Social Minds in the Novel

Palmer, Alan

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Palmer, Alan.
Social Minds in the Novel.
The Ohio State University Press, 2010.
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—William Nelles, professor of English, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

Social Minds in the Novel is the highly readable sequel to Alan Palmer’s award-winning and much-acclaimed Fictional Minds. Here he argues that because of its undue emphasis on the inner, introspective, private, solitary, and individual mind, literary theory tells only part of the story of how characters in novels think. In addition to this internalist view, Palmer persuasively advocates an externalist perspective on the outer, active, public, social, and embodied mind. His analysis reveals, for example, that a good deal of fictional thought is intermental—joint, group, shared, or collective.

Social Minds in the Novel focuses primarily on the epistemological and ethical debate in the nineteenth-century novel about the extent of our knowledge of the workings of other minds and the purposes to which this knowledge should be put. Palmer’s illuminating approach is pursued through skillful and provocative readings of Little Dorrit, Middlemarch, and Persuasion, and, in addition, Evelyn Waugh’s Men at Arms and Ian McEwan’s Enduring Love.

Social minds are not of marginal interest; they are central to our understanding of fictional storyworlds. The purpose of this groundbreaking and important book is to put the complex and fascinating relationship between social and individual minds at the heart of narrative theory. The book will be of interest to scholars in narrative theory, cognitive poetics or stylistics, cognitive approaches to literature, philosophy of mind, social psychology, and the nineteenth-century novel.

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