

Reading fiction:

the benefits are numerous

STORIES TOLD AROUND THE ANCIENT FIRE

I love reading. For me, imaginatively inhabiting Tolkien's Middle-earth offers profound comfort, where good and evil are dichotomous, and the protagonist, Frodo Baggins, knows with certainty what he must do if he can summon the courage. Aside from providing epic adventure or alien exoticism, fiction can help reveal magic in the everyday of this world. But why are people so powerfully affected by stories, and how does reading contribute to personal (and social) wellbeing?

Storytelling is globally ubiquitous and ancient, with our tendency to narrativise beginning spontaneously in childhood. Stories likely serve several adaptive functions:¹ first, in facilitating human cooperation by the establishment and broadcasting of social norms; and, second, in effectively disseminating survival-relevant information, as we remember facts better when woven into a narrative. Added to this, a skilled storyteller makes for a preferred social partner and has greater reproductive success, 'providing a pathway by which group-beneficial behaviours, such as storytelling, can evolve via individual-level selection'.¹

Combined with the power of stories to persuade and manipulate, by emotionally engaging us, it is understandable why stories are used extensively to teach children important life lessons. Storytelling further satisfies the human artistic need to express personal concepts of complex meaning. 'So I wonder what is this need to tell', questions Hig, protagonist in Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars*. He answers himself: 'to animate somehow the deathly stillness of the profoundest beauty. Breathe life in the telling.'

LIVE A THOUSAND LIVES

Reading's restorative power has long been recognised, with the ancient Theban Library of Pharaoh Ramses II bearing the inscription 'house of healing for the soul'. When reading immerses you via your imagination, it induces a state of deep focus, transiently

releasing the mind from bustling or teeming thoughts and thus providing an active form of relaxation. However, the therapeutic value of reading exceeds escapism. Stories can assist by confronting and exploring issues relevant to everyday life. We watch safely as the protagonist (who could be a memoirist) fails, adapts, and perseveres through challenge and adversity, often providing gems of wisdom and inspiration directly transferable to our own lives.

Using functional MRI, Berns *et al* found that reading a novel induces increases in neural connectivity dispersed bilaterally in the somatosensory cortex, suggesting that the reader is effectively placed in the body of the protagonist (a theory termed 'embodied semantics'). The activity enables us to vicariously experience 'other' states of being, exposing us to alternative world contexts and perspectives. As author Anne Bogel explains:

'I can tell you why I inhale books like oxygen: I'm grateful for my one life, but I'd prefer to live a thousand ...'

By allowing us to recognise similarities between ourselves and what is 'other', reading fiction has been found to ameliorate prejudiced perceptions.³ Enabling us to metaphorically walk a mile in the characters' shoes can transform judgement into understanding. Many argue that fiction has the power to enhance real-world empathic responses, and that literary fiction (that which prominently examines the characters' subjective states) may best serve this purpose, although it has proven challenging to establish a causal relationship.^{4,5} Reading fiction has also been found to induce changes in the way that we perceive our own personality trait profiles.⁶ The prominence or durability of this effect is unclear, but it tentatively suggests that reading fiction might promote personal maturation.

KEEP THE GREY MATTER TICKING

A growing body of evidence suggests that

regular reading (alongside other cognitively stimulating activities) reduces dementia risk in later life. Although many studies are limited by small size and cannot eliminate the possibility of reverse causality, it has been suggested that encouraging participation in such activities might be a worthwhile primary prevention strategy.⁷

Every reader requires something different from a 'good' book, but such is the pleasure of reading (and writing) that fortunately a diversity abounds. Fiction offers endless opportunity for adventure, connection, and enlightenment, and, beyond this, comfort and refuge. 'Books on prescription' comprise non-fiction self-help books only and these can of course be invaluable. But perhaps we can supplement this avenue by making better use of the fictional world for therapeutic purposes.

I know I'll be returning to Middle-earth and perhaps, when in need, be inspired to summon Frodo's courage.

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