

READING AND EMPATHY

Qualitative insights from teenagers

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Fiction book reading

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

- Intellectual: Cognitive and educational (Jerrim & Moss, 2019; Torppa et al., 2019)
- Social and emotional: Connection with others, emotional vocabulary, wellbeing (Currie et al., 2025; 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 the internal experience of cognitive and/or affective empathy

Empathy and fiction reading



Previous research

Research with adults demonstrates significant correlation between good social skills 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).

Research with adolescents suggests no robust relationship between fiction reading and empathy (Lenhart et al., 2022)

Adolescents seek diverse experiences with fiction books (Santi et al., 2025; Wilkinson et al., 2020; Webber et al., 2025).



Aim

To understand whether, and how, fiction book reading can support adolescents' empathy.



Method

37 adolescents (27 female, age 12-14) who all reported reading fiction regularly

Participants

Individual semi-structured interviews

Data collection

An inductive data-driven approach to thematic analysis

Note: Only 16/37 provided examples of how reading fiction supported empathy

Analysis



RESEARCH FINDINGS





1. EMPATHISING WITH
FICTIONAL CHARACTERS



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

READING AND EMPATHY



3. TRANSFERENCE BEYOND
FICTION: PERSONAL ENRICHMENT

4. FACILITATING EMPATHY:
TRANSPORTATION INTO THE
FICTIONAL WORLD



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, but just like, understand them"

"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."

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."

"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."

"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."



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

Known others

“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.”

Unknown others

“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.”

3. PERSONAL ENRICHMENT

Developing personal
skills and
dispositions

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

"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."



4. FACILITATING EMPATHY: TRANSPORTATION INTO THE FICTIONAL WORLD

Story events, story
content and writing
quality

“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.”

“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.”

“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.”

In conclusion...

Fiction books have the potential to support adolescents' empathy

Adolescents need access to, and the skills to choose books/texts which will facilitate empathy (personally meaningful to them)

Reflective reading practices (individual and social) may encourage empathy

Adolescents seek a variety of experiences with fiction books – not only empathy

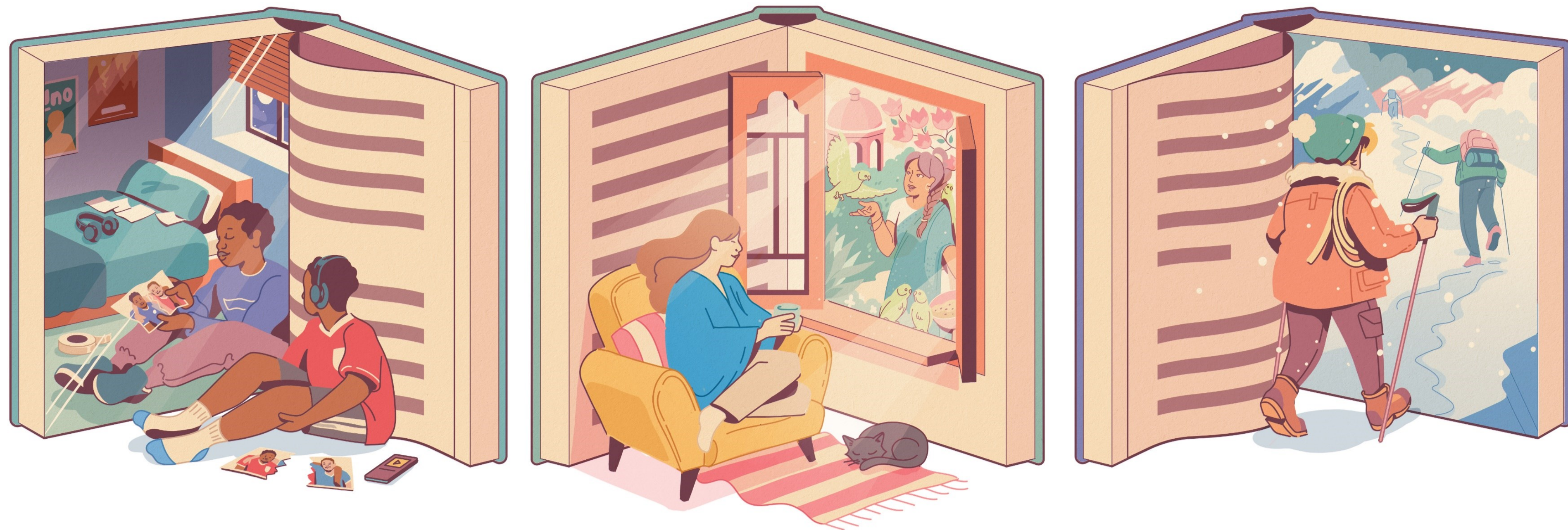
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Thank you for listening...



UoE Literacy Lab: <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/literacylab/>

Slides available in 'talks' webpage



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Questions and discussion

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