

3Q: Fiction's role in emotional development

October 16 2013, by Joe O'Connell



Laura Green, professor and chair of the Department of English, in her office at Lake Hall. Credit: Mariah Tauger

Research [published last week](#) in the journal *Science* found that subjects who read literary fiction, compared to popular fiction or nonfiction, performed better on tests measuring their ability to determine what other people were feeling. This work overlaps with research by Northeastern professor Laura Green, chair of the Department of English, whose book *Literary Identification: From Charlotte Brontë to Tsitsi Dangarembga* looks at empathy and the relationship between readers and characters.

We asked Green discuss the role fiction plays in readers' emotions and the bonds they form with authors and characters.

What did you find to be most significant about the results of the recent study published in *Science*?

It suggests that how we employ our imaginations can affect how we behave in the real world. In the study, subjects who read 10 to 15 pages of literary fiction performed better than subjects who read popular fiction or non-fiction on lab tests designed to measure a person's "Theory of Mind"—which refers to the ability to understand what other people are thinking or feeling. For example, in one of these tests—Reading the Mind in the Eyes—the subject looks quickly at images of eyes and chooses the emotion they express. The better the subject is at "reading" these eyes, the more socially attuned they are.

It's important to remember, though, that the *Science* study doesn't tell us whether the effects are long-term, whether they translate into real-life behavior, or whether they travel across cultures.

Fiction—the creation of imaginary alternate worlds—is one of the most remarkable forms of human ingenuity. I think everyone should take a literature class and experience that imaginative power—even though I can't guarantee it will make you a better person.

In your book "*Literary Identification from Charlotte Brontë to Tsitsi Dangarembga*," you talk about literary identification. How do you define literary identification?

By literary identification, I mean the emotional bonds among readers, [characters](#), and authors that can form from reading certain kinds of

novels, particularly what is known as the Bildungsroman, or novel about a character's growth and development. In a Bildungsroman such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or, to give a more recent example from my book, Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, readers are drawn by those bonds to lend our own emotions to a character's fictional situation—searching for love in a loveless environment (in *Jane Eyre*) or searching for justice in an unjust environment (in *Nervous Conditions*). Not all of the characters with whom we identify will be examples of [empathy](#); *Jane Eyre*, for one, is pretty self-centered. But repeated experiences of literary identification—of putting oneself in another's shoes, encountering new moral quandaries, societal demands, or individual desires almost as if they were one's own—may well make readers more disposed to take more seriously other peoples' point of view. And that is the root of empathy.

Is there a specific author, book, or time period in which the bond between the reader, character and/or author is more prevalent?

I teach Victorian literature—British literature from the 1830s to the end of the century, often considered the heyday of the English novel. Victorian novelists such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy have intimate designs on their readers. They want readers to extend their empathy not only to individual characters, such as Oliver Twist or Maggie Tulliver, but also to whole social groups: neglected and exploited children, abused laborers, oppressed women. They work on our emotions with scenes of death or desertion, and they're not shy about grabbing our lapels and telling us what to think.

This is true during the same time period in the U.S. Think of Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Sentimental death

scenes and intrusive narrators lost their cachet in the 20th century, and contemporary readers expect to relate directly to characters. But I wonder if the Internet, with its authors' websites, readers' blogs, Twitter feeds, and other forms of social interaction, may create new or renewed bonds between the author and reader.

Provided by Northeastern University

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