

Reading Before Bed Really Can Make You a Better Person

By Paige Towers • July 21, 2016 at 4:03pm

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As any hardcore reader can tell you, cracking open a book before bedtime is often as helpful a sleep aid as popping an Ambien. Cruising through a few chapters of a good book helps reduce stress

, serves as distraction from modern technology (ahem, blue lightemitting

devices, ahem) and, as my mother always said, ‘tires out your mind before you rest it.’ But as detailed in a recent review

published in the journal Trends in Cognitive Sciences

, there's another big benefit to being a bookhound: Reading fiction may improve your ability to empathize with others.

Life demands for us to use our social skills and awareness to interpret the current emotional state of

others and it seems that those who read fiction may do it a little better.

Keith Oatley, a researcher from the Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development at the University of Toronto, reviewed 109 studies on the subject of how fiction improves a person's ability to perceive what others are thinking and feeling. He paid particular attention to those that used the 'Mind in the Eyes' test, a measurement of empathy developed by Dr. Simon BaronCohen

(Fun fact: He's the cousin of the Borat actor). During BaronCohen's tests, participants were asked to scroll through 36 cropped photographs that showed people's eyes; then, they were asked to pick one of four emotions they instinctively feel describes what the person was thinking and feeling at the time.

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Dr. Simon BaronCohen, University of Cambridge

In the studies Oatley looked at, the 'Mind in the Eyes' test was conducted after having one group read a piece of literary fiction and another read a piece of explanatory nonfiction. Even when controlling for such factors as age and education, researchers found that those who read fiction scored significantly better than the nonfiction readers. This also proved to be true whether the participants took the test directly after a reading session or several days later.

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Mar, R.A. et al. (2006) Bookworms versus nerds: exposure to fiction versus nonfiction, divergent associations with social ability, and the simulation of fictional social worlds. J. Res. Pers. 40, 694–712

What accounts for the results? Well, one factor could be that fiction requires readers to imagine characters' inner thoughts and feelings; good stories demand their readers to work to pick up the unsaid inferences. Life demands for us to use our social skills and awareness to interpret the current emotional state of others and it seems that those who read fiction may do it a little better.

So why are the results (across multiple studies) consistently different than those who read nonfiction? Per Oatley, "Character based stories [...] encourage a sense of shared humanity as a general mode. In a more specific mode, people form relations with fictional characters." That type of

emotional engagement simply doesn't happen as easily when reading explanatory nonfiction.

In fact, even when the researchers of one study edited an Alice Munro story so that the firstperson narrator tells readers how she feels and why, readers lost their level of identification and understanding of that character. (English teachers all over the world are readying their "I told you so" faces).

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directly

For now, Oatley and others are calling for further research to find out how reading can enhance our ability to interpret the thoughts and feelings of others. There is, for instance, some conflicting information on whether literary fiction (think "The Sun Also Rises") increases empathy more than popular fiction (think "Twilight"). Additionally, literary nonfiction — a growing genre of memoirs and personal essays — hasn't yet been tested for its empathetic responses. In the meantime, if you want to show a bit more understanding for your fellow man, then reach for that James Joyce instead James Patterson. Your social life will thank you.

Want to do a little selftesting of your empathy levels? You can take the 'Mind in the Eyes' test here

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