

Is fiction good for you? How researchers are trying to find out

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It's assumed that reading fiction is good for your mental health, but evidence linking Jane Eyre or Anna Karenina to a broadened mind has been mostly anecdotal. In a Review published on July 19 in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, a psychologist-novelist delves into that issue, arguing that reading or watching narratives may encourage empathy. By exploring the inner lives of characters on the page, readers can form ideas about others' emotions, motives, and ideas, off the page.

This intersection between literature and psychology has only taken off in the last few years, says Keith Oatley, a Professor Emeritus of the University of Toronto Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development. "There's a bit of a buzz about it now," he says. "In part, because researchers are recognizing that there's something important about imagination." The field's recent turn toward brain imaging studies has also made the academic climate open to these ideas, he adds.

In this Review, one study is cited in which people were asked to imagine phrases (e.g., "a dark blue carpet," "an orange striped pencil") while in an fMRI machine. "Just three such phrases were enough to produce the most activation of the hippocampus, a brain region associated with learning and memory. This points to the power of the reader's own mind," says Oatley. "Writers don't need to describe scenarios exhaustively to draw out the reader's imagination—they only need to suggest a scene."

Reading fiction, and perhaps especially literary fiction, says Oatley,

simulates a kind of social world, prompting understanding and empathy in the reader. To measure this empathetic response, Raymond Mar and others in the Toronto research group led by Oatley were the first to use the "Mind of the Eyes Test," in which participants view 36 photographs of people's eyes, and for each choose among four terms to indicate what the person is thinking or feeling. They found that reading narrative fiction gave rise to significantly higher scores than did reading nonfictional books. This association remained significant even after personality and individual differences had been controlled for.

Similar empathy-boosting effects have been found when participants watched the fictional television drama *The West Wing*, or played a video game with a narrative storyline—the first-person detective game *Gone Home*. What's common across these media is the "engagement with characters we can think about," says Oatley.

"The most important characteristic of being human is that our lives are social," says Oatley. "What's distinctive about humans is that we make social arrangements with other people—with friends, with lovers, with children—that aren't pre-programmed by instinct. Fiction can augment and help us understand our social experience."

Further studies have shown that narratives can even generate empathy for a race or culture that is dissimilar to one's own. In one such study, readers of the fictional story *Saffron Dreams* by Shaila Abdullah (which focuses on the experience of a Muslim woman in New York) were found to have a reduced bias in the perception of Arab and Caucasian faces when compared to a control group that read a non-narrative passage.

This new field of the psychology of narrative fiction still has a long way to go. For example, there are questions surrounding the role of storytelling in human evolution. "Almost all human cultures create stories that, until now, have been rather dismissively called

'entertainment,'" notes Oatley. "I think there is also something more important going on."

Next in this line of work, there need to be studies in which people are assigned to read narrative fiction or explanatory nonfiction over a matter of months. There's also the question of how long a narrative's empathy-boosting effects last.

"What's a piece of fiction, what's a novel, what's short story, what's a play or movie or television series? It's a piece of consciousness being passed from mind to mind. When you're reading or watching a drama, you're taking in a piece of consciousness that you make your own," says Oatley. "That seems an exciting idea."

More information: *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Oatley, K.: "Fiction: Simulation of Social Worlds," [www.cell.com/trends/cognitive-...1364-6613\(16\)30070-5](http://www.cell.com/trends/cognitive-...1364-6613(16)30070-5) , DOI: [10.1016/j.tics.2016.06.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2016.06.002)

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