

The Positive Effect Fiction Has On The Mind (M)



All sorts of narratives, including literary fiction, TV shows and even certain video games could be beneficial.

Fiction helps to increase people's empathy with others, a handful of psychological studies find.

All sorts of narratives, including literary fiction, TV shows and even certain video games could help boost our fellow-feeling.

That is the conclusion of a review by Professor Keith Oatley, a cognitive psychologist and novelist.

In one study, for example, people were asked to imagine a single phrase while their brains were scanned.

Professor Oatley explained the results of this simple instruction:

“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.

Writers don’t need to describe scenarios exhaustively to draw out the reader’s imagination—they only need to suggest a scene.”

Literary fiction, in particular, which simulates the social world, may help to boost our empathy with others.

One study gave people a test of empathy after they had either read some literary fiction or some nonfiction.

It was the literary fiction which produced the most empathetic response in people.

Professor Oatley said:

“The most important characteristic of being human is that our lives are social.

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.”

But the effects aren’t limited to literary fiction.

Other studies have suggested that episodes of the West Wing or even video games with a narrative storyline can boost empathy.

Professor Oatley said:

“Almost all human cultures create stories that, until now, have been rather dismissively called ‘entertainment’.

I think there is also something more important going on.”

Fiction can also help us understand others whose experience is different to our own.

Professor Oatley said:

“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.

That seems an exciting idea.”