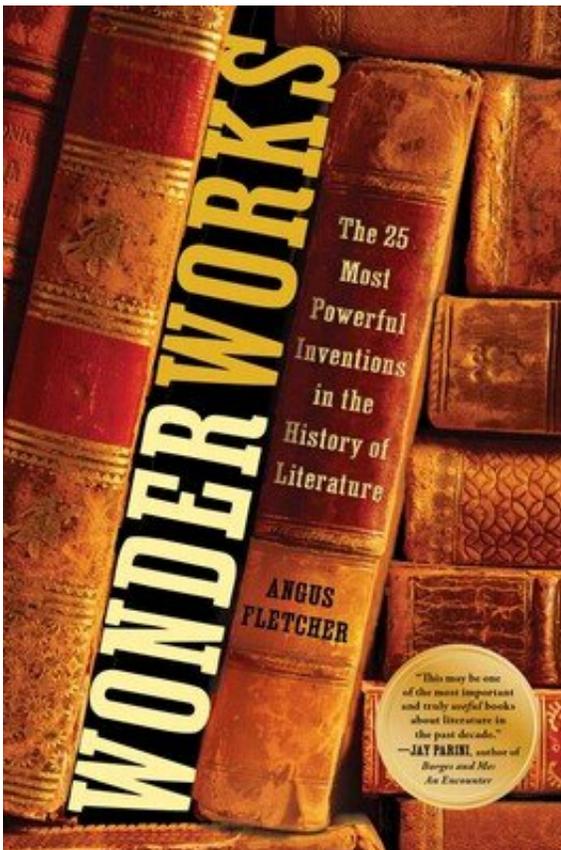


The science behind how literature improves our lives

May 3 2021, by Angus Fletcher



Credit: Simon & Schuster

If you really want to understand literature, don't start with the words on a page—start with how it affects your brain.

That's the message from Angus Fletcher, an English professor with

degrees in both [literature](#) and neuroscience, who outlines in a new book a different way to read and think about stories, from classic literature to pulp fiction to movies and TV shows.

Literature wasn't invented just as entertainment or a way to deliver messages to readers, said Fletcher, who is a professor at The Ohio State University.

"Stories are actually a form of technology. They are tools that were designed by our ancestors to alleviate depression, reduce anxiety, kindle creativity, spark courage and meet a variety of other psychological challenges of being human," Fletcher said.

"And even though we aren't taught this in literature classes today, we can still find and use these emotional tools in the stories we read today."

Fletcher explains these concepts in his book "[Wonderworks: The 25 Most Powerful Inventions in the History of Literature.](#)"

For example, in a chapter about fighting loneliness, he discusses how reading "The Godfather" by Mario Puzo may help. A chapter on feeding creativity talks about the virtues of "Alice in Wonderland" and "Winnie-the-Pooh." Looking for the best way to make your dreams come true? For that, Fletcher proposes the TV show 30 Rock.

Wonderworks doesn't ignore the classics: The book discusses how reading Shakespeare can help us heal from grief, Virginia Woolf can assist readers in finding peace of mind, and Homer can support those needing courage.

Fletcher said his neuroscience background very much influences the approach to literature he takes in Wonderworks.

"When you read a favorite poem or [story](#), you may feel joy, you feel a sense of empathy or connection. One of the things I do in the book is provide the scientific validation for the things we've long felt when we've read favorite books or watched movies or TV shows that we loved," he said.

"From my neuroscience background and studies that I've done, I can see how literature's inventions plug into different regions of our brain, to make us less lonely or help us build up our courage or do a variety of other things to help us. Every story is different and is, in effect, a different tool."

Fletcher said to truly understand the power of literature requires a different way of approaching stories from what is offered by most traditional literature courses.

The usual method of teaching literature focuses on the words, asking students to look for themes, to consider what the author intended to say and mean.

But that's not the focus at Project Narrative, an Ohio State program of which Fletcher is a member.

"At Project Narrative, we reverse the process. Instead of looking at the words first, we look first at what is going on in your mind. How does this story make you feel? We look at how people are responding to the characters, the plot, the world that the author created," Fletcher said.

After examining how the story makes you feel, the second part of the process is to trace that feeling back to some invention of the story, whether it is the plot, a character, the narrator, or the world of the story.

The themes of the story, or what the author means to say, are less

important in this approach to literature.

That means when you are looking for a book to stimulate your courage, you don't have to look for a book that has "courage" in the title or even as one of its themes according to traditional literature analysis, Fletcher said.

"Courage comes from reading a work of literature that makes us feel like we're participating in something bigger than ourselves. It doesn't have to mention courage or have courage be one of its themes," he said. "That's not relevant."

For example, you wouldn't think of reading "The Godfather" to ward off loneliness. But Fletcher said it can have this effect, partly through its use of a specific operatic technique.

In *Wonderworks*, Fletcher explains how some operas feature a period of dissonant and turbulent music that is eventually resolved by a sweet harmony.

"The clashing and discordant music is upsetting, but then the sweet relief of harmony comes and releases dopamine in our brain, bonding us to the music," he said.

"Puzo does the same thing in "The Godfather," by creating chaos and tension in a chapter and then just partly resolving it at the end, giving us this partial dopamine rush that bonds us to the characters and to the story and makes us feel like they are friends."

And even though it may not be good to be friends with gangsters in real life, the dopamine rush that we get from befriending the Corleone family can help ward off loneliness, he said.

If you're reading stories like "The Godfather" while isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic, it may even help ease the transition back to normal life when the world opens back up.

Neuroscientists have discovered that a part of the brain, called the dorsal raphe nucleus, helps us make friends, Fletcher said. It contains a cluster of dopamine neurons that are primed for short periods of loneliness and stand ready to encourage us to be sociable when we again meet people.

But if our isolation lasts weeks or months, like during the pandemic, that priming fades and our brain hunkers down in isolation—making it harder to re-connect with people.

"So what The Godfather and other stories can do is wake up the dorsal raphe nucleus and make it easier to rejoin society when the pandemic is over," he explained.

Fletcher said the use of operatic techniques in "The Godfather" is just one example of how literature can be a form of technology.

And he hopes more people will want to figure out how these technological tools in literature really work in our brains.

"The idea behind the book is to give you a different way of reading, one that unlocks the extraordinary power of literature to heal your brain, give you more joy, more courage, whatever you need in your life."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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