

Fiction books give a boost to the brain, says Stanford professor

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Literary works of fiction can offer 'a new set of methods for becoming a better maker of arguments, a better redeemer of one's own existence, a person of stronger faith or a person with a quieter mind,' says Joshua Landy, associate professor of French and Italian.

Those long summer days spent reading by the pool might not be so lazy after all.

Readers of literary works by the likes of Samuel Beckett, Stéphane Mallarmé and Geoffrey Chaucer are getting lots of exercise from these personal trainers for the brain.

New research by Stanford's Joshua Landy , associate professor of French and Italian, illustrates how authors throughout the ages have sought to improve mental skills like rational thinking and abstract thought by

leading their readers through a gantlet of mental gymnastics.

In contrast to the common practice of mining fictional works for moral messages and information, Landy's theory of fiction, outlined in his new book, "[How to Do Things with Fictions](#)," presents a new reason for reading in an age when the patience to tackle challenging pieces of writing has dwindled tremendously.

Reading fiction "does not make us better people in the moral sense, whether by teaching us lessons, making us more empathetic or training us to handle morally complex situations," said Landy.

However, for those interested in fine-tuning their intellectual capacities, Landy said literary works of fiction can offer "a new set of methods for becoming a better maker of arguments, a better redeemer of one's own existence, a person of stronger faith or a person with a quieter mind."

Landy's new "formative fiction" theory advises against a utilitarian search for meaning or information that results in an "I got what I need and I can move on" attitude. His theory implies that readers will get much more out of a text by lingering over passages, contemplating ideas between reading sessions and re-reading passages after some reflection.

According to Landy, the formative fiction approach makes complex texts more accessible to non-academic readers.

"Once you realize that some of the arguments are simply not supposed to work at all, Plato's dialogues become less forbidding," Landy said. Readers still have to invest effort, but "you aren't always asking yourself 'what does it mean?' and 'why don't I understand?'"

Mental weight-lifting

In profiling the clearest and most exciting cases of literary works that train the brain,

Landy found that Plato, the Gospel of St. Mark, Mallarmé and Beckett demonstrate most powerfully how formal devices can be used in the service of mental transformation.

With Plato, for example, "it's the ability to make and assess arguments" and with Mallarmé, says Landy, the desired skill is "the ability to believe and disbelieve at the same time." Meanwhile, with the Gospel of St. Mark, it's "the ability to think and speak figuratively."

Landy's research led him to conclude that Plato intentionally allowed his character Socrates to make flawed arguments.

Landy pointed out that in the Gorgias, a stretch of tortured logic leads Socrates to the curious conclusion that "if you want to harm a criminal, the best thing you can do is to make sure he escapes punishment."

In the same dialogue, Socrates also says that no one respects orators, that tyrants never get what they want and that punishment is always good for us. He also says that good politicians will always be popular. By having his character succumb to some very obvious fallacies, Plato invites the audience to detect and correct them, thus sharpening their analytical skills.

As for the parables in the Gospel of St. Mark, Landy rejects the popular belief that they are there to help Jesus make himself understood. Quite the contrary, they are designed to "keep outsiders out" and to bring those with advanced metaphoric interpretation skills "even further in," Landy suggests.

Written to reach a select group of readers and listeners, the parables of

Jesus "aim not to deliver information about the Kingdom of God – amazingly, even the disciples do not understand them – but to inculcate a new way of speaking, a new way of thinking, and thus a new way of living," Landy noted.

To get the most out of the text today, Landy said, readers "should try to talk and think in metaphors, just as Jesus is doing," rather than look for hidden meanings.

Within the works of the renowned Irish novelist Beckett, Landy found a method for achieving peace of mind.

The general idea, Landy explained, "is that certain philosophical questions have a way of tormenting people." Since they can't be solved, we have to find a way of putting them out of our mind.

By systematically juxtaposing competing hypotheses throughout his trilogy – "Molloy," "Malone Dies," and "The Unnamable" – Beckett trains the reader to get beyond the hope for solutions to intractable problems.

Readers of Beckett's novels, Landy said, "shouldn't bother trying to reconstruct what Beckett's theory of the mind-body problem is; rather, they should feel what it's like to come to a point where such questions no longer torment us."

Missing the point

Landy, who teaches humanities courses at all levels, became intrigued by the "why read fiction?" question when he noticed that students increasingly complained that authors were taking "too long to get to the point."

He sensed that the quest for the message, a mainstay of high school English class instruction, was causing the students to miss the point of the literature.

Over the centuries, scholars have formulated dozens of theories about the purpose of fiction. In recent years, however, the "propositional" model, which posits that fiction exists to impart knowledge, has risen to prominence in American classrooms.

Landy said high school teachers favor the propositional model because it "shows students that literature has a genuine connection to their lives, and talking about 'messages' probably seems like an easy way to do that."

Historically, authors have also felt compelled to emphasize the message.

Landy referenced Plato's Republic and the closing of English theaters in 1642 to illustrate how, at various times, fiction has been under attack for being morally dangerous. Some authors, Landy speculated, may have considered it necessary to claim that their stories were morally enriching in order to make them seem respectable: "It's remarkable how many works there are, like French playwright Molière's Dom Juan, which try to get away with morally complicated material by means of a tacked-on censor-satisfying ending."

At the same time, however, plenty of authors have been "desperately trying to stop us mining them for messages."

Chaucer, for example, is already "roundly mocking message-mongering in his 'Nun's Priest's Tale,'" said Landy.

After telling a silly story about a rooster, "the Nun's Priest proceeds to extract all kinds of ostensible lessons from it, some of which even conflict with each other," Landy explained.

Landy said he hopes that his theory will offer academics a new option for interpreting texts and maybe even inspire contemporary authors.

"Wouldn't it be great to read the 21st-century successor to Plato, Mallarmé and Beckett?" he asked.

Provided by Stanford University

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