

# READING AND NARRATIVE FICTION:

## Empathy and Reading

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# Fiction book reading

Research illustrates a wide range of benefits associated with reading fiction:

- Intellectual: Cognitive and academic (e.g., Jerrim & Moss, 2019).
- Social: Connection with, and improved understanding of, others (e.g., Currie et al., under review; van der Kleij et al., 2022).
- Emotional: Vocabulary, wellbeing (Currie et al., under review; Dylman et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2024).

# Empathy

## COGNITIVE EMPATHY

The ability to understand others' perspectives, infer cognitive/emotional states

## AFFECTIVE EMPATHY

The sharing of others' emotional responses and experiences

## BEHAVIOURAL EMPATHY

Behaviours/actions resulting from internal experience of cognitive and/or affective empathy

# Empathy and fiction reading

Fiction reading has the potential to support readers' empathy

- Narrative fiction often reflects the social world we live in (Oatley, 2016)
- Compared to other forms of narrative (e.g., TV, film), fiction books often more give insight into characters' inner worlds.
- Books may offer more opportunities for thinking and reflection.

# Empathy and fiction reading



## Previous research

Research primarily with adults

- Significant correlation between good social abilities and exposure to fiction; however, unclear whether more empathic and socially skilled adults are more likely to read fiction or whether fiction enhances readers' empathy and social skills (Mar et al., 2006; 2009).
- Is literary fiction superior to popular fiction? (Kidd & Castano, 2013)
- Fiction reading can support empathy regardless of type, depends on readers' engagement with the text (Barnes, 2018)

# Reading Engagement



Engagement is important for empathy

Reading engagement is multidimensional

- Behavioural: Frequency of reading, and text types read
- Cognitive: Cognitive effort/implementation of cognitive strategies (e.g., inference-making)
- Emotional: Emotional experiences resulting from text content/engagement
- Social: Social reading experiences beyond individual reading

(McGeown & Conradi-Smith, 2023)

# Aim

Extend our understanding of the relationship between reading fiction and empathy among adolescents, exploring it in-depth, and from adolescents' perspectives

# Method

37 adolescents (27 female, aged 12 to 14) from two high schools in Scotland, self-describing as avid readers of fiction (10+ fiction books a year)

Participants

- Short survey on their reading habits to help them recollect books they liked or had recently read
- Semi-structured interviews

Data collection

A data-driven inductive thematic analysis approach was adopted, using the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022)

Analysis





# RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS





1. EMPATHISING WITH  
FICTIONAL CHARACTERS




2. TRANSFERENCE BEYOND  
FICTION: EMPATHISING WITH  
REAL-LIFE OTHERS

## READING AND EMPATHY



4. FACILITATING EMPATHY:  
TRANSPORTATION INTO THE  
FICTIONAL WORLD



3. TRANSFERENCE BEYOND FICTION:  
PERSONAL ENRICHMENT AND  
POTENTIAL TO SUPPORT SOCIAL  
RELATIONSHIPS

# 1. EMPATHISING WITH FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

## Experiences of affective empathy



"It's, like, I have an image in my head and I kinda, like, feel what the character's feeling." [18]



"Some books, I just feel like really close to the characters, like, I feel emotions for them. [...] in some books, when something sad happens, it sometimes makes me sad because, like, they're having a hard time. And if they're happy, they kinda make me happy." [34]



"Whenever the character feels something, you kind of feel it as well. Like, if something really embarrassing happens to a character, like, say they fall over in front of everyone, you feel embarrassed, even though it's not you falling over. It's because you're so, like, into their mind. [...] I feel myself getting all embarrassed and I'm like "Oh my God", even though it's not me. Or like, when a character, when the main character is, like, sad, you just feel sad, like, you just share what they're feeling because you've, you're reading." [32]

# 1. EMPATHISING WITH FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

## Experiences of cognitive empathy



"It's interesting, I find, to figure out people's emotions and especially, like, in books [...] and it's fun and interesting to get the emotions that people are thinking and kinda not feel them with them per se, but just, like, understand them. And, like, it's almost like giving them a casual nod, you know, it's like you're not going over patting their back, but you're kind of saying, 'Yeah, I understand this.'" [24]



"It's just sometimes in books you get more about what a person might feel like...it's still just the surface, like, the first impression... all the people judge them by something they can only see at a surface level, so when you read it you can understand more about what's going inside his or her head." [16]

## 2. TRANSFERENCE BEYOND FICTION: EMPATHISING WITH REAL-LIFE OTHERS

Better understanding and empathy with  
people in their lives



“Almost every time I read I can just imagine, like, all of my friends, they're all different and they all have, like, different lives to mine and everyone else. And I can just sort of imagine how lots of them are and, like, how they feel and uh, sometimes it makes me empathise with them about some stuff.” [17]

“My friend [...] his grandma died. And when I was reading about Batman, it made me realise how much, how sad he must have been, and then I realised that it's important for other people to try find out what other people's lives are like to make sure they feel better and not go through a lonely phase...that make them feel like they are not...they aren't surrounded by people.” [8]

More empathy towards others they  
don't know



“I sometimes read fact fictions about people with depression, and they really made me understand about what depression and social anxiety was like...and also self-harm and things like that...and I guess it also made me think about why sometimes people don't stand up to bullies and things like that, because in some books, because [they] just can't do that.” [16]

“See if in, especially in high school, if someone says something... it's really easy for other people to laugh or belittle their problems, but then when you read a book, you really get to see how that impacts them, and then it makes you more, uhm...like, it gives you more empathy towards situations and people who might experience them.” [33]

### 3. PERSONAL ENRICHMENT AND POTENTIAL TO SUPPORT SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Being more concerned about others  
and being more aware of others'  
feelings and emotions



"I learned to empathise with people more, like, figure out what's going on in their heads so I can understand them better." [16]



"When I used to talk to people, I would definitely just think about, like, what I'm saying, why I'm saying it, and I wouldn't really listen to what they're saying. Definitely, with books it's been more helpful because I understand what they're saying and I understand a bit about how they're feeling because in these books you have to relate to how people are feeling and the emotions they're feeling. And it's definitely helped a lot." [35]



"It kind of helped me understand people because, like, I speak without thinking most of the time and, like, it can sometimes hurt people's feelings and I don't know why, I didn't know why before, but now it [reading fiction] started like helping me realise: 'Oh, other people don't like, no, this is like OK for me but not really OK for them and stuff'. 'Cause I don't, I still don't really get other people's feelings but it's getting better." [11]

## 4. FACILITATING EMPATHY: TRANSPORTATION INTO THE FICTIONAL WORLD

Story events, story content, and  
quality of writing



"There is, like, books that really show you the feelings of that person and, like, the past of that, of what that person went through, and it, like, makes you feel empathy for them, and, like, sad for them for what they went through." [1]



"You live through your mind, but you don't know anyone else's. So, it's kind of interesting to see how an author describes someone's mind like that and their personality. And then I kind of learn how, maybe, other people could be thinking that just by the way they can have their similarities." [33]



"And then the characters were also very well written as you can really empathise with them and relate to what they're going through with dealing with school as well." [25]

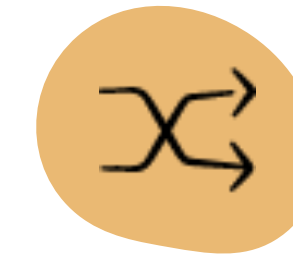
## 4. FACILITATING EMPATHY: TRANSPORTATION INTO THE FICTIONAL WORLD



“Usually I’m reading books that aren’t in first person, but when they’re in first person, you’re really, like, inside their brain. So you, yeah, you share all their feelings.” [32]

“I liked, like, how they portrayed things and you’re able to, like, they set the scene and stuff, so you can like see what, you can actually see what the place looks like in your head. And like, you can [...] actually feel like her [the character] and stuff.” [11]

“I think really does take you in with, like, the vocabulary they use and read this, like, make you feel like you’re there, like, being in those situations, a lot of the time.” [14]



“I’ve only read a couple of books where I just can’t get into it, usually like really old fashion books, like books from ages ago. Like, here [in the questionnaire] I checked classics because I do read them. I just, it’s so hard to get into them, like, you know the books by the Brontë sisters? I have them in my room and so many times I have tried to read them and it’s so hard to get into them because they all talk really weird. Obviously they’re from ages ago, and like... They all do things that we don’t do now and it’s... Or they use really old-fashioned words that I have to be like “What does that mean?” But like... I think those are the only books that I, that don’t make me feel like I’m in another place. When I’m reading those books I just feel like I’m reading, like I don’t get into them. It’s just why I don’t really read them that much.” [32]



In conclusion...



## In conclusion...

Fiction books have potential to support empathy

Young people need access to books/texts with which they will meaningfully engage

Reflective reading (individual and social) practices can encourage empathy

# School based practices

- Carefully selected texts
- Tasks which activate personal reflection (before, during, and after reading)
- Tasks which encourage dialogue with peers

# Interested to learn more?

University of Edinburgh Literacy Lab: <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/literacylab/>



Lab

<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/literacylab/current-projects/reading-and-narrative-fiction/>

# Interested to learn more?



Relevant research....



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## Reading Feelings: Does Reading Fiction Improve Children's Empathy and Pro-social skills?

Lead Research Organisation: [University of Sussex](#)

Department Name: Sch of Psychology

<https://www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology/cress/research/current/empathy>



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# Prompts...

- What initiatives or programs have you seen/run that encourage young people to engage deeply with stories and characters?
- What strategies do you use (or could you use) to encourage discussions about characters' perspectives and emotions?
- How can librarians help guide young people toward books that nurture empathy?

**THANK YOU!**

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