Why We Read Fiction
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for granted our complex institutional embedment which allows us to make sense of the world, shouldn’t we inquire with equal vigor into our cognitive embedment which—as I hope I have demonstrated in the example above—profoundly informs the institutional one? Given the suggestively constrained range of the “wrong” interpretations offered by Fish (i.e., all of his interpretations connected the behavior to a mental state), shouldn’t we qualify his assertion that unless we read Mr. Newlin’s raised hand in the context of his being a student, “there is nothing in the form of [his] gesture that tells his fellow students how to determine its significance”? Surely the form of the gesture—staying with the word that Fish himself has emphasized—is quite informative because its very deliberateness seems to delimit the range of possible “wrong” interpretations. That is, had Mr. Newlin unexpectedly jerked his hand instead of “waving” it “vigorously,” some mechanical explanation, such as a physiological spasm or someone pushing his elbow, perhaps even a wire attached to his sleeve, would seem far less absurd.

To return, then, to the potentially problematic issue of the effortless-ness with which we “read” minds: a flagrantly “wrong,” from our perspective, interpretation, such as taking tears of grief for tears of joy, or thinking that Mr. Newlin raises his hand to point out that the sky is falling, is still “effortless” from the point of view of cognitive psychologists because of the ease with which we correlate tears with an emotional state or the raised hand with a certain underlying desire/intention. Mind-reading is thus effortless in the sense that we “intuitively” connect people’s behavior to their mental states—as in the example involving Walsh’s “trembling”—although our subsequent description of these mental states could run a broad gamut from perceptively accurate to profoundly mistaken. For any description is, as Fish tells us on a different occasion, “always and already interpretation,” a “text,” a story influenced to some extent by the personal history, biases, and desires of the reader.

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WHY DO WE READ FICTION?

I have mentioned earlier that works of fiction provide grist for the mills of our mind-reading adaptations that have evolved to deal with real
people, even though on some level we do remember that literary charac-
ters are not real people at all. The question of just how we manage to keep
track of their “unreality” is very complicated and directly relates to an
important issue taken up by cognitive scientists, namely, what cognitive
mechanisms or processes make pretence (and imagination as such) possi-
ble.\(^1\) I will discuss here only a very limited sample of hypotheses currently
on the table, focusing on those that offer, especially when considered
together, some interesting insights into the larger question of why we read
fiction. The first hypothesis is developed by a cognitive scientist; the sec-
ond, by a cognitive literary critic.

To explain why autistic children do not engage in spontaneous pre-
tence, Peter Carruthers suggests that they lack access not only to other
people's mental states but to their own mental states as well.\(^2\) Carruthers
thus argues that the “awareness of one’s mental state makes possible the
enjoyment derived from the manipulation of this state.” It could be, then,
that “the awareness of the attitude of pretending does not even have to
include the content of what is pretended. Rather, it need only—at most—
metarepresent that it is now pretending.”\(^3\) Therefore, autistic children “do
have the capacity for pretence if prompted,” but they rarely exercise this
capacity. Deprived, through mind-blindness, “of ready access to their own
mental states, they are at the same time deprived of the main source of
enjoyment present in normal pretending . . . [and] do not find the activ-
ity [cognitively] rewarding.”\(^4\) And if, as cognitive psychologists argue, “the
function of pretend-play is to exercise the imagination,” then having so lit-
tle “practice at imagining,” autistic children do it less well than others.\(^5\)

The cognitive rewards of reading fiction might thus be aligned with
the cognitive rewards of pretend play through a shared capacity to stimu-
late and develop the imagination. It may mean that our enjoyment of fic-
tion is predicated—at least in part—upon our awareness of our “trying on”
mental states potentially available to us but at a given moment differing
from our own.

Keeping this in mind, let us now turn to the second hypothesis. Devel-
oped by the influential cognitive literary critic Reuven Tsur, it also focuses,
albeit from a different angle, on the pleasure attendant upon our awareness
of our cognitive functioning. Tsur’s larger argument is that fictional narra-
tives affect us by delaying or disrupting “in some other manner”\(^6\) our cog-
nitive processes. Moreover, our awareness of those disruptions “indicates to
consciousness” that our crucial cognitive adaptations are in good shape
(always welcome news). Here is how it works, for example, in the case of
one literary genre, jokes:
[Jokes] crucially depend on a cognitive mechanism of shifting mental sets. Mental set is the readiness to respond in a certain way. It is, obviously, an adaptation device of great survival value. It is required for handling any situation in a consistent manner. Of no less great survival value is the adaptation device called shift of mental sets. This may be defined as the shift of one’s readiness to respond in a certain way. It is required for handling changing situations in extralinguistic reality. The use of these two (opposing) kinds of adaptation mechanisms may yield different kinds of pleasure. Mental set is a typical instance of gaining pleasure from saving mental energy. The shift of mental sets yields a kind of pleasure that is derived from a certainty that one’s adaptation mechanisms function properly. . . . The sense of humor, or the ability to apply wit to difficult life situations, is usually regarded as a sign of mental health. . . . Jokes achieve their witty effects by inducing some marked shift of mental sets, usually involving some changing situations. They are, then, an obvious case in which an adaptive device is turned to esthetic ends.\footnote{7}

I will turn to the question of aesthetics shortly. First, however, let us see how, played off each other, Carruthers’s and Tsur’s respective hypotheses illuminate an important aspect of our relationship with literary narrative. Carruthers suggests that we may find pleasing the awareness of our attitude of pretending. Tsur argues that jokes are particularly pleasing because they serve as a fast test of one’s cognitive well-being (i.e., “I laugh; therefore I must be generally able to shift mental sets quickly”). It is possible, then, that certain cultural artifacts, such as novels, test the functioning of our cognitive adaptations for mind-reading while keeping us pleasantly aware that the “test” is proceeding quite smoothly. That is, when I am wondering if my uncle’s inconspicuous social standing will influence Mr. Darcy’s view of me as a potential wife—and yet know that what I am really experiencing is a state of mind of Elizabeth Bennet, who is, after all, not me— I am being made aware that my Theory of Mind must be functioning quite well. (So perhaps I will be all right out there in the real world, where my social survival absolutely depends on being able to imagine—correctly, incorrectly, approximately, self-servingly, bizarrely—other people’s thoughts, desires, and intentions around the clock.)

There is a rub, though. Sometimes I get so engrossed by my “test” that I lose sight, at least to some degree, of the fact that neither do I have the lawyer uncle who lives in Cheapside nor am I in love with Mr. Darcy. Or, in a related cognitive slippage, I begin to feel that there is much more to Elizabeth Bennet than meets my eye on the page. Whereas I can shake off
the former illusion pretty quickly (unless, that is, I am Don Quixote, but that is the subject of the second part of this book), the latter is much more enduring.

Hence what James Phelan sees as the striking “power of the interpretive habit to preserve the mimetic.”8 And hence, perhaps, our ambivalence toward that habit. For even though, as critics and teachers of literature, we do base both scholarly interpretations and classroom discussions on our “interest in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own,”9 we remain wary about our own and our students’ tendency to treat fictional personages as real people. We consider this tendency “a sentimental misunderstanding of the nature of literature.”10 We complain, as a colleague of mine did recently, that we “work so hard on illuminating the elaborately wrought artifice of the fictional world, and then [our students] get carried away by debating if Elizabeth Bennet slept with Mr. Darcy before marriage. She didn’t because she never existed!”11 It seems to me that our unease on this occasion stems from our intuitive realization that on some level our evolved cognitive architecture indeed does not fully distinguish between real and fictional people.12 Faced with Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, our Theory of Mind jumps at the opportunity (so to speak) to speculate about their past, present, and future states of mind, even as we realize that these “airy forms [and] phantoms of imagination”13 do not deserve such treatment. The pleasure of being “tested” by a fictional text—the pleasure of being aware, that is, that we are actively engaging our apparently well-functioning Theory of Mind—is thus never completely free from the danger of allowing the “phantoms of imagination” too strong a foothold in our view of our social world.

Note, too, how this complicates a closely connected and very attractive hypothesis advanced by several cognitive literary critics, including Palmer, who argue that one “of the pleasures of reading novels is the enjoyment of being told what a variety of fictional people are thinking. . . . This is a relief from the business of real life, much of which requires the ability to decode accurately the behavior of others.”14 Whereas on the whole I subscribe to this view myself (and will build on it shortly), here is a nuance to consider. On the one hand, we indeed “have frequent direct access to fictional minds”15 (e.g., we know that Mr. Darcy gets over his prejudice and learns to like and respect Elizabeth’s uncle for who he is as a person). On the other hand, we tend to compromise our pleasure of “direct access” by believing, like Erich Auerbach, that “the people whose story the author is telling experience much more than [the author] can ever hope to tell.”16 Without pressing this point too strongly, I still want us to see in it some-
thing of a cognitive catch-22 situation. Our Theory of Mind allows us to make sense of fictional characters by investing them with an inexhaustible repertoire of states of mind, but the price that this arrangement may extract from us is that we begin to feel that fictional people do indeed have an inexhaustible repertoire of states of mind. Our pleasant illusion that there are at least some minds in our messy social world that we know well is thus tarnished by our suspicion that even those ostensibly transparent minds harbor some secrets. (Who knows, after all, what exactly went through Mr. Darcy’s mind when he was introduced to Elizabeth’s uncle and aunt?)

In other words, we may see the pleasure afforded by fictional narratives as grounded in our awareness of the successful testing of our mind-reading adaptations, in the respite that such a testing offers us from our everyday mind-reading uncertainties, or in some combination of the two. No matter which explanation or combination of explanations we lean toward, however, we have to remember that the joys of reading fictional minds are subject to some of the same instabilities that render our real-life mind-reading both exciting and exasperating.

If this is not complex enough, throw in some aesthetics. Some writers are willing to construct rather breathtaking tests of our mind-reading ability—provided we are willing to take those tests. (This “we,” by the way, is a complex cultural compound, for it denotes a particularly historically situated reader with a particular individual taste.) After all, the story of Little Red Riding Hood tests our ToM quite well—with all the attributions of states of mind to the grandma, to the trusting little girl, and to the Big Bad Wolf that it requires from its readers/listeners. Still, as we grow older, we begin to hanker for different mind-reading fare. For literary critic Wayne Booth, for example, it has to be Henry James, and not just any James, but the one in his later period. Toward that James, Booth ends up feeling a profound “gratitude”—gratitude of a self-conscious reader of fiction at a certain point in his life toward an author who succeeded in making him try on a poignantly rich suit of mental states. As Booth puts it, in The Wings of the Dove:

[James] has invited me to recreate under his tutelage a beautiful structure—not just any abstract structure but a structure of beautifully realized human creatures highlighted miraculously by the artist. He offers me the chances to pretend, for the duration of my reading, that I too live “up there” with him, able not only to appreciate what he has done but to do it myself. Nobody, including James himself has ever lived for long in
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this empyrean. . . . How can I express my conviction that it is good for me
to be required to go through all this, and to know that if I return with
similar attentiveness to the other late novels [of James] I’ll be invited to
similar—but always fresh—recreations. I have no doubt about it
myself—I who am so much inclined to preoccupations of far less defensible kinds.

If you happen to be a sneaky cognitive literary theorist, you are only too
delighted to hear Booth wondering “how can [he] express [his] conviction
that it is good for [him] to be required to go through all this.” Why (so
you pipe in happily), if a reader’s mind-reading profile is constituted like
Booth’s, there is no doubt that it is “good” for him or her to be “tested” by
The Wings of the Dove. At every step, the book is telling such a reader, as it
were: “These immensely complex, multi-leveled, ethically ambiguous,
class-conscious, mutually reflecting and mutually distorting states of mind
you are capable of navigating. This is how good you are at this maddening
and exhilarating social game. Did you know it? Now you know it!”

Something along these lines must be going on every time we read fic-
tional stories that we enjoy, though the deeper personal meaning of each
“conversation” between the story and the reader varies widely depending
on the circumstances of the latter and her perception of those circum-
stances. For example, when I came to this country, about fifteen years ago,
I went through one of those periods of reading fiction voraciously, going
through a wild mix of novels by authors ranging from Belva Plain to
Nabokov and from Muriel Spark to Philip Roth. That battery of “tests”
must have been offering me a “guarantee” (illusory, perhaps, but still pleas-
ing) that eventually I would be all right in the English-speaking social
world, whose overwhelming difference I could only guess at from the self-
encapsulated enclave of San Francisco’s Russian Jewish community.

Did it matter to me back then that the states of mind that I tried on
with such enthusiasm ranged from those of a young Jewish immigrant
(Evergreen) to an articulate pedophile (Lolita) and from a fascist peda-
gogue (The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie) to a sex-obsessed New York lawyer
(Portnoy’s Complaint)? Apparently not. I might have identified with some
characters more than others (though even that was a tricky business, for I
think I identified more with Humbert Humbert than Anna Friedman),
but the awareness of the personal identification must have been somehow
less important than the awareness of my mind-reading wellbeing. The lat-
ter was crucial for me, the way I was and the way I thought of myself, par-
ticularly at a time when I could not express myself, much less discuss
complex states of mind, in coherent English. I remember conducting elaborate conversations about those states of mind—in what I thought was English—but only in my head. I was later surprised to learn that I was not alone in this experience. Several immigrants who came to the United States in their late fifties and sixties told me that they did this too, a habit appearing more poignant in their case because, being of a retirement age, few of them had a real chance to break through the social barrier created by the language barrier.

Many of them read a lot of fiction at that time and still do.

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**THE NOVEL AS A COGNITIVE EXPERIMENT**

How much prompting do we need to begin to attribute a mind of her own to a fictional character? Very little, it seems, since any indication that we are dealing with an entity capable of self-initiated action (e.g., “Peter Walsh has come back”) leads us to assume that this entity possesses thoughts, feelings, and desires, at least some of which we could intuit, interpret, and, frequently, misinterpret.¹

Writers can exploit our constant readiness to posit a mind whenever we observe behavior as they experiment with the amount and kind of interpretation of the characters’ mental states that they themselves supply and that they expect us to supply. When Woolf shows Clarissa observing Peter’s body language (Clarissa notices that he is “positively trembling”), she has an option of providing us with a representation of either Clarissa’s mind that would make sense of Peter’s physical action (something to the effect of: “how excited must he be to see her again!”) or of Peter’s own mind (as in: “so excited was he to see his Clarissa again!”). Instead she tells us, first, that Peter is thinking that Clarissa has “grown older” and, second, that Clarissa is thinking that Peter looks “exactly the same; . . . the same queer look; the same check suit” (40). Peter’s “trembling” still feels like an integral part of this scene, but make no mistake: we, the readers, are called on to supply the missing bit of information (such as “he must be excited to see her again”) which makes the narrative emotionally cohesive.

Ernest Hemingway, famously, made it his trademark to underrepresent his protagonists’ feelings by forcing the majority of his characters’ physical