Novel Finding: Reading Literary Fiction Improves Empathy

The types of books we read may affect how we relate to others

By Julianne Chiaet on October 4, 2013

Credit: Flickr/Susana Fernandez

How important is reading fiction in socializing school children? Researchers at The New School in New York City have found evidence that literary fiction improves a reader's capacity to understand what others are thinking and feeling.

Emanuele Castano, a social psychologist, along with PhD candidate David Kidd conducted five studies in which they divided a varying number of participants (ranging from 86 to 356) and gave them different reading assignments: excerpts from genre (or popular) fiction, literary fiction, nonfiction or nothing. After they finished the excerpts the participants took a test that measured their ability to infer and understand other people's thoughts and emotions. The researchers found, to their surprise, a significant difference between the literary- and genre-fiction readers.

When study participants read non-fiction or nothing, their results were unimpressive. When they read excerpts of genre fiction, such as Danielle Steel's *The Sins of the Mother*, their test results were dually insignificant. However, when they read literary fiction, such as *The Round House* by Louise

Erdrich, their test results improved markedly—and, by implication, so did their capacity for empathy. The study was published October 4 in *Science*. The results are consistent with what literary criticism has to say about the two genres—and indeed, this may be the first empirical evidence linking literary and psychological theories of fiction. Popular fiction tends to portray situations that are otherworldly and follow a formula to take readers on a roller-coaster ride of emotions and exciting experiences. Although the settings and situations are grand, the characters are internally consistent and predictable, which tends to affirm the reader's expectations of others. It stands to reason that popular fiction does not expand the capacity to empathize.

Literary fiction, by contrast, focuses more on the psychology of characters and their relationships. "Often those characters' minds are depicted vaguely, without many details, and we're forced to fill in the gaps to understand their intentions and motivations," Kidd says. This genre prompts the reader to imagine the characters' introspective dialogues. This psychological awareness carries over into the real world, which is full of complicated individuals whose inner lives are usually difficult to fathom. Although literary fiction tends to be more realistic than popular fiction, the characters disrupt reader expectations, undermining prejudices and stereotypes. They support and teach us values about social behavior, such as the importance of understanding those who are different from ourselves.

The results suggest that reading fiction is a valuable socializing influence. The study data could inform debates over how much fiction should be included in educational curricula and whether reading programs should be implemented in prisons, where reading literary fiction might improve inmates' social functioning and empathy. Castano also hopes the finding will encourage autistic people to engage in more literary fiction, in the hope it could improve their ability to empathize without the side effects of medication.