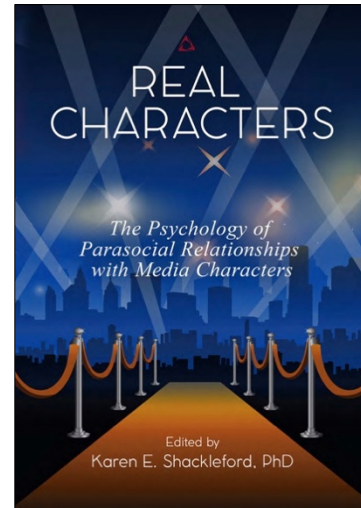


Karen E. Shackleford (Ed.), **Real Characters: The Psychology of Parasocial Relationships With Media Characters**, Santa Barbara, CA: Fielding University Press, 2021, 323 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

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On a midsummer evening in Los Angeles, I found myself seated in the historic Hayworth Theatre. Sitting just three rows from the stage, I eagerly awaited a show by an up-and-coming comedy band. While I was not very familiar with their work, I was thrilled to be in attendance. A media figure I knew and regularly spent time with was a member of the band, and maybe, just maybe, I would have a chance to introduce myself to him after the show.

***Real Characters: The Psychology of Parasocial Relationships with Media Characters*** allows readers to explore the psychology behind these types of relationships—to understand how, why, and to what effects media consumers, like myself, form connections with media characters, personae, and celebrities. Edited by Fielding Graduate University faculty member Karen E. Shackleford, *Real Characters* contains contributions from scholars, practitioners, and media producers who present a range of perspectives and research on parasocial phenomena. Through 13 chapters, these contributors discuss the significant roles that media figures and fictional stories play in our lives, highlight the prevalence of parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSRs), and reconceptualize key concepts in the field.



The first chapter, authored by Shackleford, defines and discusses central parasocial concepts and calls on scholars to revisit the notion of PSRs. Shackleford argues that the term *parasocial* is “not in the public vernacular” and the term *relationship*—which connotes reciprocal interaction and influence—does not accurately capture the complex connections that audiences develop with media figures (p. 32). She posits that misuses of this concept may contribute to the pathologizing of fans and a lack of understanding among the general public. Thus, Shackleford forwards “empathic link” (p. 30) as a complementary concept through which scholars might more effectively describe the connections that audiences form with characters.

Chapters 2 and 12 explore the power of narratives to affect individual and collective change. Chapter 2, authored by Keith Oatley, highlights the role of storytelling in human history and evolution, and reviews research on the psychological processes involved in individuals’ engagement with fictional narratives. In chapter 12, Ken Walker illustrates how fictional characters can affect tangible and significant changes in our lives, such as encouraging us to envision and pursue new versions of ourselves.

Chapter 3 explores audiences’ emotional engagement with narratives, discussing how our emotions shape and are shaped by our connections with media characters. Specifically, authors Elaine Paravati, Kaitlin Fitzgerald, and Melanie C. Green review the processes through which audiences experience emotions with,

toward, and through characters. They conclude their chapter by discussing the enduring effects that emotional involvement with media characters can have on audiences.

In chapter 4, Carlos A. González Velázquez also explores the affective dynamics of narrative engagement—focusing specifically on the gratification derived from engaging with sad stories and immoral characters. González Velázquez posits that compassion is a common response to portrayals of characters' pain and suffering, and can fuel audiences' absorption in tragic narratives and investment in immoral characters. Detailing the neurological processes involved, González Velázquez also forwards an expanded definition of enjoyment that accounts for both the anticipation and attainment of emotional rewards when consuming stories.

Chapters 5 and 7 review the roles that parasocial engagement can play in our psychological, social, and emotional development. In chapter 5, Gayle S. Stever discusses the benefits of PSI and PSRs with media figures during various developmental stages, such as skill-building in childhood and identity formation in adolescence. In chapter 7, Riva Tukachinsky and Sarah E. Erickson focus on parasocial romantic relationships' (PSRRs) functions across life stages. Tukachinsky and Erickson review four theoretical models of PSRRs and proffer recommendations for future PSRR research.

In chapter 6, David R. Ewoldsen and Sara Grady discuss the cognitive mechanisms involved in asynchronous or retrospective imaginative involvement (RII). According to Ewoldsen and Grady, RII occurs when audiences process or ponder the possibilities of narratives before or after engaging with them. Ewoldsen and Grady posit that RII is a significant, measurable, and understudied process that can influence PSRs, and—like Tukachinsky and Erickson—highlight possibilities for future research on this concept.

Chapter 10 focuses on anticipatory involvement with narratives, with Pamela Rutledge discussing film trailers' influence on audiences' engagement with cinematic stories. After reviewing key narrative elements and their roles in audience meaning making, Rutledge applies these concepts in a case study of the teaser for the 2018 film, *The Predator* (p. 235). Rutledge reveals that the absence of a clear archetypal hero and deviations from the *Predator* canon and genre in the teaser violated audiences' expectations about, and reduced their perceived enjoyment of, the film.

In chapter 11, Lee Shackleford, Clarence Brown, and Kyle Jones also discuss the significance of heroic protagonists. Drawing from their own perspectives and those shared by listeners of their podcast, *Discussing Who*, Shackleford, Brown, and Jones explore fans' relationships with the central character of *Doctor Who*—the Doctor, who can occupy different bodies and has been portrayed by over a dozen actors during the series' 26-year tenure (p. 259). The authors explore why fans feel connected to a character whose appearance and mannerisms have consistently changed over the course of the show.

Chapters 8 and 9 examine the significance and impact of media representations of gender, sexuality, and race on audiences' parasocial engagement, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Chapter 8, authored by Dara Greenwood, Bradley Bond, and Alice Aldoukhov, discusses media portrayals of women and girls and their effects on audiences. The authors importantly employ intersectionality in this work, highlighting distinctive differences in the symbolic annihilation and stereotyping of women of color and LGBTQIA+ women. In chapter 9, Aiden Hirshfield and Melody Metcalf-Stotler focus on LGBTQIA+ characters and audiences. Employing a

narrative inquiry of LGBTQIA+ media consumers' experiences, and sharing their own, Hirshfield and Metcalf-Stotler emphasize the importance of representing minoritized communities in authentic and multidimensional ways, and of cultivating audiences' critical media literacy. Additionally, they highlight the value of qualitative parasocial research.

In chapter 13, David C. Giles discusses opportunities and challenges facing contemporary parasocial scholars and addresses critiques of the field. For example, Giles explores how social media complicates traditional conceptions of PSI. Giles posits that social interaction and parasocial interaction exist on a continuum, with intimate, interpersonal interactions on one end and imaginary interactions on the other. Thus, while social media provides audiences with opportunities to directly engage with media figures—to move toward the interpersonal interaction side of the continuum—these opportunities do not render parasocial interactions obsolete.

As a whole, *Real Characters* provides readers with an engaging resource on parasocial scholarship. From tracing the history of the field and traditional models of PSI to opportunities and challenges facing contemporary scholars, this text highlights the continued significance and import of parasocial research—particularly, as various contributors discuss, within the context of the streaming age and the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, while *Real Characters* is reportedly intended for both scholars and a general readership, some of its contents appear better suited for the former. For example, the opening of Shackleford's chapter offers an accessible exploration of parasocial concepts that will undoubtedly be valuable for a general readership; however, her subsequent calls to clarify communication about parasocial phenomena—such that “non-experts” and “laypeople” (p. 35) can understand “our scholarly work” (p. 27)—suggests that parasocial scholars are the primary audience for portions of this work.

Additionally, while the preface purports that *Real Characters* examines parasocial phenomena as they are experienced “around the world” (p. 12), it ultimately prioritizes perspectives from the United States and UK. This text would be strengthened through including more non-Western work and taking up Hirshfield and Metcalf-Stotler's calls to address the lack of parasocial scholarship on minoritized audiences and characters. Further, *Real Characters* would have benefited from engaging with critical race and de/postcolonial scholarship. The need for such engagement is exemplified in the preface, which suggests that “many indigenous sagas . . . or African American storytelling traditions such as the tales of Uncle Remus, faded under the pressure of European archetypes” (p. 10). The Uncle Remus stories have been criticized for decades for appropriating and distorting Black folklore (Moore & MacCann, 1986). And Black and Indigenous communities' storytelling has more than “faded”—it has been silenced via epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988). Addressing this would allow the text to more effectively contend with the relationship between storytelling and power.

Despite these limitations, *Real Characters* remains a valuable resource for individuals interested in parasocial phenomena. The concise summaries offered at the beginning of each chapter aid comprehension and allow readers to identify which sections are most relevant to their interests. And in mapping past and present developments in parasocial research, and encouraging us to explore our own connections with media figures as we flip through its pages, this text invites and inspires readers to contribute to the future of the field.

### References

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