



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

**Heartthrobs and Inside Jokes:  
Narrative Empathy in Emily Henry's *Funny Story* and  
*People We Meet on Vacation***

Master's Programme in English Studies

Master's thesis

Author:

Neea Mantere

Supervisor:

Howard Sklar

7.5.2026

Helsinki

**Faculty:** Faculty of Humanities

**Degree programme:** Master's Programme in English Studies

**Study track:** English Studies

**Author:** Neea Mantere

**Title:** Heartthrobs and Inside Jokes: Narrative Empathy in Emily Henry's *Funny Story* and *People We Meet on Vacation*

**Level:** Master's thesis

**Month and year:** May 2026

**Number of pages:** 54

**Keywords:** Chick lit, characterization, Emily Henry, first-person narration, humor, inside jokes, narrative empathy

**Supervisor or supervisors:** Howard Sklar

**Where deposited:** Digital Repository of the University of Helsinki HELDA (e-thesis)

**Additional information:** -

**Abstract:**

This thesis focuses on narrative empathy and how it can be evoked through the use of the narrative techniques of humor, characterization and first-person narration. I argue that these narrative techniques together enhance the emotional and empathetic responses the reader can have toward narratives. While characterization and first-person narration have been examined and discussed in this context, the use of humor has not yet been analyzed. This thesis highlights the role of humor as a part of the construction of the relationships between the characters, as well as their personalities, and demonstrates the effects it can have on the reader.

The analysis was conducted through a close reading of Emily Henry's novels *Funny Story* (2024) and *People We Meet on Vacation* (2021) that focused on pieces of dialogue and narration from the narratives. The theoretical framework of this thesis relies on Suzanne Keen's research on narrative empathy, but also utilizes secondary sources that have examined narrative techniques, humor, characters and characterization, narration and reader response. Additionally, this thesis discusses the genre of the novels, chick lit, and its connection to reader response, the subjectivity of reading, and narrative empathy.

This thesis finds that the way the reader perceives the use of humor affects how they connect to the narrative, its events and its characters. Both *Funny Story* and *People We Meet on Vacation* utilize humor, such as inside jokes, that create in-groups of both the characters and the reader, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the relationships, and emotional and empathetic responses in the reader. Furthermore, this thesis argues that the novels portray their central characters as complex, coherent and nuanced, which enhances the reader's sense of connection to the narratives. To conclude, this thesis finds that the narrative techniques of humor, characterization and first-person narration have a key role in evoking empathetic responses in the reader.

# Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	<i>Primary Materials</i>	1
1.2	<i>Chick Lit and Narrative Empathy: Theoretical Framework</i>	2
1.3	<i>Thesis Overview</i>	5
<b>2</b>	<b>“It speaks to me”: Use and Effect of Humor in Narrative</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1	<i>Constructing a Humorous Narrative</i>	7
2.1.1	Humor in the Novels	10
2.1.2	Inside Jokes	18
2.2	<i>From Humor to Empathy</i>	23
<b>3</b>	<b>Characterization, Narration, and the Reader</b>	<b>28</b>
3.1	<i>Constructing Characters in Narrative</i>	28
3.1.1	Heartthrobs: Characterization in the Novels	31
3.1.2	First-Person Narration in the Novels	37
3.2	<i>From Characterization and Narration to Empathy</i>	42
<b>4</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>48</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>52</b>

# 1 Introduction

A meet-cute, a Prince Charming, a successful career, healthy relationships with friends and family, love and security, and a Happily Ever After. What more could a reader of modern-day romance want? But what is it exactly that keeps readers engaged in the same repetitive plot over and over again? Who or what does the reader empathize with and why? How does the use of humor in a novel enhance the empathetic response of the reader? These are questions I intend to answer by approaching them with the theory of narrative empathy in mind. This thesis focuses on two novels by Emily Henry: *Funny Story* (2024) and *People We Meet on Vacation* (2021). Both of these novels are popular and appropriate representatives of contemporary romance literature that appeals to readers through enticing characterization and engaging narrative techniques of humor that together, I argue, have a crucial role in evoking empathy in the reader. In other words, the main characters in the novels not only appeal to, and evoke, empathy in the reader through their personality traits but also through the clever and relatable humor they use. Furthermore, as I go on to discuss, I argue that narrative empathy is an important part in the success of chick lit literature, such as with Emily Henry's works.

## 1.1 Primary Materials

Emily Henry, an American contemporary romance and chick lit author, has gained popularity in the most recent decade. According to *The New York Times*, all of Henry's latest five novels, not counting her sixth, *The Great Big Beautiful Life* (2025), have been No. 1 best-sellers (Khatib). In fact, in the United States alone, she has sold over seven million copies of her works (Egan). Recently, her novel *People We Meet on Vacation* was adapted into a film, which was released under the same title on Netflix on January 9th, 2026. To the best of my knowledge, there is currently no academic discussion surrounding Henry's works, apart from a master's thesis published in 2024 by Sini Pesonen, titled *Romance Novels and Possibilities in Life: Analyzing Ethical Aspects in Happiness and Happy Place*, which focuses on another novel by Henry. Despite the lack of research, the non-academic interest in her works is abundant. She has been interviewed by a myriad of established newspapers and magazines, such as *Vogue* (Layne), *Elle* (Puckett-Pope) and *The New Yorker* (Harris). Additionally, the discussion surrounding her works is most lively on social media platforms such as TikTok and Goodreads, where users recommend, praise and critique the literature. Based on Henry's success alone, it is apparent, too, that the chick lit genre is thriving.

In Emily Henry's *Funny Story*, Daphne Vincent, the protagonist and narrator, moves to a small town, Waning Bay in Michigan, with her fiancé, Peter Collins. Their upcoming wedding gets cancelled at the last minute when Peter realizes he is actually in love with his best friend, Petra Comer. Peter forces Daphne out of the house they had moved into together, and Daphne has to find a new place to live. She winds up becoming roommates with another victim of Peter and Petra's relationship, Miles Nowak, who had been in a relationship with Petra. Daphne, an educated librarian, and Miles, a stoner bartender, find common ground when they decide to pretend to be in a fake relationship to fool their ex-lovers. However, over time, they fall in love. Along the way, Daphne is able to find a home in Waning Bay, as well as gain a sense of long-lost independence.

Poppy Wright is the narrator and protagonist of Henry's *People We Meet on Vacation*. Poppy and her best friend, Alex Nilsen, have gone on vacation together every summer, until something irreparable happened on vacation two years ago. Present-day Poppy realizes the reason for her unhappiness to be the absence of her best friend. She breaks the silence with Alex and asks him to go on one last vacation together to rekindle their friendship, and he agrees. The narration switches between the present-day and vacations Poppy and Alex have taken over the years. The reader slowly learns that Poppy and Alex have never been just friends, and that a confession of love is long overdue. Sure enough, Poppy and Alex confess their love for one another by the end of the novel.

## 1.2 Chick Lit and Narrative Empathy: Theoretical Framework

Before discussing the theoretical framework of this thesis, I should provide some context regarding the genre these novels represent. Chick lit is a contemporary variation of women's romance fiction. Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon define chick lit as follows: "A female-oriented form of fiction and a highly successful and commercial literary phenomenon" (128). Teresa Ebert attempts to define characteristics of chick lit, and cites a chick lit website, which claims that chick lit novels contain highly realistic narratives (103). Characters of such novels are "true-to-life," and the novels contain "boyfriend angst" and "messy detail," yet Ebert states that the narratives are still "fantasy", much like other romance novels (103-104). Chick lit novels are romance novels that additionally focus on other personal relationships of the characters, career advancements and self-empowerment. For instance, in the case of *Funny Story*, though the romantic relationships of the protagonist are the core of the novel, the story explores Daphne's life outside of romance, and her journey to find herself and navigate other aspects of life. Ebert demonstrates that the representation of love in chick lit differs from that of more traditional romances, where "love and lust, sex and sensuousness, passion and tenderness" are centered around the main male

love interest (104). In chick lit, these elements are ironically and playfully rewritten. Ebert provides examples which illustrate how love can be portrayed as less important, and even as something embarrassing (104). Even though love does get affirmed in the end, Ebert's view is that chick lit is "the romance of postcontemporary cynical reason" (104). Love is not the answer to loneliness or daily life frustrations, but nonetheless love is desired and affirmed (Ebert 105). I agree with Ebert's observations. For instance, regarding *People We Meet on Vacation*, Poppy struggles to find what makes her happy. For a while, she thinks Alex could be the solution, but in the end she realizes she must figure out her issues with herself and her career first. Even though having Alex in her life is necessary, she should not sacrifice her dreams and independence for something like love. The romance in chick lit provides a portrayal of modern-day women and love that is less conventional and more cynical than traditional romances. It is not, however, overly critical, as its tone is still breezy and lighthearted with a guaranteed happy ending.

The genre has faced some critique, which Genz and Brabon address in their article. They report, for instance, that the chick lit heroine is said to embody passive and disempowered womanhood, the appearance of which has simply been improved to fit the postfeminist era (129). However, they also claim chick lit offers a more realistic image of single life, dating and romance than conventional romance (Genz and Brabon 129). I agree that the genre thrives on realism and authenticity, as Genz and Brabon point out, though I would add relatability to the list; everyday challenges, messy love lives and frustrating career paths are cathartic to read about, evoking feelings of validation and connection, as well as empathy, in the reader. Indeed, Genz and Brabon recognize this kind of effect. They note that the typical chick lit heroine is flawed and fallible, which evokes feelings of compassion and identification in the reader (130). My view of the literature is that while works of chick lit are comfortable, quick and easy to read, they still offer worthwhile and relatable true-to-life stories with familiar everyday challenges. However, not all critics share my opinion.

Chick lit has not been researched much, despite having surfaced into the literary field already in the late 1990s. The genre is primarily considered women's fiction as it is literature written for women, about women, by women. Works of chick lit tend to follow a similar pattern with its plot, themes, protagonists and their love interests. Cecilia Konchar Farr argues that most critics that now have expressed interest in the genre both condemn and are compelled by it (201). Farr's notion is that currently sex and money dominate the genre, which has led to a shallow perception (204). Often, at bookstores that sell chick lit novels such as Henry's, the works are placed on tables decorated with sale signs that serve a consumerist purpose: "Trending on TikTok!" The value of the novels is then at risk; are they popular because they are actually a worthwhile read or because they are trending online? Indeed, as Farr points out: "Chick lit has high marketability, and in the world of aesthetics,

that is never good” (204). Unfortunately, some critics do view chick lit as “trashy fiction” (Genz and Brabon 128). Even though chick lit can be exploited due to the popular interest it has received, it should not equal a decrease in its value as a researchable, and criticizable, genre. I agree with Farr’s remarks that chick lit novels, like any novels, provide affinity, empathy, affect, entertainment, education and engagement, which ultimately truly appeal to readers (209). It is this disregard and lack of research that entices me about the chick lit genre. Henry, much like other popular chick lit authors, seems to dominate sales and bestseller lists, which also interests me. What is it in these novels that keeps the readers so hooked?

Janice Radway states that women gain possibilities for emotional gratification through romance reading because it offers them the attention and nurturance they otherwise lack in their day-to-day lives (442). Feeling, and creating, a connection between the characters in the novel and the reader is thus crucial for the reading experience, because it is what the average reader expects and demands. A central part of the theoretical framework of this thesis is narrative empathy, which has a key role in creating the connection. Suzanne Keen, in an article on the theory of narrative empathy, finds that it is natural for humans to feel emotions toward what we can perceive or imagine (“Narrative Empathy” 209). Humans especially experience empathy for beings that seem most like us, and in the case of narrative, for characters in a story. As I have previously expressed, my argument is that character descriptions and their shared engagements significantly aid how narrative empathy is evoked in the reader. Indeed, Keen recognizes that character identification evokes empathy in the reader, even if the characters in question would not resemble the reader themselves (214). Not much is needed for empathy in regard to fictional characters, even slight elements of identity, situation, and feeling suffice (Keen, “Narrative Empathy” 214). However, it should be noted that Keen makes a necessary clarification that character identification is a consequence of reading that is caused by narrative techniques of characterization (216). Therefore, it is the characterization of Henry’s novels that I study in connection to narrative empathy.

Keen defines empathy as “a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of effect, can be provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading” (“Narrative Empathy” 208). In short, empathy is feeling what another person feels; the ability to step into their shoes and relate to their situation (209). Narrative empathy is experienced through reading or otherwise experiencing a narrative in which the situation or condition of another is described. Distinguished from empathy is sympathy, in which one feels emotions regarding the feelings of others. In other words, sympathy is feeling a supportive emotion (Keen, “Narrative Empathy” 209), or for example pity, for another person. My thesis has a focus on empathy, though a reader of Henry’s novels can experience

sympathy, too. Following this, I should make a clarification regarding the type of empathy I examine in this thesis. Even though Keen states that negative emotions and experiences of fictional characters more readily evoke empathetic responses in the reader (214), I clarify that my interest in narrative empathy in the primary materials also includes positive emotions.

Finally, in this thesis, in connection to narrative empathy, I discuss the narrative techniques of characterization and humor in *Funny Story* and *People We Meet on Vacation*. Even though I previously made note of Keen's deduction that even slight elements of identity, situation, and feeling suffice for empathy to be evoked in the reader, my view is that it is indisputable that the reader can more readily relate to characters they admire and identify with. My focus is especially the positive emotions, such as admiration, amusement and interest, that the reader experiences toward the characters, thereby evoking empathy. Thus, I argue that characterization and the engagements between the characters create a connection between the reader and the characters that enhances the reader's sense of empathy.

This thesis is structured around the narrative techniques of humor and characterization in connection with narrative empathy. The theoretical framework of this thesis is further discussed alongside the analysis conducted on the primary materials in the two discussion chapters. The analysis is conducted through a close reading of the two novels where I examine the construction and descriptions of the characters as well as their engagements in dialogue with one another. I am especially interested in the humorous interactions between the characters. However, I include other engagements the characters experience, such as more negative encounters, in my analysis as well.

### 1.3 Thesis Overview

This introduction is followed by a discussion chapter that focuses on the narrative techniques of humor utilized in each novel. The arguments made in that chapter are supported by Keen's theory of narrative empathy and illustrated through examples of comical engagements. Alongside humorous remarks made by the narrators and the characters the protagonists interact with, I consider the effect of 'inside jokes' on the reader. For context, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines inside jokes, or in-jokes, as jokes that are based on references understood or appreciated by limited groups of people. An inside joke can occur between two or more people from different kinds of situations that turn humorous and are later referred to as a form of connection between the participants of the original joke, thus excluding those not present at the creation of the joke. Henry utilizes inside jokes in her novels in different ways, such as by one of the characters making a remark early on in the novel and then returning to the remark later with an amusing effect. These inside jokes appear as interesting since they then include the reader as well. I argue here that the use of inside jokes enables the

reader to feel as though they are a part of the intimate relationships within the novels. As a result, inside jokes help form a connection between the reader and the characters, which in turn activates empathy in the reader.

The third chapter is concerned with the theory of narrative empathy regarding the characters of each novel. Since their use of humor will already have been examined, this chapter provides further analysis of the characters. I am especially focused on the more admirable traits of the characters that present them as more appealing and attractive to the reader. My view here is that the characters are relatable and desirable, which enables the reader to connect to them, and likewise feel empathy toward them more readily as a consequence. I do not compare the novels and their characters to each other but rather present similarities in order to demonstrate the connection created between the characters and the reader. Additionally, in this chapter I discuss first-person narrative, which Henry utilizes in both of the novels in question. Keen reports that it is recognized in narrative theory that character identification and empathy in the reader are best achieved through an internal perspective provided by, for instance, first-person narration (“Narrative Empathy” 219). Keen states also that “an especially close relationship” between the narrator and the reader is achieved through first-person narration where the narrator recounts their own experiences and perceptions (220). Both of the narratives of the novels utilize first-person narration, where Daphne is the narrator in *Funny Story* and Poppy in *People We Meet on Vacation*. The reader can, indeed, connect with the female protagonists, especially through the first-person narration, which is enhanced by the diary-like storytelling where the narrator indirectly addresses the reader. This does, however, compromise trustworthy character analysis of the male love interest, as it is more likely that the reader sides with the perspective of the narrator. The behavior of the male love interest may then be presented as disreputable due to the narrator’s, and consequently the reader’s, narrow perspective.

This thesis aims to take part in conversations related to the construction and manifestation of narrative empathy by providing a new perspective regarding two narrative techniques coupled with two novels that have not previously been examined academically. Furthermore, this thesis participates in conversations regarding chick lit literature. The general popularity of chick lit is high, but some critics still deem it “trashy fiction” and disregard its potential significance to academic discussions related to other forms and variations of romance literature and novels. Primarily, this thesis aims to answer questions proposed regarding narrative empathy, and narrative techniques that engage and appeal to readers. With the theoretical framework and intentions of this thesis in place, the following chapter focuses on the textual analysis of humorous engagements in the novels.

## 2 “It speaks to me”: Use and Effect of Humor in Narrative

This discussion chapter examines the use and effect of narrative techniques of humor in the primary materials. The theoretical framework here is supported by research concerning the connection between language and humor. This chapter provides an overall look at different types of humor present in the novels, such as teasing, irony, sarcasm, mockery, exaggeration, and so on. These are illustrated through examples of dialogue in both of the novels. The aim of this analysis is not to assess which novel succeeds best in providing more comedy, but rather demonstrate how it can be present in and detected from the narratives. As one of the main focuses of this thesis, inside jokes are separated under its own section in which I examine the inside jokes made in the novels and their effect on the reader. I discuss how inside jokes can be made for not only comical but also comforting and endearing purposes. Furthermore, in connection to narrative empathy, I discuss how storytelling strategies such as the use of humor can shape readers' responses. Finally, I consider the perspective of the theory of narrative empathy regarding dialogue and narration and examine how humor helps the reader connect better with the narrative and its characters. Before moving on to the analysis, I begin by presenting the theoretical framework regarding the construction of comedy in narratives.

### 2.1 Constructing a Humorous Narrative

Humor, and what one finds humorous, is subjective. Some enjoy classic dad jokes and puns, others find script-based jokes more entertaining, and not all find innuendos or teasing amusing. Even though this thesis is mainly concerned with narrative techniques, it is worth mentioning that the study of humor also requires interest in sociolinguistics. Since I am not only examining how humor is linguistically constructed, but also what its effect is, I then technically consider how humor relates to society. Catherine E. Davies notes that humor is “linked to social class, gender, ethnicity, age, and regionality” (482). In other words, what one finds funny is directly dependent on their identity and upbringing. Even though humor is perceived differently by each person, it is still universally experienced. Likewise, researching it is universal, meaning it can be examined through varied approaches. Humor gains attention from academics in fields such as psychology, communication and, as in the case of this thesis, literary studies.

*Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word ‘humor’ as someone’s ability to appreciate or convey their sense of what is funny, amusing or ludicrous. In order for something to be perceived as comical, certain elements must be considered. For instance, the sense of superiority is an integral part of humor. In fact, as Cristina Larkin-Galiñanes notes, Plato

found laughter, the audible reaction to humor, to be a sign of superiority (5). Jeroen Vandaele states that humor always requires its subjects to experience superiority, as well as incongruity (732). Incongruity in this context refers to something being perceived as incongruous, meaning something surprising, unexpected and out of the ordinary is experienced (Vandaele 748). Perceiving something unprecedented, or incongruous, reframes a situation, which then invites humor. Furthermore, the feeling of superiority is linked to how the target of comedy is typically perceived as inferior, leading the audience to a heightened sense of self-esteem and intelligence (Vandaele 741). This is not to say that the intention of humor is to be aggressive or demeaning toward its target. The sense of superiority can be gained by simply making a connection between a joke and its context, for example.

Władysław Chłopicki states that humor can be detected in narratives in different forms and roles (143). What is it then that can make a narrative humorous? Chłopicki presents an assumption that humor is basically dependent on context (151). In other words, it is directly related to elements such as the dialogue between the characters, varied character descriptions and their personalities, surprising and/or entertaining events, etc. Chłopicki does not, however, respond to the initial question with a single definition, but rather explains that in order to understand why a narrative is humorous, one should look at the overall complex picture through some key dichotomies (148). Narratives can be purposefully or unintentionally funny, the humor can be obvious or indirect, and humorous narratives can exist to merely entertain or invite social critique (Chłopicki 148). Indeed, evaluating a narrative regarding its comedy is not straightforward since such opposing elements can, and often do, co-exist. A humorous piece of dialogue, for instance, does not only consist of individual jokes but also the dynamic and wit of the relationship between the characters involved.

There are multiple different linguistic devices that can help construct a humorous narrative. Again, some narratives may intentionally aim to produce amusement and laughter in the reader while others do so unintentionally. My focus here is on the intentional narrative techniques that produce comical results. Larkin-Galiñanes lists linguistic devices defined by Aristotle and classical writers alike that can be used to produce laughter, and arguably be fitted for comedy in literature. Such linguistic devices include unconventional use of language, exaggeration and impossible hyperboles, irony, punning, unexpected turns, comparisons and metaphors, and so on (Larkin-Galiñanes 12). I provide examples of some of these forms of humor later, as they relate to the analysis of Henry's novels. To return to a previous notion, Larkin-Galiñanes states that even Aristotle and Cicero emphasized the element of surprise, and additionally Demetrius and Cicero noted the importance of incongruity (12). It is clear, then, that anything out of the ordinary can be exploited for the creation of comedy, and this includes linguistic devices. This observation does not mean that

comedy can only be drawn from unexpected events. In fact, I would even argue that it is most commonly created based on mundane situations that are given a new, surprising and thus funny perspective. For example, shouting: “I’m bleeding out!” when suffering a papercut is mundane comedy. The joke evokes feelings of superiority and incongruity, and thus humor, because any witness of such a joke can understand that a mere papercut does not actually cause a life-threatening injury.

Returning to the notion of the subjectivity of humor, it is interesting to note that the audience has an effect on if intentional comedy is ultimately successful. In the case of the papercut joke, for instance, some may find the ridiculousness of the remark funny while others recognize the comical intention but would still argue that serious injuries are not to be joked about. What one finds funny is directly linked to their identity and worldview. As I mentioned earlier, the ability to understand certain kinds of comedy is determined by a myriad of qualities, such as gender, age, social class, etc. In other words, qualities that shape a person’s understanding of what is funny specifically to them. What a middle-aged science teacher from Iceland thinks is hilarious, a retired plumber from Kenya may find incomprehensible. As humor is context-dependent, part of its construction is how it is perceived by its audience.

Regarding the novels this thesis examines, the target audience is the typical chick lit reader: a woman in her 20s or 30s, well-educated, professional, often single (Ebert 111). Chick lit novels do, however, appeal to many outside of this particular group, but the typical reader tends to resemble the protagonists of the novels. For example, both of the protagonists of *Funny Story* and *People We Meet on Vacation* are in their 30s, straight, single and career-oriented. Additionally, they are both American, meaning that following Western mainstream media is important to understanding intertextual references, modern feminism and even some internet slang. I should mention, then, that even though I conduct my analysis through a theoretical framework, I represent the more typical reader of chick lit. In other words, while theory is vital to accurately describe different forms of humor, my personal taste affects my perception of the humor in the novels. Therefore, I have perceived the narratives as humorous, and analyze them as such, while others may disagree.

Regarding literature, then, I am not implying that an author must consider the expected audience when writing, but rather that a certain kind of comical storyline draws in readers that ultimately share the same perception of what is humorous. Jeroen Vandaele proposes that humor may have a role as “*captatio benevolentiae*” (734). This means that humor is utilized as a rhetorical method to appeal to readers by attracting the attention and goodwill of the reader. For example, this tactic can be used to gain the favor of an audience before delivering any arguments in a speech. As *captatio benevolentiae*, humor can be used to establish common ground, to playfully manage and approach difficult topics or conflicts, to

de-escalate or make light of a serious situation, to build an in-group and an out-group, to tease and prove intelligence, and so on (Vandaele 734). It is apparent that humor can function as a narrative technique that ultimately helps the reader to better connect with the narrative, its events and characters. Indeed, as per James Phelan's observations about experiencing fiction, storytelling is a rhetorical act where authors have an impact on how a reader experiences and understands the narrative (6). Narrative techniques, such as humor, have a crucial effect on the response and engagement of the reader to the narrative. In connection to how a reader understands emotional experiences in narrative, similarly to Phelan's assessment, Elise Nykänen finds that narrative empathy originates from the author's sense of empathy, but rhetorically becomes apparent through how the text is constructed (298). In other words, the reader is able to engage with the emotional experiences in the narrative through the use of varied narrative techniques, such as, and especially, humor. The following sections highlight this through multiple extracts from *Funny Story* and *People We Meet on Vacation*.

### 2.1.1 Humor in the Novels

I begin my analysis of the primary materials by dissecting the humor utilized in both novels. I find that humor is most commonly present through teasing, irony, and inside jokes. Additionally, the characters utilize humor by playfully mocking side characters and by attempting to defuse tension in emotionally difficult situations. While I argue that humor overall is directly connected to experiencing narrative empathy, I have divided inside jokes under its own section. My hypothesis is that the use of inside jokes is most effective in building an in-group of both the characters and the reader, and therefore more readily creates a sense of connection between the narrative and its audience. Here, then, my focus is to begin by analyzing the other types of humor present in the dialogues. Going forward, for efficiency and clarity, I refer to *Funny Story* by the abbreviation *FS*, and to *People We Meet on Vacation* by *PWMOV*.

While in both narratives humor is utilized to reinforce relationships shared between the characters as well as elicit amusement, and even laughter, in the reader, it is also used to uphold a lighthearted tone even in more negative encounters, such as fights or moments of disappointment. The main focus of analysis is the conversations between both Daphne and Miles, and Poppy and Alex. Wit-wise their conversations resemble each other; they are all quick to recognize each other's jokes and respond with the same energy. Sarcasm and irony do not go undetected and are usually followed by a similar retort that keeps jokes rolling back and forth like a game of professional tennis. Comedy is always present in mundane conversations, but also added to serious moments for a sense of emotional relief and support.

Even failed humor is executed successfully; the reader understands the joke, and when the responding character does not, the reader is amused mainly by the emerging sense of superiority they feel. Additionally, in-groups are created in both novels not only through inside jokes but also through teasing and mocking side characters. One dividing factor, though, is the status of their relationships. In *FS*, Daphne and Miles are slowly getting to know and trust each other, and their use of jokes, teasing and sarcasm help construct their amusing and supportive dynamic. In *PWMOV*, Poppy and Alex, on the other hand, have been best friends for years, and their shared sense of comedy reinforces their bond and maintains their already established quick-witted relationship.

Teasing is a common form of humor present in both of the novels. In fact, in *PWMOV* Poppy and Alex even recognize teasing as a part of natural banter in their conversations. On one of their holidays, Poppy is injured on a mountain trail, and Alex offers to carry her back down: “I’m going to pick you up, and I’m going to carry you – very slowly – down the trail. And I’m probably going to have to stop a lot and set you down, and you are not allowed to call me Seabiscuit, or scream *Faster! Faster!* in my ear” (*PWMOV* 221). Alex anticipates that Poppy would tease him and forbids her from doing so. He even assumes that she would call him ‘Seabiscuit’, the racehorse, when carrying her. The reader can note how teasing is present in all conversations, and expect it as part of the natural dynamic of the characters, even when they are under stress. Indeed, Michael Haugh finds teasing to be multilayered, where provocation and non-seriousness mix (204). An illustration of this is from *FS*, when Miles visits Story Hour at the library, where Daphne does dramatic readings of children’s books to children every Saturday:

“I had no idea you could do that,” he says.

“Oh, yeah,” I say, starting back toward the front doors. They woosh open and we enter the cool, musty quiet. “I’ve been reading since I was six. I’m getting pretty good.”

“I mean the voices,” he clarifies. “You were such a convincing elderly magician mouse.”

“If that impressed you, you should come see me do the old woman who lives in a shoe,” I say.

“I’ll clear my Saturdays,” he says.

“I was kidding,” I say.

He grins. “Not me.” (*FS* 104)

Miles does not specify his sentence about what Daphne could do, causing her to make fun of his intelligence by responding with an obviously sarcastic statement. In reaction to this, when

she jokingly suggests he should attend other readings, he keeps a serious tone that could still be interpreted as sincerity or a joke.

Teasing may become a part of a relationship, and it is customary not to take offence. However, Haugh notes that teasing invites amused but also irritated and angry responses (208). Therefore, it is a delicate form of humor. In fact, Maria Shardakova relates that teasing consists of playful attacks in interactions between friends and intimate family, while in other contexts it can be viewed as unfriendly (222). The unspoken expectation in these novels, then, is to respond to teasing with amusement and perceive it as playful and harmless. As such, the response of the reader is a growing understanding of the dynamic between the characters, and thus an empathetic response when teasing succeeds in eliciting laughter, for instance.

I noted that especially in the primary materials, teasing is often combined with exaggeration. In other words, teasing may be in response to a statement by exaggerating an aspect that was found ridiculous, thereby mocking it. An example of this is from *FS*, when Daphne and Miles decide to go kayaking in Lake Michigan, and Daphne proves to be a much slower paddler than her companion:

“There’s no rush.”

“Well, if that changes, feel free to ditch me.”

“Yes, Daphne, if something changes, and I need to escape a fresh-water shark, I’ll paddle my little heart out and leave you for dead.”

“Are there really sharks in the lake,” I ask.

“I’m offended you’d even ask that,” he says. (*FS* 165)

Here, teasing can be interpreted as humorous specifically through the sense of superiority and incongruity. Miles’s initial joke about the sharks is incongruous, because (obviously) there are no sharks in Lake Michigan. This is followed by a sense of superiority elicited in both Miles and the reader, when Daphne fails to recognize the joke and believes it to be true. Therefore here, Miles and the reader form an in-group, or a connection between them, over the shared sense of intelligence.

Teasing can also overlap with irony and sarcasm, enhancing the sense of a playful attack. Teasing, like all humor, can be used to lighten the mood of an otherwise serious situation. In the following example from *PWMOV*, Alex goes to give Poppy’s sweaty hand a kiss, and she makes an incongruous statement that creates humor in an otherwise emotional moment:

“What, am I sticky?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Just want to remember what your skin feels like.”

“That’s really sweet, Alex,” I say, “and not at all something a serial killer would say.” (*PWMOV* 313)

Here, Poppy’s teasing is directed at Alex’s sentimental gesture. In the narration, Poppy goes on to say that she is deflecting by joking, because they are on their way to the airport, and will have to say difficult goodbyes to each other. Her quip defuses the emotional tension of the moment, and the reader is amused by the softness and ridiculousness of their conversation in this instance.

Overall, as in this previous piece of dialogue, both of the narratives utilize humor in emotionally difficult situations. Its purpose can either be for one character to comfort another, or for the characters to maintain a light-hearted appearance by downplaying the emotional severity and significance of something. For instance, in *FS*, when Daphne is disappointed by the actions of her ex-fiancé, Miles is there to hug and comfort her:

His hands slide down my arms to wrap across my back. We stand there for several seconds, tangled up together.

“Want to go egg his car?” I mumble into his chest.

“Seems like a waste of good eggs,” he says.

“I agree,” I say. “I just wish my gynecologist told me that sooner.” (*FS* 125)

Miles, through his comment, is essentially saying that Daphne’s ex is not worth the trouble. It is possible that they both know they would not actually go throw eggs at his car, but it is a common revenge tactic for getting back at an ex-partner, and therefore Miles jokingly plays into Daphne’s joke. Daphne’s response further defuses the disappointed atmosphere through a sarcastic joke that includes wordplay. She basically agrees that her ex has not, in fact, been worth the trouble, and that she has been wasting her time, and even fertility, with him. Here, the reader is amused by the humor, but can note that between Miles and Daphne it is utilized to show affection and care.

As established, irony and sarcasm are present in the novels, even though they often overlap with teasing. In order to find a definition for irony, Herbert L. Colston lists some consistencies that include opposition, contradiction, contrast and other notions of juxtaposed incompatibilities (Colston 234). In other words, incongruity is at play here as well. Irony can be detected from humor that is made to contradict reality, and therefore surprising from what could be expected.

Sarcasm, along with ironic praise and analogy, hyperbole, and understatement, for instance, are considered other related forms of irony, or even subtypes (Colston 236). Especially in *FS*, irony is used elaborately, and not just for short and quick, possibly defensive, responses. For instance, when Miles’s coworker, Katya, finds out he and Daphne

are dating, he goes to tell Daphne. Provoked by Daphne's shocked response, though, he retorts with a more nuanced, sarcastic, response:

"I'm never lying again," I say.

"Except if Katya walks up to you and says *Hey, you're sleeping with Miles, right?*" he jokes. "Because if you tell the truth, this will all be very embarrassing."

"You told her we were *sleeping* together?" I say.

"Yeah, she said, *Is that your girlfriend*, and I was like, *We have sex, and we're in love. Someday, when we have a baby, we're going to name her Sue Ellen after my mom*. No, Daphne. I didn't *tell her* we're sleeping together. Petra told her I'm living with my new girlfriend. I'm just guessing Katya might do some high-level deduction here. But if you want me to go *ask* whether she thinks we're having sex, I can."

"How soon until everyone in Waning Bay hears this lie," I groan.

"I'm sure the paparazzi are gathering as we speak," he replies. (*FS* 72, emphasis original)

Daphne is clearly bothered by their scheme, but Miles's sense of sarcasm, though negative and provoking, functions as a way to defuse some of the tension in the situation. Colston's definition of sarcasm is that it is a "negative form of verbal irony" that can be used to enhance the negativity of criticism (236). Indeed, this form of sarcasm is illustrated in another scene from *FS*, where Daphne is stuck in a dress and Miles attempts to help her with the jammed zipper:

"It's stuck," I say. "I think I broke the zipper, and the dress is too tight, and I can't breathe, and it's *stuck*."

"It's okay."

"Oh, is it?" I say. "Then I feel better." ...

"Do you have any ChapStick?" he asks.

"Can your mouth moisturization wait a minute?" I cry.

"Nah, not really—it's for the *zipper*, Daphne." (*FS* 238-239, emphasis original)

Here, both of their replies to each other's remarks are mean-spirited. Miles attempts to comfort Daphne, which she declines through sarcasm, and when Daphne misunderstands Miles's intention with the ChapStick, he is quick to utilize sarcasm in a similar way. Even though humor is utilized to insult the other person, these extracts still grow the reader's understanding of their continuously witty dynamic.

However, while I agree with Colston's notion that sarcasm can be portrayed as negative, it can also be used in a teasing, and more positive, way. In *PWMOV* this is illustrated in a scene where Poppy and Alex are fighting over a foldout chair:

“Stop it, you weirdo,” he says.

“I'm not the weirdo.” I turn sideways, try to use my hip and side body to force him off. “You're the one who's trying to steal my one joy in life, this weird bed.” (*PWMOV* 133)

Their Airbnb apartment was supposed to have separate beds, only they discover there is only one bed and one foldout chair. While neither actually wants to sleep in the chair, Poppy's use of sarcasm is not to negatively critique Alex for not giving in, but rather to humorously gain his favor. It is clear to the reader that her only joy in life is not to sleep in the foldout chair, but the sarcasm portrays her adamant need to stay polite.

Hyperbole is another form of irony present in the narratives, though less common. It is used to describe an exaggerated state of a topic where something is much larger in magnitude, severity, quantity, etc. than it is in reality (Colston 236). In fact, my earlier example of the papercut contains a hyperbole where the gravity of the injury is exaggerated. In *PWMOV*, on the other hand, the use of hyperbole overlaps with teasing and sarcasm in conversations. An example of this is a piece of dialogue between Poppy and Alex while they're traveling by car:

“Has there always been this much Billy Joel traveling over the airwaves?” Alex asks the third time we switch channels mid-commercial only to plunge back into the middle of “Piano Man.”

“Since the dawn of time, I think. When the cavemen built the first radio, this was already playing.”

“I didn't know you were a historian,” he deadpans. “You should come talk to my class.”

I snort. “You could not drag me into the halls of East Linfield High with the combined force of every tractor in a five-mile radius of that building, Alex.” (*PWMOV* 81)

Poppy's use of hyperbole exaggerates the frequency of *Piano Man* on the radio and her interest to visit her old school, where Alex works. She also slightly teases Alex for his sarcastic reply. Poppy referencing the commonality of tractors in her/their old hometown additionally mocks Linfield. This is due to Poppy's sense of superiority for having been able to move away from the rural smalltown, even though it does have a negative impact on Alex, who enjoys

living there. Here, the reader can note that Poppy's use of hyperbole is not meant to insult Alex, but rather tease him as is customary in their relationship.

Finally, mockery, and specifically mocking other characters, is an especially common form of humor used in both of the novels. In *FS*, Daphne and Miles mostly teasingly mock their close friends, but mockery is also extended to side characters, such as Daphne's new stepmom, Starfire. For instance, after Starfire tells Daphne she could call her 'Mom,' Miles asks Daphne if it would make her feel better or worse to know that she had said the same thing to him as well. To this Daphne replies: "It makes me want to buy her a dictionary" (*FS* 278). In this example, humor arises from the sense of superiority that Starfire is not smart enough to understand the definition of the word 'mom.' The reader is a part of the conversation between Daphne and Miles, and can relate to the sense of superiority over Starfire's intelligence (or lack thereof).

Another instance of mockery in *FS* is illustrated in a scene where Daphne and Miles are causing a disturbance in the hallway of their apartment building after a night out. They are scolded by their next-door neighbor, Mr. Dorner:

We're both laughing so hard we're crying when our elderly neighbor pops his head into the hallway to hiss, "*Some* of us are trying to sleep around here!"

"Sorry, Mr. Dorner," Miles says like a chastened schoolboy.

Mr. Dorner retreats.

I squint after him, confused. "Doesn't he usually have hair?"

Miles bursts into not-at-all-quiet laughter. I smush my hands over his mouth to shut him up. "You thought that hair was *real*?" he asks. "You have to be the most gullible person on the planet. (*FS* 35, emphasis original)

In this scene, mocking Mr. Dorner is harmless. They respect and understand his request for silence, but his presence interrupts a previous fit of laughter, leading to the need to keep the comedy going by finding the latest surprising incident funny. Both Daphne's surprise at Mr. Dorner's lack of hair and Miles's sarcastic notion about the fake hair mock Mr. Dorner as a character. Even though I stated that such mockery is harmless, it could also be construed in a negative light. Mockery is a comic element that can be utilized for teasing, for example, but like teasing, it can be interpreted as mean or unjust. The key to successful mockery is then to stay in the realm of playfulness. As in this scene, the characters are ultimately only teasing each other, and thus provoking more (inappropriate) laughter. The reader can then understand that the use of mockery is not meant to insult, but to keep amusing each other.

Similarly, in *PWMOV*, most comedy is gained by mocking occasional side characters. Poppy and Alex travel each year to a new destination in which they by default run into

colorful people to make fun of. For instance, on one of their trips they take a water taxi ride, driven by free-spirited Buck:

Buck waves his hands like he's talking to us for the whole length of the (much-too-long) ride, but we can't hear him, which makes both Alex and me semihysterical with laughter after the first twenty minutes of inaudible monologue.

"WHAT IF HE'S CONFESSING TO A CRIME RIGHT NOW?" Alex yells.

"RECITING THE DICTIONARY FROM BACK TO FRONT," I suggest.

"SOLVING COMPLEX MATH EQUATIONS," Alex says.

"COMMUNICATING WITH THE DEAD," I say.

"THIS IS WORSE THAN—"

Buck cuts the engine, and Alex's voice far overshoots it. He drops his voice into a whisper against my ear: "Worse than flying."

"Is he stopping to kill us?" I whisper back.

"Was that what he was saying?" Alex hisses. "Is it time to panic?"

"Look out that way," Buck says, spinning leftward in his chair and pointing ahead.

"Where he's going to kill us?" Alex murmurs, and I turn my laugh into a cough. (*PWMOV* 96-97)

This scene creates unique situational comedy, and the banter is driven by the witty back-and-forth joking between Alex and Daphne. Their quips are surprising, and incongruous, enough to amuse the audience, laced with playful mocking of Buck. Here, as in the previous example, mocking is not mean-spirited toward Buck, even though he is the subject of comedy. The jokes made at his expense here create an in-group between Alex, Daphne, and the audience, because due to the loud noise of the water taxi, he is excluded from the joking. On their way to this vacation, Alex admitted to being afraid of flying, and kept asking Daphne when it would be acceptable to panic. Therefore, when he references this earlier joke, it can also be appreciated by the audience.

Both of the narratives of *FS* and *PWMOV* feature common types of narrative techniques of humor that are strongly connected to how the relationships between the characters are formed and enforced throughout the narratives. Additionally, how the audience perceives the use of comedy has an effect on the reader's sense of connection to the narrative and its characters. The witty banter shared between Daphne and Miles as well as Poppy and Alex create in-groups that include the audience. Ultimately, as I have argued, these humorous in-groups have a crucial role in ensuring that the reader empathizes with the narrative.

### 2.1.2 Inside Jokes

As I have now discussed, other types of comedy present in the narratives form in-groups crucial for the construction of narrative empathy, but the most significant and frequently used type is inside jokes. Inside jokes, as much as humor overall, are based on the notion of superiority. They are formed by referencing something only certain people witnessed or would be able to understand. Inside jokes can be shared between families, friends, spouses, even between coworkers. They create an in-group of people that share the same intelligence of the context and content of the joke, thus bonding them over their shared sense of what is funny. Any reader, including myself, can recognize the feeling of having been left outside of a joke. The typical response, “you had to be there,” however, does not apply to the reader regarding the narratives of *FS* or *PWMOV*, since they have been included in the jokes all along. Ultimately, inside jokes can also be used to reinforce relationships without a direct need to elicit laughter, but merely amuse. As in the previous examples, the following illustrations are only of dialogues between Daphne and Miles, and Poppy and Alex.

In comparison to *PWMOV*, *FS* has fewer recurring jokes. There are only two that the characters keep referencing, and a few others that receive just one mention later on. Of course, it is more logical that Poppy and Alex share more inside jokes between them than Daphne and Miles, since they have known each other longer and have had time to travel and come across situations which they can keep referencing throughout the years. Daphne and Miles are only getting to know each other, but then again, for that reason alone, the inside jokes they share are important for a closer bond to form between them, with the reader as their witness.

One of the most revisited remarks in *FS* is ‘Gill from MEATLOCKER.’ Shortly after moving into Miles’s apartment, Daphne and Miles go out to a bar together. Miles takes her to a neighborhood bar called MEATLOCKER, where they end up taking shots with an old biker named Gill (*FS* 30). One day, a few weeks after this, Miles is showing Daphne around Waning Bay. Miles works as a supplier for a winery, and has a long list of vendors for basically any product. Daphne is intrigued by this, and quizzes him:

“What about if I need green beans?” I ask.

“Ted Ganges Green Bean Farm,” he says.

“And if I need to take out a hit on someone,” I say.

“Gill from MEATLOCKER,” he answers, not missing a beat.

At the look on my face, a laugh rockets out of him. “It’s a joke, Daphne. But Gill did mention he was looking for homes for a litter of kittens.” (*FS* 111)

This joke is made at Gill's expense, though harmlessly, as a surprising element to an otherwise mundane topic. They are both familiar with the guy, and that he was a slightly mysterious biker, which is why Daphne is not instantly amused by the joke, although even the reader can recognize that Gill was, most likely, not a hitman. Miles' comment about the kittens adds on to the mystery of Gill as well as the ridiculousness of his remark. The purpose of the inside joke here is to reaffirm their bond as friends. Gill comes up again, when Miles and his sister, Julia, visit Daphne and her coworker, Ashleigh, at the library where they work. Miles returns to the group after speaking to someone else:

“What did I miss?”

“Nothing,” Julia says innocently, right as I say, “Your sister wants to get into a knife fight.”

“I'll call Gill,” Miles says. “We can get her a kitten at the same time.”

“Am I missing something?” Julia asks.

Ashleigh sidles up then too. “Just one of their adorable *best friend* jokes,” she tells Julia. (*FS* 159-160, emphasis original)

This time, Miles continues the incongruity of Daphne's joke about Julia and the knife fight, by returning to his assumption of Gill as a hitman. Moreover, he mentions the kittens, even though they are not related to the topic of conversation in any way, but nonetheless bring more comedic value as a surprising element. Here, their bond is affirmed through Ashleigh, who notes that she and Julia are not part of the in-group between Miles, Daphne, and of course, the reader. The reader gains a sense of superiority for understanding the joke, since Julia is left clueless, and Ashleigh expresses her interest in the joke by referring to it as “adorable.”

There is a similar instance with an inside joke in *PWMOV*. This joke is recurring, and is first introduced on Poppy and Alex's trip to Victoria, a vacation they took ten summers ago. Exhausted from the day, their visit to a gallery creates a monumental joke between them:

The gallery girl in the Empress Hotel who spent thirty minutes trying to sell us a six-inch, twenty-one-thousand-dollar bear sculpture while we dragged our tattered luggage around behind us.

“We don't really...have money...for that,” Alex said, sounding diplomatic.

The girl nodded enthusiastically. “Hardly anyone does. But when art speaks to you, you find a way to make it work.”

Somehow, neither of us could bring ourselves to tell the girl that the twenty-one-thousand-dollar bear was *not* speaking to us, but we'd spent all day, since then, picking things up – a signed Backstreet Boys album in the

used record shop, a copy of a novel called *What My G-Spot Is Telling You* in a squat little bookstore off a cobbled street, a pleather [sic] catsuit in a fetish shop I led Alex into primarily to embarrass him – and asking, *Does this speak to you?*

*Yes, Poppy, it's saying, Bye-Bye-Bye.*

*No, Alex, tell your G-spot to speak up.*

*Yes, I'll take it for twenty-one thousand dollars and not a penny less!*

(PWMOV 92-93, emphasis original)

“It speaks to me,” and other variations of this phrase/inside joke go on to be repeated multiple times throughout the story. Primarily, it serves as an important reminder to Poppy and Alex of their very first vacation together and consequently connects the reader to what can be learned of their friendship over the course of a decade. The joke is created at the expense of the girl working at the gallery, and invites feelings of superiority, since Poppy, Alex, and the reader understand that spending that amount of money for art is out of the question. The girl is then the subject of comedy, though it is not mean-spirited. Furthermore, an average reader can appreciate the intertextual references made in this scene. The album by the Backstreet Boys actually does not include the famous track “Bye-Bye-Bye,” since it is a hit by the band NSYNC, which any American woman in her 30s should recognize. This joke is mentioned again later during the same trip:

Most of the crowd has drifted off, Alex included, and the fire has burned down to embers when Buck asks me if I want to come inside, and I tell him yes, I do.

I almost tell him that *going inside speaks to me*, then remember that's not a worldwide joke, it's just one of mine and Alex's, and I don't really want to say it to Buck after all. (PWMOV 101)

Similarly to how Gill created an in-group in *FS*, “it speaks to me” creates an in-group which excludes Buck. Poppy is aware of the inside joke, and her refusal to confuse Buck by uttering the phrase, indicates that sharing inside jokes with someone close to you, like Alex, is intimate. This joke has created a bond between Alex and Poppy, in which the reader is included. The reader can understand Poppy's motivation here, and appreciate the intimacy of the joke.

Furthermore, as can be observed from the previous example, inside jokes can be shared in an endearing way. They can be meant to remain between the participants, and not to create a sense of superiority when uttered around others who are excluded from the joke. Inside jokes, like in the previous example, can remind one of another, and thus function as simply fond memories shared with someone important. Additionally, this kind of humor can

be utilized to show affection and concern for someone. An example of this is the “Ryan Reynolds” joke in *FS*. Miles’s sister is coming to visit, and Miles is worried that she could be a burden and bother to Daphne:

“If she gets to be too much and you need me to kick her out,” he says,  
“just say the word.”

My throat feel desert-dry. “What should the word be?”

“Ryan Reynolds,” he suggests.

My laugh breaks up some of the growing tension. “That’s two words, and also comes up way too often in casual conversation.”

“Okay, just scream enough at the top of your lungs and I’ll use context clues to figure it out.” (*FS* 147)

For additional context, Miles and Daphne had been watching a Marvel movie. Ryan Reynolds famously plays the role of the main character in the Marvel movie titled *Deadpool*. Miles suggesting to use his name for a sort of safe word is surprising, but fitting and funny given the context of the situation. They end up not needing the safe word around Julia, but it is put into use when Daphne’s father is visiting. Daphne’s relationship with her father is difficult, since he has not been a present and supportive father for her. She continues to have faith in him, which is why she asks him and his new wife to join her and Miles’s plans while they are in Waning Bay:

“Is there room for two more in our plans?” I ask Miles.

His head cocks. I can tell he’s waiting for more of a signal than that, so I add, “We could probably make it work, right?”

He holds my gaze for a second, giving me a chance to change my mind, to scream “Ryan Reynolds!” at the top of my lungs.

I don’t.

He turns a tamped-down version of his impishly charming smile toward them. “You all bring bathing suits?” (*FS* 261)

Miles is aware of the conflicts between Daphne and her father, and despite not being officially her boyfriend yet at this point, shows support and care for her. Daphne’s thoughts about the aforementioned safe word prove that she could use it in a way that would only attract his attention, and he would help her, instead of reacting to it with just a laugh. Here, “Ryan Reynolds” is an inside joke between them, but the purpose of the joke can be altered to show affection in a given situation. Additionally, the reader has learned about Daphne’s challenges, and knows the joke, and is therefore, too, able to react to the remark with endearment and empathy rather than simply finding it funny.

In addition to altering jokes to fit different situations, jokes can be combined for more of an empathic effect. In *PWMOV* Poppy and Alex constantly combine inside jokes, which illustrates a significantly close bond between them. The narrative clearly introduces each joke so that once they are referenced again and combined with other jokes, the reader is able to comprehend the entire context of the remarks made. The bigger picture, then, shows a nuanced relationship with jokes that connect to not only sweet moments but also emotionally difficult times. Through understanding the combined inside jokes, the reader can experience empathy by observing the different remarks that define a close relationship. In the story, two jokes stand out in regard to this.

The first of these jokes is related to a car, which Poppy has rented for their present-day vacation. It is a Ford Aspire that is in quite bad condition. The awful state of the car has inspired a joking game between Poppy and Alex:

“It aspires to have working air-conditioning,” Alex says.

“It aspires to *not* smell like a butthole that’s smoking a blunt,” I say.

We’ve been playing this game since we got on the highway heading into the desert. Sasha the Ceramist had mentioned in her post about the car that its air-conditioning came and went at random, but she’d left out the fact that she’d evidently been using it to hot-box for five years straight.

“It aspires to live long enough to see the end of all human suffering,” I add.

“This car,” Alex says, “isn’t going to live long enough to see the end of the *Star Wars* franchise.” (*PWMOV* 80-81, emphasis original)

These jokes are made to improve the otherwise unfortunate mood and events of the day. However, they face other challenges during that same trip. The second joke is formed around the broken air-conditioning in their Airbnb. For context, the owner of the apartment is called Nikolai. When they arrive at the apartment, they notice that the balcony is walled off with plastic sheeting:

Alex steps out beside me. “Construction?”

“I feel like I’m inside a ziplock bag, *inside* of someone’s body.”

“Someone with a fever,” he says.

“Who’s also on fire.” (*PWMOV* 90, emphasis original)

As per usual to their dynamic, the somewhat inappropriate and exaggerating, joking banter is used to lift the mood. Later, Alex has a back spasm that forces him to stay in bed for a couple of days. He apologizes for the trouble he has caused Poppy, but Poppy brushes it off by blaming Nikolai. Eventually, the Ford Aspire joke is added to the banter. Alex has been able

to lower the temperature of the apartment down to seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit, which Poppy thinks is amazing:

He laughs. "This is a pathetic thing to celebrate."

"The theme of this trip is Taking What We Can Get," I say as I sit back down beside him.

"I thought it was Aspire," Alex says.

"Aspire to reach seventy-five degrees"

"Aspire to fit inside the swimming pool at some point."

"Aspire to get away with the murder of Nikolai." "Aspire to get out of bed." (*PWMOV* 160)

Here, the jokes made are identical in form to the jokes they made initially at the expense of the rental car. However, what is special about this conversation now, is that they have combined the Ford Aspire jokes with their jokes about the awful Airbnb. At this point, their trip has been nothing but miserable. For additional context, they have not even been able to cool off in the pool due to it being full of people every day because of the heatwave. The reader is aware of Poppy's quest to rekindle with Alex, and empathizes with the unfortunate circumstances of the trip that make it difficult for Poppy to succeed in her efforts. However, the jokes keep the mood light-hearted, and may even evoke empathy in the reader through the bond they share. The reader observes them connect again, even if it is clouded by disappointing events.

The humor in both novels is especially highlighted through the clever use of inside jokes. The jokes serve to form a bond between the characters, as well as include the reader in the events that unfold. The jokes can be made, like other types of humor, at the expense of others, but also to provide the other person emotional support. When such humor is shared, it can be used as a tool to show affection and care for the other person(s) involved. Above all, regarding the aims of this thesis, inside jokes are a crucial narrative technique in evoking empathy in the reader. A close connection between the participants of the narratives always includes the reader, thereby ensuring that reader experiences empathy along with and for the characters as the bond between them grows stronger.

## 2.2 From Humor to Empathy

As I have now demonstrated, creating an in-group between the reader and the characters is not only possible through the use of inside jokes, but also other types of humor. Especially when one character is the subject of humor, and a sense of superiority is created between another character and the reader, an in-group always includes the audience of the narrative.

However, the effect of such humor that includes its audience is not to only elicit amusement and laughter, but more importantly to also evoke empathy. Considering this more broadly in terms of the connection formed by a narrative, Andreea Deciu Ritivoi finds empathy to be grounded in a relationship (63). In order for empathy to exist, we must recognize and share the feelings of another person as we begin a relationship with them (Ritivoi 63). Humor, as I have now discussed, has an important role in forming as well as maintaining a relationship with someone. In terms of fictional narratives, then, the reader can be, and arguably is, at the center of such relationships. The reader gains insight into the feelings of characters and into the relationship dynamic between them. Therefore, empathy is likely to form as a result. Indeed, in connection to what I have observed here, Suzanne Keen theorizes that it is specifically ‘bounded strategic empathy’ that operates within an in-group (“Narrative Empathy” 215). It originates from mutual experiences as well as experiences that lead to feeling with familiar others (215). More broadly, strategic empathy is a kind of empathy curated by the author to influence the emotional response of the reader through a fictional work (224). However, such as with humor, empathy can be unintentionally evoked (222). Therefore, even though I find that humor can evoke empathy, it is difficult to say whether this is done intentionally or unintentionally. Taking this into account, I am not interested in the intention of humor used, but rather that its ultimate effects include the sense of empathy.

While, to the best of my knowledge, dialogue and humor specifically have not been the focus of much research concerning narrative empathy, still much has been argued, and theorized, about narratives in general. Jèmeljan Hakemulder recognized already in 2000 that it was often believed that reading literature had an effect on the empathic abilities of readers (11). Later, in 2006, Suzanne Keen argued the same: Empathy can be evoked by not only learning about the condition of another person, but also by reading (“Narrative Empathy” 208). Keen found also that in addition to understanding someone else’s perspective, memory and experience are connected to empathy (213). In fact, Hakemulder made the same observation that relevant personal experiences of a reader shape the empathic response they have (71). More specifically, the intensity of an empathic response depends on how recently and frequently the reader has had or thought about a similar experience to that represented in a narrative (Hakemulder 71). Of course, then, regarding humor, sharing a similar sense of humor with the characters, and overall relating to the references they make, enhances the emotional connection a reader can have with the narrative.

An example of this, one that specifically appeals to the average reader of *FS*, is a conversation Daphne has with Miles regarding a phone call he overheard. Miles learns that Daphne’s mom is into CrossFit, a form of exercise that includes strength training and weightlifting, and he admits to sometimes hearing related sounds from Daphne’s bedroom:

“The screams and clanking metal I hear from the other room when you’re on speakerphone.”

“Oh, no,” I say, “that’s unrelated.”

“I don’t want any more information,” he plays along. “I feel totally uncurious.”

“My regularly scheduled calls with Christian Grey are completely mundane.”

His brows pinch. “Who?”

“It’s from a book,” I say. “Never mind.” (*FS* 126)

Here, the reader and Daphne share the same sense of humor, but for Miles, Daphne’s joke represents failed humor. Jokes that go unnoticed, sarcasm that is not detected, references and irony that are not understood, represent failed humor. Nancy D. Bell recognizes the notion of subjectivity regarding failed humor and points out that “not everyone will be amused by the same things” (357). Bell relates that the comprehension of humor is similar to understanding serious conversations (358). “The hearer must be able to decode the language used” as well as understand the incongruity of the joke (Bell 358). While Bell finds that giving up on humor when it is not understood can be a solution to save the person’s dignity, I believe this does not directly apply to narrative humor (360). In narrative, a joke may not land between the characters, but it can still be understood and appreciated by the reader. This could be true especially if the expected audience of a narrative is similar to the narrating protagonist. In the case of this last example, then, Miles does not understand the reference to Christian Grey, but I assume an average reader of chick lit does. Christian Gray is the male love interest in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, which any avid romance reader over the age of 30 has most likely read, or at least is familiar with. This sort of humor not only creates an in-group between the reader and Daphne, since the reader has been able to connect with a reference from their real life, but also enhances the emotional connection of the reader to the narrative overall.

Moreover, once readers connect with the perspectives of the characters, they are able to intensely experience the emotions, thoughts, and even desires the characters are expected to have (Hakemulder 150). Especially regarding romance literature, readers can expect the narrative to provide certain features, such as amusing, emotional, and endearing moments shared between the characters. The relationship dynamics that are portrayed are then not only understood and perceived through the perspective that is provided, but they also may appeal to the reader as something they desire and envy in their personal life. Indeed, as Hakemulder states, through reading, one may imagine their life as someone else and thus gain a better understating of who they would like to be (150). I would then suggest that, when humor is given a key role in the relationship between the main characters, the reader can

more readily experience empathy for them, and additionally feel a sense of longing for a similar experience in their real life.

Furthermore, Hakemulder relates that research has shown that stories that focus on the experiences of characters, rather than stories that contain action and suspense, are read more slowly and with deeper attention to detail and events (74). In other words, slower reading speed allows the reader to consider and reflect on their own emotional experiences more thereby connecting to the elements of the narrative (Hakemulder 74). It is possible then, that literature which emphasizes relationships between characters, such as romance novels, are more readily inclined to stimulate empathy in the reader. After all, the events are often mundane, but time is spent on slowly building relationships through dialogue and conflicts between the main participants of the narrative. I would then suggest that in the case of Poppy and Alex in *PWMOV*, for instance, experiencing empathy for their conflicts is increased through the slow pace of the narrative. The reader learns about their relationship slowly through different vacations that the pair has taken over the years. Once Poppy and Alex go on their final trip, and Poppy begins her quest to rekindle their relationship, the reader can empathize with each inside joke Poppy attempts to reference that get ignored by Alex.

“It’s pretty good,” he says.

“It speaks to me,” I say, but if he catches the reference to that very first trip we took together, he ignores it, and my heart sinks. It’s possible that all those little moments that meant so much to me never meant quite the same thing to him. (*PWMOV* 155)

By this point, the reader has been introduced to their relationship dynamic, and most likely has begun to support Poppy’s mission to gain Alex’s favor again. The reader has observed the creation of each inside joke and then is able to understand the sting Poppy feels when her amusing efforts are dismissed. Inside jokes are special specifically because they are equally shared within the in-group. The in-group consequently demonstrates the strong bond created between the characters, and disappointment is expected if the bond falls apart. Later, Alex does admit to remembering everything and to understanding every reference Poppy has attempted to make. His dismissal of Poppy’s efforts is due to his fear of Poppy not loving him the way he loves her, and once this is revealed, their reunion is quite cathartic. In this instance, narration through Poppy’s perspective guides how empathy is evoked. The reader is more inclined to side with Poppy’s mission, and may feel empathetic when Alex has seemingly significantly distanced himself from their relationship. The reader has, as I discuss in the following chapter, connected with Alex through his portrayal otherwise, but only after Poppy learns about his feelings does the reader find more empathy for him again.

Finally, Hakemulder and Keen have similar observations regarding the perspectives and narrators of narratives. Hakemulder notes that “[a] story written from the perspective of a particular character may stimulate readers to understand and elaborate on that character’s emotions and goals, and thus enable them to take his or her role” (73). Hakemulder considers empathy to be more specifically ‘role-taking,’ where an emotional response stems from imagining oneself in the position of another person (153). Meanwhile, Keen reports that narrative theorists have found that narrative techniques that provide an interior representation of the mental and emotional states of characters, such as the use of first-person narration, contribute to the reader’s empathetic response (“Narrative Empathy” 213). I have now examined humor as one part of the relationships, as well as personalities, of the main characters, and now move on to further discussing their other traits that contribute to the reader connecting to the narrative and responding empathically. The following chapter focuses on characterization as a tool for narrative empathy, of which the first-person narration is a key part.

### 3 Characterization, Narration, and the Reader

In this chapter, I examine the characters of the novels further regarding how the narrator presents them to the reader. In the previous chapter I concluded that their use of humor is part of their personalities and relationship dynamics that appeal to the reader, but additionally their other traits have a significant role in attracting the reader and creating a sense of connection to the narratives. I begin by conducting an analysis on the male love interests, Alex and Miles, through extracts of dialogue and narration pertaining to them. I consider how the narrator describes them as attractive, admirable and loveable, not only to be experienced by the protagonist but also the reader. I hypothesize that in order to keep readers engaged in romantic narratives, they should become emotionally, and physically, attracted to the love interest, and in the relationship forming between him and the protagonist. Therefore, I move on to analyzing the narration, or more specifically the narrators more closely. I suggest that the narrator describing their own experiences and perceptions creates a closer bond with the reader; the reader can either feel more connected to the storyline, or even imagine themselves as the narrating protagonist. Furthermore, these aspects of characterization through the narration serve as a tool for experiencing narrative empathy. Attraction toward the love interest and relatability with the protagonist attach the reader to the story, thus ensuring empathy can be more readily experienced.

#### 3.1 Constructing Characters in Narrative

While characters are created by the author of a narrative, characterization, or the construction and portrayal of characters, is also related to the readers' experience with the narrative. Even though as readers we understand that characters in narratives are fictional, we cannot help but add human experience. Daniel Schwarz provides a useful example of this: We do not see fictional characters like we would physical statues (87). Physical statues have a set form, but fictional characters, no matter how detailed their descriptions are, leave aspects up to the imagination of the reader (Schwarz 87). Furthermore, as a story progresses, the reader's perception and mental image of the characters may change; thus, reading becomes quite dependent on even the selectivity of human memory (Schwarz 87). The perspective we as readers add to fictional characters is driven by our real-world experiences and expectations. Indeed, Baruch Hochman finds that we identify characters in literature through qualities we can recognize from life (48). Even if the characterization of a character is symbolic, we are still able to consider which of our own experiences it could correspond to (Hochman 48). Therefore, Hochman argues that we construct our images of characters based

on our knowledge and experiences (56). This sort of response to narratives is of course human nature. We read characters in real life and literature; we consider our understanding of other people as we do fictional characters. This is guided by our idea of what people are like and how they operate (Hochman 59). Hochman lists eight categories, and their opposites, based on which we view characters. These include aspects such as coherence, complexity, transparency and closure (Hochman 89). Such categories overlap, and together create a complete image of a character. Characters can be coherent and whole, as well as complex and less open. What I consider interesting about Hochman's observations is that when we are presented with realistic characters, we may come to realize that we cannot comprehend their motives just as we cannot with people in real life (128). Again, even though we understand narratives as fictitious, we may find aspects akin to the real world. However, characterization in narrative should be looked at as something rather final. The character has been written, and how they act and grow has been predetermined by the author. Ultimately, as Schwarz states: "Characters in the novels are means by which we learn about true and false, integrity and dishonor, motives and obsessions" (97). He also suggests that characters have power to affect our worldview, shape our beliefs and the emotions we feel (97). Through characters, then, narratives cause us to reflect, make us consider different perspectives, and stimulate emotional responses in us.

According to Suzanne Keen, formalist and poststructuralist theorists view characters as "nonhuman word-masses, existents, actants, narrative-men, Nobodies, or the products of semes traversing proper names" ("Readers' Temperaments" 295). However, I share Keen's opinion that, despite this, readers regard characters as more human, and can consider them to be like friends or neighbors, rather than hypothetical beings (295). Keen argues that it is common readerly practice to like and hate characters, as well as connect with or distrust them (295). I would suggest that such practices require seeing the characters as more human-like, and thereby feeling human emotions regarding them. Returning to a previous notion, then, Keen finds that even though readers are aware that the fictional characters are "make-believe," they still feel emotions toward them, and imagine them as life-like beings (309). As I discussed before, this reaction is normal to reading; We add human experience to our perception of characters.

This thesis focuses especially on the analysis of the main characters, or protagonists, of Henry's novels. In fact, when discussing reader response with a focus on narrative empathy, the central characters of a narrative are most useful for analysis. Indeed, W. J. Harvey relates that the protagonists have a more complex and varied effect on evoking our beliefs, sympathies and revulsions than other characters (56). Protagonists as characters are fully established, their motivations and history are clear, and they evolve as the story goes on (Harvey 56). However, this does not negate the effect other "background" characters may

have on us. Background characters appear more as voices than actual individuals and finalized characters, but they may function as “useful cogs in the mechanism of the plot” (Harvey 56). For instance, as Harvey finds, background characters can play a pivotal part in forming, and providing depth to, the society in which the protagonists exist (56). This could then include different kinds of representation. For example, the protagonists of both *FS* and *PWMOV* are ethnically white Americans and present as heterosexual. The background characters in each novel provide depth to the fictional realities through representation of diversity and unconventionality. For instance, in *FS*, Miles introduces Daphne to his friends, Barb and Lenore, who are an older lesbian couple in charge of a farm in rural Michigan. In *PMWOV*, Alex’s brother marries a man of Asian heritage, despite having grown up in a Catholic family in the more conservative state of Ohio. The novels, then, through the background characters that represent different age groups, sexualities, ethnicities and even occupations, provide descriptions of deep fictitious worlds. Moreover, as Harvey finds, through our perception as readers, characters that represent different mixes of individualities can extend to become a commentary on the world (69). More broadly, this serves to support a more meaningful interpretation of a work as a whole. After all, we are not meant to only understand the work but also who we are in relation to it (Harvey 73). Connecting and identifying with fictional characters not only engages emotional responses in us, but also causes us to reflect on our own experiences and the impact the work may have on us.

Furthermore, the way readers relate to a narrative, as well as reflect on the contents of it, can be highlighted through the perspective of the story. For instance, in *FS* and *PWMOV*, through first-person narration where the protagonist is the narrator, the reader is granted both the descriptions of events by the narrator as well as their inner dialogue concerning the events. In connection to her theory of narrative empathy, Suzanne Keen clarifies that character identification is not a narrative technique, but rather a consequence of particular techniques of characterization (“Narrative Empathy” 216). Keen notes that narrative theorists commonly regard that one route to promoting character identification is through the use of what is known as first-person self-narration (219). Additionally, this kind of internal perspective contributes to evoking empathy in the reader (Keen, “Narrative Empathy” 219). Through first-person self-narration we learn about the thoughts, experiences and relationships of the narrator-protagonist, and thus we are able to form a closer bond with them. Indeed, Amy Coplan presents a similar conclusion; she refers to several studies that have found that readers tend to position themselves with the protagonist in the narrative (141). She argues that how the reader engages with a fictional narrative includes taking up the perspective of the characters (Coplan 143). Of course, this brings us to experiencing empathy, because taking the perspective of another causes one to imaginatively experience their reality. I would then argue that the perspective of a narrating protagonist only enhances this

experience. However, Coplan states that experiencing narrative empathy is not limited to any one character (149). Within a narrative, the reader can shift between different perspectives (Coplan 149). I agree with Coplan, and suggest that in the case of Henry's novels, the reader experiences empathy toward the protagonists as well as the love interests.

In the following section, I discuss Henry's characters, Alex and Miles, as realistic and appealing characters. I consider them reflecting Hochman's categories. There are many central aspects that need to be taken into consideration when constructing characters, but here I find the categories of coherence and complexity most useful. As coherent characters, they present favorable traits such as stability and trustworthiness. As complex characters, they provide nuanced histories and more room for understanding different perspectives than merely those of the narrating protagonist or even one's own. Even though the reader may instinctively assume the perspective of the narrating protagonist, they can still empathize with and understand the perspectives of other characters, such as Miles and Alex.

### 3.1.1 Heartthrobs: Characterization in the Novels

Alex and Miles are the main male love interests of *Funny Story* and *People We Meet on Vacation*, respectively. They are both straight men in their thirties, although in *PWMOV*, because of the flashbacks, Alex's character is also described during different ages in his life. I argue that much like any male love interest in the romance genre, they possess many admirable traits that ensure that the protagonist, and the reader, can become attached to, or even fall in love with, them as characters. Alex and Miles are described as conventionally attractive, physically fit, and, perhaps most importantly, emotionally attractive. They are caring, considerate, supportive, and overall admirable. All in all, they are the epitome of a dream partner for the protagonist, and possibly for the average reader. However, I should note that as with the subjectivity of humor, not all readers are amused by the same things. Therefore, this analysis is conducted with the assumption that the way the male characters are portrayed is considered attractive and desirable to the characters as well as the reader. This assumption is made with the interest of the average reader in mind: a career-oriented intelligent woman most likely desires maturity, emotional support and equality in a partnership. Furthermore, I consider the effects the representation of these characters have on the empathetic response of the reader. I discuss how becoming attached to these characters through their descriptions in the narration ensures that the reader more readily empathizes with them.

As an overview, the way Alex and Miles are described in the novels resembles how men are sometimes referred to as 'heartthrobs' in popular culture and the mainstream media. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word 'heartthrob' to relate to a person, or thing, that

arouses romantic feelings. Nowadays, though, the definition also relates to an attractive male celebrity. Of course, neither Alex nor Miles are exactly celebrities, because they are fictional characters, but considering the popularity of Henry's novels and the typical kind of heartthrob adored by the mainstream media, I would argue that the term is likewise applicable to them. In fact, in *Urban Dictionary*, a website where users can anonymously submit their definitions of words, such as slang words or words related to pop culture, many definitions lack the requirement for celebrity status. For instance, user 'annonymus125256' defines a heartthrob as "a female or a male who is very good looking and have people swooning over them." Similarly, user 'Amy\_Marie97' defines it as "one who is considered pleasing to the sense, often resulting in increased respiration, increased circulation to the face, and a noticeable 'pounding' in the chest." According to these definitions heartthrobs tend to be people that are especially pleasing to the eye to the point where they cause an infatuation. Therefore, in the same way one could become infatuated with an attractive celebrity, they could view a fictional character as a heartthrob. Generally, celebrities are quite distant from an average person, like fictional characters can be. They have narratives built around them that control what is shared with the public, and leave key aspects of their lives only attainable to people in their private circle.

Additionally, this term is mostly used in reference to men, but hardly ever women. For instance, Christian Allaire lists favorite heartthrobs of 2023 in a *Vogue* article, which only features male celebrities such as Timothée Chalamet, Jacob Elordi and Austin Butler. Allaire's definition of a heartthrob includes mentions of 'chiseled arms', abs and jawlines, in addition to a flashy sense of fashion. I was unable to find a confirmed explanation as to why this particular word cannot be used to describe women. However, discussions on online forums like *Quora* hypothesize that the term is more male-oriented due to gender expectations related to how 'fangirls' stereotypically react to male celebrities they are infatuated with: fainting, maybe screaming, and of course, heart-throbbing.

How, then, are the heartthrobs, Alex and Miles, portrayed? What kind of an effect does their characterization have on the expected reader? This will most likely not involve any fainting, screaming, or heart-throbbing, but some response, nonetheless. Here, I inspect what kind of traits they have been given through extracts of dialogue and narration in each of the novels. I intend to look for consistencies and similarities in the narrations that result in them being perceived as desirable and appealing characters. A good place to begin is the description of their first appearances in the stories. In both of the novels, the narrator has known the male love interest prior to describing them to the reader.

In *PWMOV*, Alex is first mentioned when he and Poppy are playing a game of roleplay, where they are pretending not to know each other yet, in a bar during one of their annual vacations:

In a sticky-floored bar called only BAR, scouring the meager crowd for my target.

He's sitting at the corner of BAR's bar itself. A man about my age, twenty-five, sandy haired and tall with broad shoulders, though so hunched you might not notice either of these last two facts on first glance. His head is bent over his phone, a look of quiet concentration visible in his profile. His teeth worry at his full bottom lip as his finger slowly swipes across the screen. (*PWMOV 2-3*)

Later, the narrator adds aspects of personality to Alex's character: "...the oldest child of a widower with the most vocal anxiety of anyone I've ever met..." "strict religious upbringing in direct opposition to most of his passions; namely, academia..." and "the most truly strange, secretly silly, and intensely softhearted goof-ball I've had the pleasure to know" (*PWMOV 6*). These descriptions of Alex not only create an image of a physically fit man, but also someone who is educated, sweet and funny. As stated before, I suggest these characteristics appeal to a typical reader of chick lit who is looking for a partner capable of emotional and educational intelligence, for example. The narrator does not go into too much detail, however, thereby leaving some aspects of Alex up to the imagination of the reader.

Moving on to Miles, then, the narration in *FS* gives the reader quite a contrasting first impression of the love interest:

The door swings open, and a weed fog wafts out.

My roommate's dark brown eyes are ringed in pink, and he's in nothing but a pair of boxers and a funky knitted afghan wrapped around his shoulders like a very sad cape. Considering the overall climate of our hotbox apartment, I can only assume this is for modesty's sake. Seems like overkill for a man who, just last night, forgot I lived with him long enough to take a whole-ass shower with the door wide open. (*FS 4*)

This early description of Miles is not especially appealing; he seems to be quite aloof, but somehow still considerate. The narrator does not judge him, though, and seems to find Miles's appearance amusing, leaving room for future improvement. Indeed, the scene goes on to reveal that Miles has been watching the film *Bridget Jones's Diary* alone in his room, and he responds defensively – "It's a good movie!" – when Daphne asks him about it (*FS 5*). At this point in the story, both Miles and Daphne are in the midst of getting over difficult break-ups, and Miles's way of coping shows an emotionally intelligent side of him. When he admits to watching and enjoying a romance film, an activity considered to be more feminine, he

shows an understanding of a healthy relationship with his own masculinity. All in all, these contrasting first impressions leave the reader intrigued by the possible love interests.

A typical pattern in chick lit novels is that the first man to interact with the protagonist ends up being the ultimate love interest. No matter how unappealing the first impression of him may be, the character will redeem himself, and therefore the reader is prepared to give him a chance for character improvement. Indeed, this is what happens with the portrayal of Miles:

Miles is handsome, if not the kind of man to make your jaw drop and hands sweat in sight. That was Peter – *TV* handsome, Mom called it. The kind that knocks you off balance from the start.

Miles is the other kind. The kind that's disarming enough that you don't feel nervous talking to him, or like you need to show your best angle, until – wham! Suddenly, he's smiling at you with his messy hair and impish smirk, and you realize his hotness has been boiling around you so slowly you missed it. (*FS* 29)

Miles's scrappy stoner look is quickly replaced with an image of a disarmingly attractive and kind man. As the novel goes on, through different interactions, Daphne describes Miles as a man who listens, supports, pays attention, and cares. He comforts her when she is feeling down, and notices which drink order she likes and brings it to her unprompted. They often discuss their ex-relationships, and Miles encourages her to move on. One of the most pivotal changes in their dynamic happens when Daphne tells her ex, out of revenge, that she is dating Miles, even though she is not. Miles's reaction to this is not angry, but rather amused as he says: "That fucking rules" (44-45). This additionally shows Miles's supportive side; he goes along with Daphne's decisions without judgement.

Alex's character, in many ways, is similar to Miles. For instance, he walks with his arm around Poppy, and lifts it to shield her when it starts raining. He asks to take pictures with her when they are travelling, even though Poppy reminds him that he hates having his picture taken. He is even respectful when he meets Poppy's family:

In all the years I've known him since, he's still never said an unkind word about any of it. He even sent flowers to my dorm when Rupert, the husky, died. *I always felt we had a special connection after that night we shared*, he jokes in the card. *He will be missed. If you need anything at all, P, I'm here. Always.*

Not that I have the note memorized or anything. (*PWMOV* 64, emphasis original)

For additional context: Poppy considers her family odd and is ashamed to introduce new people to them, and Rupert, the husky, humped Alex's leg upon meeting. Even though Alex did not know the dog well, and had an awkward time meeting him, he still wrote a kind-hearted card that he knew Poppy would appreciate. These descriptions of Alex render him considerate, attentive and admirable. As with Miles, the little things they seem to do for Daphne and Poppy, respectively, add up to an image of men the reader cannot help but connect and ultimately empathize with.

Additionally, the physical attraction, though partly left up to the imagination, keeps the target reader even more engaged. Both Alex and Miles are granted, for lack of a better word, sexy descriptions. For instance, Daphne fawns over Miles after she notices that he has shaved his beard:

The thing, it would seem, Miles has been hiding all along is that he's diabolically handsome, with angular cheekbones and a jaw that sort of looks like it might cut you if you were to run a hand over it. Or your tongue. You know, whatever. (*FS* 157)

The narrator paints a specific image of an attractive man, with focus on features that are typically regarded as alluring, but still broad enough to leave room for imagination. A similar, descriptive, scene is in *PWMOV* when Alex steps out of the bathroom when he and Poppy are sharing a hotel room:

Alex steps out of the bathroom in a cloud of steam with a towel wrapped around his waist, one hand securing it at the hip as the other swipes through his wet hair, leaving it sticking up and out messily. "Your turn," he says, but it takes me a second to compute through the haze of his long, lean torso and the sharp jut of his left hip bone. (*PWMOV* 113)

This image of Alex is like something out of a movie, similar to how late-heartthrob Eric Dane once famously stepped out of the shower in an episode of *Grey's Anatomy*. Through this description combined with the narration of Poppy's reaction to seeing him, the reader can connect to Poppy's emotions, and imagine themselves there. By this point, both novels have focused more on creating an emotionally appealing image of the male love interests, but in order to build romantic tension, some heated descriptions are to be expected. The narration, then, has a good balance of adoration and lust. Both of these engage the reader and ensure that they also become attracted to the love interest. Along with the humorous in-groups that invite the reader into the relationships, these aspects provide an opportunity to experience deeper connections.

Alex and Miles are more or less consistently portrayed as supportive and trustworthy companions. Not only are their personalities and appearances appealing to the protagonists, but they also share the same sense of humor, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter. They are, however, granted more complex backgrounds as well. In addition to relationship issues that they have with their respective partners, both Alex and Miles have experienced difficulties with their immediate families. For instance, in Miles's case, his mother was abusive, and he made efforts to protect his little sister from it:

“You weren't the adult,” I say.

“I was what she had,” he argues.

“And you did what you could,” I tell him.

“That's the thing, though.” He shakes his head. “I don't know if I did. I don't trust my perception of things. That's what my childhood did to me. Made my brain into a fucking fun house where I might *think* I'm standing on the floor, but really I'm stuck to a wall. I never know if I'm feeling the right thing, and I'm tired of fucking things up for the people I care about.” (*FS* 217, emphasis original)

Background information about Miles's childhood and emotions not only presents him as a more vulnerable and nuanced character, but makes him more coherent, complex, and open for interpretation. Scenes where he has issues with opening up to Daphne or trusting himself in a committed relationship can be proof of how his childhood experiences have affected his character as an adult.

Similarly, Alex is granted a vulnerable and emotional side. He and Poppy end up confessing their feelings for one another, but Poppy remains indecisive:

“I'm not a vacation from your real life,” he says. “I'm not a novelty experience. I'm someone who's been in love with you for a decade, and you should never have kissed me if you didn't *know* that you wanted this, all the way. It wasn't fair.”

“I *want* this,” I say, but even as I say it, a part of me has no idea what that means. ...

“You don't know that,” Alex says. “You just said you don't know, Poppy. I can't leave my job and my house and my family just to see if that cures your boredom.” (*PWMOV* 316-317, emphasis original)

Throughout the novel Alex has been consistently loyal to his habits and what he is like as a person. Poppy has been aware of what he has wanted from his life, relationships, and career all these years, while she has been unsure and less settled. Yet, Alex has been holding onto the hope that she would come around, and their lives would become more compatible. In this

scene, he is portrayed as more of an independent character, rather than just a love interest to the protagonist. His needs are voiced, and he isn't willing to blindly sacrifice everything for Poppy.

Adding history and emotional issues to the storylines of Alex and Miles ensures that they can be perceived as more whole, coherent, and realistic characters. After all, I would suggest, readers are more readily able to connect with such protagonist characters than with less nuanced background characters. Even though the reader may not directly identify with the male love interests, their interest in and desire for the attractive personality traits and appearances enables the readers to become attached to them. Thus, when the narrator shares the emotional histories of Alex and Miles, the reader is ready to empathize with the characters and their experiences. I discuss this feature in more depth in the section of this chapter dedicated to narrative empathy.

### 3.1.2 First-Person Narration in the Novels

Both *People We Meet on Vacation* and *Funny Story* utilize first-person self-narration in the narratives. Daphne, a single librarian in her 30s, is the narrator for *FS*, while Poppy, a single travel journalist in her 30s, is the narrator in *PWMOV*. Both novels begin with the protagonists facing new challenges in their lives: Daphne's fiancée has left her after she uprooted her life by moving into his small hometown, and Poppy is feeling unhappy at her dream job, unable to figure out where to find motivation again. While both novels focus on building romantic relationships, the personal development of the protagonists is never disregarded. This section is focused on analyzing the self-narration of Daphne and Poppy. I suggest that their descriptions and narration outside of dialogue with other characters serve as a means to build a connection with the reader. Through realistic and varied themes the reader is able to relate to, and identify with, the narratives. As I will also discuss in the following section, this sense of identification has a role in affecting the reader's sense of empathy toward the characters and their experiences.

I consider Daphne and Poppy to be, for the most part, reliable narrators. They narrate their own experiences and share inner dialogue, and the credibility of the narration is never put to question by other characters in the stories. Since Daphne and Poppy are in charge of what aspects of their realities they share with the reader, and at times it is clear they withhold information, they can also be considered partly unreliable narrators. In general, the information they leave out has a purpose in building suspense and creating surprising elements in the narrative. For instance, toward the end of *FS*, Daphne and Miles have a falling out. Following this, Daphne decides to take time to herself and sort out her friendship with Ashleigh, confront her absent father, and consider her next move with her career.

However, regarding her career, she does not reach a decision. It is not until she reconnects with Miles that the reader learns, through their dialogue, that she has decided to stay in Waning Bay, but move out of Miles's apartment. This information is still reliable, even though the narrator had not shared it with the reader. Indeed, in relation to this, W. J. Harvey finds that reliable narrators share their view of their reality within the novel, and even if it does not resemble our reality as readers, we can still render the narration as sane, decent, candid and mature (74). Furthermore, Michał Głowiński relates that regarding first-person narration, both the narrator's lack and possession of knowledge are equally important (109). The narrator's lack of information does not immediately equal unreliability.

In my analysis, I especially consider the information the narrator chooses to share with the reader. The narration in both novels is detailed, open, and, for lack of a better word, friendly. The narrators do not directly ever address the reader, but the tone of the narration outside of dialogues features pieces of inner dialogue and colorful descriptions that invite the reader to connect with the narration. Both Daphne and Poppy often narrate some of their inner thoughts, in order to emphasize the situations they are in. For instance, this is present in *FS* when Daphne learns that Miles had secretly gone to speak to her father:

And maybe I should be mad that he overstepped. But I don't feel mad. I feel *raw*. I feel like the boundary between me and the world is stretching thinner, making me tender and vulnerable, a water balloon fit to burst.

*Why wouldn't he have just told me?*

But I know the answer.

I know Miles, and he knows me.

I look toward the road, the sparkling band of blue water, the scraggly beach trees blurring behind a wall of tears.

*He knows me.*

*He loves me. (FS 358, emphasis original)*

Here, the narrator is already describing their thoughts regarding how they feel toward the situation at hand. The additional italicized phrases indicating inner dialogue add onto the inner turmoil the protagonist is going through. The first italicized phrase even resembles a rhetorical question directed at the reader, who of course cannot answer. However, this way, the reader is invited to the thought-process of the narrator.

Likewise in *PWMOV*, in a scene with a similar kind of tone, Poppy and Alex are discussing romantic feelings, and debate whether or not they could go back to being just friends:

"You were right. We can't go back."

His teeth skim over his bottom lip. “I mean ... would you really want to?”

“I just want...” I shrug.

*You, I think.*

*You.*

*You.*

*You. Say it.*

I shake my head. “I don’t want to lose you again.” (*PWMOV* 233-234, emphasis original)

Poppy’s inner dialogue invites the reader closer to her dilemma, and her desires. Through this type of narration, it is arguable, then, that the reader is more closely involved in the events of the stories. Additionally, even though the reader is aware that they are observing a fictitious world, and cannot influence the events, they find themselves responding emotionally to them. For example, in the case of this previous quote, the reader feels frustration toward Poppy’s inability to confess her feelings to Alex, especially since the reader has been let in on what she is truly thinking. By this point in the story, the reader has been observing the development of their relationship and is expecting them to end up together. Poppy is delaying the awaited outcome, but the reader is unable to intervene in order to expedite the process. Indeed, Baruch Hochman relates that “[w]hen we respond to literary characters, we in part abandon ourselves to fantasy, letting our feelings govern the direction of response” (40). In other words, the reader is aware the reality is not their own, but they are still able to understand and feel appropriate emotions. As such, character identification can be experienced as a by-product of first-person self-narration.

Character identification is, however, a complex term to discuss. Norman N. Holland makes a distinction between identification in psychology, and in the literary world: In literary terms, identification refers to someone putting themselves in the place of another character, whereas in psychology identification means a permanent change in someone that is driven by influence from the characters of other people (204). Holland emphasizes deeper structures of adaptation and lifestyle as determining factors for experiencing identification, rather than more superficial qualities such as gender, age, culture, or class (205). He argues that once we internally and psychologically match with a character, rather than find more external likeness with them, we are able to identify with them, or feel what they feel (Holland 205). This is an interesting notion, since I have considered the aspect of subjectivity in terms of connecting with the experiences of the characters. I suggest that being able to find common ground with characters, albeit through superficial qualities and external likenesses, enables the reader to become more engaged with the narrative than they would if they did not share these traits with the characters. However, I do not negate the power of more psychological qualities having an impact on the experience of the reader. After all, once Daphne and Poppy share

their emotional issues that are affecting their respective relationships, it is possible to better empathize with and understand the choices they have made, no matter how frustrating they may at times feel to the reader.

Both *FS* and *PWMOV*, through the narration, introduce and discuss themes relating to finding independence, satisfaction and happiness, and emotional growth. These aspects are most specifically discussed in pieces of narration where the narrators share their insights and conclusions about their realities. Throughout the novels, then, the reader is able to witness their change in attitude and imagine themselves having taken part on these emotional journeys, so to speak. In *FS*, for example, Daphne is trying to find a balance between independence and the ability to trust someone new in a relationship. In the beginning of the novel, she narrates her experience with people, which shows her lack of trust in stability: “Life I’d learned, is a revolving door. Most things that come into it only stay awhile” (*FS* 17). As the novel goes on, it is revealed that she and her mother had moved around a lot growing up, and she had become accustomed to always changing sceneries and having to make new acquaintances. However, in the end, after her experiences with Miles in Waning Bay, she faces her fear of committing to one place and to one person:

And things I can’t dream up too. The ways it will all go wrong, and the beauty that can only happen in the wake.

A second act I fell into, and the home that I chose, as much as it chose me.

I can’t wait. I can’t wait for this whole world I’ve invited to surprise me.  
(*FS* 377)

Instead of expecting disappointments, she adapts to a new attitude of dreaming about the future and hoping for surprises in life. Even if the reader cannot relate to her experiences, dreams, or even fears, her success in finding happiness and adapting to a more optimistic outlook on life can be considered empowering to any reader. Indeed, the more emotional revelations, rather than the superficial resemblances, allow the reader to better connect with the deeper themes of the novel.

Furthermore, Daphne’s interest in independence outside the confines of a relationship suggests a clearly feminist approach to the narration, one that decenters men and relationships in the narrative. Considering these novels represent the chick lit genre, I consider it important that the narratives aim to emphasize female empowerment and self-reliance. This is most present in Daphne’s post-breakup storyline:

For three years I’ve been eating like him, exercising like him, working tirelessly to befriend *his* friends and impress *his* family, going to his favorite

breweries, and all along I thought it was my idea, *my* life. Only now, without him in the picture, absolutely none of the rest of the picture makes sense.

I'm not sure what parts of me are *him* and which parts are genuinely my own. And I want to know. I want to know myself, to test my edges and see where I stop and the rest of the world begins. (*FS* 89, emphasis original)

The narrative of *FS* discusses how Daphne's lack of stability during her adolescence affected her image of relationships. Only when she was able to disconnect herself from her partner, did she realize that she had been discarding her own desires for some time. For the rest of the novel, even though Miles is involved, Daphne's wants and needs are centered. Indeed, when they reconnect in the end, Daphne shares this with Miles:

"You mean so much to me, Miles," I say. "So much. But you can't be everything. You were right that I'd love it here. I do. And you're a huge part of why I want to build a life here. But I can't build it around you. If this ends, I need to know that I don't just disappear. I need to have my own stuff that's not about anyone else. Whether it works out between us or not, I need that." (*FS* 375, emphasis original)

The male love interest, though portrayed as a complex character, is only a vessel for support and love, but never something the protagonist could not live without. Daphne's emotional journey has a feminist purpose in representing the possibilities women have in the modern world, regarding career and relationships. The intimacy of the narration regarding Daphne ensures that the reader can experience her emotional growth up close, either by empathizing or identifying with her. An average reader of chick lit may even relate to her experiences and find a sense of unity with the narrating character.

In contrast to Daphne's experience, Poppy appears to find herself too independent. Even though she shares different relationships she has been in over the years, she has remained quite stubborn in her ways and incapable of settling down. She rejoices about freedom and self-efficiency, but ultimately finds that the inability to lean on someone else is hindering her opportunity to have supportive love in her life. Less like *FS*, *PWMOV* highlights love and partnership above career and self; in the end, Poppy is willing to make great changes in her life in order to stay committed to Alex. However, before this, and during most of the story, she had expressed no interest in serious commitment. For instance, all throughout the novel, Poppy applauds herself for having made it out of her and Alex's hometown, Linfield, Ohio, where she never felt like she fit in. The life she describes in the novel is grand, with an apartment in New York City, and a career that takes her across the

globe meeting new people. Alex has opted to stay as a teacher in Linfield, which Poppy often attempts to joke about. The element of surprise is introduced when Poppy reveals to the reader that she has quit her job as a travel journalist, and is attempting to find a balance between her life in New York and Alex's in Linfield:

We'll stay in Betty's house while he fixes it up and I sit on the floor, eating Twizzlers and finding new ways to make him blush. We'll tear down wallpaper and choose new paint colors. We'll drink diet soda at dinner with his dad and brothers and the nieces and nephew. We'll sit on the porch with my parents looking out over the wasteland of Wright Family Cars Past. We'll try on our hometown the same way we've been trying on New York together. We'll see how it fits, where we want to be. (*PWMOV* 360)

Before Poppy had thought that she was at her happiest when travelling to different corners of the world, constantly meeting new people. In the end, she finds herself enjoying a simple life with Alex in Linfield, a town she used to hate. Unlike *FS*, or other chick lit novels, Poppy's narration in *PWMOV* offers a contrasting take on love and independence. Even if Poppy's choices would not align with the reader's wishes, they are still able to connect to the storyline through self-reflection. The narrative appeals to the reader through portrayals of maturity and sensibility in relationships by emphasizing the need for communication and compromises between partners. A feminist approach can be applied to Poppy's experiences as well: Not all women crave solace and self-reliance; yearning for a shared life with someone is an acceptable and available option as well.

The descriptions of experiences by the protagonists in the narratives enable more in-depth connections to the central characters and the relationships between them. Having already connected to the characters through the construction of humor and in-groups, descriptive self-narration offers a closer, and more personal, perspective on the stances and expectations of the narrators, as well as the love interests. Arguably a deeper understanding of the situations and experiences of the characters ensures that readers more readily respond emotionally and empathetically to narratives.

### **3.2 From Characterization and Narration to Empathy**

This chapter has focused on demonstrating how characterization and first-person narration impact the relationship between the reader and the participants of the narrative. The relatable and identifiable accounts given by the self-narrating protagonists, along with amusing and nuanced descriptions of the love interests, allow the reader to experience more

real-life emotions toward fictional characters. In the previous chapter I concluded that humor plays a central role in evoking empathy in the reader, especially through the formation of humorous in-groups that include the reader. Here my interest is to examine how narration and character descriptions can accentuate that effect. In other words, while it is a widely recognized fact that narratives have the ability to evoke feelings in readers and cause them to feel emotions toward fictional characters, in this thesis I discuss different narrative techniques that have a central role in evoking this response.

Narratives invite readers to situate themselves into fictional worlds and become acquainted with fictitious people. It is human nature to attempt to understand the feelings of others, even if they are simply make-believe and thereby only seemingly similar to us. However, narratives are limited to only evoking emotional responses. Suzanne Keen finds that readers can feel intense interest in characters, but also notes that there are rules to fictionality which dictate that readers must realize they are unable to feel any real obligations toward them (“Narrative Empathy” 212). That is, readers can become attached to characters to a point where they care about them, but for instance when a character is in distress, readers cannot act as though they are obligated to help them, precisely because they are fictitious. This lack of obligation, however, does not diminish the real emotions readers feel when they read. Empathy, then, is an expected and valid response to experiencing narratives.

Similarly to what I already discussed in the chapter related to humor, I suggest that bounded strategic empathy can be created through narration and characterization. To reiterate: Bounded strategic empathy forms through shared experiences and experiences that lead to feeling with familiar others (Keen, “Narrative Empathy” 215). In this case, it is exactly feeling with familiar others that ensues once the reader has formed a relationship with the participants in the narrative. Narratives where the perspective is provided through first-person self-narration, and the accounts of the love interests provide personal details, offer opportunities for close relationships to form where the reader is able to connect with the narratives through more emotional and psychological qualities. I suggest that if the reader is able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the characters’ backgrounds and motivations, it is easier for the reader to imagine the appropriate emotions, and thus empathy can be more readily experienced. While I suggest this, Keen’s argument is less direct: Superficial and simple descriptions of what a character experiences may be enough to cause the reader to empathize (“Narrative Empathy” 219). Additionally, sometimes revealing too much may hinder this response. Keen notes that sustained exposure to a character’s thoughts or voice could decrease the opportunity for character identification and for readers to empathize (219). This, of course, could relate back to subjectivity and if the reader has found a friendly connection with the participants in the narrative. In other words, I suggest that if the reader considers themselves included in the relationships of the narrative, additional intimate

details of the characters would only increase the sense of connection instead of restricting it. Ultimately, Keen states that first-person self-narration is thought to invite “an especially close relationship” between the reader and the narrator (220). Narration that provides an internal perspective is the best route to character identification and readers’ empathy (Keen, “Narrative Empathy” 219). I would then conclude that even if internal perspectives could decrease the opportunity for relating to the narrative, it is still a more productive route to evoking narrative empathy in the reader than through other types of narration. Therefore, I consider the close relationship and the intimate perspective to work in favor of creating a sense of empathy in the reader.

Regarding the primary materials then, once readers have established a relationship with Alex and Miles, empathy toward them can arise from both amusing and unpleasant situations. Both narratives respectively grant them more complex backgrounds than other secondary characters in the narratives, making it possible for the reader to better understand their motivations and emotions. An instance of an amusing situation the reader empathizes with is Miles’s openly emotional way of coping with his difficult breakup:

As soon as he starts the car, “The Tracks of My Tears” by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles comes on full blast.

A deceptively happy-sounding song about being incredibly depressed. I try and fail to swallow a laugh. Miles gives a sheepish smile.

“No idea how *that* got on.”

“This truck is probably haunted,” I agree.

“Exactly.” He pulls out along the gravel drive. “And if the soundtrack to *A Star Is Born* starts playing, just don’t be alarmed. Because the ghost likes that one too.”

“This ghost gets more tragic by the second,” I say.

“He’s perfectly fine, thank you,” Miles says. (*FS* 77, emphasis original)

The reader is able to empathize with Miles through his portrayal as a character as well as the relatable situation at hand. The reader can relate to listening to sad music in the car after a breakup, and empathize with Miles’s ability to find humor in the situation. Miles’s choice of music portrays him as open, vulnerable and emotional, which the reader can appreciate and understand. This scene also provides the reader with more intimate details about him and his perspective. Since the narrative has mainly focused on Daphne’s emotional journey, these depictions of Miles ensure that the reader is able to connect with his experiences as well.

While primarily empathy can be evoked by amusing or unfortunate events, it also arises from situations where they are misrepresented by the narration. Especially self-narration at times represents Alex and Miles in a disreputable way. While I consider the narrators to be

reliable, their accounts do not relate exactly what the male protagonists feel. Therefore, when the narrators, Daphne and Poppy, experience doubt toward Alex and Miles, the reader may feel conflicted about whom to primarily empathize with. The reader may more readily experience character identification and empathy toward the narrating protagonists, but still remain optimistic regarding Alex and Miles.

For instance, in *PWMOV*, once the reader learns that Poppy is actually in love with Alex, they empathize with Poppy when it is revealed that Alex had been planning on proposing to his long-term on-and-off girlfriend, Sarah. The reader can understand Poppy's hurt and disappointment, and may even feel frustration over how clueless Alex is about Poppy's feelings. However, these feelings may subside once the reader learns that Alex has been harboring feelings for Poppy the entire time; her depiction left out the possibility that Alex might be in love with her, too. This does not, however, make Poppy any less of a reliable self-narrator. She has not had access to Alex's perspective and has only been narrating her experiences and perceptions.

Something similar to this is present in *FS*, when Daphne and Miles have a falling out after Miles forgets to pick her up after work. Daphne attempts to find out where he has gone and begins to suspect he is planning to get back together with his ex, after he fails to properly explain himself via text. Daphne's suspicion grows when her ex shows up to her apartment to tell her that he has ended things with Miles's ex, and that Miles is helping her move out. Daphne understands that this is where Miles has gone and is hurt by his lack of communication regarding the situation. The reader begins to question Miles's integrity as a character due to Daphne's depiction and feels empathy toward Daphne and her disappointment. However, it is later revealed that Miles had driven hours to confront Daphne's absent father and had not wanted to share the truth with her, because she would not have approved. Ultimately, she is touched by his gesture, and the reader can empathize with Miles's intentions.

In both of these instances, the reader, due to the perspective of the narrator, is more inclined to assume the worst of the male characters and side with the narrating protagonist. However, having connected and become attached to the male love interests, it is possible for the reader to remain hopeful about the outcome of the situations. The reader arguably does not lose the ability to empathize with the male characters despite the temporary misrepresentation of their actions. I would suggest that the intention of these disreputable depictions is not to harm the connection the reader feels toward the love interests but rather serve as a way to create suspense in the novels. They work as plot points before the final climax where the protagonists and love interests finally end up together.

Finally, the narrative technique of first-person self-narration emphasizes the close proximity of the reader to the narrative through the use of storytelling that resembles

dialogue. The narrators share stories within the main story that enhance the experience of character identification in the reader, along with narration that recognizes that the story is being told to a reader. However, the reader is not exactly addressed, but the sense of familiarity is gained. For instance, in *FS* Daphne narrates her experience of moving in with Miles:

He did me a huge favor letting me move in. ...

He needed to replace Petra's half of their shared rent. I needed a place to sleep. Did I say sleep? I meant weep. (*FS* 6)

Another similar example is from *PWMOV*, after Poppy has realized she has feelings for Alex:

When I look back up at him, he's beaming at me, and I think, *I love you more now than I ever have*. How is it possible that this keeps happening with him?

"Can we take a picture together?" I ask, but what I'm thinking is, *I wish I could bottle this moment and wear it as perfume*. It would always be with me. Everywhere I went, he'd be there too, and so I'd always feel like myself. (*PWMOV* 180, emphasis original)

In these extracts, the narrators propose rhetorical questions to the reader in order to convey their emotional responses to their situations. Daphne's approach is more humorous, while Poppy narrates her feelings of confusion. Neither of them addresses the reader, but the proposed questions add an aspect of dialogue to their self-narration. Through the use of this narrative technique, the reader is able to gain a deeper understanding of Daphne's and Poppy's emotions, as well as feel connected to the progression of events.

Furthermore, I suggest that the relatability of the narration is connected to subjectivity, and the expected reader. As I have previously cited, Janice Radway finds that romance reading in general is a vessel for women to experience attention and nurturance they otherwise lack in their real lives (442). Additionally, through romance reading, women are able to explore their shared challenges in a male-dominated world, and imagine a world where their needs would be adequately addressed (Radway 442). Therefore, gaining a sense of relatability from romance novels is subjective, because it primarily affects female readers. However, chick lit novels tend to offer depictions of female experiences that are not necessarily demonstrations of challenges but rather situations women can relate to and find positively cathartic. For instance, in *FS*, Daphne narrates her experience of her friendship with her coworker Ashleigh: "I've never had this kind of friendship before, the sort you see women have in movies, where they spare each other none of the gory or lusty details, the best friend who teaches you how to put in a tampon at thirteen, or texts you from the bathroom

the night she sleeps with someone for the first time” (*FS* 340). Daphne’s lack of supportive and healthy female friendships in her life can be a relatable aspect to a reader that has craved something similar in their life. Arguably, reading about someone’s similar experience is cathartic. Likewise, if the reader cannot relate to Daphne, they can feel empathetic for what Daphne has shared, as well as feel pride over the female friendships they do have in their real lives.

Another quote that appeals to the reader regarding relatability is from *PWMOV*, when Poppy is ill:

Whenever I’m sick, I just wish I were in Linfield. Lying in my childhood bedroom, its walls papered in vintage travel posters, the pale pink quilt Mom made while she was pregnant with me pulled up tight around my chin. I wish she were bringing me soup and a thermometer, and checking that I was drinking water, keeping up on ibuprofen to lower my fever.  
(*PWMOV* 241)

This piece of narration evokes empathy in the reader through the ability to relate to Poppy’s miserable condition, and her reminiscence of what it was like to be sick and be taken care of by her mother. While the novel represents Poppy as an independent career-oriented woman who takes pride over having moved out of her parents’ house in Linfield, scenes like these remind the reader that this kind of vulnerability is normal, and something the reader and the narrator may have in common.

Narrative empathy then arises from the shared experience and the emotions the reader can understand and relate to. All in all, romance reading, such as reading chick lit novels, includes representations of what an average reader of the genre may crave, find comforting, or feel a sense of nostalgia over. Along with shared experiences of humor, both characterization and first-person self-narration are arguably key techniques that can be utilized to evoke empathetic responses in readers.

## 4 Conclusion

Emily Henry's popular chick lit novels *Funny Story* and *People We Meet on Vacation* utilize narrative techniques of humor, characterization and first-person self-narration, which all enhance the empathetic responses readers have toward the narratives. Even though these novels share many similarities, such as plot progression, types of characters, themes and even jokes, they still excel at keeping their average readers engaged. Targeted at readers that are educated, professional, and often single women in their 20s and 30s, chick lit novels discuss themes, present characters and describe relationships that are realistic, authentic, identifiable and relatable. Through reading these kinds of narratives, readers can gain a sense of emotional gratification, because they are offered attention and nurturance they may not otherwise experience in their real lives (Radway 442). Primarily, chick lit novels represent everyday challenges, messy love lives and unclear career paths that evoke feelings of relatability and validation, but including the readers in the intimate relationships of the narratives ensures that they also experience connection and empathy.

In the introduction to this thesis, I argued that Henry's novels appeal to readers through engaging and appealing narrative techniques of humor and characterization that together have a crucial role in evoking empathy in the reader. Especially the main characters of the novels, the protagonists and their respective love interests, evoke empathy in the readers through their personality traits, shared relationship dynamics, and use of humor. My arguments are supported by secondary sources and an analysis of the primary materials, which was conducted through close reading that focused on pieces of dialogue and narration, and character descriptions. When conducting the analysis, I considered the aspect of subjectivity in my findings: The expected readers of these novels find the humorous dialogue amusing and the character descriptions relatable and engaging, but readers outside of the typical target group may not have the same experience with these narratives. Therefore, I clarified that my analysis expected that generally readers would agree with my findings.

I began my analysis by dissecting the different types of humor utilized in the novels. I found that even though all use of humor can elicit emotional responses, like empathy, in the readers, inside jokes are most effective. Overall, the frequent use of humor serves as a means to strengthen the developing relationship between readers and the participants in the narratives: Readers observe their relationship dynamics, which consist of teasing and witty banter, and begins to understand, and feel included in, the connection they share. Specifically the use of inside jokes creates in-groups that enhance these relationships, thus also enhancing the experience of narrative empathy in the readers.

My analysis continued to examine pieces of dialogue and narration that described the physical and non-physical traits of the love interests. Not only did the narration of the novels

ensure that the readers could imagine the characters as physically appealing, but also their actions, motivations, and histories portrayed them as nuanced, complex and coherent characters that the readers could find mutually enticing. I suggested that detailed accounts of the love interests allow for readers to better understand the characters, and thus more readily experience narrative empathy toward them. I extended my analysis to the narration of the novels, where I focused on extracts of narration that offered comprehensive accounts of the interests and feelings of the narrating protagonists. I concluded that narratives where the perspective is offered through the protagonist, and the love interests are described in depth, enable close relationships to form that consist of the participants of the narratives and the readers. Readers have the opportunity to thoroughly understand the emotions of the characters and thus empathize with them. I concluded that even if detailed descriptions of characters and internal perspectives would decrease the readers' ability to relate to the narratives, they are still more effective techniques to evoke narrative empathy than other types of narration. All in all, shared experiences of humor, characterization and first-person self-narration in Henry's novels are narrative techniques that have an arguably central effect in evoking empathetic responses in readers.

The theoretical framework of this thesis consisted of the theory of narrative empathy, studies of humor in literature as well as different aspects of characterization. In the chapter concerned with the construction of humor, Vandaele's notion of the superiority and incongruity of humor proved especially central to my analysis. The subjects of humor always experience superiority since the target of humor is often presented as inferior, which leads to heightened sense of self-esteem and intelligence in the audience (Vandaele 741). Incongruity refers to the way experiencing something unprecedented, surprising or out of the ordinary invites humor (Vandaele 748). Both superiority and incongruity are present in the extracts I analyze in relation to humor. Likewise, many authors featured in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*, such as Larkin-Galiñanes, Davies, and Bell, provided important sources for the discussion of different types of humor and their effects on readers. Similarly, in the chapter dedicated to characterization and narration, research conducted by Schwarz, Hochman, and Harvey were pivotal for understanding character identification, human experiences with narratives, and how readers ultimately view characters. Regarding narrative empathy, Suzanne Keen's findings created an important foundation for the aims and interests of this thesis. Keen's definition of narrative empathy includes taking into account the effect of characterization: Character identification, which is a consequence of reading that is caused by narrative techniques of characterization, evokes empathy in readers (Keen, "Narrative Empathy" 214-16). While her research does not discuss the effects of humor on narrative empathy, she theorizes that empathy that operates within an in-group originates

from shared experiences that lead to feeling familiar with others (“Narrative Empathy” 215), which I argue to be true concerning humorous in-groups as well.

The novels, through the use of different types of humor, create in-groups that include the readers. As participants of these in-groups, readers form relationships with the characters of the narratives. Ritivoi finds that empathy is grounded in relationships, meaning that in order for it to exist, we must recognize and share the feelings of another person as we enter a relationship with them (63). Experiencing empathy toward a narrative is not limited to any one relationship or character. Coplan explains that readers can shift between perspectives within a narrative, and experience empathy toward multiple characters (149). Her findings proved useful when analyzing both the narrating protagonists and their respective love interests; readers become participants of relationships that include them, and are therefore able to feel empathy toward these different characters. Hakemulder’s arguments only reinforced these conclusions: once readers form connections to the characters, they are able to intensely experience the perspectives of the characters (150). Despite the point-of-view of the narratives being that of the protagonists, readers are still able to connect with the love interests, and narrative empathy can equally be evoked by them.

Furthermore, Genz and Barbon, Farr, Ebert and Radway provided valuable background information on the characteristics and receptions of chick lit and romance reading that helped shape the foundation for the analysis of the primary materials. As I mentioned, some critics deem chick lit as “trashy fiction” (Genz and Brabon 128), but it should not diminish its value as a researchable genre or the effects it can have on its readers. Farr, for instance, has found that chick lit novels, much like any novels, provide affinity, empathy, entertainment, education and engagement to their readers (209). However, chick lit has become a commercial literary phenomenon (Genz and Brabon 128), and the culture of consumerism surrounding it has led to a shallow perception of the genre (Farr 204). Regardless of this, the genuine interest in chick lit novels is ever-growing: Taking Henry’s works as examples, most of her novels have been No. 1 best sellers that have sold millions of copies in the United States alone. The mainstream popularity of the novels, and chick lit, cannot be the product of successful and clever marketing alone; there must be more to the genre that makes readers always come back for more. While I have argued that the narrative techniques of humor, characterization and narration have an effect on evoking empathy in the readers, which then ensures that they find closer connections with the narratives, there is more to be said about what it is exactly that attracts readers to this type of literature. For instance, the social influence and significance of chick lit demands more attention. In polarized and unstable political climates, I would suggest, literature has an impact on creating a sense of unity, catharsis, comfort as well as strength. Chick lit represents the experiences of young Western women and appeals to readers that identify similarly. Considering its overall success and

target audience, chick lit could be analyzed for what it as a phenomenon says about the society it is connected to.

Finally, this thesis has an interest in taking part in the research concerned with the construction and manifestation of narrative empathy. The approach of this thesis is distinctive and aims to offer valuable commentary on the kinds of narrative techniques that play a role in evoking narrative empathy in readers. Even though first-person self-narration and characterization have already received academic attention, to the best of my knowledge, the use of humor in this context has not yet been examined. The use of humor adds an informal tone to a narrative, but still has an important role in affecting the connection readers can form with it. Moreover, chick lit novels, such as *Henry's*, deserve more attention in literary studies. They are comfortable reads and casual in tone, but represent realistic depictions of the world through the eyes of young women, as well as offer contemporary stances on female empowerment.

## Bibliography

- “Heartthrob, N.” Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, Sept. 2025,  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4473084809>.
- “Humour | Humor, N.” Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, December 2025,  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5203477249>.
- “In-joke, N.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, 2023,  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8634702642>.
- “Incongruous, Adj.” Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, December 2025,  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9452743403>.
- “Inside Joke, N.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, 2025,  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6564686110>.
- “Why is that the word ‘heartthrob,’ despite being gender neutral in structure, can only refer to men?” *Quora*, [www.quora.com/Why-is-that-the-word-heartthrob-despite-being-gender-neutral-in-structure-can-only-refer-to-men](http://www.quora.com/Why-is-that-the-word-heartthrob-despite-being-gender-neutral-in-structure-can-only-refer-to-men). Accessed on 12 Mar. 2026.
- Allaire, Christian. “Who Was Your Favorite Heartthrob of the Year?” *Vogue*, 29 Nov. 2023.  
[www.vogue.com/slideshow/hollywood-heartthrobs-fashion-red-carpet](http://www.vogue.com/slideshow/hollywood-heartthrobs-fashion-red-carpet).
- Amy\_Marie97. “Heartthrob.” *Urban Dictionary*, 10 Jan. 2011,  
[www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Heartthrob&page=1](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Heartthrob&page=1). Accessed 4 Mar. 2026.
- annonymus125256. “Heartthrob.” *Urban Dictionary*, 29 Oct. 2017,  
[www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Heartthrob&page=1](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Heartthrob&page=1). Accessed 4 Mar. 2026.
- Bell, Nancy D. “Failed Humor.” *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*, edited by Salvatore Attardo, 1st ed., Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, pp. 356–370.
- Chłopicki, Władysław. “Humor and Narrative.” *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*, edited by Salvatore Attardo, 1st ed., Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, pp. 143–157.
- Colston, Herbert L. “Irony and Sarcasm.” *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*, edited by Salvatore Attardo, 1st ed., Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, pp. 234–249.
- Coplan, Amy. “Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2004, pp. 141–52. *JSTOR*,  
[www.jstor.org/stable/1559198](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1559198).
- Davies, Catherine E. “Sociolinguistic Approaches to Humor.” *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*, edited by Salvatore Attardo, 1st ed., Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, pp. 470–88.

- Ebert, Teresa L. "Chick Lit: 'Not Your Mother's Romance Novels.'" *The Task of Cultural Critique*, University of Illinois Press, 2009, pp. 97–117. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1xcm1m.8](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1xcm1m.8).
- Egan, Elizabeth. "Emily Henry on Writing Best-Sellers Without Tours and TikTok." *The New York Times*, 27. Jun. 2024. [www.nytimes.com/2024/06/27/books/emily-henry-funny-story-tiktok.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/27/books/emily-henry-funny-story-tiktok.html).
- Farr, Cecilia Konchar. "It Was Chick Lit All Along: The Gendering of a Genre." *You've Come A Long Way, Baby: Women, Politics, and Popular Culture*, edited by Lilly J. Goren, University Press of Kentucky, 2009, pp. 201–14. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jcnsv.14](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jcnsv.14).
- Genz, Stéphanie, and Benjamin A. Brabon. "Girl Power and Chick Lit." *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pp. 119–38. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1tqxv9w.8](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1tqxv9w.8).
- Głowiński, Michał. "On the First-Person Novel." *New Literary History*, Translated by Rochelle Stone, vol. 9, no. 1, 1977, pp. 103–14. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/468439>.
- Hakemulder, Jèmeljan. *The Moral Laboratory: Experiments Examining the Effects of Reading Literature on Social Perception and Moral Self-Concept*. J. Benjamins Pub., 2000.
- Harvey, W. J. *Character and the Novel*. Chatto & Windus Ltd., 1965.
- Harris, Lauren Boersma. "The Gospel According to Emily Henry." *The New Yorker*, 9. Jan. 2026. [www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-gospel-according-to-emily-henry](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-gospel-according-to-emily-henry).
- Haugh, Michael. "Teasing." *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*, edited by Salvatore Attardo, 1st ed., Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, pp. 204–218.
- Henry, Emily. *Funny Story*. Penguin Books, 2025. (First published by Berkley 2024).
- Henry, Emily. *People We Meet on Vacation*. Berkley, 2021.
- Hochman, Baruch. *Character in Literature*. Cornell University Press, 1985.
- Holland, Norman N. *5 Readers Reading*. Yale University Press, 1975.
- Keen, Suzanne. "A Theory of Narrative Empathy." *Narrative*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2006, pp. 207–36. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20107388](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107388).
- Keen, Suzanne. "Readers' Temperaments and Fictional Character." *New Literary History*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2011, pp. 295–314. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/23012545](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23012545).
- Khatib, Joumana. "Everything You Need to Know About Emily Henry." *The New York Times*, 18. Apr. 2025. [www.nytimes.com/article/emily-henry-books.html](http://www.nytimes.com/article/emily-henry-books.html).

- Larkin-Galiñanes, Cristina. "An Overview of Humor Theory." *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*, edited by Salvatore Attardo, 1st ed., Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, pp. 4–16.
- Layne, Maya. "Emily Henry on Her New Novel, Ceding (Some) Control Over Her New Adaptations, and Loving Hacks." *Vogue*, 22. Apr. 2025. [www.vogue.com/article/emily-henry-great-big-beautiful-life-interview](http://www.vogue.com/article/emily-henry-great-big-beautiful-life-interview).
- Montefusco, Lucia (Bologna) Calboli. "Captatio benevolentiae". *Brill's New Pauly Online*. Brill, 2006. [https://doi-org.libproxy.helsinki.fi/10.1163/1574-9347\\_bnp\\_e226810](https://doi-org.libproxy.helsinki.fi/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e226810).
- Nykänen, Elise. "Breaking the Ice, Freezing the Laughter: Authorial Empathy, Reader Response, and the Kafkaesque Poetics of Guilt and Shame." *Writing Emotions: Theoretical Concepts and Selected Case Studies in Literature*, edited by Ingeborg Jandl et al., transcript Verlag, 2017, pp. 295–310. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1wxt3t.19>.
- Phelan, James. *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative*. The Ohio State University Press, 2007. *Project MUSE*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27972>.
- Puckett-Pope, Lauren. "Emily Henry on the Wisdom of Modern Romance Novels: 'Love Is Not Just a Silly Story.'" *Elle*, 24. Apr. 2024. [www.elle.com/culture/books/a60569995/emily-henry-funny-story-interview/](http://www.elle.com/culture/books/a60569995/emily-henry-funny-story-interview/).
- Radway, Janice. "Reading the Romance." *Media Studies: A Reader*, edited by Sue Thornham et al., Edinburgh University Press, 2009, pp. 440–50. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrv1h.52](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrv1h.52).
- Ritivoi, Andreea Deciu.. "Reading Stories, Reading (Others') Lives: Empathy, Intersubjectivity, and Narrative Understanding." *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2016, pp. 51–75. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.5250/storyworlds.8.1.0051>.
- Schwarz, Daniel. "Character and Characterization: An Inquiry." *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1989, pp. 85–105. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/30225237](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225237).
- Shardakova, Maria. "Politeness, Teasing, and Humor." *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*, edited by Salvatore Attardo, 1st ed., Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, pp. 219–233.
- Vandaele, Jeroen. "Narrative Humor (I): Enter Perspective." *Poetics Today*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1. Dec. 2010, pp. 721–785. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2010-011>.