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Margaret Mackey

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## Did Elena Die?: Narrative Practices of an Online Community of Interpreters

by Margaret Mackey

One of the problems of studying the behaviors of textual interpretation is that they are seldom susceptible to real-time observation. Much of our interpretive activity is profoundly internal, and it can come as a great surprise to one reader to learn that another reader actually processes text in different ways. (Not everybody actively visualizes while reading, for example, a discovery that usually astounds those who routinely do so.) Furthermore, with most kinds of interpretive textual activity, it is very difficult both to interpret and to report on those interpretive processes at the same time; and think-aloud protocols, although certainly valuable, are undeniably artificial.

These awkward facts make studies of the phenomenology of narrative interpretation very difficult to authenticate, and what we very often achieve is a highly singular and introspective account of how *one* reader or critic achieved a satisfying measure of understanding of a text. These reports are often useful and illuminating but sometimes subsume the plurality and variety of response under the myth of "the reader."

Compounding these difficulties is the rapid development of technological change that may impinge on how new generations of young people understand the achievement of narrative understanding. Children who have grown up with television, video, digital games, and the hyperlinked world of computer texts may indeed be using new protocols of narrative interpretation that are neither visible nor intuitively comprehensible to their elders. Equally, the singular interpretation of the adult critic may reflect interpretive processes that are less meaningful to younger readers. Just as I instinctively think in inches and my children, metrically educated, refer to meters and centimeters as a first resort, so it may be that our narrative comprehension schemas similarly operate on a different basis.

These are substantial barriers to a greater understanding of young people and their narrative processes, and I do not wish to underestimate their importance. Furthermore, we should acknowledge that the developing skills of young people themselves may also be affected by a certain kind of relative diminution of expertise among the adults who surround them. Young people's world knowledge is limited in many ways (as has always been the case), but their skills in handling new media often outshine the capabilities of their teachers, librarians, and parents. When they are more experienced media users

than the adults in their lives, at least in terms of technical finesse, where do they turn for help in fostering narrative understanding?

One short answer is that they turn to each other, and one new factor for those seeking a better understanding of these processes is that contemporary interpretation is much more often social and public than it used to be, back in the twentieth century. The Internet provides a home for many different kinds of communities of interpreters and also provides a convenient record of their commentary.

Drawing on this new resource, I propose a modest case study, with a view to both displaying actual interpretive processes in action and also developing a greater theoretical and practical understanding of how those processes operate. My sample narrative is the final episode of a young adult television program, *Felicity*, created for WBTV by J.J. Abrams and Matt Reeves. This example fortuitously but helpfully raises many productive questions for our understanding of narrative practices, and the insights it enables may usefully transfer to other forms of narrative interpretation such as reading and game-playing.

### *Felicity*

*Felicity*, which aired its final episode in May 2002 after four years, is a cross between a comedy drama series and a soap opera (using the best, non-pejorative sense of that label). Clearly aimed at young viewers, females in particular, it relates the story of a college student through the four years of her university life. The major plot engine is a romantic triangle involving Felicity; Ben, whom she knows from high school; and Noel, whom she meets at college during her first semester. Other main characters are Elena, Tracey (Elena's boyfriend), Sean, Javier, Richard, and Meghan, Felicity's Wiccan roommate. The romantic, academic, and financial exigencies of college life provide major plot complications. There are the usual television exaggerations: all the characters are implausibly gorgeous, they live in astoundingly comfortable surroundings in New York City, and they appear to be able to afford many new and expensive electronic gadgets. At the same time, however, the writers and producers have explored many real problems. For example Sean survives a bout of testicular cancer; Elena and Tracey deal with a major sexual conflict (Elena yearns for a sexual relationship;

Tracey, a committed Christian, is determined to wait for marriage); Felicity's parents separate; and Ben's father battles liver degeneration after years of heavy drinking. Exams, assignments, and issues of cheating, plagiarism, and academic probation also feature in different plotlines. Over the four years of the series, the characters have grown and become recognizable individuals. I would not argue that the show is substantial literature, but I would certainly rate it as more complex and more truthful than much print series literature that deals with eighteen-year-olds and their problems. The way the story is narrated is also of interest; I have described elsewhere ("Television," 389-410) how the characters' own literacies feature in the series, and how their use of contemporary electronic equipment is exploited in a variety of narrative devices used to tell the story.

The conditions of production and distribution have had a major impact on how the series has developed. *Felicity* is a Warner Bros. production, but WBTV has been very erratic in its commitment to the program. Over the years, fans have orchestrated many campaigns to keep the show on the air, to guarantee another series for the new television year, and so forth. These demands have undoubtedly strengthened the friendship bonds among many of the Internet correspondents who discuss *Felicity* online; at the same time, such exigencies of production had very real consequences for the final set of episodes.

The usual television arrangement of serial publication has also had an impact on fans' relationship to the series and its characters—and to each other. Online chatters have grown accustomed to speculating with each other about how particular plotlines will develop. Just as with nineteenth-century serial publication of novels, there is room and time between published episodes for committed readers or viewers to consider many alternative possibilities, heightening their interest in the next production before it even starts. The show's producers have also had the benefit of all this free online feedback (see Sella, 2002).

### ***Felicity*: the Final Series**

The material conditions for the production of *Felicity* were not always ideal and sometimes led to some peculiar outcomes, especially in the last series. The fourth and final season of *Felicity* was divided into two sections, and it would be fair to say that there were three finales. The first run of eleven episodes ended at Christmas 2001 with Felicity and Ben back together after a number of trials. Because the producers were not sure they would be given more time later in the year, they made sure the loose ends were tied up. When the series recommenced in the spring of 2002, the producers were still not clear whether they would be allowed to make six episodes or ten. Accordingly, episode 17 features Felicity's graduation from

college and has the potential to wrap up the whole series. When the final four episodes were permitted, the producers had to find a way to fill the time coherently, and their decisions led to some complicated plotting and viewing.

In order to provide a context for the rest of my discussion, I need to supply a precis of subsequent developments. Because of the pressures of space, I will do my best to include only information necessary to understand the online discussions, but readers should be aware that the resulting truncation does less than justice to the normal narrative range of the program.

By and large, throughout its four years of production, *Felicity* has conformed to the standards of realism (give or take a few qualms about college students living in a luxurious New York loft). Throughout the series, however, there was the occasional nod to something more freaky. Felicity's freshman roommate, Meghan, is a devotee of Wicca, and the occasional episode plot played games with Meghan's Wiccan spells. One whole episode ("Help for the Lovelorn," Episode 11 of the second series) was created as a *Twilight Zone* parody, filmed in black and white with the appropriate menacing music and convoluted plot. There was never any plausible diegetic explanation for this narrative twist, but Meghan's mysterious box of Wiccan accoutrements was at the heart of the plot of this episode. So the idea of *Felicity* going the way of fantasy is not completely unprecedented.

At the beginning of the fourth season, however, the plot develops along realistic rather than fantastic lines. In the first episode, Felicity wavers from her longstanding commitment to Ben and indulges in a one-night stand with Noel. Despite this aberration, she remains committed to Ben, and after some friction, they stay together to the end of the graduation episode.

In episode 18, however, the first episode after the pseudo-finale of graduation, there are many dramatic developments. Felicity's good friend Elena is killed in a car accident, and Felicity becomes very depressed. As a result Ben takes up with a different woman. Noel, meanwhile, has found a new girlfriend and is about to marry her. Distraught, Felicity seeks out Meghan. What she requests is a spell to allow her to travel back in time to the night she slept with Noel—she wants a chance to make good with Noel instead of Ben.

Thus, the final episodes involve time travel and the repetition of months already covered by the series but now featuring a new set of events. This departure is a radical step for a program that has largely featured realistic events and psychology. The doubleness of events compounds through these final programs. Although Felicity's return to the past means that Elena is still alive, the development of the alternative events throughout the second fictional run-through of the fall months leads to Noel's death in a fire that he survived in its first incarnation.

At this point, Felicity again turns to Meghan who locates the man who originally published the time-traveling spell. In the final installment, a double episode, Felicity visits this spell-maker, and together they discuss Felicity's memories as they weave a new spell to undo her time traveling and return her to the point in the future from which she departed (this discussion about Felicity's past enables the producers to incorporate a number of flashbacks from earlier moments of the series as part of the final hour).

On Felicity's return to the future, she finds herself right where she left off, at the onset of Noel's wedding. Noel is still alive—and, mysteriously, so is Elena, who appears with Tracey in the final scene of all the friends gathered together at the wedding party. By the logic established through the plot-lines, it would seem that one set of events or the other should prevail, that either Noel or Elena should not survive—but they both are there as the credits roll.

### A Narrative Puzzle

Like many other television programs, *Felicity* provides the originating subject matter for a large variety of Internet postings (see Mackey, "Television," for a discussion of the role of the official website, the activities of the chat rooms, the multimedia collages of image and music, the fan fiction that takes the characters and puts them into new stories, and so forth). Some fans have been corresponding with each other throughout the course of the four years of the show and are comfortable with each other's proclivities, even in the absence of the normal social information about gender, race, age, and background. (One thing they do know about each other is that very many of them have been college students themselves for all or part of the *Felicity* years; it is striking how many correspondents mention that they started university the same year as Felicity did.) When the final episode aired, these fans were already providing support to each other as they lamented their upcoming withdrawal symptoms and mourned the departure of characters they had come to know and love.

The enigma of what actually happened to Elena disturbed these correspondents very deeply. Some felt betrayed by a careless production that ignored their years of emotional investment in the characters and situations of *Felicity*. Some were intellectually outraged by slipshod plotting and tried to come up with scenarios that had the potential to make sense of this development. Others simply continued to mourn the end of a much-loved show.

For the rest of this article, I am going to explore these online interpretive discussions with a view to developing a greater understanding both of generic narrative interpretive processes and also of the specific, plural, and

social elements of the online community that relates to a particular ongoing narrative. I will largely concentrate on the writings of the site [www.televisionwithoutpity.com](http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com), both to keep the content to a manageable scale and also because the contributors to this site are relatively articulate and sophisticated in making certain responses visible.

I shall focus on four different aspects of this online discussion: the articulation of emotional links to characters and situations, the hermeneutics of the enigma of Elena, the assessment of the arc of the series as a whole over the complete four-year run, and the analysis of the show as an artistic construction.

### The Emotional Investment of Identification

Four years of serial viewing is a considerable investment, and the online fans have much to say about their emotional commitment to the characters of *Felicity*. Dominique Pasquier studied the responses of younger girls (aged 8 to 12) to a French television series, *Hélène et les garçons* (Helen and the boys). His comments apply acutely to many of the online observations concerning *Felicity*:

Teen series do not supply information about society, they supply the emotions around the two main areas a child worries about on becoming an adolescent: friendship and love. Young people don't watch teen series to learn, they watch them to experiment with new feelings.... They want to experience how one feels in these romantic scenarios. At that age, role play is very important. Friends gather in the playground at school and reenact the previous day's episode. The roles might be fixed...or they might change.... But the goal is clear: it is to experience emotions. (352, 354)

Viewers of *Felicity* are not likely to rehearse affecting moments on the playground, but they do make use of their online forum to relive their strong emotional connection to the show. Much of the correspondence over the years has been devoted to the virtues of Ben or Noel as a suitable partner for Felicity, and there is a great deal of "I just melted when..." A typical example is this remark from "yuleminer," writing just as the final credits rolled for the last time: "Oh, my, when Ben went in for the kiss and paused for a second I was seriously swooning." (This and all subsequent quotes until further notice were accessed and printed off on May 29, 2002, from the Television Without Pity site, at the forum listing: <http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/ijsbbs/forum.cgi?a=list&f=11&d=10&t=1188590&n=276>). (All spellings are as in the original documents.)

Postings about the final episode began before it even started and drew on two themes in particular: sadness that the show was ending and curiosity about how the authors would solve all the complications of the plot in just two hours. The precise time listings for each posting provide a surprisingly vivid reminder that we are eavesdropping on real-time reactions. (The program itself, a two-hour special, aired between 8:00 and 10:00 pm EST on May 22, 2002.)

For example, "bass67" (posted May 22, 2:20:10 pm EST) said on the afternoon before the last episode,

I am actually NERVOUS about the final episode. I want it to be wonderful, but I also want it to suck so that I won't miss it as much. OK, of course I want it to be good. Blegh. But I can't wait! I have lost it.

Is anyone going to be on the forum during the show? I will be watching solo \*sniff\* and would love to swap posts during the show. You know, to feel the solidarity and the Felicity love. I am normally not this ridiculous, y'all.

A number of viewers did post as they watched. "yuleminer" (posted May 22, 8:33:12 pm EST) observed, "Commercials are really long, yes?" and later commented (posted May 22, 8:58:42 pm EST), "Keri Russell is just amazing. I'm not crying yet, but I can tell I will!" "Gal3" was timekeeping (posted May 22, 9:44:26 pm EST): "Wow. Only 20 minutes left and it is O.V.E.R. :( ." "brkfstfnys" complained about the flashbacks (posted May 22, 9:12:18 pm EST): "FLASHBACKS?!? They're wasting our last two hours ever on flashbacks? Grrrr! Get us back to the action!" A number of contributors instantly replied to say how much they were enjoying the flashbacks, and "No1uNo" raised a question that would dominate the conversation after the end of the show (posted May 22, 9:19:56 pm EST), "But did she forget about Elena?"

The time-bound nature of the viewing experience was also emphasized by "Tchr Tchr ID Claire" who, the next day, reported on her reactions as follows (posted May 23, 2:38:43 pm EST):

I should have taken a valium last night before the show. I didn't want it to end and kept watching the timer in the upper right hand corner of my screen for the first half because it just wouldn't move along fast enough for me.

Then I had to turn off the timer because I caught myself figuring how much time was left every minute or so because it was moving along way too fast for me! Such emotions for such a great show.

Most of the commentary on the final episodes was positive apart from the specific outrage over the strange issue of Elena. However, approval was not unanimous. "k1j2g3" was vehement in her disapproval (posted May 23, 4:34:12 pm EST):

"Episode was so perfect?!" I can't believe what I am reading here! Didn't anyone else notice with the flashbacks how good the writing and storylines USED to be the first year? How sadly it has degenerated since then?...

I just hate how this show started out so realistic and then dove off the deep end. I am annoyed that they spent the last few episodes going backwards instead of forwards...

Please wake up people! These last few episodes were TERRIBLE! Some of you actually cried? I was rolling my eyes...and I have been a faithful viewer since the very first show. Sigh. I will never forgive JJ Abrams for this! :(

"thecartoonchick" was relieved to read this lament (posted May 26, 4:29:56 pm EST): "Phew! I thought I was the only one who thought these last two ep's sucked hardcore."

Overall, however, the correspondents were happy with the conclusion of the story, with Felicity's ultimate choice of Ben as partner, with the acting, with the music, and with the use of flashbacks as a mnemonic for the series as a whole.

### The Enigma of Elena

At the exact moment that the show ended, two entries were posted that flagged the themes that would continue to run for some days. "bass67" commented on the emotional connection (posted May 22, 9:57:31 pm EST): "me=puddle on floor." And "No1uNo" spotted Elena in the final scene and was the first on this site to raise the alarm (posted May 22, 9:57:35 pm EST): "Wait, what the?? What was Elena doing there? Did I miss something? Uh,?????????????"

"Mbg" joined in (posted May 22 9:57:46 pm EST):

Okay, not that I wasn't thrilled to see Elana—and Tracey—because I was. But how did she get into the original timeline? And if she never died then what on earth led to Felicity getting depressed and Ben sleeping with Claire? Sigh. I loved this episode so maybe I shouldn't quibble, but would have been nice to know exactly how all that came about...

And "Annie Chase" neatly summed up the two themes (posted May 22, 9:58:22 pm EST): "who? what? how? sob sob sob elaina? help me!"

"Rosseveli" was relieved to hear it wasn't her own inadequacies as a viewer (posted May 22, 9:59:52 pm EST): "Oh good... I was afraid I'd be called stupid if I came in here to ask if I missed something that made Elena undead.... it's not just me that was confused, I see."

In these entries and others in this thread, there is a lively sense of viewers revelling in their connections to the characters that some have been following for four years—and also enjoying their connection with each other. But those who thought they were in for an uncomplicated wallow in reminiscence and emotion were taken aback as they realized that the Elena story could not readily be folded into their developing understanding of the plot.

Richard J. Gerrig, in his illuminating book *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, points out how important it is to us to be able to discriminate causal explanations effortlessly:

Several traditions of research on narrative worlds have converged on the single conclusion that the perception of causality is critical: experimentation has shown that comprehension is guided by the search for causal relations and that these causal relations, once recovered, provide much of the global coherence of memory representations. (46)

We make many of these causal discriminations on the fly, "locally in the immediate processing of texts" (Gerrig 57), and use our understanding of causality to direct our attention. The immediate and provisional nature of this kind of assessment often renders it invisible to the outside observer; but in these minute-by-minute reactions to *Felicity* we can see the instant outburst of outrage when causal expectations (in this case both local and global) are so thoroughly upset.

The emotional involvement of the viewers also affected how they responded to this surprise, however. "ShyGirl926" was ambivalent (posted May 22, 10:01:14 pm EST): "Oh, they had me, then they lost me... Ugh! That's so frustrating. And yet, it's a good cheat because I hated that Elena had been killed off in the first place." "SarahJanet," posting a few hours later, had a different emotional response (posted May 23, 2:15:30 am EST):

So. I really enjoyed the episode except for the damn Elena thing...it pissed me off through the ENTIRE episode that nobody even mentioned the fact that she died and it pretty much wrecked the emotional impact that the ending should have had for me.

And "Miranda\_Red" was simply confused (posted May 22, 10:39:42 pm EST): "Ughhh, I need some help

here... Wandering around room very confused, now am muttering to self."

### Online Emergent Hermeneutics

By one minute past ten on May 22, the first tentative explanations began to roll in, along with ongoing expressions of confusion. "Gal3" suggested (posted 10:01:44 pm EST): "I think the last scene was all of them out of character. That's my guess. Cause, it didn't make any sense to have Elaina and Tracey in there. So they could have just been toasting each other to say goodbye."

Even in these early stages of comprehension, "Gal3" is already moving effortlessly between the diegetic world of the *story of Felicity* and the extradiegetic level that we may describe as the *show of Felicity*. Although there are no apparent markers of such a shift within the scene itself, many viewers opted for the idea that the final moment of *Felicity* showed the actors appearing as actors rather than as characters.

Before 10.30 that night, the first "researcher" reported her findings from an alternative source of information. "SwanTheDuck" wrote (posted May 22, 10:27:12 pm EST):

I remember reading about something being off in the final scene in TVGuide, so I went back and checked TVGuide.com and found this quote from Matt Roush's review of the last episode: "Sharp-eyed fans, however, will likely be left scratching their heads at one character's unexplained return in the final scenes. (All we can say is there were scenes in the original script setting this up which must have been cut for time.)" So I guess that explains that! Anybody know where we can find a copy of the original shooting script? Maybe they shot the scenes and will throw them on the DVD set I'm hoping they'll release?

"Levitate This," in the very next posting, drew on a different kind of intertextual connection (posted May 22, 10:32:44 pm EST):

The title of the final ep was "Back to the Future" right? So what if, just like in the film of the same name, Felicity somehow warned Elena of the car crash (like Marty warning Doc about the terrorists)? Considering some scenes were apparently left out of this final ep it's possible we never saw her warn Elena.

"Vetrikk," however, soon raised a question that would continue to bother the posters for many days

(posted May 22, 10:48:41 pm EST): "I was fine with Felicity warning Elena in a scene we didn't end up seeing, but that raises the question of why Ben still cheated if there was no event to make Felicity pull away."

"mbg" provided a succinct account of an explanation that eventually satisfied at least some contributors, when she referred to how Felicity described her past history to the wizard who helped to undo the time travel spell (posted May 22, 11:14:24 pm EST):

I don't think that was the cast party at the end, given that we saw Elana fighting with Javier for the bouquet. She was alive. If I had to guess how... I'd say it's because in order for Felicity to "return" to her future, she had to re-create the future from her memories et al. Ben's cheating stayed because that was the reason she left originally; even if she didn't actively want it to have happened, it had become a key part of her psyche. Plus, she had resolved it and accepted it; it was no longer a source of pain, and by causing her to return to the past it had in some ways had its good points. Whereas Elana's death wasn't resolved and it was a source of pain. There was nothing even indirectly good about it. She hadn't accepted it. When Felicity re-created her future, she subconsciously erased out Elana's death. Why did Ben cheat, though? I don't know. I wish JJ had left in scenes explaining all that. Maybe it'll be on the DVD. Everyone, go e-mail Disney to ask for a DVD.

"mbg" here is drawing on a number of resources: her knowledge of the characters and her own personal understanding of psychology, her awareness that the originally planned episode had not been aired in its entirety, her hopes that a DVD version of the whole series would provide more complete information. Some of these ingredients are longstanding components of conventional interpretive processes in action; others reflect the more plural and contingent nature of text in contemporary culture.

A further source of information was brought into the discussion by "Silly" the following day (posted May 23, 1:06:40 pm EST):

The Elena thing didn't make sense, but in a fashion suspiciously like the DC Craptops, TPTB<sup>1</sup> decided to resolve it off camera, leaving those of us who watched the show obviously confused. The official episode guide at Felicity.com said: "[After hearing Ben's forgive me speech] Felicity suddenly remembers that in the future, Elena is killed in a car accident

while attending Columbia University. Before she goes to bed, Felicity tells Elena to attend Duke University... At the wedding, Felicity is ecstatically surprised when Elena and Tracy walk in. Thanks to Felicity's note, Elena attended Duke where she not only avoided the fated accident but also rekindled her engagement to Tracy." All of that didn't make it into the episode we saw, hence the rounds of speculation.

It is interesting to see these posters looking for sources that involve some kind of authority to weigh against the actual screened episode: they turn to *TV Guide* and to the official website [www.felicity.com](http://www.felicity.com). And other contributors were happy to accept these additional sources as reliable indicators of what should have happened. For example, "darcy" actually used the word "official" (posted May 23, 2:01:26 pm EST):

So it is official—who ever edited Felicity's last episode was on crack. If WB's website specifically stated that Felicity told Elena to go to Duke University so that way she wouldn't be killed in the accident, and yet they couldn't put two lousy lines in the show for the viewers, then that person should be fired. Seriously. The ending made no sense without that scene.

Anyway, thank you to the people that posted this very important piece of info. At least we know that at some point it all made sense.

Expostulations and theories continued to be posted to the site for some time, and some contributors made references to theories posted on other sites. However, there is a marked shift in the nature of the online discussion after the posting of this information from the official website. The fans (reasonably enough, in my view) may not have been very satisfied with WBTV and the editors of the show, but they were at least freed from the most intolerable forms of uncertainty. Noticeably, the discussion began to shift more strongly to issues concerning the series as a whole.

### The Good-enough Interpretation

Some years ago, I worked with readers of a complex young adult novel, *Wolf* by Gillian Cross (Mackey, "Good-Enough," "Imagining"). While I never succeeded in gaining complete and real-time access to their interpretive processes, I did use retrospective think-aloud protocols on a chapter-by-chapter basis and was thus privy to some of their provisional interpretations before they

knew the whole story. What came across very strikingly was the capacity of many readers to be satisfied, at least temporarily, with what I termed a "good-enough reading"—an interpretation that would make enough sense that they could keep going, even though they might reassess their ideas at a later point.

That idea of the good-enough interpretation returned to me as I assessed these struggles for an explanation that was at least adequate enough that the plot glitch stopped interfering with viewers' different ways of saying farewell to a show they had enjoyed over a long period of time. The astonishment and the outrage of these viewers' responses (and I have printed only a sample here) were also a reminder that they fully expected not to be having to make good-enough assessments at the very end of a story. Good-enough is a place-holder; something you establish, on a local and immediate basis, as a way of keeping going. The dogged way in which these chat room correspondents pursue at least a good-enough explanation suggests that it was indeed important for them to keep going long enough to think of the series without becoming annoyed or upset, and to establish a coherent discussion of the complete story. "catsoup" expresses this need fairly clearly (posted May 24, 12:30:32 am EST). After outlining her own theory, she says, "There. Now I can sleep and watch the finale over and over without having issues with the ending. :) (And yes I know it's silly and doesn't make total sense.)"

### Applying the Conventions of Interpretation

Once the Elena question was answered at least to a good-enough degree, the fans shifted to a discussion of the larger story questions of the series as a whole. Should Felicity have wound up with Ben? Should she have opted for Noel somewhere along the way? Should she have turned them both down and gone her independent way? Should she have chosen to return to pre-med or stayed with her art program? How should the story have been wrapped up? And how did particular details dovetail into the final shape of the story?

Peter Rabinowitz has produced a set of reading protocols that provide a useful schema for interpretive processes in action. He elaborated them out of a study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century print fiction, but they work well when applied to narrative in other media also (for example, I found them quite effective in a study of young people playing *Starship Titanic*, a narrative computer game—see Mackey, "Literacies").

Summed up very briefly, Rabinowitz outlines four sets of conventions: rules of notice, rules of signification, rules of configuration, and rules of coherence. In this correspondence about *Felicity*, we can see these conventions being disrupted. Rules of notice involve how we decide

what to pay attention to, and are well exemplified by "No1uNo's" howl of protest when Elena appeared at the end of the final show: "Wait, what the??" Rules of signification deal with *how* we decide to attend to what we've decided to notice, and many correspondents reported not knowing how to make sense of the appearance of Elena (for example, "Miranda\_Red," "Wandering around room very confused, now am muttering to self"). Rules of configuration entail setting events and characters into some kind of order that makes sense, and many viewers found they had to draw on sources outside the text in order to configure events in any plausible way. Their frustration was a testimonial to the degree to which they assumed these interpretive activities should proceed automatically.

In short, the Elena episode had these chat room contributors discussing the breakdown of their normal narrative processing as they confronted a plot development that contradicted other already available information. Their correspondence is interesting in the way it highlights a substantial failure in their efforts to come to terms with a story, the kind of short-term problem that is very often smoothed out of sight when we talk or write about an interpretation after the event. The immediacy of the discussion, and the real-time give-and-take of correspondents who trust each other, meant that they raised questions that might embarrass them in other formats.

Once they resolved their problems to the best of their abilities and collectively produced a good-enough understanding that most of them could live with, however, they moved on, almost immediately, to the final process, the application of rules of coherence. Rabinowitz says these are applied retrospectively after the text is complete, and they involve our effort to make the story the best possible in the circumstances (always supposing we are reading cooperatively—that is, with the purpose of aligning our interpretation with our perceptions of the authors' intentions—, which the vast majority of these correspondents were certainly doing).

There are many examples of rules of coherence being applied to particular texts already available in print. Any critical essay involves at least some application of these rules. What the *Felicity* websites offer is a preliminary and immediate application of these conventions—not the considered and reworked thoughts that are reified into essay form, but the early thoughts and reflections of viewers who have been immersed in a story for a long time and who have only just learned how it ends.

### Reflecting on *Felicity*

Some correspondents produced what in different contexts might be considered proto-character studies. For example "lexyqtpi" assessed Ben at some length. Here is part of her analysis (posted May 27, 5:12:20 pm EST):



re: Ben being a loser/wacko that Felicity should walk away from—while I agree that the resolution of the cheating storyline was way too simple, I don't think the rest of Ben's character necessarily makes him a poor dating choice. So he struggles with school and isn't quite sure what he wants to do with career/life post-college? This doesn't make him a loser, this makes him your average college student. He does have some serious baggage from his childhood/home life but a) he's become progressively better at trying to deal with the issues that come up from that part of his life, and b) he who enters a relationship with no former life baggage, feel free to cast the first stone.

"abs" produced her "first and only post" to comment on the overall shaping of the story (posted May 25, 3:11:43 am EST):

I luv this show for the fact that all the characters have grown up during their 4 years together. Felicity turned from the shy quiet girl to a person who spoke her mind and let her heart direct towards the right place. Ben lacked direction and commitment and at the end he found both. He became a better communicator particularly because he never was able to open up to his true emotions about his father and the hatred that he felt towards him and all this was because of feli.<sup>2</sup> She made him start to trust ppl.

"YuppieLawyer" was one of a number of correspondents who looked at different elements of the final production (posted May 24, 12:19:02 pm EST):

Ben could have been written as just the popular jock, but instead the writers gave us a very complex character who struggled every day to overcome a horrific childhood and to try to be a better man. I also give major credit to Scott Speedman, who brought an amazing depth to the character and found something in him that I'm not even sure the writers originally imagined.

There is much more on this site in the way of extended analysis of plot and character, a certain amount of musing on the dominant theme over the whole series—the issue of deciding who you really are (correspondents are not completely persuaded by Felicity's late move back to pre-med)—and many observations on the writing and the acting. In a short time, these correspondents explored

many different elements of the four years of the series. In the course of their discussions, some of them came up with quite succinct summaries of the important features of the story. For example, "fed\_up\_with\_society" produced a pithy thematic statement (posted May 23, 2:03:51 pm EST):

I liked how these time travel episodes gave her a way to make up her mind between the two (even though the Graduation episode would have been a fitting ending as well.) So a "Choose Your Own Adventure" story became a "Choose Your Path to Happiness" one.

"bvn2rbbr" was even more concise (posted May 23, 8:22:08 pm EST): "'Felicity' was warmth emanating from the television set." And "abs" turned her summative statement back onto a consideration of herself as viewer (posted May 25, 3:11:43 am EST): "Thanks for 4 great years!! I think the greatest thing is that the writers, cast and particularly the characters have made me grow up as well!!"

Not everyone was ecstatic with the overall conclusion of the show. "lanie" objected to the "two-by-two" nature of the ending (posted May 23, 2:40:16 am EST):

Also, was anyone else bothered by the fact that these are all 22 and 23 years olds, but everyone had to end up married or with their "soul mate." Would it have been so wrong for anyone, besides Richard, to be alone and just ok with it? While I'm happy Felicity and Ben ended up together, the whole two finales thing makes it all ring hollow. She was happy, it was all solved and then Ben screwed up. Who's to say he won't do it again?

Some viewers might be happy with that degree of openness in the ending, but "lanie" clearly is not. She immediately adds, "Wow, I sound so incredibly bitter, I am scaring myself... Ok, goodbye..."

There were not too many replies to this lament, but "catsoup" did pick up on "lanie's" remarks. After quoting the comments, "catsoup" replies (posted May 23, 11:22:06 am EST): "YES! And thank you for mentioning it." But "catsoup" also raises the possibility that personal sourness is interfering with her capacity to enjoy a happy ending: "Of course, I might be a little bit of a bitter singleton at the moment so maybe that's why it bothered me so much."

### The Role of the Chat Room

I suspect, though I cannot prove it in any way, that for many contributors, it is the ability to articulate their

own account of the show that really powers their engagement with the site; it is the writing that matters more than the reading. They obviously read and value each other's contributions, because they quote comments and reply to them. However, much of the writing is clearly done for the writer's own benefit: the lists of favorite moments, the descriptions of how they "melted", the accounts of laughter or tears. The opportunity to re-live the experience while it is still fresh in their minds within the circle of friends who can be trusted to accept large amounts of self-indulgence does seem to be liberating to these correspondents.

Around and even through these self-absorbed recapitulations of melting moments, however, the correspondence evolves into a serious collective and dialogic enterprise. The posters are collaboratively developing a coherent reading of the four years of *Felicity*.

One question that intrigues me, and that cannot be answered by the written record, is the degree to which some or all of these posters come to depend on this correspondence as part of their personal strategy for arriving at coherence. We all know members of book groups who feel that their reading of a book is not complete until the group has dissected it. The Internet, being more constantly available than a group of locally present people, has the potential to weave itself much more habitually into the interpretive processes of a fan. Certainly, some young posters of my acquaintance can sometimes barely wait for a show to finish in order to get online and talk about it. It would be a very interesting study to talk to these posters and discover how many of them feel they are participating in a form of what might be called emergent coherence, where the different contributions are essential to their own final assessment of the story.

A second, very interesting question about the interactive connections of the chat room is raised by Marshall Sella, who suggests in his analysis of *Television Without Pity* that "the new interactivity has its distorting effects. As much as it grounds the program, it fictionalizes the viewer" (73). What is the impact on contributors of weaving themselves into a kind of post-hoc co-production of fictional effects? The efforts at plot interpretation are relatively straightforward and productive; the role of the chat room in sustaining a prolonged immersion in a fictional universe is rather more difficult to explore because it is so deeply personal.

### Multiple Sources

It is clear from the correspondence that the contributors collect and recall information from a variety of sources and take this procedure as a routine element of the interpretive processes. "Kavan," for example, is looking for guidance from the show's makers and refers to a number

of actual and potential external sources of information (posted May 25, 5:56:48 pm EST):

I wish when the inevitable Felicity special on E or better yet JJ approved guide to Felicity comes out some time is spent on discussing the original vision of the show. I remember reading a season 2 JJ interview (and I'm blanking on where) where JJA clearly said of Ben and Noel that one was the one you dated, one was the one you married.

"Kavan" goes on in the same posting to discuss another external force that captured the fans' attention for several years: the real-life romance between Keri Russell (Felicity) and Scott Speedman (Ben):

I've always wondered if the original aim of Felicity was to show how Felicity grew past her crush on Ben and fell for Noel. But I wonder if the chemistry between KR and SS pushed the narrative in another direction.

Replies to "Kavan's" question draw on other people's readings of interviews with JJ Abrams, making use of a variety of sources.

The exchanges include references to many different kinds of information. Correspondents mention other stories that play games with an original story such as *Peggy Sue Got Married*, and even *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. They refer to their knowledge about the actors, and the expressed intentions of the show's creators. They draw on their knowledge of previous episodes and their understanding of the general back story of the series. Many of the elements of serious literary engagement are present, even if the text they are discussing is "only" an example of popular culture.

### Television Viewing Behaviors

As well as creating a forum for concurrent and post-show discussion, online sources affect other elements of normal text processing behaviours in more obvious ways. Viewers are no longer so dependent on catching the show as it airs or making arrangements to locate a videotape. The extensive recaps and complete scripts of episodes that are made available online, often within days of the program's airing, mean that many viewers can shift between watching and reading a particular episode. "blairsey" refers casually to exactly such a media shift (posted May 23, 7:16:34 am EST): "I'm a reader rather than a watcher of TV lately but after reading recaps and all of your comments on the episodes I forced Mr. Blairsey to watch the finale last night and it was just awesome."

It would be interesting to know to what extent the makers of the program feel they can rely on the Internet to assist with filling in the gaps for individual viewers. The time travel sequence was very complex and viewers relying on the television synopsis ("Previously on *Felicity*....") would have found very little help in understanding implications of the time travel. Internet users had an alternative source of information.

Video profoundly affected one of the major qualities of television, its ephemerality. With video, it is possible to hang onto a television program that previously would have vanished as it was viewed. The chat room is full of pleas from people whose VCRs broke down (or whose mothers forgot!) at crucial moments, and it would appear to be a useful resource for locating videotapes of particular episodes. However, the option of simply reading a synopsis or a script of a missed show is now a timely possibility as well, and some fans do blend their viewing and reading, in order to keep abreast of the serial developments rather than fall behind. Series book and magazine readers and series television and movie viewers have always had to be able to fill in blanks or make sense out of episodes read or seen out of sequence; Internet recaps reduce the need for television series watchers to develop that particular, very specialized skill of watching or reading *as if* you know what has previously occurred, while waiting for the clues to fall into place.

### The Constructed Nature of Television Fiction

One very interesting element in the online discussion is the way it moves between the internal story world of *Felicity* and the larger but still contained world of the show. It is as if there is an anteroom where you are still in a *Felicity*-zone, even if you are not actually inside the story. The chat room viewers raise many questions with each other, some quite technical, and take completely for granted that this zone is a legitimate part of their territory.

Even in their rage over the Elena issue, correspondents dealt with the show as a constructed text and not just as a seamless story world. "darcy," for example, was furious but aware that the story she was watching was the result of deliberate choices (posted May 23, 11:18:29 am EST):

I have no idea how Noel could be alive but also have Elena be alive. It's too bad they had to have so many #^\$&% commercials and had to cut out the pivotal scene that explains her coming back (there had to be SOME explanation filmed!). Whoever edited this episode must have part of a brain missing for screwing it up that much. This was a huge gaff!

Likewise, even through their farewell tears, some correspondents moved back and forth across the diegetic border of the actual story. "queenmargot" ("My eyes are still crusty from crying!") moved effortlessly between characters and actresses in this comment (posted May 23, 1:16:11 am EST):

Also, at the end, did anyone notice the way Felicity and Megan were sort of looking at each other and crying? I really felt like Keri Russell and Amanda Foreman were really gonna miss each other. That made me cry, too, just that you could tell these people were friends besides being people who worked together. I hate things I like ending. :(

The sorrow at the ending was palpable. "dummypants" spoke for many (posted May 23, 1:14:23 am EST): "Geez, I am crying like a bunch of my friends just died." But she immediately followed this sentiment with an acknowledgement to the makers: "Thanks for a great 4 years JJ and crew!"

As has been the case throughout the four years, many of the comments about the production featured questions or observations about the music, an important aesthetic feature of this particular show. Anahid Kassabian (2001), talking about film scores, distinguishes between the composed score, which is created from scratch, and the compiled score, which is assembled out of pre-existing songs (2). *Felicity* operates on a compiled score, one that is put together with considerable skill. Kassabian suggests that compiled scores draw on many associations:

Compiled scores, however, can operate quite differently. With their range of complete songs used just as they are heard on the radio, they bring the immediate threat of history. Most people in the movie theater, even on opening day, have probably heard at least a few of the songs before, whether the score is made up of oldies or new releases. Airplay for the songs may serve as good advertising for the film, but it means that perceivers bring external associations with the songs into their engagements with the film (2001, 2-3).

Viewers of *Felicity* are knowledgeable about the soundtrack of the show, and their expertise is augmented by many websites offering information about or downloads of particular songs. The chat room correspondents are interested in the emotional counterpoint between the actions of the program and the various associations of the songs. The fact that they are paying serious attention to these songs is underlined by "rowdy," who talks about

about the music underlying some of the flashback scenes (posted May 23, 1:40:44 am EST):

I did cry like a baby at the clip of the Gold Rush moment—another favorite. But they also used one of my favorite current songs in that clip—wondering what was in the original ep as the Ryan Adams song wasn't out back when it first aired.

Such knowledgeable listening is one sign of the different kinds of pleasures fans take in their experience of television. This form of attention, unlike the "melting moments," reflects the pleasures of understanding how a show is constructed, rather than indulging in unalloyed immersion in the fictional universe. The interweaving of such different forms of response is illuminated in the chat room discussions in ways that shed light on how narrative enjoyment is developed.

## Conclusions

In this modest case study, we see an interactive and real-time mode of narrative construction. The ease and swiftness with which these contributors turned to their Internet buddies when a substantial interpretive problem arose in what they had anticipated as untroublesome viewing is indicative of the strengths of this new arena of interpretation. The ease with which these contributors cross media boundaries is also striking; they move back and forth between the Internet and their television sets very comfortably.

The roles of this new form of interpretation are various. There was a certain amount of sappy self-indulgence on the site I have studied here (and considerably more on other sites with less analytical contributors). There was joy in the recounting of arcane details purely for their own sake and not for any contribution to the development of narrative understanding. Nevertheless, the overall impact is of a community of interpreters discovering the delights of working together to make sense of a story that has compelled their attention over many years.

Such real-time and spontaneous response to a text, made conveniently accessible on the Internet, is also of considerable benefit to scholars interested in the fine points of narrative processing behaviours. In the case of *Felicity* (and in countless other online examples) we have a valuable example of interpretation occurring, as it were, in the present participle—comprehension as it actually happens to a far greater degree than we often gain access to.

The Internet also provides access to responses to print literature and to film, which are often also surprisingly substantial; but the particular interest with televi-

sion lies in the fact that so many viewers encounter the same story at the same time. Even those who videotaped the program rushed to watch their tape as quickly as possible, partly in order to join the early stages of the discussion. As a resource for the interpreters, and as a resource for those interested in studying the narrative behaviours of the interpreters, the chat room has the potential to enhance understanding on many levels.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> the powers that be

<sup>2</sup> Felicity

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- Margaret Mackey works in the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alberta, where she teaches courses on theories and practices of reading, on multimedia texts for young people, and on young adult literature. She is the author of *Literacies Across Media: Playing the Text* (RoutledgeFalmer 2002) and of many articles about changing texts for young people and their responses.