those contingencies include personal inclinations and histories of individual writers and readers.

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IS THIS WHY WE READ FICTION?
SURELY, THERE IS MORE TO IT!

This emphasis on local contingencies carries over to another claim that I think you think I have been making throughout this book (yes, that’s the third level of embedment—we handle it easily). Theory of Mind is a cluster of cognitive adaptations that allows us to navigate our social world and also structures that world. Intensely social species that we are, we thus read fiction because it engages, in a variety of particularly focused ways, our Theory of Mind.

That’s my general claim, and here are the promised qualifications. First of all, some texts experiment with our ToM more intensely than others, and some readers appreciate that experimentation more than others, or appreciate some forms of that experimentation more than others. (Again, neither preference is a meaningful indicator of the reader’s emotional intelligence or any other personal characteristic. For example, people who love Woolf’s prose at times apply to graduate programs in English, and that’s as much as I can say about their overall personal profiles.)

Second, the reader’s predilection for a certain form of novelistic experimentation with ToM does not mean that she is guaranteed to enjoy every well-written novel adhering to that form. For example, among the people who like the cognitive thrill offered by the figure of the unreliable narrator, somebody could be turned off by Lolita’s theme of pedophilia. By the same token, an aficionado of a detective novel could find too depressing certain aspects of P. D. James’s The Black Tower. Conversely, a person could find intolerable James’s depiction of corruption in the house of assisted living but still be deeply touched by her portrayal of the novel’s murdered protagonist, Father Baddeley. This is to say that factors other than the form of the novel’s engagement with ToM enter into the assessment of our personal liking of the novel or our assessment of its relative aesthetic value.

Third—but here I ought to be interrupted by my long-suffering reader
who feels badly misrepresented by the argument of this book, in spite of all my qualifications. Let me play the role of that impatient reader myself and voice her main objection, which would sound (in case she happens to like Henry James) something like this:

There is more to my reading of fiction than simply having my ToM tickled! The argument of your book does not even begin to explain what I feel when I learn that the dearest wish of incurably ill Ralph Touchett of James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* has always been to die at the same time with his father, and that Ralph is “steeped in melancholy” (84) when he realizes that this wish will not be granted, and, ill as he is, he will still outlive his father. As James puts it, “The father and the son had been close companions, and the idea of being left alone with the remnants of a tasteless life on his hands was not gratifying to the young man, who had always and tacitly counted upon his elder’s help in making the best of a poor business” (85). Why I relate to this sentiment so strongly is my own business, but isn’t it obvious that your book’s theorizing on ToM and fiction does not capture or explain the instant recognition and heartache that is such an important part of my interaction with the novel? (A hypothetical reader, who insists, quite rightly, on the complexity and unpredictability of her feelings)

I expect that by now you have also thought of episodes like this and concluded that there must be more to our response to our favorite fictional stories than just having our ToM stimulated by them. Except that if you have, you are mistaken, and your mistake stems from our use of that little word “just.” It is fair to say that my book has dealt with just a few aspects of the relationship between our ToM and fiction—with a tiny subset of that relationship, in fact. It does not make sense, however, to say that our interaction with fiction entails much more than just having our ToM stimulated. When it comes to our everyday social functioning (which includes making sense of the social world of the novel), ToM is always much more than whatever cluster of cognitive adaptations we have isolated to make the discussion of it manageable.

For instance, in practical terms, how do you separate our ToM and emotions? If, using my source-monitoring ability, I remember that it was my enemy who wanted my boss to promote me into a certain department, my emotions concerning that impending promotion might be quite different from what they were had I known that he hated the idea of my transfer. I might feel anxiety and anger instead of happy anticipation, and
I might imagine unknown dangers and difficulties lurking behind my new appointment. ToM gives meaning to our emotions and is in turn given meaning by them. As Palmer observes, “[T]he interconnections between cognition and emotion . . . are difficult if not impossible to disentangle. Cognitions tend to have a strong emotional element and vice versa. They also relate closely in causal terms: a character’s anger might be caused by a cognition of some sort that in turn results in further emotions and then other cognitions.”

By the same token, my imagined reader’s argument about *The Portrait of a Lady* is a complex amalgamation of dynamically interacting emotions and cognitions. Her personal feelings about some elder relative that she herself feels very close to are made more poignant, first, because she is able to attribute a particular sentiment to a literary character; second, because she can keep track of the complex source of the sentiment, seeing it issuing from James via “Ralph” and not from herself; and third, because she is titillated by the similarity between something that she has quietly felt for a long time and something that a highly sympathetic personage, such as Ralph, is experiencing. She realizes that she is not alone in the wish that she used to consider odd, and her new awareness of this fragile but comforting community is not reducible to the sum of cognitions and emotions that went into it.

In other words, we do read novels because they engage our ToM, but we are at present a long way off from grasping fully the levels of complexity that this engagement entails. Fiction helps us to pattern in newly nuanced ways our emotions and perceptions; it bestows “new knowledge or increased understanding” and gives “the chance for a sharpened ethical sense”; and it creates new forms of meaning for our everyday existence. All of this exploratory work is inextricably bound up with ToM, and the overall effect of it on the reader is not reducible to the sum of this narrative’s engagements with our various cognitive adaptations. Some day we may have a conceptual framework that will allow us to speak about this overall effect—that “emergent meaning” of the literary narrative. In preparation for that sophisticated future, here is a very specific, modest, take-home claim from my book. I can say that I personally read fiction because it offers a pleasurable and intensive workout for my Theory of Mind. And, if you have indeed read this study of mine from cover to cover and followed attentively its arguments about Clarissa, Lolita, Arsène Lupin, and Mrs. Dalloway, I suspect that this is why you read fiction, too.