

MRS ELM as Literacy Sponsorship and its Impacts on Nora Seed's Self-Transformation in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*

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Abstract: *The present study examines the character of Mrs. Elm as a literacy sponsor in the character development of Nora Seed, particularly in relation to her conflict with despair and her internal struggle between life and death. Through the analysis of the relationship between these two characters, the study shows that literacy guidance by Mrs. Elm helps Nora transform from a person full of regret and despair into a more reflective individual who comes to terms with her life. In addition, the study investigates how Nora Seed's self-transformation through the literacy process affects her self-perception, acceptance of life's imperfections, and reinterpretation of past decisions that were previously considered failures. This study also contributes to literary studies by emphasizing the significance of literacy and the role of literacy sponsorship in shaping character development and psychological transformation in literary works.*

INTRODUCTION

The conceptualization of literacy has become less about the technical skills of reading and writing, and more about a socially located practice that is defined in relations to relationships, institutions, and power systems (Moss, 2021). Instead of considering literacy as an independent intellectual ability, modern literacy studies focus on its entrenchment in the context of cultural and social practices that govern the way that reading and writing are taught and learned (Moss, 2021; Ungureanu, 2024). (Ungureanu, 2024) also believes that the practices of literacy ensure that people occupy specific roles of identity, which are, in many cases, mediated by the teachers and the figures of authority that regulate access to knowledge and organize the interpretative processes. (Theodotou, 2017) emphasizes that literacy develops through social interaction and participation rather than as an isolated cognitive skill. Those views define literacy as a socially organized practice whereby meaning making is organized and guided as opposed to being formed independently.

The studies of reading within a literary context also indicate that reading fiction needs an interpretive negotiation and a reflective assessment. (Hollis, 2023) discovers that fiction helps readers to judge ambiguity, subtlety, competing possibilities, and engage in more in-depth critical thinking. Since fiction conveys ideas obliquely and in the complexity of the narrative, it is the reader who must create meaning. Nonetheless, this type of construction does not take place in a vacuum. Mediation, guidance, and regulation in particular social contexts often influence interpretive development.

The theory of literacy sponsorship by (Brandt, 1998) is one of the most influential theories used in interpreting the social organisation of literacy. (Brandt, 1998) refers to the sponsors of literacy as agents, both local and distant, concrete, or abstract, enabling, supporting, teaching, modelling, recruiting, regulating, suppressing, or withholding literacy—and benefiting by it in some manner (Brandt, 1998). This definition brings out two major principles. To begin with, the process of literacy development requires sponsors to facilitate, teach, and model. Secondly, there is the aspect of power relations as the sponsors control the terms of learning and practicing literacy.

Although the literature on the topic of literacy sponsorship is growing, most of the research has focused on educational environments, literacy discourses, and institutional backgrounds (Benson, 2018; Lawrence, 2015). The use of sponsorship theory on fictional narratives is small. However, literary materials often presuppose the images of guided reading, interpretive mediation, and controlled access to knowledge, which are the circumstances according to which the sponsorship dynamics are presented (Brandt, 1998). Fiction thus offers a fruitful venue where the literacy sponsorship theory can be applied to the non-academic setting.

The book *The Midnight Library* by (Haig, 2020) has a narrative structure whereby literacy as a transformational mechanism is involved. The novel charts the story of Nora Seed who discovers herself in a metaphysical library whose books symbolize alternative life paths to her own. It is here that Mrs. Elm, once a school librarian of Nora, initiates the books, the rules that are to be followed in their usage and leads Nora to the interpretation imposed on each life she goes through. Nora is continuously involved in reading and contemplating, reevaluating her sense of regret and possibility with organized experiences with readings.

Applying the framework provided by (Brandt, 1998), Mrs. Elm can be discussed as the figure of a literacy sponsor that helps to gain access to the texts, demonstrates the interpretive strategies, and controls the circumstances in which the meaning is constructed. *The Midnight Library* as such is a mediated space of literacy organization. Instead of discussing the transformation of Nora as based purely on the psychological change, this study grounds literacy sponsorship as the key driver that determines her reconstruction of identity and experience.

RESEARCH METHOD

The primary data of this study consist of textual excerpts from *The Midnight Library* by (Haig, 2020). The data include dialogues, narrative descriptions, and scenes depicting Nora Seed's interactions with Mrs. Elm and her engagement with the alternative life books in *The Midnight Library*. The data are limited to passages that illustrate literacy sponsorship dynamics, particularly instances of enabling, modelling, regulating, or guiding literacy practices as conceptualized by (Brandt, 1998). No secondary empirical data, interviews, or reader-response materials are included, as the study is confined to textual analysis of the novel.

The data are collected through close reading of the novel. The study systematically identifies scenes that depict Nora's access to the alternative life books and her interactions with Mrs. Elm. Passages are selected based on their relevance to the key components of literacy sponsorship theory, including enabling access to texts, modelling interpretive strategies, regulating literacy engagement, and structuring conditions of reading. Relevant excerpts are categorized according to sponsorship functions outlined by (Brandt, 1998), such as enabling, regulating, and mediating literacy practices.

The data are analysed using a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in (Brandt, 1998) theory of literacy sponsorship. The analysis involves examining how Mrs. Elm functions as a literacy sponsor by enabling access to texts, providing interpretive guidance, and regulating the

conditions under which Nora engages with the alternative life books. Each selected excerpt is interpreted in relation to the core elements of sponsorship theory, identifying patterns of mediation and structured literacy engagement within the narrative.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

This section presents the analysis of selected excerpts from *The Midnight Library* by (Haig, 2020). The interaction between Nora Seed and Mrs. Elm and the moments when Nora engages with the alternative life books are analysed. Using literacy sponsorship theory developed by (Brandt, 1998), the analysis shows that Mrs. Elm functions as a literacy sponsor who enables access to texts, regulates interpretation, and guides reading practices. These sponsored literacy experiences allow Nora to reinterpret her past choices and undergo self-transformation.

Interpretive Regulation Through Literacy Sponsorship

This scene takes place following Nora coming back after having lived one of the alternative lives. Nora is disappointed by the result of such a life. Mrs. Elm reacts by telling Nora the distinction between choices and outcomes and leads Nora to rethink the experience

Table 1. Interpretive Regulation by Mrs. Elm

Page Number	Sponsorship Function (Brandt, 1998)	Excerpt
P.85	Regulation of Interpretation	"You can choose choices but not outcomes."
p.85	Interpretive Guidance	"It was a good choice. It just wasn't a desired outcome."
p.85	Mediated Explanation	"You got stuck. You were grieving. You were depressed."

Interpretation

Through this interaction, Nora is shaped by the interpretive guidance of Mrs. Elm in understanding the alternative lives. (Brandt, 1998) states that literacy sponsors regulate how individuals interpret literacy practices. In this scene, Mrs. Elm reframes Nora's disappointment by separating choice from outcome. Nora is encouraged to reconsider the meaning of her decisions rather than viewing them as failures. This demonstrates how literacy sponsorship structures the interpretive process of reading the life books.

Enabling Access to Alternative Life Books

This scene depicts the moment when Mrs. Elm retrieves a book from the library shelves and instructs Nora to begin reading another life.

Table 2. Providing Access to Literacy Resources

Page Number	Sponsorship Function (Brandt, 1998)	Excerpt
p.49	Enabling Access	"Mrs Elm crouched down and took a book from the lowest shelf."
p.49	Distribution of Literacy Resources	"She handed it to Nora."
p.49	Instructional Modelling	"You open the book and turn to the first page."
p.49	Guided Reading Practice	"Now, read the first line."

Interpretation

Mrs. Elm acts as a mediator who provides Nora access to the life books. According to (Brandt, 1998), sponsors provide resources and opportunities that enable individuals to engage in literacy practices. Nora does not freely choose the books; access is structured by Mrs. Elm. In addition, Mrs. Elm instructs Nora on how to begin reading, demonstrating how sponsors model literacy practices and organize the conditions of engagement.

Mediated Reading Practices in *The Midnight Library*

As Nora continues exploring the library, she begins to understand that each book represents a different version of her life. Mrs. Elm explains how the books function and guides Nora's interaction with them.

Table 3. Mediated Reading Practices

Page Number	Sponsorship Function (Brandt, 1998)	Excerpt
p.49	Conceptual Guidance	"Oh Nora, they are all your lives."
p.49	Reading Instruction	"You open the book and turn to the first page."
p.49	Initiation of Literacy Activity	"Read the first line."

Interpretation

The scene shows that Nora's reading of the life books is mediated by Mrs. Elm. The books represent alternative possibilities of Nora's life, but the reading process is not independent. Mrs. Elm structures the reading process by explaining the meaning of the books and guiding Nora's

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interaction with them. Literacy sponsorship theory explains that sponsors shape literacy practices by modelling and directing interpretation.

Reinterpretation of Regret Through Literacy Experiences

As Nora continues reading different life narratives, she begins to reconsider the regrets that previously defined her understanding of life.

Table 4. Reframing Personal Narratives

Page Number	Sponsorship Function (Brandt, 1998)	Excerpt
p.71	Motivational Sponsorship	“The only way to learn is to live.”
p.241	Conceptual Framing	“Every life contains millions of decisions.”

Interpretation

Through repeated guidance, Mrs. Elm encourages Nora to reconsider her understanding of regret and possibility. The literacy experiences provided by the life books allow Nora to see that each life consists of multiple choices and consequences. This process gradually shifts Nora’s perspective from regret to reflection. In Brandt’s framework, literacy sponsorship shapes how individuals understand experience and identity.

Literacy Sponsorship and Nora’s Self-Transformation

After experiencing multiple life narratives, Nora begins to develop a new understanding of her own life.

Table 5. Transformation Through Sponsored Literacy

Page Number	Sponsorship Function (Brandt, 1998)	Excerpt
p.206	Motivational Guidance	“You are not stuck where you are unless you decide to be.”
p.206	Interpretive Reframing	“You don’t have to understand life. You just have to live it.”

Interpretation

With constant sponsorship, Mrs. Elm helps Nora to reevaluate her life under new angles. Through directing Nora through her reading experiences and interpretations, Mrs. Elm teaches Nora to realize that life is determined by decisions and options and not by predetermined regrets. Therefore, the process of becoming literate created by the sponsor brings about the transformation of Nora.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that Nora Seed's transformation in *The Midnight Library* can be understood through literacy sponsorship. Mrs. Elm functions as a literacy sponsor who organizes Nora's interaction with the alternative life books. (Brandt, 1998) defines literacy sponsors as agents who enable, support, teach, and regulate literacy practices. This is reflected in how Mrs. Elm controls access to the books and guides Nora's interpretation of each life. This interpretation is also supported by (Pokhare, 2025), who conceptualizes the Midnight Library as a liminal space that enables transformation and reorientation of life. This observation aligns with the sociocultural understanding of literacy as a socially organized practice. (Moss, 2021) explains that social structures shape literacy and determine access to it. Similarly, (Ungureanu, 2024) states that authority figures influence literacy development by shaping interpretive processes. This is reflected in the role of Mrs. Elm, who organizes Nora's reading process and influences how Nora perceives different life possibilities. Similarly, (Thompson, 2025) highlights that literacy mediation is a relational practice in which individuals depend on others to access and engage with texts.

The analysis also shows that mediated reading practices influence how individuals interpret personal experience. (Hollis, 2023) argues that fiction stimulates reflection and critical thinking. Nora's interaction with the life books enables her to reconsider her regrets and reconstruct her understanding of identity. Previous studies on *The Midnight Library* focus on psychological interpretations (Rozadi, 2022; Saputri, 2022; Sholikhah & Dewi, 2025; Sihotang & Mubarak, 2024). However, these studies do not examine literacy as a structured practice. This study addresses that gap by showing that Nora's transformation is constructed through sponsor-mediated reading practices.

CONCLUSION

The study examines how the notion of sponsoring literacy sounds in *The Midnight Library* and how it influences the transformation of Nora Seed. Based on the analysis of Mrs. Elm, a literacy sponsor, according to the theory of a literacy sponsor which (Brandt, 1998) developed, Mrs. Elm can provide access to texts, model the process of reading and control the process of interpretation. These mediation experiences of literacy allow Nora to reintroduce her former choices and come up with a new meaning of a regret, possibility and identity.

The results indicate that literacy sponsorship offers a practical method towards literary analysis. Although the main focus of previous studies centres on psychological interpretation, the present study lays emphasis on the mediation of literacy practices towards narrative transformation. More research can also be done to consider other literature works that display mediated access to knowledge through mediated access to knowledge through literacy sponsorship.

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