviews. Based on my research, I argue that children's literature tattoos tell personal stories about the tattooees and their lives and can thus be considered a form of life narrative. Children's literature tattoos narrate what someone has been through, what someone likes, but most of all the things that shape the person and that they hope will continue to shape them in the future.

Keywords: life narrative, constructing identity, children's literature, tattoos

Samenvatting

Tatoeages en jeugdliteratuur lijken weinig gemeen te hebben, maar ze komen samen in de vorm van jeugdliteraire tatoeages, waarvan ik in dit artikel betoog dat ze een

nieuwe vorm van 'life narrative' zijn. Veel van deze literaire tatoeages zijn geïnspireerd door jeugdliteratuur zoals de *Harry Potter*-serie en *De avonturen van Alice in Wonderland*. Ondanks dat deze tatoeages geïnspireerd zijn door literaire werken, fungeren ze als persoonlijke herinneringen aan de jeugd en als een weerspiegeling van de gewenste toekomst van de getatoeëerden en van wie ze willen worden. Ik bestudeer jeugdliteraire tatoeages als 'life narrative' op empirische wijze, door drie datasets te combineren: blogs over persoonlijke verhalen achter de literaire tatoeages, een online vragenlijst over de betekenis van jeugdliteraire tatoeages voor getatoeëerden zelf, en semigestructureerd interviews. Op basis daarvan betoog ik dat jeugdliteraire tatoeages persoonlijke verhalen vertellen over de getatoeëerden en hun levens en dus als een vorm van 'life narrative' kunnen worden beschouwd. Jeugdliteraire tatoeages vertellen wat iemand heeft meegemaakt, wat iemand leuk vindt, maar bovenal de dingen die de persoon vormen en waarvan ze hopen dat die hen in de toekomst zullen blijven vormen.

Trefwoorden: life narrative, identiteitsvorming, jeugdliteratuur, tatoeages

Introduction

In this article, I argue that children's literature and tattoos come together in a new form of life narrative: children's literature tattoos. While people value children's books as an important medium to make children familiar with reading and the world they live in, tattoos had a poor reputation. However, in the past decades, tattoos have become more accepted and more popular. Several scholars describe how their social status has improved over the years: Margo DeMello (2014) speaks of a renaissance of tattooing and Mary Kosut (2013) of an artification of tattoos. Despite a different focus, both authors agree that over the past decades, tattoos have become more appreciated and sophisticated cultural expressions with both a literal and symbolic meaning. Scholars such as Robert Arp (2012) and Karin Beeler (2006) argue that tattoos are a special type of body modification, because what tattooees can express with tattoos is their own identity and sense of self. I argue that tattooees cannot only express themselves through a children's literature tattoo, but they can narrate their life with it.

The artification of tattoos is present in many forms (Kosut, 2013), but in this article I focus on literary tattoos, which are tattoos that are inspired by literature. These tattoos can be quotes from books, illustrations from books, entire poems, or even

portraits of authors¹. Literary tattoos are found to be based on all types of books, from non-fiction books to poems, as well as on children's literature, with very popular examples on blogs such as www.contrariwise.org and tattoolit.tumblr.com being tattoos inspired by J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), or Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). What is interesting about these children's literature tattoos is that they are often based on books that the tattooees read years ago. When the readers reach the legal age to get a tattoo, which varies from 14 to 18 years old across the Western world², or an even later age, they decide to memorialise that book on their skin, which is a significant indication of the lasting impact these books have on the tattooees. According to Silke Wohlrab, Jutta Stahl and Peter Kappeler (2007), people generally value tattoos as a way to express themselves and to tell a story about oneself. In what follows, I study whether tattoos based on someone else's story can still function as a form of life writing. In this context, I have identified the following research question, which I will answer in this article:

To what extent can children's literature tattoos be considered life narratives of childhood?

After having framed this question theoretically by discussing life narratives, children's literature and tattoos, I will present the main results of my own empirical research on the aspects of life narratives in children's literature tattoos. The empirical research consists of a document analysis, a survey and in-depth interviews with tattooees who have a Western background³. Based on those results, I will argue that the tattoos tell personal stories about the tattooees and their (future) lives and can thus be considered a form of life narrative.

Telling stories on skin

Wohlrab, Stahl and Kappeler (2007) argue that tattoos are able to tell parts of someone's life stories. Children's literature tattoos, even though inspired by another story, tell stories about someone's life as well and can thus function as a form of life narrative. In talking about life narratives, I follow Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who see a life narrative as 'a general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer's life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital' (2010, 4). Their definition offers a broad spectrum of media in which life writing can occur, leaving room for the skin as a medium as well. Smith and Watson state that life writing⁴ in its broadest sense can be considered 'a set of self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on

identity in the present' (2010, 1). Taking the permanent nature of skin into account, this reflection on identity is not only relevant for the present, but will keep playing a role in the tattooees' futures as well.

In *Contesting Childhood* (2010), Kate Douglas signals a trend of increased interest for autobiographies⁵ on childhood specifically. She defines these texts as 'a piece of autobiographical writing concerned with the narration of childhood experiences' (Douglas 2010, 1). When someone is writing about their childhood when they are adult, the author interprets their childhood from an adult perspective. This causes a tension because two levels of the person that are present in the text: the autobiographical child, and the adult who is trying to structure the childhood. For Douglas, remembering one's childhood is a way of 'understanding the adult self within the context of childhood' (2010, 120). By writing about one's childhood, the child is brought to life again and is allowed to live longer.

By writing memories down and publishing them, they become more than individual stories, because the memories are shared with other people. Tattoos and the childhood autobiographies that Douglas (2010) describes differ in a lot of ways. The medium is for example rather different: the autobiographies that Douglas focuses on are written books, whereas tattoos are placed on skin, which is a living medium. In a book, there is room to go into detail about a story, but the amount of skin one has is limited and therefore the representation of the story needs to be small enough to fit onto the skin. However, tattoos inspired by children's literature do have an important element in common with Douglas' childhood autobiographies: they make memories from one's childhood visible for an audience who might not share those memories.

When writing about one's childhood, in a book or through a tattoo, adults are remembering their past. Douglas connects the ways people tell stories about their childhood to different modes of remembering and distinguishes between two modes of remembering the past: a nostalgic and a traumatic way (2010, 84). When remembering traumatically, authors are telling a story about their unhappy past and how they survived it. The other mode of remembering the past that Douglas (2010) mentions is the nostalgic one. In her discussion of nostalgic autobiographies Douglas refers to Svetlana Boym who defines nostalgia as 'an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world' (2001, xiv).

Anne Chassagnol argues that children's literature tattoos 'encapsulate a longing for childhood' (2018, 65), but as people will carry their tattoos with them for the rest of their lives, the tattoo might be more than a reference to the tattooee's past. Boym (2001)

notes that one cannot long only for the past, but for the future as well. She calls this 'prospective nostalgia' which 'is not nostalgia for the ideal past, but only for its many potentialities that have not been realized' (2001, 168). The tattoos have a presence in the future and will as a consequence play a role in that future which is yet to happen and which the tattooee cannot grasp yet. Where these tattoos differ from other forms of life narratives is in their inevitable presence in the future. With most forms of life narrative, the creator can to a certain extent distance themselves from the physical product of life writing. However, the tattooees cannot distance themselves from their skin, as it will most likely always be present in their life.

Paul John Eakin's (2001) argument about life writing also stresses that life writing plays a role in the future of the life writer. He focuses on autobiographies and argues that the autobiography is a way to discover and construct one's identity and thus can only show part of someone's life, because the autobiography helps in constructing the rest of that life. This applies to life narratives in a broader sense, such as tattoos, as well: they do not only chronicle an event in the past, they influence events in the future and narrate that future to a certain extent. Because tattoos are always present in the tattooee's life and because they are so prominently present in someone's life, they have an important role in constructing identity.

Sanna Lehtonen (2015) observes a specific kind of life writing that stresses the importance of the present and future as well: speculative life writing. In fan fiction stories, fans add themselves as a character to an often already existing literary work, in order to explore their identity, which is what Sanna Lehtonen calls speculative life writing. According to Lehtonen, speculative life writing is the process where writers 'construct their identities through writing that combines their real-life elements with fiction' (2015, 8). The same applies to tattoos inspired by children's literature: by getting a tattoo based on someone else's fictional story, people construct parts of their own real-life identity and tell a personal story that combines fiction with real-life elements.

These literary works that inspire the tattoos are someone else's story, but a story that made a lasting impact on the tattooee, which is why these stories themselves cannot be overlooked when studying children's literature tattoos. The reasons these stories make an impact on the tattooees can be explained by the three functions Rita Ghesquière (2009) argues children's literature can have. The first function is the psychological function, which offers the readers the opportunity to identify with the story and its characters, for example by letting the readers escape to another world or by giving them different perspectives on real-life problems. The second group of

functions are societal and allow readers to learn about choices and their consequences in a safe space, where they can experiment with personal roles and identity. Thirdly, children's books can impact readers because they have an intellectual function and for example stimulate readers to reflect upon philosophical questions. Children's books thus have the ability to provide children with knowledge and insights that they will take with them for a long time and want to commemorate for the rest of their lives, for example in the form of a tattoo.

In order to understand the fictional works that inspire the tattoos, it is also necessary to understand the special character of children's literature as opposed to literature for adults. In the case of literature for adults, the texts are both written and read by adults. In contrast, children's literature is characterised by an asymmetrical relationship between writer and reader. Children's books are in most cases written by an adult but read by a child. Adults are not only responsible for writing the book, but also for the production, distribution and reception of the books. According to Ghesquière (2009), the ones buying children's books are often not the ones reading them, and the ones reading the books are most of the time not the ones buying them, or at least not the ones involved in the production process of the books. This asymmetrical communication determines the character of the texts, because the writer tends to address two intended readers: the child and the adult. The former is the one who will be reading the book, whereas the latter is the one who will most likely buy the books and distribute them to children.

In *Poetics of Children's Literature* (1986), Zohar Shavit addresses this asymmetrical communication process in children's literature. In her view, children's literature is a system within the literary polysystem. Itamar Even-Zohar (1979) characterises the polysystem as a net of relations that function to give value to semiotic objects such as literature. This means that children's literature exists this way because of its relation to other literatures, such as literature for adults. The literary polysystem is dynamic because positions of systems can change over time and because sometimes literary texts can belong to two systems at the same time, for example when a book is produced in one system, for example that of children's literature, but is also being read in another, for example that of literature for adults. Shavit characterises these texts that move along the systems as having a 'diffuse status' (1986, 64). When tattooees read a children's book at a later (adult) age, when they are getting a tattoo inspired by the book, the book can thus be said to travel along the different systems in the polysystem.

Not only can texts move along the polysystem, readers can as well and Rachel Falconer (2008) signals the phenomenon of cross-reading as a way in which readers do so. Falconer (2008) distinguishes between different forms of cross-reading, but the one that is interesting for children's literary tattoos is the form of cross-reading where adults enjoy rereading children's literature that they read in their childhood, out of nostalgia. These adults have already read the book when they were younger, but want to experience the story again. Falconer (2008) argues that 'part of the pleasure for the adult rereader lies in reliving the experience one had as a child-reader. In cross-reading of this kind, the paratextual material (cover, title page, blurbs, illustrations) should all ideally emphasise the text's childliness rather than the reverse; and in this case, what "childliness" means is that the text should look as it did when the adult reader first encountered it as a child' (2008, 155). Thus, part of the joy in rereading when the reader is an adult is reading the book like one did as a child.

Rereading children's books does not only mean experiencing the story again, but also experiencing the reader's memories of being a child again. According to Falconer, not only the book is remembered, but 'this whole segment of lost time' (2008, 158) that is associated with the book. The books that serve as inspiration for literary tattoos thus offer new layers to the readers, which might result in new interpretations due to being older and having had more and different experiences in life. The reader could also in some way feel like a child again, because the book reminds them of more than just the story but also that entire segment of time in their childhood.

Now that I have discussed the specifics, status and functions of children's literature, I do the same for tattoos. While (children's) literary tattoos may be a fairly new phenomenon, tattoos in general have been around for thousands of years and are one of the oldest ways of modifying the body, where the skin is being exogenously pigmented. This can be a painful experience, because the ink is being brought into the skin often with the use of a sharp object such as a needle (Perper, 2017).

While tattoos have been studied in numerous contexts, I focus on tattoos as being a part of someone's identity and as telling a story about that identity. Arp (2012) argues that people with tattoos are conscious of the fact that they can use their bodies to communicate with others about their inner worlds (xvi). Beeler states that in popular culture, tattoos are often used to 'narrate and visualize the self' (2006, 22). According to Sarah Riley and Sharon Cahill (2005) tattoos are a means of playing with one's identity and Paul Sweetman even goes as far as arguing that acquiring a tattoo can be seen as a way of 'self-creation' (1999, 68), because 'becoming tattooed might be argued to commit the tattooee to a particular narrative' (69). Kyle Fruh and Emily Thomas

(2012) state that tattoos belong to a special kind of identity, which they call the narrative identity. They consider narrative identity as an ongoing process of crafting one's identity by understanding oneself in stories. Fruh and Thomas characterise that process as 'an uneasy balance in having a say in determining who we are and how events in our lives ultimately inform the person we become, [...] and the constraints on how we construct a narrative so that it is not sheer fantasy' (2012, 90). Slight differences aside, all these critics emphasise the connection between tattoos as part of someone's identity and as a way of telling stories about that identity and in some cases even as a way of creating one's identity.

David Kirkland (2009) takes the narrativity of tattoos a step further and argues that tattoos can be considered a new form of literacy. It is a form of literacy that is close to the body and he argues that tattoos 'illuminate the meaning-making necessary to write [...] life in a way not easily achievable using paper and pencil' (2009, 376). Chassagnol also stresses the need for tattoos to be read and even argues that 'the participation of the viewer as reader is essential' (2018, 68) when interpreting tattoos. Kirkland sees tattoos as symbols for 'both human stories and human struggles' (2009, 382) and states that tattoos are personal and may therefore function as journal entries of one's most important memories and as a way to cope with those memories. Kirkland compares the body to a narrative that can be read but considers it a different kind of telling a story, which requires a different way of thinking about human literacy and the ways in which humans are able to tell and share their stories.

In his study, Kirkland points out that tattoos can have a 'story behind the tattoo' (2009, 385). For tattoos inspired by children's literature that means that someone might see a tattoo of children's book tattooed on someone but might not know what said book means for the tattooee and why they have it tattooed. Someone who is informed on any background that contextualises the tattoo and a passer-by without that extra context will both have a different ability to participate with the tattoo, which results in the two having different narratives to read when encountering the tattoo.

Tattooees about their tattoos

I wanted to see if people who have children's literature tattoos on their own skin do experience them as life narratives themselves. I studied this by doing qualitative research in a mixed method form. This research focuses on what is traditionally known as the Western world and consisted of three steps, the first of which was a document analysis of two tattoo blogs, to be known tattooolit.tumblr.com and

www.contrariwise.org. Contrariwise is a blog that has been inactive since 22 March 2014 and Tattoolit is a Tumblr-based blog that has been inactive since 2 August 2016, but both still offer a large archive of literary tattoos (inspired by children’s literature)⁶. Tattoolit was curated by two American bloggers. The blogger behind Contrariwise has not made their location known, but all posts and submissions are in English⁷. Since these blogs contained tattoos based on literature in general, I selected only the tattoos based on children’s books, which resulted in 550 posts being analysed.

After that I did an online questionnaire with 34 mostly open questions about tattoos inspired by children’s literature to people who have a children’s literature tattoo and agreed to fill in my survey. I posted the request to fill in the survey on different social media (Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr), where it got shared by my friends and followers⁸. Moreover, the usage of tags attracted more people than just my followers, but it could not be determined how many more. In the end, 76 people who received the link to the survey, clicked on the link. I have only used the responses that were filled in entirely, leaving 22 people whose answers are discussed in this study.

Finally, I conducted two interviews with two tattooees, to be able to deepen and broaden the results of the document analysis and the questionnaire. I know one of the interviewees directly and the other through a mutual friend. Both interviewees are Dutch, one of them is a male of 27 years old and the other a female of 29 years old. I used a semi-structured interview, because there were certain topics and themes that I wanted to discuss during the interviews to confirm concepts and patterns that were found in the document analysis and in the survey results (Rabionet 2011, 564).

The analysis of 550 tattoos showed that the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), *Peter and Wendy* (1911), *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), *Looking for Alaska* (2005), *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006) and Shel Silverstein’s oeuvre were the most popular literary works that inspired tattoos. 315 of the 550 blogposts were accompanied by a comment on the tattoo rather than showing just a picture of the tattoo. These are thus small stories that tattooees themselves told about the tattoos to an (online) audience. This illustrates that the tattoos are not just tattoos, but that there is a story attached to them which requires some extra explanation. The following analysis functions to see what type of stories are being told with these children’s literature tattoos.

The comments can be categorised in five groups: Firstly, there are eight comments about the origin of the quote or illustration that inspired the tattoo or the changes that have been made to the source text or illustration. For example, one tattooee adapted an illustration from the *Inkheart* (2003-2007) trilogy by Cornelia Funke, because ‘it

seemed fitting' (The Word Made Flesh, 12 January 2013). Instead of the chapter numbers that are part of the original illustration, the tattooee got books tattooed to symbolise her love of books, which is why she considers the adaptation fitting for her personality. This is an example of how the tattoo holds a connection to the tattooee's personality and how the literary inspiration gets adapted to fit the tattooee's personality.

Secondly, there are nineteen comments about the tattoo itself, for example from people who express how much they love their tattoo or talk about the process of getting the tattoo. The following quote is representative of this category: 'This is my Saphira tattoo from the *Inheritance* series, it's not finished yet, all the colour still needs to be done.' (The Word Made Flesh, 12 November 2014). These kinds of comments focus on the visual characteristics of the tattoo itself rather than on the story it might tell.

The third category of comments contains 66 comments about the book itself or literature in general expressing the tattooees' passion for the tattooed book. An example comes from someone with a tattoo from the *Trickster* series by Tamora Pierce: 'I love the raven drawing in each of the books, I love the story so very much, and loved how the history and mythology of raven stretches all around the world. Ms. Pierce is one of my favourite authors and I'm so pleased to have a symbol of her work with me always' (The Word Made Flesh, 19 June 2014). This comment shows that the tattooee adores the book so much that she chose to have it on her body forever. These types of comments do not necessarily reflect an entire life narrative, but they do reflect the connection between the tattoo and the tattooee's identity and they reflect the tattooees' desire to carry the tattoo and what it symbolises with them into the future.

Next are 72 comments about the tattoo as a guideline that explain how a certain book or quote changed the tattooee's mind or confirmed their own beliefs. An example is a tattooee explaining that 'this reminds me so much of my childhood, and truly reflects my whole view on this time of my life right now' (Jen, 17 February 2013). This indicates that both the book and the tattoo mean more to the tattooee than just someone else's story, and are affecting the tattooee's life experiences that do not directly have anything to do with the book as well. As I stated earlier, and in line with Eakin's (2001) view on autobiographies, this influence on the tattooee's further life makes that the tattoo functions as more than just a memory and narrates a greater part of the tattooee's life.

Finally, there is a category of 150 comments that explain that the tattoo serves as a remembrance of all the memories the tattooees have of the book and of the role the

book played in their lives. These comments connect the tattoo to the tattooee's memories and mark important moments in their lives, as the following tattooee for example explains: 'My uncle bought me this book when I was two years old. Shortly thereafter, I proceeded to rip out all the pages and eat them. My mother then bought me another copy of the book and read it to me multiple times a night before bed for years. *The Monster Motel* is my favourite book and consists of illustrations of different monsters done in watercolour, with witty little poems that go along with the images' (The Word Made Flesh, 17 September 2011). This tattooee vividly remembers a memory around the book and feels the need to keep remembering it by having it tattooed. While such a comment does not show that a tattoo might tell an entire life story, it does show that the tattoo refers to more than only the book, but also to the tattooee's personal life and a certain period in their life that the tattooee deems important and wants to remember for the future

These results show that more than half of the people on these two blogs feel the need to tell something more about their tattoo rather than just showing the image⁹ to the world. They might be encouraged to do so because other contributors to the blog have done so as well, but it is still a voluntary act of telling (part of) the stories that accompany the tattoo and it shows that the tattoos do indeed represent personal stories for these tattooees that symbolise more than the literary work the tattoo is inspired by. The tattoos are present reminders of the books as well as the memories and guidelines that the tattooees connect to these books and now the tattoos. Not only are these memories and guidelines present for the tattooee, but since the tattoos are on the tattooees' skin and on the internet, (parts of) these stories are to a certain extent available for an audience as well.

In order to find out more about what stories the tattoos tell, I sent out an online questionnaire which I asked people with a tattoo inspired by children's literature to fill in. The respondents of the online questionnaire all identified as female and their ages varied from 20 years to 42 years old with an average of 26,5 years old. The most common (for nine of the respondents) occupation was teacher. Six respondents were students and other professions that were mentioned were sales woman, make-up artist, bar attendant, pharmacy technician, social worker and childcare worker. The cultural backgrounds that were mentioned by the respondents are American (thirteen times), Argentinean, Australian, Belgian, Canadian, Dutch (four times), English and Polish. The tattoos that the respondents have are based on the following books: the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) by J.K. Rowling (ten times), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll (4 times), *And to Think I Saw it on Mulberry Street*

(1937) by Dr. Seuss, Shel Silverstein's oeuvre, *The Giver* (1993) by Lois Lowry, the *Calvin and Hobbes* series (1987–1997) by Bill Watterson, *Matilda* (1988) by Roald Dahl, *Peter and Wendy* (1911) by J.M. Barrie, *Le Petit Prince* (1943) by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the story of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Mabel Lucie Atwell's oeuvre, and *Flowers for Algernon* (1959) by Daniel Keyes.

The first category of questions concerned the tattoo itself and the meaning it has for the tattooees. The respondents consider the tattoo to be a medium that tells something personal about them. Even those respondents who initially say that their tattoo does not tell a personal story per se, add that the tattoo does have personal elements to it, like the tattoo serving as a reminder of who they are and what was going on at the time of getting the tattoo. An example is the following tattooee, who explains that all her tattoos together make a map of her life and the things that are important to her: 'I feel that all of my tattoos are a map of my personal history. It's why I tell people that I will never regret any of my tattoos. Because at some point in my life, each of those things were important enough to me to have them put on my body permanently. And even if I don't like them now or in the future, it's a road map of my life. I can see where I was, what I liked, and how far I have come'. This comment not only shows that the tattoos on someone's body are connected to experiences from the tattooee's personal life, but also that because their lives change, the way the tattoos are regarded changes as well. Children's literature tattoos do the same as Smith and Watson say life narratives do, which is 'in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present' (2010, 4).

When asked about the motives to get a tattoo inspired by a children's book, respondents mention both personal motivations and aesthetic motivations: the tattooees want to express their love for the book, or for reading in general. For some, the book was their favourite book as a child, and it affected them greatly, has been a part of their life and even helped them escape their own life. Respondents were also asked why they wanted their tattoo to be based on a children's book. The answers are very diverse: for some it is simply because they love the book or because they are avid readers and collect children's books, while others note that the book has been important to them because it helped them grow up, it influenced one of their life decisions, the book reminds them of a loved one, or because they strongly identify with one of the book's characters. When asked what they wanted to express with their tattoos, respondents feel the tattoo is something very personal and that it functions, for example, as a reminder of good times, or of values that the tattooee deems important. One respondent explains that she wants to express her life story with her

tattoos: 'I want to express who I am and tell the story of me with them (the tattoos MB). Each one is like a badge of honour of good and bad times for me'. What all these answers have in common, is that the tattoo reflects not only the literary work, but also the way in which that work influenced the tattooees' personal lives. The story of the literary work impacted the tattooees' lives and it is that change in their outlook on life that the tattooees want to remember by tattooing a reference to the literary work on their skin.

The next category of questions regarded the relation between the tattoo and the tattooee's personal identity. Eighteen respondents feel like the tattoo is part of their identity, because it shows people around them what they like, what they stand for or what they believe in. There are several ways in which identity is interpreted by the tattooees and how those levels of identities are connected to the tattoos. The tattoos can be a way to show others what the tattooees' hobbies and passions are, but also what kind of person they are and what values they deem important. The tattoo also helps the tattooees to remind themselves who they are, as the following respondent explains: 'It was kind of a way for me to remain grounded to and remember my childhood identity, as I have lost sight of it to some extent as an adult. Sometimes you need more of an external reminder'. This shows that tattoos can anchor past feelings for the future and in that way thus serve as a way of telling a life story and at the same time constructing one's identity, similar to how Eakin (2001) describes autobiographies construct identity.

Respondents were asked explicitly whether or not all their tattoos were indeed connected and told a part of their life stories. For eleven respondents, this is indeed the case, because the tattoos all mark important memories they have. The tattoo that is inspired by a children's book is always in some way related to their childhood. For some, it is a reminder of their childhood, or of the child that is still within them, while for others it is a reminder of how they were able to escape their childhood. What all the answers have in common, is that the tattoo describes a certain era in the tattooees' lives that is important to the tattooees, which is illustrated by a respondent who says: 'All of my tattoos have different meanings and represent different parts of my life. They all in some way fit into the narrative of my life'.

The final block of questions dealt with the past and the future of the tattooees. For most respondents, the tattoo is a combination of remembering the past as well as guiding the future. Since the past has been a way to learn things and go through experiences that have made the tattooees into who they are today and have helped them decide how they want to live their lives. The book and primarily what it meant

in the tattooees' past is used to make guidelines for the future. The tattoos tell a story about who someone was, but also about who they want to be in the present and in the future. In narrating the past, the future gets partly narrated already as well. As mentioned earlier, the tattoo will in most cases always be part of the tattooees' lives and more presently so than another type of life writing would be because of the inevitable presence of someone's skin in their life.

While not being asked about it directly, eight respondents spontaneously explain that their past was a negative period in their life and that the book and now the tattoo helps them in dealing with the traumatic experiences they mention, what Ghesquière would call 'Lebenshilfe' (2009, 116) and as Kirkland (2009) would say: the tattoos help the tattooees cope. Telling those stories on their own terms helps these tattooees accept those stories as part of their lives. The tattooees explain that with having this tattoo they are constantly reminded of what they have overcome and they hope the tattoo will serve as a reminder of the book that helped them do so and will guide them in being the person they want to be for the remainder of their lives.

In order to confirm the results obtained during the document analysis and online survey, I interviewed two tattooees, who confirmed the tattoo as a protocol for the future once more: the first interviewee has a tattoo inspired by Roald Dahl's book *The BFG* that contains a message for him that helps him to stay close to himself and the man he wants to be. He wants to be able to look at it when he needs it. Moreover, the interviewee explains that 'in the beginning you look at your tattoo often and then that happens less. At one moment, you're showering or swimming or bicycling and at once you remember 'I got a tattoo'. The interviewee explains that at that moment he is again reminded of that book and what it means to him. The second interviewee mainly got the tattoo (inspired by Annie M.G. Schmidt's *Jip en Janneke*) to reflect a personal interest, but it is one that she wants to carry with her the rest of her life. She explains that the tattoos do not tell a story in the sense that they refer to specific events in the interviewee's past, but they do tell a story of the things that she likes and finds interesting. What both these interviews illustrate, is that the tattoo is a part of the person and tells a story about the person rather than only about the book the tattoo refers to.

The blogposts show that a tattoo inspired by a children's book functions as a memory of the role the children's book has played in the tattooee's life or as a guideline for their future life. The results of the online questionnaire underline the importance of these two functions and indicate that the memory serves as a foundation for the guideline that the tattoos symbolise. The interviewees stress this

once more: both the tattoo inspired by *The BFG* and the one inspired by *Jip en Janneke* are tattoos that express a love for a book the tattooees (were) read in the past, while these tattoos at the same time reflect the tattooees' desire to carry their connection to that book with them into the future. Things learned and experienced in the past have formed the tattooees' identities and influenced their outlook on life. Through the past, a perspective on the future is created, which is being represented by the tattoo based on a children's book. In telling that story about their lives and how they want to live their lives in the future, the tattooees are thus creating life narratives in the form of their tattoos.

To conclude

The analysis of the blogs and the survey and the interviews show that many tattoos based on children's literature indeed function as life narratives. The role that the source of inspiration for the tattoo, the literary work¹⁰, plays cannot be underestimated. These sources helped the tattooee through some tough times or sparked something in them that they want to be reminded of in such a permanent way that the skin was the medium the tattooees chose. Despite the books often being bestsellers that have been read by many people all over the world, it is the personal dimension to the tattoo that matters. It is this dimension of the tattoos that is something the tattooees spontaneously talk about, even before being asked about it. On the blogposts the tattooees tell their personal story voluntarily because they feel it is something that needs to be told to others in order to understand the tattoo. It is this 'story behind the tattoo' (Kirkland 2009, 385) that is about more than the literary work it refers to and that the tattooees want to share with an audience.¹¹

Children's literature tattoos not only capture who the tattooee is in the present, as Fruh and Thomas (2012) explained, but they also register who someone wants to become. In the words of Sweetman (1999), the tattoos are a way to commit to something, to hold on to certain life lessons. Most of these stories that tattooees want to tell with their tattoo are related to the book and the role it played in the tattooees' lives. The book gave the tattooees a certain feeling or idea when they read it and that is what they want to remember for the rest of their lives. In line with what Falconer (2008) explained about rereading children's literature, these tattooees not only remember the story of the book, but how they felt during that time when they first read it as well. During their childhoods and also later in life, the book that inspired a tattoo represented a part of the tattooee's own life story. The stories of the tattoos can

therefore be considered stories within someone's life narrative inspired by yet another story, that of the book that inspired the tattoo.

Because of the permanent nature of tattoos, the tattoos tie together the past, the present and the future of the tattooees. The tattooees want to keep their past or their memories of it with them in the future, because they feel it will help them with whatever the future holds for them. Initially, the past and the literary work is what inspired tattooees to get to the tattoo. However, the function of the tattoos in the tattooees' present life is mainly to look at the future or use lessons learned in the past to be able to deal with that future. In that respect, children's literature tattoos show similarities with the self-insert in fan fiction that Lehtonen (2015) described. The tattooees use fiction written by someone else to tell a story about themselves and even to shape that story and their own identity. That implies that the tattoos are not merely life narratives only on childhood. Rather, these tattoos based on children's literature cover a greater period of time in the tattooee's lives, of which the tattooees' future is an important part. The way the books changed the tattooees' outlook on life is so important to them that they want to take it with them into the future. Tattoos based on children's literature can therefore be regarded an example of prospective nostalgia. The tattoos symbolise a longing to do things a certain way in the future and to make the future something more desirable than the past has been.

Children's literature tattoos not only refer to the books that they are inspired by, but also or even more so to the personal lives of tattooees. These tattoos are a special kind of life narrative, in the sense that they have a strong focus towards the future, due to their presence on one's skin. Similar to the children's books where readers can experience new layers when reading the books again, the tattoos and the stories they tell can gain new layers in the case of new experiences that the tattooees gather.

Since children's literature tattoos do not tell a life narrative in a linear and integrated form, but rather give a fragmented insight into someone's life, they are in line with the trend of life narrative no longer being a story that goes from the beginning of someone's life to the end, but telling the story of (a) part(s) of someone's life (Smith & Watson, 2010). Moreover, tattoos inspired by children's literature are in line with Eakin's (2001) idea of autobiography, because the tattoos can construct the rest of someone's life. The tattoos function as a reminder for the tattooees of how to live their lives in the future and thus help them in constructing their identity for that future. Children's literature tattoos show what someone has been through, what someone likes, but most of all the things that shape the person and that they hope will continue to shape them. Tattoos inspired by children's books are a way of creating a

life narrative, which unites several narratives: both one’s own story and a story written by someone else, as well the narrative of one’s past, present and future.

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About the author

During her bachelor in Cultural Studies at Tilburg University Marjolein Breems became interested in literary tattoos and wrote a thesis on the recontextualisation of literature when quotes get tattooed on someone’s skin rather than written in a book. The topic kept her attention during her Master’s program in Children’s and Young Adult Literature at Tilburg University and for this program she again wrote a thesis on literary tattoos, this time on the way in which children’s literature can inspire tattoos based on it.

Email: marjoleinbreems@gmail.com ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9245-7053>

Notes

¹ While literary tattoos can be based on a variety of literary works or literary references, in the remainder of this article I will use ‘books’ to refer to all kinds of literary references that tattoos are based on, in order to maintain readability.

² This study focuses on what is traditionally known as the Western world. This has implications for the study, since the renaissance and artification of tattoos are phenomena that predominantly apply to these countries, while tattoos might have a different status in different countries and cultures. It would prove insightful to study whether this phenomenon of tattoos based on children’s literature is present in other cultures as well and to study what it entails in different cultures

³ This was mainly due to do with the way in which data was collected.

⁴ In this article, I will use life writing as the umbrella term for the act of writing, in the broadest sense, thus including filming, drawing, telling, singing, tattooing etc, about a life and the term life narrative for the product of that act of life writing.

⁵ Douglas (2010) mainly focuses on written autobiographies.

⁶ Both blogs had been posting actively for years but stopped publishing new posts all of a sudden. Neither of the blog owners mentioned why they did not post any new content anymore. However, literary tattoos are still posted to general tattoo blogs such as www.tattoo-ideas.com as well as on social media such as Instagram, Pinterest and Reddit.

⁷ That does fuel the assumption that both are Western blogs, where the artification of tattoos that Kosut (2013) describes is indeed a present development.

⁸ Starting collecting these responses amongst my own friends and followers did mean having a lot of people from the same social ‘bubble’, leaving again little room for diversity.

⁹ A lot of the tattoos on the two blogs are visual representations of the books. Besides that, quotes from the books were also often encountered.

¹⁰ A lot of the books encountered during this study are fantasy books, but there surely are more patterns to be discovered in the type of books that get made into tattoos. It would be interesting to study those to understand what elements in books make them apt for getting made into a tattoo and how fiction and life narratives get intertwined in the tattoos.

¹¹ Tattoos based on children’s literature are often just one of the types of tattoos that tattooees have. I am interested in the other types of tattoos these tattooees with tattoos based on children’s literature have and how they relate to each other and whether or not the tattoos based on children’s literature have a different role in developing the life narrative of the tattooee compared to the other types of tattoos.