Rebuilding leadership theory through literature

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Introduction

In parallel to philosophers of science who have considered literary narrative as a sociological resource (Longo, 2015; Polkinghorne, 1988), for several decades now management and organisation studies (MOS) scholarship has drawn on literary fiction, and especially novels (e.g., Czarniawska-Joerges & Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Griffin et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2018; Śliwa et al., 2015; Waldo, 1968) for the purposes of management education and research. Within this body of work, literary fiction has been proposed as an excellent vehicle especially for the study and pedagogy of leadership, with examples of application addressing topics such as the figure of the leader (Gosling & Villers, 2012), the power dynamics in leadership contexts (e.g., Knights & Wilmott, 1999), leadership ethics (e.g., Sucher, 2007) and explanation of post-heroic leadership theories (e.g., McManus & Perruci, 2015). Notwithstanding the many virtues that characterise extant writings that bring together literary fiction and leadership, these efforts have not yet succeeded in helping leadership scholars address the, arguably, most pressing challenges in leadership studies, and – in Carrol et al.'s (2019, n.p.) words – *construct the foundations of a more inclusive, participatory, bold, relational and social platform for leadership in the future*. This chapter offers reflections on why this might be the case and points to the need for leadership scholars to engage with more recent literary fiction that explores in complex and nuanced ways the relations between people and the phenomena contemporary society faces – from issues associated with gender,

race, class and sexuality, to populism and threats to democracy, postcolonialism and migration, environmental degradation, and warfare.

In the chapter, I discuss the importance of literary fiction, and especially the novel, for management and organisation studies and, more specifically, for leadership education and research. I argue that scholars continue to be inspired by the novel, and see it as a vehicle for generating insights into managing, organising and leading. What I note though is that the novels selected by organisation studies and leadership scholars tend to reflect their own aesthetic preferences and the content of the literary canon into which they have been socialised; as a result, leadership scholars often tend to draw on classical literature. The chosen novels are, for good reason, applied in a way that serves the arguments that the researchers want to make. This approach to selecting and using novels also means that, in drawing on novels, MOS and leadership researchers and educators are not preoccupied with the current 'state of the art' in the broader world of novel-writing and publishing. They do not necessarily follow how the field has been evolving, which topics are seen at present as worthy of literary attention, which authors are considered to be the most interesting and promising – and, by implication, what new insights can be gained into how we understand and go about organising and leading. I argue that as scholars usually focus on the lessons that can be learnt about organisations and leadership from one literary novel at a time, we might be missing the chance to understand whether and what challenges to our thinking on leadership are posed by contemporary developments in the universe of literary fiction. Similarly, we might also be missing the opportunity to come up with creative solutions to what Alvesson (2019) refers to as the *Eight major problems in the odd field of leadership studies*. In proposing a shift towards greater engagement of leadership scholars with more recent literary fiction, I use the Booker Prize as an illustration of the evolution of literary novel-writing and reading over the past few decades, and argue that contemporary novels have a lot to offer in prompting us to reconsider how we understand leadership and come up with constructive alternatives

following the process of *discarding, deconstructing,* [and] *starting again* (Carroll et al., 2019, n.p.) with leadership knowledge.

Organisation studies and literary fiction

Turning to fiction in order to learn and theorise about organisations and organising remains a marginal approach (Holt & Zundel, 2014) within broader management and organisation studies research. Nevertheless, it has a long history and constitutes an established, even if still niche, endeavour. Already towards the end of the 1960s, Waldo (1968, 5), writing with a focus on public administration contexts, argued that fictional *literature helps to restore what the professional-scientific literature necessarily omits or slights: the concrete, the sensual, the emotional, the subjective, the valuational*. Similarly, a quarter of a century ago, Phillips (1995, 635) contended that *narrative fiction provides organizational analysis with an additional point of contact in the everyday world of real 'life'*. More recently, Longo (2015, 140) stated that a *fictional document is an instrument with which to probe into reality, testing certain features of the world as described in the text*, whereas Savage et al. (2018) have argued for the need to see fiction as a central concern in organisation studies.

In a Themed Section of the journal *Organization Studies* dedicated to the multiple connections between MOS research and literary fiction, Beyes et al. (2019, 1788) reflect on the interdependence of literature and organisation studies as forms of discourse as follows:

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the study of organization is contaminated by novels […] *literary works influence the imagination of organizational scholars* […] *Novels can make us not only see new and different things but also see things differently. They have the power to affect the way we sense and, in this way, alter the very ways we perceive, study and write organization.*

Novels, as Beyes et al. (2019) point out, are not simply an object of organisational analysis but can also fulfil the role of a medium of organisational thought. Beyes et al. (2019) elaborate on this point through reference to De Cock and Land's (2006) typology of three *modes of engagement* that can be discerned when analysing the relationship between literature and organisation. Mode One involves the application of literary theory to organisational literature in a way that aims to *problematise organization theory, thus enabling it to reinvigorate itself* (Czarniawska, 1999, 12). In Mode Two, literary genres are being deployed in the process of *production and presentation of organizational knowledge* (De Cock & Land, 2006, 520). Within Mode Three, literary fiction is used as an educational resource, with the view to helping students of management and organisation develop their knowledge and practice. Expanding De Cock and Land's (2006) distinction between the three modes of engagement, Śliwa and Cairns (2007) develop a discussion of the work that can be classified under Mode Three. They explain that it involves a consideration of novels from a realist perspective, and identify three levels at which management and organisation studies scholars apply the Mode Three-type of engagement with the 'novel as resource'. At the first level, novels serve as 'surrogate cases' of organisations; at second, as 'stories of organising', whereby an analogy is drawn between what is described in the novel and lived experience; and at third, as vehicles for organisational analysis, enabling *complex engagement with phenomena at a higher level of abstraction* (Śliwa & Carins, 2007, 312).

Śliwa and Cairns (2007) encourage the use of novels by management and organisation studies researchers and educators, highlighting that to mobilise literary fiction in their work, MOS scholars need not have the kind of competence in analysing literary texts that literary critics do. Drawing on DeVault (1990, 1999), Śliwa and Cairns (2007, 309) argue for the value of *lay reading* of novels *in order to facilitate the readers' processes of meso-theorising and critical reflection*. To DeVault (1990, 106), lay reading enables *experiment in the use of personal response as part of an archive for analysis*. While the *lay reading* differs from the *expert reading* of the literary critic, it does not mean that it is naive or lacking in critical

analysis. Rather, lay reading acknowledges *the situated character of reading* (DeVault, 1999, 105) and considers the readers – including their demographic characteristics, circumstances and purposes of reading – as inseparable from interpretation. The lay reading approach, therefore, is particularly useful to organisation theory in that it offers:

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the possibility of an inclusive, pluralist approach to learning that allows reading communities of students to reflect upon a range of theoretical perspectives from a starting point grounded in their own a priori knowledge and understanding of the world, as developed through reading literary fiction.

(Śliwa & Cairns, 2007, 321)

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Such lay readings of literary fiction can offer ample opportunities for knowledge-building not only within the broadly understood field of management and organisation, but also in relation to a range of sub-disciplines, such as entrepreneurship (Loacker, 2021), project management (Bröchner, 2021), or, indeed, leadership (e.g., Martin et al., 2018; Śliwa et al., 2013). This broad applicability of literary fiction to research and education across different management-related disciplines gives rise to questions about which novels are chosen by MOS researchers and on what basis these choices are made. Loacker's (2021) recent discussion of entrepreneurship through the lens of Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities* is an example of an in-depth reflection on the selection of a specific oeuvre, whereby a lot of consideration was given to both the novel's content and to its author's knowledge and outlook on the world. Reading *The Man Without Qualities* has provided Loacker (2021, 2) with the opportunity *to develop a subtler understanding of the multi-faceted ambiguities accompanying 'total' orders such as entrepreneurship.* On the basis of her analysis, Loacker (2021) argues that *The Man Without Qualities* provides the first critique of entrepreneurship, as conceived by its early proponents from the Austrian School, such as von Mises and

Schumpeter, whose ideas Musil would have been familiar with. Crucially, in addition to analysing the themes present in the novel, Loacker (2021) also draws attention to the importance of understanding how novels written by specific authors can be particularly valuable for our theorising. In analysing Musil's work, she reminds us that he was a polymath whose writings brought together literary, social and economic theory as well as philosophy. Following Harrington (2002, 59), she considers Musil,

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as an exemplary kind of social theorist, a philosopher and critic of European civilization who exploits the literary devices of irony, ambivalence and aesthetics in order to communicate a particular style of thinking about the social conditions, ideologies and contradictory identities of modernity that could not otherwise be expressed in the abstract discursive language of social science.

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The issue of which authors' novels, and which novels, are chosen for the purpose of studying and educating students about management-related phenomena and concepts, as well as what insights into these phenomena are being generated on the basis of literary fiction is important for our ability to exploit more fully and more creatively the potential of novels to challenge our thinking about management and leadership, and to propose alternatives to the still dominant *masculine, linear rational and individualistic character of leadership as both a practice and a topic of research* (Knights, 2019, 7) in leadership studies. I elaborate on this in more detail in the sub-section below which discusses more specifically the uses of literary fiction in leadership education and research.

The use of novels in leadership studies

Novels are used in leadership education because they are considered to have the capacity to invoke in students what leadership 'feels' like, and thus to vicariously experience it

(Badaracco, 2006; Kajtár, 2015). Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux (1994) argue for the use of fictional literature with students of leadership because of its complexity and concreteness, and its ability to portray 'ideal' types of leadership and to convey tacit knowledge about it. Currie (2016) contends that in learning about leadership from novels, students can develop their imagination as well as cognitive and emotional skills. It has also been suggested that when drawing on novels, leadership education can prompt students to ask critical and important questions (Hermida-Ruiz, 2008; Warner, 2008) which otherwise they would have found difficult to generate and articulate.

In addition to offering a fruitful approach to leadership education, fictional narratives can also provide a basis of valid insights into leadership phenomena (Colton, 2020; Gosling & Villiers, 2012). Since leadership itself can be understood as *rooted in storytelling* (Nehls, 2012), narrative analysis should offer a promising approach to understanding leadership. In Colton's (2020) view, literary narratives provide particularly apt 'models' of leadership, in an analogous way to how equations, diagrams or physical representations provide fictional models that are widely used in the natural sciences. This is because, according to Colton (2020, 404), leadership concepts, both traditional and more recent ones, *present leadership as an irreducibly triadic relation that cannot be reduced to any series of dyadic relations, such as causal interactions*. In turn, the triadic relations that form leadership call for investigations *by means of other triadic relations* (Ketner et al., 1995, 275), and models of such triadic relations are plentiful in novels.

In a similar vein to Colton's (2020) argument, in Warner's (2011) view, literary fiction – even if it is yet to receive the attention it deserves from leadership scholars – has special relevance to leadership studies through its emphasis on emotions and ethical issues, its clear descriptions of events and settings, and the overall nuanced and insightful characterisation of humanity it offers. While both Colton's (2020) and Warner's (2011) observations are undoubtedly valuable, it is helpful to look more closely at the applications of literary fiction in leadership education and research, in order to build a picture of the kinds of insights into

leadership and the novels on the basis of which these have been generated that have been gained to date.

Colton (2020) himself turns to *high fantasy* literary work for a portrayal of leadership. Following the contention that a *fruitful model of leadership can be found in J. R. R. Tolkien's stories and novels*, (Colton, 2020, 401), he draws attention to *The Silmarillon* and *The Lord of the Rings* as examples of narratives that present leadership as *practical wisdom* rather than craft. To Colton (2020), insights drawn from Tolkien's works can provide a response to the *Hitler problem* (Burns, 1978; Ciulla, 1995; Ciulla et al., 2018) in leadership studies which refers to the issue of whether bad leaders can be classified as leaders: based on Colton's reading of Tolkien, individuals who do bad things are still considered to be leaders, except that they are corrupt leaders. What is worth pointing out here is that the novels to which Colton (2020) refers were written throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and – notwithstanding Tolkien's excellent literary imagination and craft, and the popularity of his books – the myths which the books conjure up have been described as *profoundly conservative*, with a storyline which romanticises the idea of *return of the king to his rightful throne* which, in practice, means *the reassertion of a feudal social structure which had been disrupted by the 'evil'* (Walter, 2014, n.p.). Tolkien's books are marked by a nostalgia for *a more conservative society, one where people knew their place*, and, at the same time, they ignore *the brutality and oppression that were part and parcel of a world ruled by men with swords* (Walter, 2014, n.p.).

Another example of the use of fiction, albeit more contemporary, is provided by Vizmuller-Zocco (2016) who draws on examples of Italian literary fiction in order to move beyond anthropocentric views of leadership. Following her summary of existing ontologies and their concomitant definitions of leadership – which she categorises as belonging to one of two types: 1) a tripod consisting of leaders, followers and common goals; and 2) a focus on leadership outcomes, with an emphasis on direction, alignment and commitment – Vizmuller-Zocco (2016, 356) contends that *so far, no definition puts forth new types of technology as indispensable elements without which leadership could not function*. She proposes drawing on

science fiction works as a *way to approach leadership of a more complex type, that is, the one that takes into account both human and possible future technological contributions to leadership* (Vizmuller-Zocco, 2016, 355; see also Parker et al., 1999).

Vizmuller-Zocco's (2016) analysis focuses on four novels, published in Italy and written by Italian authors, and which belong to the sub-genre of 'transhumanist fiction'. The author argues that 'transhumanist fiction' affords us a glimpse into a world where human leadership is replaced with technology as the latter both creates goals for individuals and fulfils them. In a transhuman future, in Vizmuller-Zocco's (2016, 357) words, *no one seems to be in charge. This type of society relies on the self-made man and woman who grope to find their own goals and look for ways to fulfil them on their own, or with minimal help from friends.* As Vizmuller-Zocco (2016) suggests based on the analysis of the selected novels, leadership in a transhuman society is difficult to discern and is associated with whoever controls technology, which, in turn, manages people – for example, by manufacturing consensus through deleting people's memories, or by gifting them *unspecified liquid born out of* [their] *DNA* Vizmuller-Zocco's (2016, 359) that enables the re-growth of previously lost limbs. Nevertheless, a technologically driven, transhuman society, as depicted in the four novels discussed by Vizmuller-Zocco (2016, 360) retains a number of characteristics associated with 'traditional' notions of leadership, including *charisma, authority, successful delegation of duties to skilled and skillful followers,* [and] *power*, as well as male dominance and a paternalistic style of leadership that selfishly demands unquestioning obedience from the followers. Altogether, the picture that emerges from the dystopian science-fiction novels analysed by Vizmuller-Zocco (2016) is one of undemocratic, coercive and sometimes violent ways of leading, devoid of ethically informed aspirations that would seek to accomplish broader humanitarian goals.

Both Colton (2020) and Vizmuller-Zocco (2016) discuss novels in which leadership is portrayed as individual-centric and hierarchical, as the domain of men and as an endeavour which justifies the use of violence. Arguably, to arrive at different conclusions about and visions of leadership, it would have been necessary to draw on other novels. However,

Colton's (2020) and Vizmuller-Zocco's (2016) analyses are not unique within leadership writings that use literary fiction. For one, they can be seen as an illustration of a more general tendency observed by Martin et al. (2018): those leadership scholars who have drawn on literary fiction have primarily used texts written by men, and the texts used lack examples of women leaders and their experiences. Martin et al. (2018) also highlight that among the frequently cited examples of leadership in literature are Shakespeare's plays, whereas within the publicly available lists of literary fiction pieces composed by different leadership scholars and recommended for use in leadership education (e.g., Badaracco, 2006; McManus & Perrucci, 2015; Peters & Nesteruk, 2014; Sucher, 2007), women authors or protagonists constitute only a very small minority. As a consequence of such choices, the use of literary fiction in leadership research and education has contributed to the perpetuation of the framing and understanding of leadership in masculine terms (Sinclair & Evans, 2015). This, in Martin et al.'s (2018) view, is a key shortcoming because by excluding fiction that addresses women leaders' experiences, the research on leadership and literary fiction has not engaged with those aspects of the experience of leadership that have been documented as unique to women leaders, such as gender inequality and both conscious and unconscious biases against women (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hoyt & Simon, 2016; Rhee & Sigler, 2015). What we can add to this is that neither has research that brings together leadership and literary fiction done much to engage with the experience of leadership of non-white people and members of other minority groups, or with more participatory, perhaps even 'leaderless' (Kempster & Parry, 2019) leadership contexts.

In summary, although a number of leadership scholars and educators have proposed using literary fiction both for leadership research and education purposes, these applications have primarily resulted in 'traditional' depictions of leadership, reflecting those typically found in leadership studies: what Carroll et al. (2019, n.p.) call *a field bounded by old or well-established ways of thinking and doing, engaging in limited critical assessment of its assumptions and making few excursions into new or exciting terrains*, and one in which *leadership has been portrayed as associated with the traits and actions of a specific*

individual, typically a white man, and with a model of a paternalistically governed, hierarchical and undemocratic society and organisation. Moreover, the great majority of the literary texts drawn on by leadership scholars have been written by white men, and have been part of the canon of classical literature. This gives rise to some interesting questions: if leadership researchers and educators were to look for images of leadership in other examples of literary fiction, would it be possible to arrive at a different portrayal of leadership? Have the profiles of the authors of literary fiction changed over the past few decades and what are the concerns and worlds depicted by contemporary novelists? Below, I attempt to address these questions through a series of reflections on the evolution of the Booker Prize for International Fiction.

The Booker Prize: The evolving world of fiction

The Booker Prize holds a special place within the global *book prize culture* (Squires, 2004). It launched in 1969 as the Booker-McConnell Prize, with the aim to *promote the finest in fiction by rewarding the best novel of the year written by a citizen of the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth or the Republic of Ireland* (quoted in Morris, 2020, 262), with novels published in the UK eligible for the prize. Between 2002 and 2018, throughout the period of sponsorship by the Man Group, it was known as the Man Booker Prize. Since 2014, novels written by US citizens and published in the UK can be submitted to the Booker Prize competition. On a global level, the Booker is a highly prestigious award; in the UK, it tends to be the only literary prize that members of the general public are aware of. Being 'longlisted' or 'shortlisted' for the Booker guarantees an increase in the book sales and promises an additional income for the author from possible sales of film, TV and translation rights. As has been pointed out by its critics, the significance of the Booker also *reinforces London as the centre of cultural judgement about art production in the colonies* (Morris, 2020, 263; for further insights into the link between leadership and (post)coloniality, see e.g., Chapter 25, Indigenous leadership as a conscious adaptive system and Chapter 31, Leadership and culture).

Importantly in the context of this chapter, ever since its establishment in 1969, *the Booker has displayed an uncanny ability to reflect the broader social, political and economic changes that have taken place in Britain* (Norris, 2006, 140). For example, in the beginning, the panel of shortlisted authors comprised a group of renowned authors with impressive cultural, educational and social credentials. The winner was P. H. Newby who was Head of the BBC's Third Programme as well as an established novelist and literary critic. The other names on the shortlist included Iris Murdoch, who was an Oxford graduate, novelist and academic; Muriel Spark, another established novelist; Nicholas Mosley who was both an aristocrat and an Oxford graduate; and Barry England and Gordon Williams (Norris, 2006). Although, as noted by Todd (1996, 8), *the catchment area* [of authors eligible to enter] *comprises one quarter of the world's population*, all of the authors shortlisted in the first year of the Booker Prize were white and British (although Iris Murdoch had been born in Dublin to Irish parents, the family moved to London when she was a few weeks old). In other words, despite the competition's global aspirations, the authors on the 'leader board' of the Booker Prize were initially drawn from a narrow demographic group, traditionally associated with leadership in the British context – that is, white British elites.

Two years later, in 1971, the prize was awarded for the first time to a non-white author – V. S. Naipaul and ten years later to another non-white novelist, Salman Rushdie – for *Midnight's Children*. The 1981 award is considered especially historically significant in that, contrary to previous Booker winners that have dealt with the topic of India, it presented a perspective on India that was *not British but Indian, not that of the colonizer but of the colonized* (Todd, 1996, p. 82). Nevertheless, the evaluation of Rushdie's novel – as well as of other postcolonial fiction that has gained appreciation by Booker's judges – was carried out, in the process of selecting the Booker's winner, by members of a white British culture elite (Huggan, 2001). In Huggan's (2001) view, there was a link between the model of literary evaluation whereby the British elites judge the value of novels written by authors from the former colonies and the colonial history of the literary prize's sponsor, the company Booker McConnell, in the Caribbean, where for many years it exploited sugar workers in the British

Guiana. To this, Frenkel (2008, 87) adds that – at least until the mid-2000s – the Booker propagated texts that *communicate a particular idea of history and culture* which he terms *post-colonial pathos*, and that *are intimately caught up in the mechanics of the empire*, whereby especially India and South Africa *are represented as being overwhelmed by their histories and marked by the triumph of loss or instability over love or redemption*. All this suggests that for many years, the leadership of the Booker Prize as an organisational phenomenon was performed in accordance with a 'traditional' Western approach to leadership, in the sense that it was not inclusive of non-dominant groups' perspectives and voices, and was characterised by sense- and decision-making kept in the hands of members of the ethnically and societally privileged group in the British context.

The evolution of the Booker Prize awards reflects the changing attitudes to age and sexuality within the British society, and a slow shift to a more inclusive approach to leadership. For many years, up until 2002 when the prize was given to the Canadian novelist Yann Martel (born in 1963), the Booker was typically awarded to older authors. For the first time, in 2004, the prize was given to a gay novel, *The Line of Beauty*, written by an openly gay author, Alan Hollinghurst. That year, the panel of judges was also chaired by an openly gay man, Chris Smith, who was the former UK Culture Secretary. Nevertheless, as Norris (2006) points out, the opening up of the Booker Prize to homosexual male authors did not mean that a similar extent of opening up was happening in relation to some of other categories of social difference, especially class, which in the British context is inextricably connected to education within specific institutions (for further insights into related issues in the context of leadership, see Chapter 20, Critiquing leadership and gender research through a feminist lens, Chapter 41, Politicising the leader's body, and Chapter 43, Leadership representation). For example, all members of the judging panel that awarded the Booker to Hollinghurst, as well as the winning author himself, were Oxford-educated.

Both the prestige of the Booker and the controversies surrounding it have persisted over the years. In 2019, the prize was split between two novels: *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood and *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo. Evaristo was the first black woman

to ever have won the Booker – though in practice, she won half of the monetary prize and overall, possibly less than half of the in-store display space in bookshops, often dominated by or even exclusively given to Atwood's novel (Flood, 2019). Another controversy associated with the Booker has been the limited international diversity of the winners. Although the prize has been open to writers from all 53 Commonwealth countries (and since 2014 also to authors from the US), the circle of winners has only been represented by writers from eight Commonwealth countries outside the UK. The winners' list has been dominated by English writers, even though the English population comprises only 2.5 per cent of the Commonwealth population. Likewise, the narratives present in the shortlisted and winning novels have predominantly been those based on white experience. The history of the Booker is also marked by the lack of shortlisted novels written by Indigenous Australian writers and black South African writers, and by a very small number of black or Māori novelists, even if over the past few years, the number of black writers on the shortlist has increased, as exemplified by the inclusion of names such as Evaristo, Obioma, James or Edugyan among those recognised by the Booker judges. All this points to the persistence but also a slow thawing of the 'white elite' leadership model in the case of the Booker Prize.

In recent years, the Booker has come to be viewed as cultivating *a young, international, and racially-diverse cast of writers* (Eatough, 2021, 41). Over time, *the prize had morphed into something more like the Nobel Prize for Literature, the standard-bearer for international letters* (Holmes, 2021, 9), and in terms of the subject matter explored in the winning novels, the Booker has been described as favouring *intellectual engagement with the world* (Holmes, 2021, 11). In 2004, the Man Booker International Prize was created, to allow authors from outside the Commonwealth countries and literary works which were not originally published in English, as long as they have been translated into English. The International Booker showcases literary works written by authors from across the world, with awards between 2016 and 2020 given to writers from South Korea, Israel, Poland, Oman and the Netherlands.

The diversity of authors and topics that currently characterise the Booker Prize 'brand' is exemplified by the selection of shortlisted authors and novels. In 2020, the Booker shortlist – which could offer valuable inspiration to leadership scholars interested in advancing the field in a more inclusive, progressive and contemporarily relevant direction – included: 1) Douglas Stuart (the winner) – a debut novelist from a working-class Glaswegian background and an openly gay man, the author of *Shuggie Bain* – a novel about a young Scottish boy, inspired by the author's own upbringing and his mother's struggle with alcohol; 2) Avni Doshi – an American woman writer of ethnic Indian origin and the author of *Burnt Sugar* – an India-set story about a complex relationship between a daughter and her mother who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease; 3) Brandon Taylor – an Alabama-born Black American gay man and the author of *Real Life* – a partly autobiographical campus novel about the experiences of a gay, black student studying towards a PhD in a predominantly white Midwestern university; 4) Diane Cook – a white American woman and the author of *The New Wilderness*, a dystopian story set in a world ravaged by climate change, about a mother's fight to save her daughter from perishing in that world; 5) Tsitsi Dangarembga – a Zimbabwean woman novelist and the author of *This Mournable Body* – a novel set in post-independence Zimbabwe, dealing with the condition of the Zimbabwean nation and the place of personal agency and responsibility for individuals' choices; and 6) Maaza Mengiste – an Ethiopia-born woman novelist currently living in New York and the author of *The Shadow King*, a novel about the African women soldiers in 1935 Ethiopia threatened by Mussolini's invasion.

As the Booker Prize 2020 shortlist suggests, regardless of the problematic nature of the 'institution' of book awards and especially the Booker (e.g., Holmes, 2021; Norris, 2006; O'Key, 2021) and its leadership, the recent developments in the world of literary fiction display a shift towards a greater diversity of the authors whose voices have been included as worth attending to as well as the subject matter of the books considered as deserving of recognition. In other words, the literary field has been redefining itself and undergoing a slow but sure decolonisation process, along with a serious and creative engagement with topics of import to 21st-century society. In the next section, I elaborate on the opportunities this self-

redefinition of the literary field presents for the field of leadership studies which, as previously argued, continues to look for inspiration in the classical literary canon or in more contemporary novels which offer a vision of person-centric, hierarchical, undemocratic, white male-dominated leadership that does not provide an alternative to portrayals of leadership found in mainstream leadership studies.

The literary novel as a vehicle for addressing problems with leadership studies

The first two sub-sections of this chapter have argued that management and organisation studies, and specifically leadership scholarship, has been drawing on literary fiction to advance both leadership research and education. Building on this, the third sub-section has suggested that the way in which leadership scholars have used literary fiction has been largely separated from – and not reflective of – the changes which the literary field has been undergoing over the past few decades. Then again, why would we worry about this? At the end of the day, is it fair and appropriate to expect leadership researchers and educators to be *au courant* with the developments in the world of fiction and, even if they were, then in what ways, if any, could this knowledge be expected to help with addressing the challenges that the field of leadership studies faces? I would like to propose affirmative answers to these questions, for two reasons. First, the discipline of leadership studies suffers from serious shortcomings and turning to contemporary fiction, in its diversity of the subject matter and authorship, might contribute to overcoming these. Second, critical leadership scholars have been grappling with the question of *whether and how leadership theory ought to be rebuilt* (Carroll et al., 2019, n.p.); here, again, drawing on some of the recent novels could certainly be of help.

Alvesson (2019, 27) offers a diagnosis of the key problematic aspects of leadership studies, which he systematises under eight labels: *Hollywood, Disneyland, closed system, two kinds of people, bees and the honeypot, reification, tautology and hyperreality problems*. In

referring to *Hollywood*, Alvesson (2019, 29) points to the predilection of leadership theories to conform to a *hero mythology*, whereby *great leaders have a strong impact on mouldable followers.* In the depictions of leadership that are consistent with the hero mythology, organisational leaders are assumed to have the ability to *instill* [*sic*] *their values, beliefs, and assumptions within an organization* (Hartnell & Wallumbwa, 2011, 232). Drawing on examples of literary fiction which depict strong, male leaders as influencing, through their individual agency, the followers and the entire environment reinforces heroic views of leadership. However, turning to novels which present the embeddedness of all human action and reflection, and the ways in which what individuals do is inextricably linked to the actions of others and the broader historical, socioeconomic and cultural circumstances would help debunk the hero myth in leadership studies. In this regard, Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* offers an excellent analysis of such embeddedness through his depiction of how the lives of the novel's characters unfold against the backdrop of socioeconomic and cultural change in post-industrial Glasgow in the 1980s.

The *Disneyland ideology* is the label Alvesson (2019, 30) uses to describe leadership studies' *celebration of moral virtue as a key quality in effective leadership*. Authenticity and integrity are part of the moral virtue expected of and assumed about leaders, contributing to another myth about leadership which equips leaders with *messianic* qualities (Alvesson, 2011; Spoelstra & ten Bos, 2011; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002; also, Chapter 12, Authentic leadership or authenticity in leadership?, and Chapter 17, The myth of the passions). Again, there is a lot of scope for contributing to a more relational and multifaceted view of leadership drawing on novels that, unlike the classical Disney-style tales, dissect the moral complexity and ambiguity of human character, and show the capacity of people to act differently depending on circumstances. Among the 2020 Booker Prize shortlisted novels, Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* could be drawn on by leadership scholars because, in its critical portrayal of life in an ashram, including the conduct of the guru and his followers, it questions the morality and ethics underlying leadership practice.

The *closed system* problem diagnosed by Alvesson (2019, 31) refers to how leadership studies scholars often treat leadership *as a closed system, made up* [of] *a limited, self-contained unit of a leader and a (or several) followers.* Again, to counter this problem, using novels that present the richness of context and address the multiple, historico-geographical, nonlinear interconnections between people, places, events and outcomes might help leadership scholars in moving away from the *closed system* view of leadership. An example of a novel that could be used by leadership scholars wishing to overcome the 'closed system' problem is Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*. With its episodic structure and composition that experiments with a move away from the realist novel genre, the novel portrays the protagonist Tambu's life in contemporary Harare – and the different social worlds co-existing in the city – in a complex, contextualised and nonlinear way.

The fourth issue identified by Alvesson (2019, 32), *two kinds of people*, is described as the tendency of leadership studies to only present *two types of people: leaders and followers.* Such dichotomy, however, misrepresents the nature of human relations and identities. Obviously, literary fiction offers invaluable insights into the multiple ways people relate to one another, and contemporary fiction, with its diversity of characters – for example, in terms of ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality and age – deserves attention as a possible solution to the *two kinds of people* problem. Any of the six novels shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize could be drawn on by leadership scholars wishing to highlight the multiplicity and diversity of human relations and identities.

Further, Alvesson (2019) coins the term *bees and the honey pot* to describe another reason for his unease with leadership studies, namely, that due to the perceived high returns in career and financial terms for both academics and students, a lot of people are attracted to research, teaching and being trained in leadership, and a lot of very varied content becomes subsumed under the mega-discourse of leadership. As a result, the leadership discourse crowds out other possible discursive framings, such as *management, peer relations, professionalism, autonomy, co-workership, organizing processes or mutual adjustment* (Alvesson, 2019, 34). As a space within which complex and diverse types of relationships are

described, and their difference examined, contemporary literary fiction provides multiple opportunities for exploring and pushing the boundaries of what we understand as leadership versus non-leadership. Again, any of the 2020 Booker Prize shortlisted novels could serve as a source of interrogation and insights into the nuanced phenomena that often get subsumed under the mega-discourse of leadership.

The fifth predicament that, according to Alvesson (2019, 34), the field of leadership studies suffers from is *reification – turning leadership into an 'it'*, or the fact that *all the popular leadership theories assemble a more or less complex, vague and varied qualities into a seemingly coherent, integrated and solid phenomenon becoming a suitable object for measurement*. The reification of leadership, in Alvesson's (2019) view, also makes it impossible to consider within leadership theories the *leadership according to whom?* question, and taking into account that different parties within the leadership relation will often have a different perspective and view on the aspects of leadership. Yet again, literary novels – and especially pieces of contemporary fiction that focus on matters of great importance to present-day society, and describe them as seen from the viewpoint of diverse characters, with different values and agendas – can help leadership scholars unsettle such reified, one perspective-based notions and elements of leadership. Diane Cook's book *The New Wilderness* which addresses the timely subjects of the climate crisis and human individualism and destructiveness, while half-way switching the narrative from one protagonist's (Bea, the mother) to another one's (Agnes, the daughter), is an inspirational example of such a novel.

Alvesson (2019, 35) also takes an issue with what he calls a *tautology* of *the good leads to the good* within leadership studies. He points out that very often, knowledge claims about leadership are made on the basis of conceptually and empirically weak research. This, for example, tends to be the case with questionnaire-based studies which, in Alvesson's (2019, 35) opinion, typically claim a connection between individuals' influence and positive outcomes on the basis of *highly subjective ratings of people evaluating leadership*. Of course, compared to questionnaire inventories, literary fiction provides a much more sophisticated way of capturing the ambiguities of influence, and the multiple and often indirect ways in

which things, people and places are interconnected. They also have a unique ability to show how particular outcomes result from complex entanglements of external, structural conditions, existing relations of power, and individuals' agency. All of the 2020 Booker Prize shortlisted novels offer a complex account of such interconnections and entanglements.

Finally, Alvesson (2019, 36) identifies the eighth problem with leadership studies, which he labels *hyperreality – or who cares about reality?*. He challenges leadership studies scholars by expressing doubt about whether, when conducting empirical research, they are actually interested in organisational reality. Alvesson (2019, 36) argues that data derived from questionnaires or one-off interviews with individuals disconnected from one another *are usually distanced from actions, events, feelings, relations, articulations of opinions, etc. emerging in everyday life situations*. Valuable insights into such 'everyday life' phenomena, be it those occurring within organisational or other contexts, are offered by literary fiction. In particular, they can be found in contemporary novels as these have been written by authors who might have themselves experienced or at least observed them, as is the case, for example, with Brandon Taylor's novel *Real Life*, based on the author's own experience as a young black gay man on a PhD programme in a predominantly white university in the US, and Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain*, drawing on the author's experience of growing up in Thatcher-era Scotland.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued for a more discerning engagement of leadership scholars with literary fiction. I have recommended, in particular, a turn towards more recent literary fiction, and especially towards fiction that would offer a different view of society – and leadership – to that found in 'traditional' leadership studies. Of course, this does not mean that there are no novels in the 'classical' canon that might help us reimagine leadership or that all contemporary fiction has this potential. Nevertheless, it is the contemporary novel that offers us a uniquely insightful glimpse into present-day world, together with its challenges which Carroll et al. (2019, n.p.) poignantly describe as:

a number of catastrophes that can clearly be laid at leadership's door – global warming, polarisation of wealth and poverty, unresolved and often generational conflicts and wars, racism, sexism and fear of mistrust of 'the other' – to name but a few.

<ext ends>

Contemporary literary fiction, written by diverse authors and exploring a broad range of societally relevant topics from a variety of perspectives can help us understand better these catastrophes and can inspire us to find new ways of addressing them through opening up new avenues for thinking about leadership.

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