

UNITED WISDOM

Parasocial closeness: a connection with someone who does not know us personally

Relationships and Shared Life

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

R-30-N04 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

Parasocial closeness: a connection with someone who does not know us personally

Epigraph

“the unappeasable curiosity”

Henry James, the author’s preface to The Tragic Muse, the paragraph about public interest in performers. A short fragment in the original English; the literary observation is not a diagnosis of an audience. Primary context.

What this article is about

Marina has listened to the same podcast for months. She recognises the host’s voice from the first words, remembers the story of her move and smiles before a familiar joke arrives. In the evening, that voice helps her feel in the company of others. One day the host changes the subject and announces a long break. Marina is surprised by the strength of her disappointment: someone who has become part of her week knows nothing about her. She feels awkward even telling friends, as though a meaningful connection had to be mutual to deserve attention.

This is a fictional scene, not a description of a disorder. We will consider closeness to a public person that develops mainly on the viewer’s or listener’s side. The feeling can be real without a personal agreement between two people. The question is how to preserve valuable participation without assigning the author the role of friend, support or debtor without her response. The term does not explain someone’s entire life or allow their health to be assessed from a subscription. A literary scene, a study of the state of the research field and our ethical reflections do different jobs. The voluntary practice at the end has not been tested as a method and does not promise a particular feeling or result.

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

I. A feeling of closeness has its own participant

Marina really does look forward to an episode. She remembers where she was when she heard an important story and associates the voice with a difficult period in her life. This is part of her own experience. It would be inaccurate to call that experience imaginary merely because the host cannot name her. Yet significance for one person does not tell us what exists between two. Familiarity, a shared history and a mutually accepted connection have different scopes. We can acknowledge the first without inventing the other two.

Public communication is often shaped to be received personally: the author speaks in the first person, looks into the camera and addresses the listener. This can be an honest way of speaking to an audience. An author need not have a special feeling for every individual to thank everyone for their attention. Equally, a viewer need not be cold to understand the scale of the address. A warm impression and an accurate understanding of its recipient can coexist; neither has to destroy the other in the name of correctness.

It helps to name what actually happened. Marina has heard the host speak many times, but the host has not heard her responses. The host has described certain events without discussing Marina’s life with her. These differences do not diminish the work or Marina’s gratitude. They show where known participation ends. If Marina wants to write a letter, that wish concerns her next action. It has not yet become a shared conversation. She can see this limit without accusing herself of naivety or concluding that all public sincerity must be deceptive.

II. A public address and a personal response are different

The host says that listeners were there during a difficult year. Marina recognises her own participation in those words. The gratitude may indeed include her as part of the audience. But that does not mean the host remembers her individual story or is ready to receive a private approach. Words spoken to many people retain their public scope even when each person hears them alone at home. Being included in a collective address is not an individual promise. This distinction concerns the content of the message, not the reality or strength of the listener’s experience.

A personal response sometimes does appear. An author may answer a comment, use a name or talk after an event. There is then a particular instance of mutual participation that need not be denied. Its scope, however, remains a separate question. An answer about a book does not mean readiness to discuss relationships; thanks for a letter do not create permanent availability. A connection may contain both public and personal elements. The distinction is therefore not a universal label that prevents us from recognising a real acquaintance where one has genuinely arisen and continues through both people’s responses.

Marina received a brief thank you for explaining how an episode helped her. She can value that response while remaining precise: the host read one letter and replied to it. If there is no further response, the earlier thanks do not require endless continuation. A promise comes from what was actually promised, not from everything that became emotionally imaginable after a warm remark. Someone can feel hope without presenting it to another as a role already accepted. Refraining from doing so preserves both participants' dignity, although it does not guarantee freedom from disappointment.

An answer may also be ambiguous in form. The host reads several letters, combines themes and discusses a similar difficulty without names. Marina recognises her question but does not know whether her particular letter was used. She can value the helpful discussion without treating recognition as confirmation. Without a separate indication, a general response remains general. Even if her letter informed the discussion, that does not authorise the next private subject. The scope of each answer can stay small, requiring neither the complete denial of participation nor an appealing story of a personal connection coming into being.

III. A familiar image leaves the person partly unknown

Marina knows how the host describes setbacks, what she considers important in her work and which books she chooses for the programme. This is substantial knowledge of public material. It does not provide complete knowledge of a private life. Even a sincere account selects its subject, timing and form. It may leave out people, events and aspects of experience not intended for the audience. What is not shown need not be a dark secret. Someone is entitled to a life that does not become an extension of an episode, however attentively others have listened.

This places a limit on prediction. Marina may think that the host will certainly understand her difficulty because she spoke well about a similar subject. Perhaps a conversation would be attentive; perhaps a personal approach would be inappropriate or impossible. Until there is a response, both possibilities remain unknown. Understanding a general question, being able to help in a particular situation and agreeing to do so now are different things. A good talk should not become a guarantee of individual help. Choosing support may require entirely different information and people.

The same limit applies when something unpleasant happens. One contentious episode may change someone's view of the work without revealing all the author's motives. Marina can stop listening without diagnosing another person's character. She can also continue without defending every unknown circumstance. Assessing a particular text is more accessible than passing an overall judgement on someone. If real harm has been identified, it requires attention and facts of its own; a familiar voice should not excuse it in advance. But knowing one episode does not make us owners of an entire biography or establish that every other suspicion is true.

Private uncertainty is especially apparent when a public person retells a similar story many times. A viewer may feel present throughout the event while knowing only several versions of its telling. Repetition makes the material familiar but does not automatically supply missing information. We can remember an account accurately without knowing how those involved understand the event now. Marina need not search for its hidden continuation. It is enough not to treat familiarity with the story as authority to speak for everyone in it or judge their present decisions beyond what has been shown.

IV. Significance requires neither shame nor idealisation

A connection with a work can be valuable. Marina noticed an important subject, found words for her own experience and met people at a discussion of an episode. None of these results requires mutual friendship with the host. She can be grateful for the work and acknowledge the part it played. Its value does not increase by declaring the author the only person who understands her. Nor does that value disappear when the connection is named more accurately. A podcast can remain an important podcast without replacing every other kind of human participation.

Researchers distinguish an experience of interaction during media consumption from a more enduring relationship with a media figure. In their 2024 descriptive study of the research field, Schramm and colleagues examine 281 studies from 2016–2020 and identify limits in samples and measurement. This is a map of research conducted, not Marina’s diagnosis or proof that a particular subscription improves or worsens her life. One term cannot establish the cause of loneliness, a person’s need for others or the right amount of viewing.

For her own decision, Marina can return to what she observes. What does an episode offer her? What takes up her time? Which expectation arose on her side, and did anyone confirm it? The answers can change across periods of life. She need not prove the whole connection beneficial in order to keep it, or harmful in order to change it. She can reduce participation because she is tired, keep a favourite programme or notice that she wants different support. Such a decision concerns current circumstances and need not turn earlier months into a mistake or make her a weak person.

V. Hoping for a response does not create a right of access

Marina decides to write to the host. The letter matters to her, and she hopes for a response. She can consider whether a suitable way to make this approach is actually known and what the author offers within it. A channel for suggesting topics does not become a place for private assistance. If replies are not promised, sending a letter does not create that promise. This is a question of matching one’s action to a known invitation. The article gives no instructions for a particular platform or ways to find private contacts beyond those the person has made available for this communication.

No response means there is no response yet. The reason may be unknown: the letter has not been read, time is lacking, the subject is unsuitable or a private conversation is unwanted. We do not select one explanation as true or prescribe endless waiting. Marina can stop writing, direct her attention elsewhere or approach someone with whom there really is a suitable opportunity to talk. An unresolved feeling does not oblige the author to provide closure. Another person’s response may be desired, but its absence does not authorise bypassing a stated limit through relatives, colleagues or another private route.

There is an important boundary in the other direction. Not every request to a public person is an unjustified demand for attention. There may be a specific promise, commissioned work or a public question about their actions. That particular subject and the relevant facts then need consideration. Describing a connection as nonreciprocal does not cancel real obligations or protect an author from substantive criticism. Our question is narrower: one known matter cannot silently expand into a right to the whole of someone’s personal life. Answering for an accepted action and being permanently emotionally available are different, even when the approach concerns the same person.

VI. Financial support does not buy personal closeness

Marina sometimes supports the programme with a small payment. She wants the work to continue and enjoys additional material. That support may have a clear purpose. If particular content is promised, it matters to distinguish it from expecting special treatment. Payment does not make every unspoken wish part of an agreement. Nor should an author leave an important matter unclear by relying on the audience’s emotional involvement. We do not determine a purchaser’s legal rights here: the terms of a particular purchase and applicable rules need to be established separately.

In our fictional scene, Marina discovers that she pays more than she can comfortably afford because she fears disappearing from the host’s attention. She can stay with that observation without explaining why her entire life has this shape. What is actually promised in return for support? What expense is she willing to accept? Is there a hope that payment cannot confirm?

These questions do not establish an amount appropriate for everyone. They help separate participation’s purpose from an attempt to secure a personal place in someone’s life when such a place has never been offered and cannot be guaranteed by regular contributions.

An author, in turn, can welcome support without calling it evidence of a special friendship with every payer. Public thanks can remain thanks. If personal communication is offered, its terms and limits need separate clarity; language about closeness does not make them unnecessary. Marina can value an additional conversation without expecting permanent care. She can decline further participation without proving the author bad. She retains the option to reconsider her spending. Money already spent does not oblige her to continue, and stopping does not erase everything she actually received before.

A gift also needs a name of its own. If Marina sends a postcard as thanks, it does not become a hidden request for a long conversation. If she really wants an answer, she can acknowledge that wish to herself rather than concealing it beneath compulsory selflessness. Yet acknowledging the wish does not produce the author’s unknown agreement. Sometimes it is better to express gratitude in an available public form or take no additional action at all. The value of what she heard does not depend on personally repaying someone and receiving a sign that this particular expression of thanks was noticed among many others.

VII. An audience can become a community without collective rights over the author

After discussing an episode, Marina gets to know two other listeners. They answer her, ask questions and talk about themselves. This is a different arrangement: reciprocity can arise among audience members while the connection with the host remains mostly one-sided. We cannot call everyone a friend merely because they subscribe, but we can notice particular responses. A community need not be a smaller copy of its relationship with the leading voice. People can develop their own subjects and agreements without requiring the author’s presence in every conversation.

A shared liking does not confer shared authority over the host. A group may want a new episode without determining the duration of her rest or the contents of her private life. Equally, participants need not show the author every conversation among themselves or accept one interpretation of the work as proof of loyalty. They can discuss content and disagreements. Attention to a particular action remains important, but membership does not require defending everything a public person does. Belonging to an audience does not replace one’s own judgement or turn someone else’s disagreement into a betrayal of everyone involved.

There is also a limit on telling another listener’s story. Marina heard it at a small gathering. Shared interests do not make the story available as public proof of how much the programme

helps everyone. First, the disclosure's subject and that person's participation need attention. This example is not a legal instruction on handling information. It shows that gratitude to the host should not be paid for by someone else's unrequested appearance in a shared success story. A community may matter precisely because an individual retains the right not to become an illustration of its strength.

Listeners can disagree about an episode and still be able to talk. Marina need not defend every statement the host makes to retain her place in the group. Another participant need not immediately stop listening for a doubt to count as sincere. Discussing a particular assertion and one's reasons is more useful than testing belonging through a required intensity of admiration. A conversation, however, is not promised to everyone at all times: someone can decline to continue a dispute. A community remains communication among individual participants when their responses matter instead of being replaced by an assumed single will of the audience.

VIII. A change in the programme can change one's own connection

The host's break interrupted Marina's familiar evening. She can acknowledge disappointment without demanding that it be immediately repaired. A real part of her routine changed: anticipation, a familiar subject and the opportunity to discuss the next episode. The host's not knowing Marina does not cancel this change. But a sense of loss and an obligation to keep working are separate questions. Someone can miss a person without acquiring the right to cancel their rest. They can also dislike a new programme and stop participating without declaring the change a moral betrayal of every listener.

In the preface to The Tragic Muse, Henry James describes his own experience of a perceived lack of response to the work and notes public curiosity about performers. These are literary observations about art and its audience, not research into podcasts or an explanation of Marina. Our comparison asks whether strongly directed attention tells us what participation exists on the other side. The literary image opens a question while preserving uncertainty about the real person and our fictional circumstances.

Marina can find another shape for her evening without appointing a new person to the same compulsory role. She might return to favourite episodes, try another programme, speak to someone she knows or leave free time free. None of these options promises to remove the feeling. What matters is that the decision concerns her life and does not first require an explanation from the author convincing enough to satisfy her. The earlier connection remains significant in memory. New participation can have a different scope; it need not reproduce the old habit or establish in advance what will become equally dear.

IX. A boundary can be one’s own and small

Marina wants to check less often for a new episode. She need not draw up a large plan to correct her personality or publicly announce withdrawal from the programme. She can choose one small limit: returning to the page at a convenient time, for instance, rather than with every impulse. This article gives no tested rule for frequency and does not promise that such a choice will suit her. What matters is being able to consider an action separately from a feeling. Changing habitual access to material does not require first ceasing to love a voice, feel grateful for the work or miss it during a break.

A limit can be considered through what is manageable and what is actually observed. Marina notices that she is less distracted in the evening; or finds the rule inconvenient; or sees no substantial change. Each answer is possible. Something that did not occur should not be declared a success, and a mismatch need not become proof of weakness. The trial can be changed or abandoned. It contains no secret test of the author: we do not disappear to check whether our absence is noticed, or turn silence into a way of obtaining a stronger personal invitation.

Sometimes the question extends beyond one habit. Someone may lack an available conversation, help with a particular situation or participation the programme cannot provide. Then it can make sense to seek support with a suitable real subject and terms rather than requiring a favourite author to become everything at once. The article does not determine the professional help needed or diagnose this need from viewing. It leaves room to acknowledge the limits of the present format. Turning to another person does not devalue the work; continuing to watch does not mean its familiar voice has already resolved every other question.

X. Naming the connection accurately preserves both people’s freedom

Marina can say that this work mattered to her. That acknowledgement need not include declaring the host her friend. She can be grateful for what she heard, remain interested in public material and allow the author’s private life to stay unknown. Precision does not automatically drain an experience of feeling. It frees that experience from having to prove reciprocity where none exists. The work can therefore remain significant on its own scale, and the author a separate person whose present agreement does not arise from the quantity of a viewer’s attention.

The viewer’s freedom matters too. They can change participation, question what was said, stop paying or decline to wait for the next season. They need not maintain the image of a loyal

listener for imagined approval. They can remember what was good and recognise a present mismatch. A factual question about an accepted promise requires consideration of its own, without turning the whole connection into a personal debt. Content, a particular action and the entirety of an unknown person remain distinguishable. This distinction does not dictate one choice, but it allows someone to make their own decision about a more accurately understood subject.

Our story can continue in different ways. Marina may keep the podcast, find a new rhythm or decide that other participation suits her better. The host may return or change her work. None of this is proved by the sources or assigned as the correct ending. The question remains modest: what connection are we actually sustaining, what do we value in it, and what cannot we require without the other person’s response? Closeness on the listener’s side has human substance. That substance does not automatically grant access to its object or oblige the listener to remain in the same form of participation forever.

What this means in practice

If you wish, choose one familiar public voice or image and name what matters to you. It might be a subject, a way of speaking, a memory of a period, a feeling of company or a particular useful thought. You need not immediately decide whether the whole connection is good or bad. It is enough to distinguish your own experience from what actually occurred between you and the other person. If there were no personal responses, do not invent them; if there were, note their limited subject without extending it to everything else.

You can then choose one expectation. What would you like to receive? Was it actually offered, in what form and with what limits? A reply, continuation of a programme, individual help and promised content are different. The strength of a wish does not bring an absent promise into existence. Yet a real, specific question should not be cancelled by the word nonreciprocal. Where substantial obligations are concerned, facts and an appropriate way to establish them matter; this article does not determine them for you.

If you want a small boundary of your own, choose something manageable: viewing time, spending, one approach or a decision to stop waiting for a response. Do not use the boundary as a hidden test of the author’s love for the audience. Do not search for private contacts to bypass an absent invitation. Afterwards, notice only what actually changed and reconsider the trial if needed. Gratitude, freedom from missing someone and mutual closeness are not promised outcomes.

You can skip or stop the practice. It does not replace needed support or require public discussion of sensitive experiences. Where there are threats or coercion, another contact is not proposed as a test of boundaries; suitable safe help needs to take real conditions into

account. In an ordinary situation, one precise distinction may be enough: this work matters to me, but its author has not promised permanent availability. Or another: the earlier format no longer suits me. Both responses preserve the significance of experience and the ability to choose for oneself.

Key quotation

> *“no echo or message”*

Henry James, the same preface, the paragraph about his perceived lack of response to a work. A fragment in the original English. The author’s experience does not explain our listener’s reaction or create an obligation to respond. Source.

Connections between traditions

Line of thought	Shared question and limit of the comparison
Henry James’s literary preface ↔ an audience	Directed attention and a received response are different. A writer’s observation does not describe a modern platform or establish its psychological effects.
Parasocial interaction ↔ an enduring relationship	The concepts help distinguish research subjects. The term is not a diagnosis of an individual listener.
Gratitude for a work ↔ mutual friendship	Significance can exist without a personal agreement. A collective public address does not imply an individual promise.
Audience ↔ community	Reciprocal responses may arise among listeners. This is separate participation and does not give a group rights over the author’s private life.
One’s own boundary ↔ another person’s agreement	Viewing or spending can be changed. One’s expectation does not replace the author’s agreement to private communication.

Primary sources and research

1. Henry James. The Tragic Muse, author's Preface. The fixed version transcribes Macmillan, 1921; Gutenberg 20085, released 10 December 2006. Metadata and a continuous selected preface context concerning the work, its reception and public interest in performers were read. Complete reading of the novel is not claimed. Quotations and paraphrase concern the author's preface; international permission for all versions is not inferred from Gutenberg's US status.

2. Holger Schramm, Nicole Liebers, Laurenz Biniak, Franca Dettmar. Research trends on parasocial interactions and relationships with media characters. Frontiers in Psychology, 2024, DOI 10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1418564. Publication details and selected introduction, conceptual, methodological and limitation contexts were read. This is an original descriptive study of a research corpus, not a test of our practice. International or individual causal conclusions are not asserted.

Tags

parasocial closeness, audience, listener, public person, podcast, voice, familiarity, personal response, reciprocity, agreement, promise, expectation, uncertainty, private life, gratitude, work, support, spending, community, boundary, access, attention, break, change, freedom of choice, Henry James, The Tragic Muse, media psychology, Schramm, research, dignity, United Wisdom

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she aims to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life among people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.