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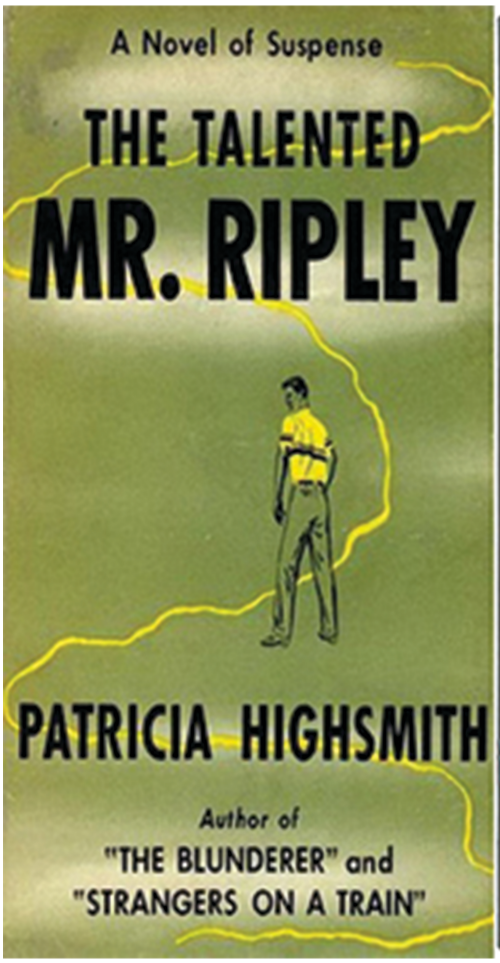
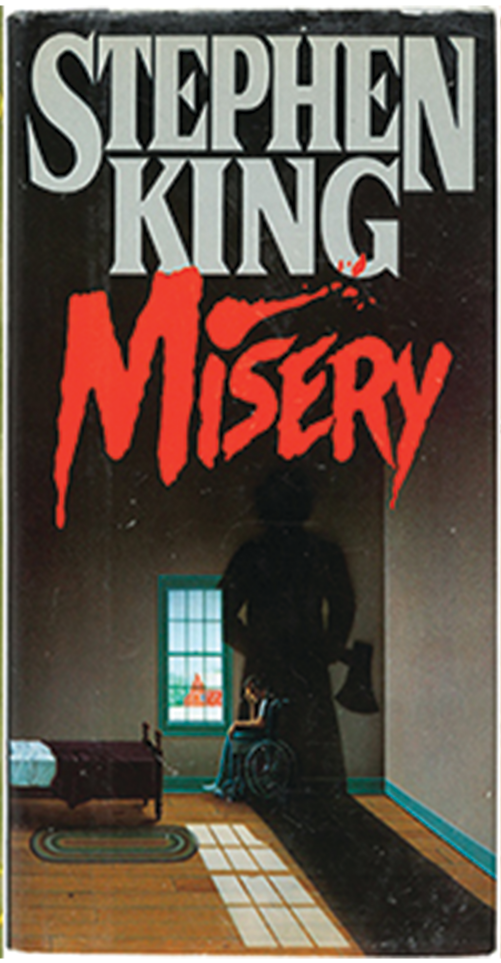
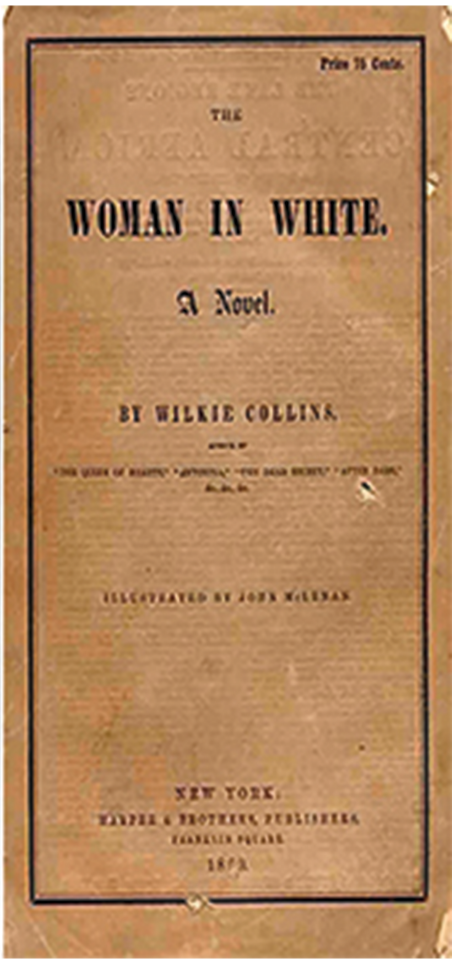
Introducing the psychology of our relationships with fictional villains







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About this free course

This version of the content may include video, images and interactive content that may not be optimised for your device.

You can experience this free course as it was originally designed on OpenLearn, the home of free learning from The Open University –

www.open.edu/openlearn/health-sports-psychology/introducing-the-psychology-our-relationships-fictional-villains/content-section-overview

There you'll also be able to track your progress via your activity record, which you can use to demonstrate your learning.

First published 2024.

Intellectual property

Contents

Introduction and guidance

Introduction

This free course explores psychological theory and research on the relationships we form with fictional characters. Throughout the course you will hear from leading crime writers, who will talk about how they create and write about their characters. The course involves interactive components designed for you to discover something about your own thinking and behaviour. You will learn about why fictional villains might be attractive to us, in a way that real villains are not. You will also learn about how the relationships we form with fictional characters can influence our psychological engagement with the real world around us.

This free course lasts 12 hours, with 4 weeks. You can work through the course at your own pace, so if you have more time one week there is no problem with pushing on to complete a further week.

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand how crime writers approach creating and developing villainous fictional characters
- understand what parasocial relationships are, and why we might form them with people we read about
- understand how engagement with fictional characters can affect our own sense of self
- understand how our relationship with fictional characters can, in turn, alter our relationships with people in the real world.

Throughout the course you will hear from leading crime writers – Lin Anderson, Gordon Brown, Val McDermid, Sir Ian Rankin and Craig Robertson – who will talk about how they create and write about their characters.

The opportunity to work with these authors arose due to their participation at the Bloody Scotland festival.

Moving around the course

In the ‘Summary’ at the end of each week, you will find a link to the next week. If at any time you want to return to the start of the course, click on ‘Course content’. From here you can navigate to any part of the course. Alternatively, use the week links at the top of every page of the course.

It’s also good practice, if you access a link from within a course page, to open it in a new window or tab. That way you can easily return to where you’ve come from without having to use the back button in your browser. You can do this by holding down the ‘CTRL’ key (or CMD on a Mac) and left clicking the mouse button; or right click and ‘open in new tab’.

Go to Week 1.

Week 1: Fictional villains

Introduction

Who is your favourite fictional villain? From Voldemort to Moriarty, from Hannibal Lecter to Cruella de Vil, villains are often the most thrilling aspect of a story and can be more exciting than the hero. It is argued that 'villainy is integral in narratives that reflect the innermost fears of the human psyche and is often a significant part of the construction of loss whether it is loss of innocence, loss of loved ones, loss of power, or loss of self and/or identity' (Fahraeus and Yakah-Çamoğlu, 2011, p. vii).

Villains are designed to be morally reprehensible, yet they are often popular and celebrated characters in books, films and other media (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen *et al*., 2021). While your attraction towards heroic characters in fiction is easy to understand (they are pro-social, positive characters whom you may see as being role models), the attraction that you feel towards your favourite villain is perhaps harder to explain and has been something which psychologists, alongside authors of fiction, have been interested to explore.

By the end of this week, you should be able to:

- consider your favourite villainous characters and start to understand why they might be attractive to you, despite their despicable behaviour and intentions
- understand how various authors create villainous characters and how they feel about their creations
- think about the different ways in which writers, like psychologists, consider personality and character.

1 Your most-loved villain

It might sound a little unusual to have the words ‘love’ and ‘villain’ together in the heading to this section, but despite their often reprehensible character traits and behaviour, villains are often memorable and popular characters in fiction. In the following video you will meet Zoe, Graham and Siobhan who are the creators of this course, and they will discuss the fictional villains that they are most drawn to, and explain why they are interested in villains in fiction.

Video content is not available in this format.

1.1 Your favourite fictional villain

You will now turn to think about your own favourite villains from fiction.

Activity 1 Baddies I have known and loved

Think back to your own reading of books over the years and make a list of some of the fictional villains that you can remember. These might be from very far back in your childhood, perhaps from fairy tales or fables, or could be much more recent characters, perhaps the latest baddie in some crime fiction you are reading.

Provide your answer...

Looking at the list of characters you have generated are there any that jump out at you (excuse the pun) as being particular favourites? If so, what is it about those favourite villains that you enjoy? Try and write a couple of sentences summarising why you found that particular character so appealing.

Provide your answer...

There are any number of reasons that you might have found a villainous character appealing. It might have been that you particularly like the setting that the villain was in. For example if you enjoy history and period drama you might have found that your chosen villain is one who stalks the corridors of an old stately home. It might have been that there are particular aspects of the chemistry between the villain you chose and some of the other characters in the story (including the hero) that made that particular character appealing or it might have been that there are aspects of that person's disposition or character traits that drew you to them (something that you will come back to later on in the course).

It is also possible that the reason that you were drawn to a particular character is because of how they have been written by the author that created them, and in the next section you will meet some authors of crime fiction and learn a bit more about how they have created fictional characters, particularly villains.

2 Crime authors and their villainous creations

Throughout the ages a popular genre of fiction has related to crime, and particularly in Britain there has long been a lot of interest in detective stories, as Andrew Marr suggests in this excerpt from the BBC OU co-production, *Paperback fiction, Sleuths, Spies and Sorcerers*.

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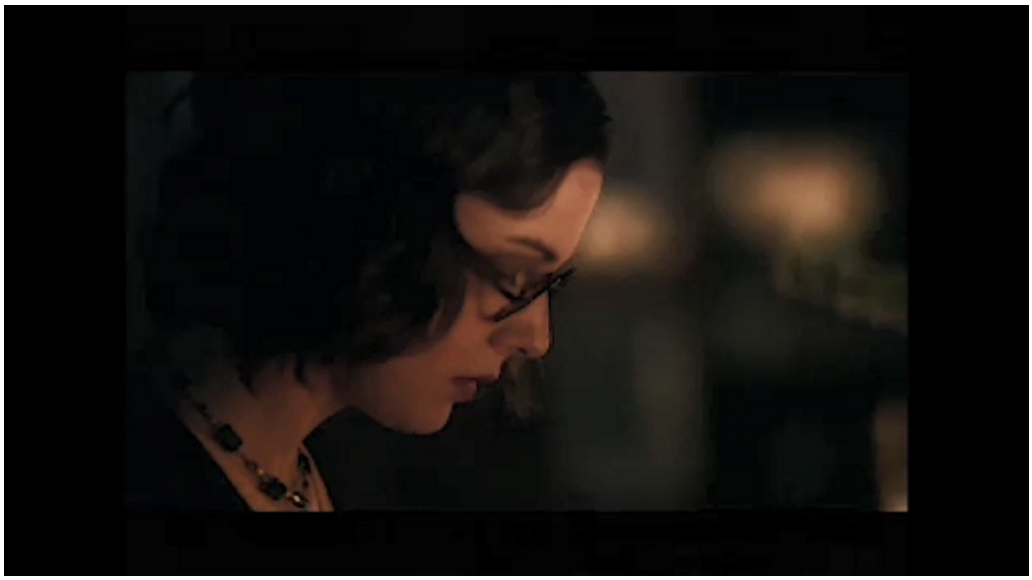

Activity 2 What makes a good crime drama?

In the video you have just watched, Andrew Marr suggests that such novels are a storytelling machine. What do you see as being the central elements of that machine or what is it about these stories that keeps you reading? For instance, an antagonist who has redeeming features, an intriguing setting, or a side-kick who provides comic relief might appear in some stories. Are there particular things that you feel could make a good detective story even better?

Provide your answer...

While many different genres of fiction will include villainous characters, crime fiction is a genre in which villains are often central to driving the narrative of the book, or even a whole series of books. In the following sections you will meet several crime writers who will tell you about how they created villains in the books that they have written. After you have watched the videos in which the authors outline their different approaches you will be asked about the different approaches of the authors.

These interviews were recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, and so were recorded over video conferencing.

As you watch the videos make a note of anything that strikes you as interesting.

2.1 Sir Ian Rankin

Sir Ian Rankin is a best-selling Scottish crime writer who created a series of books based around a fictional Scottish Detective named John Rebus. The fictional detective was born in the late 1940s in Fife and joined the army before joining the police. His antagonist, the ruthless Morris Gerald Cafferty, is an Edinburgh organised crime gang boss. The two characters meet in several of Ian's novels.

In the following video you will meet Ian Rankin as he introduces us to his villain, Morris Gerald 'Big Ger' Cafferty.

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Of course this is just one author's approach to creating villains. In the next video you will see the author Lin Anderson talk about her approach to creating a baddie.

2.2 Lin Anderson

Lin Anderson is a crime novelist and screenwriter, known for her character Rhona MacLeod, a forensic scientist. Unlike Ian Rankin, her villains tend to change from story to story. She is one of the founders of a festival for crime writers in Scotland called 'Bloody Scotland'.

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2.3 Gordon Brown

Gordon Brown is a crime thriller author, and tends to set his novels in Scotland, Spain and the USA. He is also a board director of the crime writing festival Bloody Scotland.

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Activity 3 Villainous creatures

Having watched three different authors talking about how they create villains, note down your observations about the different approaches to creating villains. Perhaps try and concentrate on the noticeable differences, as well as the similarities in what the authors have outlined.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The authors revealed a variety of approaches to creating villainous characters. Some take a dispositional approach, i.e. they appear to start with the personality or disposition of the individual (e.g. Ian Rankin, who mentions charisma). Others take a more situational approach, i.e. they focus more on the character emerging out of the circumstances (e.g. Lin Anderson who talks about the needs of the story/plot). Gordon's answer seems to draw on both of these elements (the situation and the disposition).

3 Character and personality: the lens of psychology

The focus on both the ‘internal’ or dispositional factors versus the ‘external’ or situational factors in creating characters in fiction has an interesting parallel with psychological theories regarding personality. A key aspect of psychological study has been to try and determine what differs between people and makes one individual distinctive from another (psychologists refer to this as ‘individual differences’).

Activity 4 What makes people tick?

To explore your own theories about personality, try to answer the following questions:

A. Think of the last time you were late for something (e.g. work, an appointment, a bus/train or meeting someone). Which of the following is the best description of the main reason you were late? Put an ‘X’ in the right-hand column.

1. You had too much to do and too little time to do it.	*Provide your answer...*
2. You are not very good at planning your time.	*Provide your answer...*
3. Events conspired against you, causing delays.	*Provide your answer...*
4. You are not really fussed about being late, so tend to take your time getting ready and setting off.	*Provide your answer...*

B. Think of the last time you won in a competitive situation (e.g. a board game, a race, a game of tennis or golf, an online game). Which of the following is the best description of the main reason for your success?

1. It was mostly good luck as everything just seemed to go your way.	*Provide your answer...*
2. The result was because of your own skill and talents.	*Provide your answer...*

3. It was mostly due to the mistakes made by your competitor(s).

Provide your answer...

4. Although you don't like to brag, on this occasion you were just better than your competitor(s).

Provide your answer...

C. Imagine you are at a social gathering. You notice someone who seems to be avoiding contact with the other people there. What do you think the most likely explanation for this is?

1. They have had a tough day and are struggling to find the energy to socialise.

Provide your answer...

2. They are an unfriendly person that prefers their own company.

Provide your answer...

3. They had some bad news on the way to the gathering, which they are still thinking about rather than talking to others.

Provide your answer...

4. They are a shy person that can find it difficult to talk to others.

Provide your answer...

D. You are at a restaurant. The person serving you takes a long time to come to your table and then is not polite when they finally do show up. What do you think the most likely explanation for this is?

1. The people at the two previous tables they served were rude and abusive, so they needed a few minutes to calm their nerves and are still feeling upset.

Provide your answer...

2. They are probably quite a rude person generally.

Provide your answer...

3. They dropped a plate in the kitchen, and cleaning it up delayed them, plus the head chef shouted at them leaving them feeling anxious.

Provide your answer...

4. They are probably quite an arrogant person that does not think they need to be punctual or nice to their clients.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Look back at the answers you gave. For each question, answers 1 and 3 described situational factors while answers 2 and 4 described dispositional factors. The first two questions were about you; did you tend to provide a situational or dispositional explanation? The last two questions were about other people; did you tend to provide a situational or dispositional explanation? If your answers about yourself were different to your answers about someone else, why do you think that might be? You will come back to this question later this week.

3.1 Different approaches to personality

In Activity 4 in the previous section, you explored situational and dispositional factors and how these can explain our actions. Another way of saying this is that the activity allowed you to explore whether you feel that our actions come from our personalities or are a response to a specific situation. It might surprise you to hear, though, that within the academic study of psychology there is not agreement about exactly what constitutes personality. However, most psychologists, regardless of the approach they take to studying behaviour, accept that some form of 'personality' does exist (Ellis, 2024) that can to some extent be measured, although their view on what exactly constitutes personality can often differ.

Trait theory (which within the history of psychology is a more traditional or older idea) relies on the notion that people have consistent personality traits (i.e. tendencies to think or behave in particular ways) that are reasonably stable both across time and in different situations. Psychologists who take this approach look to measure different dimensions of personality through personality tests based on questionnaires. At some point during your life, you may have taken such a test, possibly as part of a recruitment activity if you were applying for certain types of employment.

However, the developments made in personality psychology by some psychologists (e.g. Mischel, 1968) have moved away from the idea of fairly stable traits which predict consistent behaviour over time. You might understand why if you think about your own behaviour in three different situations, such as 'in work', 'out socially with your friends', and 'when discussing a health problem with your GP'. You may think that actually you behave quite differently in each, depending on the particular constraints of the situation. Psychologists have carried out research which suggests that people are not always behaviourally consistent, arguing that we behave quite differently depending on the circumstances we find ourselves in. Mischel (1968) posited the idea of 'if… then…' behavioural contingencies, i.e. if X happens (a situation) then behaviour Y is likely to happen as a result (Rubenstein and Terrell, 2018). This theory prioritised the situation as opposed to the personality traits of the individual in explaining human behaviour.

These debates in the academic discipline of psychology between the influence of both people's dispositions or characters, and the influence of the situation, also seem to be reflected in comments from the authors regarding how they create characters. More than that though, these debates are also important when we move on to considering how we relate to other people in the real world. Specifically, what we understand about ourselves, and other people, is an important aspect of living in a society which involves living and working with many different types of people, and doing so in a way that is (hopefully) peaceful and pleasurable.

3.2 Attributions about behaviour: the fundamental attribution error

As you discovered in the last section, there are theories in psychology that draw on assumptions about how much of what is thought of as our 'personality' comes from our fundamental disposition, and how much of it comes from the situations we find ourselves in. Psychologists take an interest in our thought processes, as well as our behaviour, and in researching this have noticed a number of ways in which our thinking can be less than perfect and can be biased. One such bias that is important when considering how we understand other people is that we tend to view our own behaviour as being determined by our circumstances, or the situations we find ourselves in (e.g. I was late for work because I was stuck in traffic) but we tend to assume the behaviour of other people is in some way down to who they are, or their disposition (e.g. you were late for work because you are disorganised and set off too late).

The tendency to make this error is called the 'fundamental attribution error' (Ross, 1977). As you will discover in later weeks of this course, this error is just one of the ways in which human thinking can result in biased interpretation of what we observe about others.

Think back to your answers to Activity 4. Did you provide a situational answer (answers 1 and 3) to the first two questions that asked about your own actions, and a dispositional answer (answers 2 and 4) to the last two questions that asked you about the actions of someone else? If so, your answers demonstrated the 'fundamental attribution error', because you saw your own actions as resulting from situational factors and the actions of others being caused by dispositional factors. If you did, don't worry, this is a really common bias in human thinking, hence the name 'fundamental'.

3.3 Making a murderer

In the previous sections you explored the importance of both situational and dispositional factors in how we explain human behaviour, but do these feature in the creation of fictional characters, particularly those that undertake extraordinary behaviour, such as villains? In the video below Ian Rankin talks about his creative process, which is fascinating in itself, but also demonstrates that a fictional villain's behaviour is not always simply a product of their personality. Instead, Ian discusses the necessary creative complexity involved in creating a believable and complex character, and how the author must not locate the cause of that behaviour simply through reference to either situational or dispositional factors.

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Activity 5 What a state I'm in

Think back to the favourite villain that you nominated at the start of this week or pick another one whom you feel you know well. Make a list of things you know about them. These can relate to how they live or to the ways they act. Once you have completed your list divide it into two columns. One column for the information that relates to the villain's character or disposition and another column for information which relates to the situations they found themselves in. You may find that dividing them up gives you more to add in each column.

Character or disposition	Situations
Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*

It is likely that you may have written more about your villain's character than you wrote about the situations they found themselves in. This is because of our tendency to see the actions of others as resulting from dispositional factors. In other words, we think the villain acts the way they do because of who they are (their personality) and not because of the situation they find themselves in. After all, we would never act like a villain even if we found ourselves in the same situation as them! This is the fundamental attribution error at work again. Take a look at your list and see if this was the case for your particular favourite villain.

4 Your villain

So far this week you have explored your relationships to some fictional villains that you have previously read about and have listened to crime writing authors talking about how they create the villains they have successfully written about. You have also started to think about some simple concepts in psychology that relate to character and personality and begun thinking about how people's behaviour might reflect a combination of more enduring characteristics, and more situational or 'in the moment' circumstances. You have also learned about the ways in which we think about the behaviour of other people (as opposed to ourselves) might be subject to bias.

Activity 6 Villainy of my own making

There is a well-known phrase that we 'all have a novel in us', and it is very common for people to have imagined writing a story. Having thought about your own favourite villains that you like to read about, and having heard about the creation of fictional villains from different crime writers you can now start to think about the type of villain you might be interested in creating yourself should you decide to write a story.

Begin to jot down notes about a fictional character that you might like to create. You can write in sentences or just in short ideas or phrases. You may not need any prompts, but you might find it helpful to answer the following questions as a way of structuring this activity.

1. Is your character human or some other kind of entity?
2. What would people first notice about your character in terms of how they appear physically? Are they attractive or unattractive, tall or short, what is their stature? Do they have any interesting facial characteristics?
3. How would you describe the way your character moves? Is there anything noticeable about their gait?
4. What does your villain particularly like and dislike?
5. What sorts of other characters is your own villain drawn to and why?
6. Is there anything distinctive about how the character sounds or speaks? Do they have anything distinctive about their accent, any phrases they like to use, or any other sounds that they make?
7. Do you have an idea yet about what sort of behaviour your villain might engage in? What does your character regret in their life?
8. Do you have any ideas as to what might be driving those behaviours? What does your character want in life?
9. What sort of situation do you imagine your character might find itself in? Does it fit into mainstream society? Does it hold power? Is it rich or poor? What has it been successful at? When did it last fail?
10. Finally give your character a fictional name and an address or location where they might be found.

Make any notes you want to in the box below

Provide your answer...

You have now started to think about a villainous character that you might find interesting.
Keep your notes on this character as you will return to these later on in the course.

5 Summary of Week 1

This week you have started to recall and think about fictional villains you have met in your previous engagement with books. You have started to create your own fictional villain, using your imagination, and have learned a little about how established authors have created their popular villains.

Next week you will build on this foundation by starting to think a little more about the concept of empathy, and why it is that we may feel more empathy with certain types of people than others. You will explore how important empathy might be to both writers and psychologists and consider some of the real world applications of empathy. You will also move along to thinking about whether or not it is possible, or a good idea, to feel empathy with characters who do not seem similar to ourselves, such as villains.

You can now go to Week 2.

Week 2: How literature affects us psychologically

Introduction

Although not everyone reads, and certainly not everyone is a ‘bookworm’, reading fiction has endured despite the many competing entertainment options that now exist, such as streaming TV series, online gaming, watching films and even experiencing virtual worlds through VR headsets. Given all these options, why has reading remained so popular? One answer to that question is something that you might not previously have given much thought to, which is the idea that who you spend your time reading about might be both changing your sense of self, and also your relationships with other people.

This week you will learn about the power of a story to affect you psychologically. You will learn about some of the research that has been carried out by psychologists and other social scientists to try and discover ways in which you might relate to what you read about, such as how you respond to particular characters, and the extent to which you feel immersed in the story worlds you read about.

By the end of this week, you should be able to:

- understand some of the ways that reading can change us psychologically, according to research
- understand what is meant by transportation into narrative worlds
- learn about the impact of reading on empathic responses towards other people.

1 The power of story

Before you explore how reading fiction can affect the reader, you will look very briefly at just how prevalent and powerful stories are, and have been, within human culture. Stories are thought to be a universal form of communication among humans (Rubin, 1995), meaning that storytelling is not limited to particular cultures or geographies. They have been popular for thousands of years and the evidence suggests that early humans exchanged stories (Donald, 1991). Alongside their value in providing entertainment, stories have been recognised as devices that can play a part in bringing about significant societal change. The Indigenous peoples saying that ‘the one who tells the story rules the world’ recognises the rhetorical power of stories to effect change.

You may well be aware of recent examples that demonstrate how stories can cause cultural change. In 2024 in the UK, ITV broadcast a drama series about the Post Office submasters who were wrongly accused of fraud due to failures in the accounting system that they were forced to use. This series had a substantial impact despite the fact that the issues the post masters faced had been reported factually for several years in the news. The story portrayed in the series captured the imagination of the viewers to the extent that it raised the profile of the submasters’ plight to one of the most important national issues of the time and led to policy change and legal consequences.

It may seem surprising that the drama was what led to this change, when the same story told factually in the news had failed to have the same effect. However, researchers who study the impacts of stories will not have found that surprising at all, as stories are known to be capable of substantial persuasion. Before you consider this persuasion in more depth, you will return to how reading a story can affect the reader and some of the benefits that result from reading.

1.1 The benefits of reading

Reading is known to have a number of health benefits, and this finding is not a recent one. During the First World War (1914–18), Helen Mary Gaskell set up a war library which organised donations of books to sick and wounded soldiers wherever they were based. During this period the practice of ‘bibliotherapy’ emerged. Bibliotherapy is ‘the use of literature to improve people’s mental health’ (Mårtensson and Andersson, 2015, p. 62) or ‘the therapeutic use of literature’ (Howie, 1983, p. 287).

The effect of reading books is argued to impact not just the mind but also the body. Bavishi, Slade and Levy (2016) carried out a longitudinal study of individuals aged over 50

years old, and found that people who read books actually lived slightly longer than those that didn't, with reading books reducing mortality risk by 20%. They also found that reading books (as opposed to magazines and newspapers) rather than simply reading versus not reading was important in the survival advantage.

1.2 Stories as a simulation of the social world

One of the arguments about why stories involve us so much is that they are ways of simulating the complex social world around us and also allowing us to imagine and rehearse taking part in social interactions (Mar and Oatley, 2008). Moreover, when you read a book about a social situation you are able to gain an insight directly into the inner workings of the mind of the character you are reading about (and potentially also the minds of other characters, depending on how the book is written). When you take a moment to consider this idea you can see how reading might be quite a powerful exercise enabling us to take the perspective of someone else.

Activity 1 Switching places

Take a moment to think about a conversation you recently had. It might be simplest to choose the very last conversation you had, no matter who that conversation was with, reducing the amount of work you need to do to select a conversation. This might have been a conversation at home with a family member or friend, a conversation in the workplace, or even an interaction where you spoke to your dog, cat or other family pet.

First, jot a few notes down about the context: where you were, when it was, and who the 'characters' were in this conversation. Who was present and who had a speaking role? If you can remember approximately what was said, make a quick note of it. Don't take more than two minutes to make these notes. Remember that this might have been quite a fleeting interaction.

If you are struggling to come up with something, there is an example response in the discussion below.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

An example of this exercise: 'My good friend Paula just popped round to my house. She was dropping off a pair of trousers which she had bought but didn't fit her, and she wondered if I might want to try them on. She didn't come in. We stood at the door and chatted briefly. She was on her way to the gym. It was 9am. I had been in my office upstairs at the computer working. My two dogs both came to the door to see Paula.'

Next, choose any of the other people (or animals!) who were involved in the interaction BUT DO NOT CHOOSE YOURSELF. You are going to write a description of the same conversation but this time from the point of view of the other character you chose. This means they will be observing what you said, and how you behaved, but from their own point of view. In writing this description, think about what the other person might have noticed about what you were wearing, or other things about your appearance. Also think about what they might have observed about your behaviour, for example did you appear tense or relaxed, upbeat or more subdued?

Take about ten minutes to write this description, and rather than in note form, write a more fully formed paragraph or two that could be a part of a novel or short story, about that conversation. Even though you are writing from the perspective of one of the other characters in the scene, you should write in the '**first person**', i.e. as though you are actually the person in question (e.g. using I or me or my). It doesn't matter if you only really capture a minute or two of the conversation.

Again, if you are struggling to come up with something, there is an example response in the discussion below.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

An example of this exercise: 'As usual I am rushing. It is a beautiful morning and as I pull up outside Zoe's house there is no free parking. I just stop the car in the quiet lane she lives on, grab the trousers, and quickly climb the steps up to Zoe's house. I notice that her garden is looking a bit overgrown, she needs to get the secateurs out. There are loads of overhanging plants. Clematis, Honeysuckle, Ivy. Even on a morning as beautiful as this some of it is wet and the moisture catches on my skin as I head up her steps. I'm dressed for the gym so it doesn't matter. Maybe she is too busy to tidy her garden, I know she is working hard, something I don't need to worry about anymore. God, I'm glad those days are behind me. I'd prayed for redundancy for months and just four weeks ago it had finally come. I knock and the dogs start barking. When she opens the door, she looks older than I remembered. She isn't wearing any make up. She might be thin enough to get into the trousers I am holding but it wouldn't hurt her to run a brush through her hair before work.'

The activity that you have just undertaken has asked you to take the perspective of someone else while interacting with you. You may have found it rather strange to imagine how you may have appeared, sounded and come across to someone else.

You will come back to learn more about this task of perspective taking shortly when you learn more about empathy. First though you will learn a little more about one of the potential reasons that reading books might have a positive effect on health by learning a little about what psychologists call social cognition.

1.3 Stories and social cognition

The idea that reading provides a window into the minds of fictional characters seems obvious, after all the author can literally state to the reader what the character is thinking. What may seem more surprising is that reading can actually help us see into the minds of real people! Not literally of course, but research has suggested that reading about fictional characters can increase our capacity to interact effectively with other people in the social world outside of books. Socio-cognitive ability refers to 'one's ability to perceive, interpret and respond to social information' (Dodell-Feder and Tamir, 2018, p. 1713), where 'socio' relates to social interactions and 'cognitive' relates to the processes that take place in our brains. In their research, Dodell-Fayer and Tamir re-analysed a broad range of research which had been carried out in this area by other research teams (using what is called a **meta-analysis**) concluding that there is a causal effect of reading fiction on improving social-cognitive ability. However, they argued the reasons for this effect remain unknown. It might be that readers of fiction are able to practice social interactions through reading, or it might be that concrete information or knowledge about how to interact socially is transmitted through reading.

The suggestion that the reader is actually practising social interactions, requires a level of engagement with the story in which the reader is immersed in the world of the story to the extent that they might actually feel as if they are part of what is taking place. The degree to which individuals get involved in the story worlds that they read about is a phenomenon that psychologists call 'transportation'.

2 Transportation

You may have experienced times when you became fully immersed in, or swept along by, a story. You may have had the experience of reading a book, and almost feeling like you were actually in the story world described in the book, to the extent that things going on in the room around you faded completely into the background. This sense of immersion is referred to by psychologists as ‘transportation’, where the reader is (mentally) transported into the world of the story. Conversely, you might have had the experience of wanting to read a book, but feeling that you ‘just can’t get into it’ and rather than feeling immersed in the story you have to consciously force yourself to keep reading. That feeling would be referred to as a lack of transportation.

One definition of transportation is ‘the state of feeling cognitively, emotionally and imaginatively immersed in a narrative world’ (Sestir and Green, 2010, p. 274). Research has found that the extent to which the individual is transported into the story world has important impacts psychologically. For example, the extent to which people feel like they are ‘in’ the story affects the degree of empathy readers feel for the characters (e.g. Bal and Veltkamp, 2013; Walkington, Ashton Wigman and Bowles, 2020). The degree to which a reader is transported can even affect pro-social behaviour towards others. For example, Johnson (2012) found that readers who were transported into a story world during an experiment were more likely to subsequently help a researcher who dropped their pens on the floor. It has also been found to be an important determinant in health-related behaviours. Bannerjee and Green (2013) found that transportation into stories about the negative effects of alcohol use led to negative expectancies about alcohol use, and suggested this might be because information which is presented in a story form is accepted more readily than facts and figures.

Next you will read about how crime writers feel they draw readers into their narrative worlds. Of course, to crime writers the term ‘transportation’ in and of itself, and particularly its psychological consequences, might not be something they necessarily recognise given the subject matter they write about. However, all authors want to achieve transportation, in as much as they want to draw readers in to their books and the stories they tell.

2.1 Val McDermid

Val McDermid is a best-selling and international award winning Scottish crime writer. She is perhaps best known for her *Wire in the Blood* series which features a clinical psychologist (Dr Tony Hill) and DCI Carol Jordan, but she has written three other series of crime fiction. Alongside crime fiction Val has written graphic novels, non-fiction and a children’s picture book, as well as writing for both radio and theatre.

In this video, Val McDermid was asked about how she draws readers into the story worlds that she creates.

Video content is not available in this format.

So, to Val the key to engaging readers and immersing them in the story world is through the creation of characters that the reader both understands and cares about.

Next, you will consider how a different author engages their readers.

2.2 Gordon Brown

In the following video Gordon Brown talks about his technique for engaging readers.

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Gordon talks about the specific point of view he uses when writing, which in his case tends to be first-person present tense narration. As he points out, this is a very involving technique as it allows the reader to fully inhabit the mind of the character, and it also allows the writer to develop an authentic and strong voice. There are disadvantages, as Gordon points out, in that this stylistic choice means the author needs to work to alleviate the relentless nature of the first-person present tense, while still allowing other angles on characters. One way around this is to intersperse with other material which allows the reader to pause and change the pace, and also allows insight into other points of view.

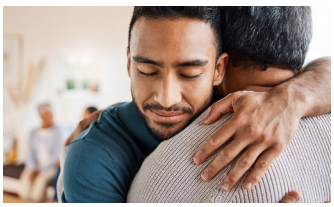
Having considered transportation into narratives you will next move on to explore how transportation, as well as being an enjoyable experience for readers, can lead to change in affective responses, by learning a little about empathy.

3 Empathy

One useful way to start to conceptualise what we mean by empathy is to look at where the word itself emerged from. There are two routes underpinning the origins of the word. One is the ancient Greek word empatheia which means passion or physical affection (Jamieson, 2014). The second route is the German adaptation of the term em (into) and pathos (feeling). This sense of 'feeling into' someone else's emotional state is a useful way of conceptualising empathy and one that sets it apart from sympathy.

To put it simply, sympathy is saying 'I'm sorry to hear that' when a friend (for the purposes of this example let's call her Joanne) tells you that her cat has died. Empathy is much more involved than sympathy and means psychologically experiencing someone else's cognitive perspective and emotional state, while still maintaining a sense of your own identity as separate (Coplan, 2011). Being empathic towards Joanne would involve thinking it through from her perspective, such as thinking, 'Oh no, I know Joanne lives on her own, and she works from home, and the cat is really good company for her, the house will seem really quiet without anyone else around'. Empathy is, therefore, argued to be a process that involves imagining what it is like to be the other person, rather than just imagining how the circumstances that have befallen someone else might feel if they happened to you.

3.1 Does everyone agree what empathy is?



Empathy is something which is studied by a wide range of different academic disciplines, including philosophy, psychology and areas of the arts too, so it is perhaps unsurprising that there are quite a range of definitions, although all tend to share a common focus.

A book written by a philosophy academic referred to empathy as ‘using our imaginations as a tool so as to adopt a different perspective in order to grasp how things appear (or feel) from there’ (Matravers, 2017, p. 1). A different philosophy scholar states: ‘I propose that empathy be conceptualized as a complex, imaginative process through which an observer simulates another person’s situated psychological states while maintaining clear self–other differentiation’ (Coplan, 2011, p. 40). Suzanne Keen, a professor of English, refers to it as ‘a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect’, also suggesting that in empathy ‘we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others’ (Keen, 2006, p. 208).

Psychologists tend to separate out empathy as having elements that are cognitive (i.e. to do with thinking) and elements that are emotional, and tend to view both aspects as being skills or abilities. Bal and Veltkamp (2013) define empathy as ‘a cognitive and intellectual ability to recognise the emotions of other persons and to emotionally respond to other persons’ (Bal and Veltkamp, 2013, p. 2). Psychologists such as Davis (1983) have designed ways in which the cognitive and emotional aspects of empathy can be measured separately using a **scale** such as the Interpersonal Reactivity Index. This way of measuring empathy breaks it down into four different qualities of empathy:

> the first is the personal distress scale which ‘measures “self-oriented” feelings of personal anxiety and unease in tense interpersonal settings’
>
> the second is the empathic concern scale which ‘assesses “other oriented” feelings of sympathy and concern for unfortunate others’
>
> the third is the perspective taking scale (the most clearly cognitive element of empathy) and considers ‘the tendency to spontaneously adopt the psychological point of view of others’
>
> the final one is the fantasy scale which ‘taps respondents’ tendencies to transpose themselves imaginatively into the feelings and actions of fictitious characters in books movies and plays’.

(Davis, 1980, p. 1)

You might have a feeling that you vary on the different aspects of empathy that Davis outlines.

NOTE: If you want to complete the Interpersonal Reactivity Index you can do so in the next activity.

Activity 2 Empathy and me

The following statements enquire about your thoughts and feelings in a variety of situations. For each item, indicate how well it describes you on a scale from A, does not describe me well, to E, describes me very well, by choosing the appropriate letter on the scale. When you have decided on your answer, click on the appropriate letter.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

For example, you may find that you are not that high on the fantasy scale (i.e. you don’t get so immersed in a book that you almost feel like you are one of the characters) but that you take the perspectives of other people, in meetings with colleagues for example, really quickly and easily.

In the text box below, reflect on your empathy scores and which of the scales you were higher or lower on. Do the results surprise you?

Provide your answer...

In the following sections you will find out what some of our crime writers think about empathy with characters.

3.2 Val McDermid

Your own experience as a reader probably tells you that empathy is quite important in literature. After all, if you don’t care what the characters are feeling you probably won’t enjoy the book and if you find yourself experiencing the same emotions as the characters you are probably fully immersed in the story. Now you have explored a little of the psychology of empathy and also how you yourself might experience it, you will look at how our crime writers use empathy in their stories.

In this video Val McDermid outlines some of her thoughts on empathy with characters.

Video content is not available in this format.

3.3 Sir Ian Rankin

In this video Sir Ian Rankin talks about a particular problem he faced with his character Cafferty, which was brought to light by a reader comment at a book signing.

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You will notice that the writers so far have pointed out that they can vary who the reader feels empathy with to achieve different effects with their readers and that is also a feature picked out by Craig Robertson in the next video.

3.4 Craig Robertson

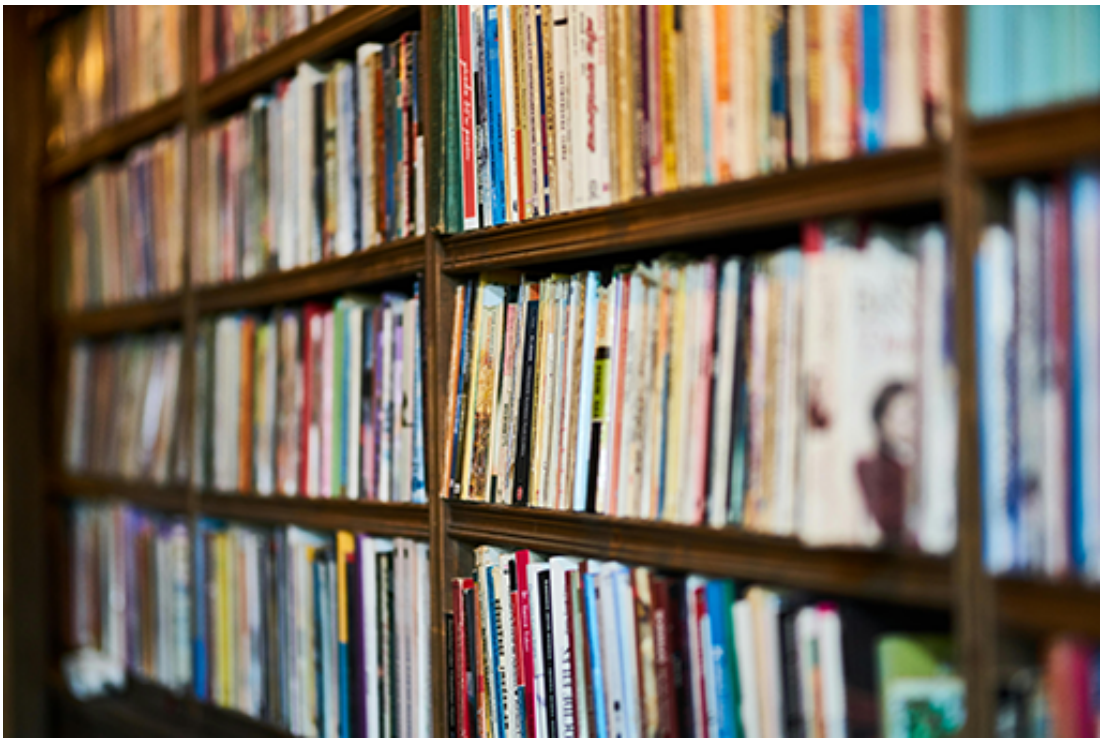
Craig Robertson is a former journalist and now full-time author writing crime novels based in contemporary Glasgow. His crime series centres around DS Rachel Narey and police photographer Tony Winter. His first novel, *Random*, was a *New York Times* bestseller.

Video content is not available in this format.

Having viewed the videos, you will see that the crime authors are not only interested in making us feel empathy with their protagonists, they are also at times trying to create empathy with their villains. You will also notice, particularly in the last video, that the authors realise that readers might not always like being put on the side of the villain.

Psychologists have tended to suggest that the empathy that can be built through reading is most readily experienced for people who seem like us (Keen, 2006). How might this translate though when the characters involved are people we see as not being similar to us, such as villains? Later on in the course you will return to why readers may feel this way in much more detail, and will examine further whether or not it is possible for us to feel empathy with villains, and still enjoy ourselves, and feel comfortable as readers.

3.5 Transportation and empathy



Research suggests that there is a relationship between transportation into story worlds and empathy. Bal and Veltkamp (2013) found that participants who were highly transported were found to be more empathic than their less transported colleagues, and Johnson (2012) found participants who were more transported were more likely to help the experimenter in a study if they had been transported. While some research has not found the same sort of relationship between transportation and empathy (e.g. Koopamn, 2015), a recent meta-analysis by Van Laer, De Ruyter, Visconti and Wetzels (2013) found transportation had a large effect on affective responses. In the latter meta-analysis, it was also found that when individuals were highly transported they engaged in fewer critical thoughts about the material they read. This suggests that when the reader is transported into a story world, they are less likely to counter-argue the information they are presented with, and more likely to accept it uncritically. This greater acceptance of story messages when highly transported into a story world is one of the reasons that psychologists believe that story can be so persuasive.

4 Summary of Week 2

This week you have learned a little about the potential effects that reading can have on individuals who read. You have explored the concepts of transportation into a story world, and you have learned about empathy with characters, and how crime writers might deliberately want to manipulate who we feel empathy with. You have considered some of the real-world consequences of reading fiction on empathic responding towards others in the real-world and have been introduced to the idea that reading stories may be persuasive in changing our attitudes.

Next week you will develop your learning with a more specific focus on the relationships that you form with the characters you read about and will learn a little more about how these relationships might help reduce loneliness, and improve your **self-concept**.

You can now go to Week 3.

Week 3: Relationships with fictional characters: para-social relationships

Introduction

> We read to know we are not alone.
>
> C. S. Lewis in *Shadowlands* (Attenborough, 1993)

Reading is very often an activity that is undertaken alone. Indeed, as you saw in the previous week, even if you are surrounded by other people, when reading you can become so immersed in a book that you stop being aware of your surroundings. This can make reading sound like a solitary and isolating thing to do. Even though that can be, in some sense at least, true of the *physical* act of reading, the *psychological* engagement with the story and the world(s) it depicts tends to act in the opposite way. Research has found that engaging with fictional characters and fictional worlds can replicate many of the psychological benefits that result from interacting socially with real people in the real world (Liebers and Schramm, 2019). Of course, anyone who is an avid reader of fiction knew this already … but it is always nice to have some evidence in support!

By the end of this week, you should be able to:

- explore the relationships that readers can form with fictional characters
- understand what is meant by para-social relationships
- understand some of the psychological and health benefits that can result from reading such as meeting our need to belong and reducing loneliness.

1 Fictional friends

Have you ever re-read a novel several times, eagerly awaited the next book in an ongoing series or indeed watched a TV series multiple times or become addicted to a long-running programme? Of course, sometimes it is the excellent writing or acting that brings us back but more often it is a sense of familiarity, like we are visiting old friends. In other words, we form a relationship with the characters depicted in the story, and it is these relationships that bring us back. It is also, of course, possible to read a novel only once, but become so deeply immersed in the story that you form a relationship with the people within it. This raises an important question, and one which we will look at this week, which is whether our relationships with fictional characters are similar to those we form with real people?

Below, the course authors (Graham, Zoë and Siobhan) reflect on some of the relationships they have built with fictional characters.

Graham

I am a big fan of sci-fi and one of my favourite authors is C.J. Cherryh. I started reading her novels as a teenager and still have them in a cherished place on my bookshelf to this day. Two of her books, *Downbelow Station* and *Merchanter's Luck*, which depict life in an interstellar war-torn future, became firm favourites of mine, and reading either is like returning home to catch up with much loved old friends. Admittedly I am prone to getting lost inside my own fantasies, but I have spent many, many hours not just reading these two novels but imagining myself as a new character within them: maybe an interstellar hitchhiker with a dark origin story that saves the hero before becoming their best friend and falling in love with the shy and unassuming ship's navigator. These books, and many others, have great meaning to me because of the relationships I have with the characters and because of the time I have spent (mentally) visiting the worlds in the stories. Unlike relationships in the real world, these never become problematic and can be revisited after many years without any awkwardness.

Zoë

I absolutely love the novels in the *Bridget Jones* series. I discovered them when I was in my thirties, and the protagonist Bridget is a 30-something single woman, working in London. The group of friends who form Bridget's 'urban family', and who convened in the pub most nights after work, reminded me of my own friendship group at the time, but it was Bridget herself who I particularly bonded with. Because the books are quite comic and Bridget repeatedly gets into scrapes, often involving too much wine and not enough self-control, I found her to be light-hearted company. A character who was able to laugh at herself and the ridiculous situations she found herself in. I felt like I knew her, like she could so easily be in my own circle of friends if

she were real. I have read all of the novels several times and must have spent countless hours listening to them on audiobooks. Years later they came out in film format, and so of course I had to watch the films too. Even now, at the time of writing in my early fifties, if I am ever feeling like I need cheering up, or have had a stressful day, I would turn back to these books so that I can hang out with Bridget. I can't imagine it will be much different when I am 70.

Siobhan

It's the enduring appeal of Jane Austen's sharp wit and social observation, that brings me back to her books again and again. One character in particular, who draws me in every time, is Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice*. Charlotte is the particular friend of Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine, but Charlotte is not particularly striking in terms of looks, nor are readers given much access to her inner life. We do however see that she is pragmatic and makes key decisions about her own trajectory. Understanding fully the social scaffolding that essentially requires women of no fortune to marry, she becomes engaged to the odious Mr Collins just hours after Elizabeth Bennet rejects him. This leads to an awkward encounter between the friends as Elizabeth cannot believe that Charlotte would marry so far beneath her own level of intelligence. But this is what is so appealing about Charlotte – she is a woman of many parts. When we see her later in the novel, she has carved out quite an independent life, even while being the wife of Collins and having to operate carefully within the patronage of the insufferable Lady Catherine de Bourgh. At one point, her husband reveals how she encourages him to spend more time in his garden while we, the readers, totally get that this is Charlotte's way of being as free as she can! Charlotte is driven by reason and realism, rather than by the pride or the prejudice of Elizabeth or of Mr Darcy. She doesn't subscribe to the underlying romantic notions which seem to imply that the match of Darcy and Elizabeth is destined to be happy-ever-after. She's a deliciously portrayed character to my mind and I'm glad she's in the novel.

1.1 Relationships with fictional characters

Like the course authors, you may well have cherished relationships with the fictional characters you have read about, particularly maybe in those stories you have returned to several times. Psychologists, and researchers from other academic disciplines such as sociology and communication studies, refer to these relationships with fictional characters as being ‘para-social’ – where ‘para’ has its usual meaning as a prefix, namely ‘resembling’ or ‘beyond’.

Although the exact definition can vary, para-social relationships tend to be seen as those that are formed between a person and someone that they do not know personally. Thus, it is possible to have a para-social relationship with a character in a book, an actor on stage, an influencer on social media or indeed a famous person that you read about in a magazine. This means that it is possible to form a para-social relationship both with a fictional character and also with an actual person (as long as you do not actually know them). Although more and more research is exploring para-social relationships formed on social media platforms, here you will restrict yourself to a focus on fictional characters.

As relationships with fictional characters are studied by researchers from many different academic disciplines, different terms and ways of conceptualising the relationships tend to be used. So, while some researchers use the term para-social relationships, others might use a different term (which is something to bear in mind if you decide to explore research in this area further).

Activity 1 Friends with (fictional) benefits

Think about some of the fictional characters that you might have had a para-social relationship with and also some of the relationships you have had in real life.

1. Jot down one major thing about two or three relationships you have with fictional characters in terms of how you characterise your relationship to them.
2. Jot down one major thing about two or three relationships you have with real people in your life.
3. Consider what you think are the similarities and differences between these two forms of relationship.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Here are some the key similarities and differences that you may have come up with.

Differences:

- Para-social relationships are one sided while real relationships require both people to be active participants.
- Para-social relationships require no effort on your behalf, and no significant investment (apart from reading the book). However real relationships require the investment of time and energy to maintain the relationship.
- Forming a para-social relationship with someone who continues to behave in appalling ways (such as a villain) feels more likely than forming a real friendship with a real person that does.
- Real relationships require some form of proximity, in that you have to actually meet the person, while para-social relationships are formed with characters that are put in front of you.

- In a para-social relationship you can imagine the best possible version of yourself interacting with the other person. In a real relationship, it will be your ordinary, flawed self interacting with another person.

Similarities:

- Forming either sort of relationship is unlikely if the person is not someone we inherently find interesting.
- Both forms of relationship can elicit genuine emotions, and these can be both positive and negative.
- It is possible to worry about what is going to happen to the person in both forms of relationships, although it is often the case that real relationships might cause more worry.
- In both forms of relationship you can have a sense of looking forward to hanging out with the other person, and might even feel like you miss the other person when you are apart from them.

In the next section you will hear from our crime authors about how their readers form relationships with the characters they create in their stories.

1.2 Lin Anderson

First you will hear from Lin Anderson about the relationships that readers form with her characters.

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In this video Lin describes the importance of relationships in forming the ‘heart’ of a series and being what keeps readers coming back to revisit what they have described as ‘old

friends'. She also makes it clear that her readers engage with the characters as if they were real, getting cross if they make bad decisions and enjoying the camaraderie.

1.3 Sir Ian Rankin

The idea that it is the relationships that readers form with fictional characters that keeps them reading a series of novels is something Sir Ian Rankin also recognises. In the following video he also explores the para-social relationships that people form with the characters in his books.

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It would be very interesting to get Ian on a psychoanalyst's couch and explore the relationship he has formed with the villain in his stories, a person who he appears to be following around Edinburgh in real life!

1.4 Val McDermid

Val McDermid also sees the para-social relationships with villains to be an important element of how people engage with stories.

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2 Likeability and para-social relationships

Interpersonal attraction, namely forming a ‘positive perception of warm feeling’ towards someone (McCroskey and McCain, 1974), tends to be an important factor when it comes to forming a social relationship with someone in real life. Such attraction can have elements that are either physical, finding someone’s appearance to be attractive, or social, such as whether they fit easily into your own social circle. Researchers have suggested that when it comes to initiating a relationship when two individuals meet for the first time, the formation of positive first impressions tends to be characterised by both high attraction and high uncertainty; in other words, we are attracted (including socially, not necessarily physically) to someone, know little about them but are driven to find out more (Knapp, 1978).

Researchers have tended to assume that the formation of para-social relationships follows a similar pattern (Tukachinsky, Walter and Saucier, 2020). A very simple way of putting this is that to want to start either a real social relationship or a para-social relationship with someone, we have to like them.

An interesting question is how, and indeed whether, likeability and attraction feature in crime fiction, where the subject matter and many of the characters pose problems for everyday definitions of what and whom we should like and be attracted to. In the previous section you heard from the authors that their readers do seem to form para-social relationships with their villains (such as with Cafferty in Ian Rankin’s books), but does that mean that the readers liked and were attracted to the villains? In the next section you will hear from our crime authors with regards to how (and whether) they approach the likeability of their characters and particularly their villains.

2.1 Lin Anderson

In the following video, Lin Anderson talks about how she tackles the issue of the likeability of her characters in terms of how readers form para-social relationships with them.

Video content is not available in this format.

Lin raises an interesting issue, which is the extent to which our relationships with fictional characters can teach us something about ourselves, an issue you will return to later.

2.2 Gordon Brown

Gordon Brown also acknowledges the importance of likeability.

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In describing the role of likeability for a fictional character, Gordon covers similar factors that govern whether we like a real person, including that we might be able to continue a friendship with someone who did something ‘bad’ as long as we are able to understand the rational for that behaviour and can justify it to ourselves. He notes that readers may decide to stop reading if something happens that makes them go ‘really?’, and it is easy to imagine that ‘handbrake’ moment happening in a real relationship too.

2.3 Val McDermid

Val McDermid has a slightly different view on likeability.

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Val raises a point about the difference between heroes and villains, and of the importance in her stories for the villain not to become the hero.

2.4 Craig Robertson

Craig Robertson touches on a similar theme in discussing likeability.

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Craig asks an insightful question and worries as much that people will like his villains than as they may not. As he notes, a book will not work if the readers do not form a para-social relationship with the characters even if this relationship is characterised by fear or hate. As Lin noted, relationships can be both positive and negative, and both types can be useful in revealing something about ourselves.

You will return to explore how forming para-social relationships with villains might actually have some benefits next week. In the next section you will explore the nature of para-social relationships in more depth by looking at how research in this area has developed.

2.5 Wallflowers or socialisers?

Early research (e.g. Levy, 1979) into para-social relationships tended to see them as being a substitution or compensation for relationships in the real world (Tukachinsky, Walter and Saucier, 2020). As para-social relationships were one-sided and illusory they were seen as offering a means of forming a relationship to those who might struggle to form relationships in the real world, without risk of rejection. As such, it was suggested that it was people who struggled with their social lives, who were lonely and/or shy, that formed para-social relationships. In other words, they formed relationships with people they did not know as a substitution for forming relationships with people who they did know.

Although there is an undoubted logic to this suggestion, it does presume that people who are socially active would not form para-social relationships because they would not need to. Subjectively this feels wrong to anyone who has formed a para-social relationship who also has friendships, social networks and an active social life.

Research in the area also did not find a great deal of support for the idea that para-social relationships only happened to those who may struggle socially. For example, a meta-analysis of para-social relationship research found that although there was a link between the intensity of the para-social relationships formed with people who have an 'anxious attachment' style (meaning people who struggle to feel secure in their relationships), there were no links with loneliness, gregariousness nor self-esteem (Tukachinsky, Walter and Saucier, 2020).

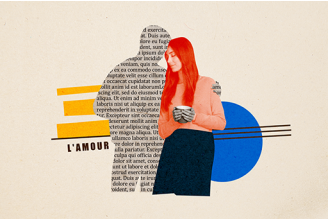
An alternative explanation is that the same cognitive mechanisms that underpin us forming real relationships are also used in the formation of para-social relationships. This makes sense when we consider that the human brain evolved in response to the need to make relationships with real people. When you imagine a visual scene you use the same cognitive mechanisms, and the same parts of the brain, that you use when looking at a real scene in front of you (Pearson, 2019). That is why it is so hard to imagine a complex scene while you are also looking at one and why you tend to close your eyes or look at a blank space when using your imagination. If forming a para-social relationship uses the same processes involved in forming a real relationship, shouldn't it be the case that those people who struggle to form real relationships would also struggle to form para-social relationships?

In other words, if both forms of relationships use the same mental processes, then it will be people who are able to form strong social relationships that will also tend to form strong para-social relationships. The same meta-analysis (Tukachinsky, Walter and Saucier, 2020) found support for this hypothesis in that a number of factors linked with forming a strong actual relationship (such as the interpersonal factors you looked at before including perceived physical and social attractiveness) were also linked with forming para-social relationships.

What to conclude? One answer is that research is very much ongoing and is likely to reveal more about para-social relationships in the near future. For now, it seems premature to conclude that there are some people that form para-social relationships and some that do not because of their ability to form real social relationships. It is more likely that para-social relationships are a sufficiently powerful and complex phenomenon that they can act as both substitution for those that are lonely and as extension for those that have active social networks but love to get lost in a book.

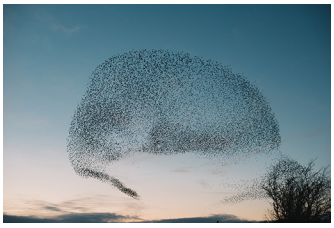
There are other factors that affect whether and how strongly someone will tend to form relationships with fictional characters, including one you read about previously when considering aspects of empathy, which is how prone they are to fantasising. For example, Liebers and Straub (2020) studied the links between fantasy and *romantic* para-social relationships (think of Graham and his 'shy and unassuming ship's navigator') and found that fantasy enhanced the intensity of the relationship formed. The authors drew a similar conclusion in noting the complexities involved in what leads people to form relationships with fictional characters and also that further research is needed: 'We assume that while an individual's level of fantasy is important, it is just one of many personal characteristics that shape romantic thoughts, feelings, and behaviour toward media characters and we hope that future studies will investigate additional personal predictors' (Liebers and Straub, 2020, p. 11).

3 The benefits of relationships with fictional characters



In the previous section you looked at what para-social relationships are, who might form them, how they might be formed and what form they might take. In this section you will look at how forming a relationship with a fictional character might change the reader.

3.1 Belonging



Psychologists have considered the possibility that simply engaging with characters in a story, regardless of how they are written about, might have an impact on us.

One of the greatest influences that relationships with characters in books might have on readers is giving them a sense of ‘belonging’ or ‘fitting in’, of forming (para)social connections with groups of people. Fitting in with a social group is a fundamental element of the human condition and one we have evolved internal mechanisms that drive us to join, and indeed create, social groups (Stevens and Fiske, 1995). In addition, being part of social groups will tend to make us experience increased satisfaction with life, pleasure and other positive emotions (Baumeister and Leary, 1995).

One thing that seems to help us become part of a social group is to make ourselves more like the other people in the group. For example, we might adopt attitudes and behaviours that help us to fit in (DeMarree, Wheeler and Petty, 2005). You may well have had this experience yourself, even if it might have been to avoid expressing opinions or behaving in a way that you knew would not fit in with the wider group. Psychologists refer to this process of taking on the characteristics of a group as ‘assimilation’, a process you will return to later.

The course has already explored the idea that relationships with fictional characters might be a *substitute* for real social relationships or that they might be an *extension* of our real social relationship that use the same mental processes. Can such relationships, therefore, fulfil our fundamental desire to belong?

Certainly, there do appear to be some clear benefits of forming relationships by engaging in fiction. Although their research looked at TV programmes rather than novels, Derrick, Gabriel and Hugenberg (2009) found that when people feel lonely, they have a tendency to turn to their favoured programmes and that simply thinking about these TV programmes can mitigate reductions in self-esteem, mood and feelings of rejection.

There is also evidence that engagement with a narrative can help people to learn social rules, such as how to interact with others (Mar and Oatley, 2008), and also how to empathise (Oatley, 1999). Additionally, research has found that our own self-concept can change, albeit temporarily, as a result of exposure to a narrative; in other words, we can actually take on the traits of the character we are reading about (Sestir and Green, 2010).

Interestingly, neuroscientific research using an MRI scanner (that can determine which parts of the brain are activated) revealed that people tend to use the same part of the brain when reading a narrative as they would when processing that type of information in real life (Speer *et al*., 2009). Thus, the parts of the brain used to process visual, motor or conceptual features of an activity were also activated if those same features were present in the narrative. For example, if the narrative involved a character interacting with an object, the parts of the reader's brain associated with grasping hand movements would show an increase in activation.

It seems clear then that reading a narrative and forming a relationship with its characters can have an impact on us as the reader. It is also clear we have a strong drive to fit in and that engaging with fictional characters can not only stave off loneliness but that the reader might even adapt their self-concept in a similar fashion to someone altering their attitudes and behaviour in order to 'belong'.

3.2 Assimilation: Batman to the rescue!

When we say that in order to feel like we belong to a group comprised of fictional characters that we might take on their attitudes and behaviour, do we mean that we would simply adopt these in our imagination or do we mean that people really adopt them to the point where their actual personality, opinions or even behaviour might change? In other words, when Zoë is reading *Bridget Jones' Diary*, does she actually adopt some of Bridget's personality traits?

As mentioned earlier, this is a process called assimilation, which has often been researched by asking participants in a study to read a passage from a story and then to rate themselves against a series of statements that describe various personality traits associated with the character they had read about.

Research exploring para-social relationships and assimilation has found that rather than comparing themselves to a fictional character and feeling bad if they do not measure up in some way, that readers rather tend to assimilate those characteristics and that this can make them feel better about themselves (Derrick *et al*., 2008). Young, Gabriel and Hollar (2013) demonstrated this (in a paper titled 'Batman to the rescue!') by studying the impact that para-social relationships with superheroes had on men's body image. They found that being shown an image of a muscular superhero made men feel bad about their own bodies, unless they had a para-social relationship with that superhero, in which case there was no negative impact on their body satisfaction and instead actually led to an increase in their strength measured using a dynamometer (which measures hand-grip strength)! In

other words, they had assimilated the superheroes characteristics of muscularity and strength.

Activity 2 Becoming Count Dracula

In Week 4 you will learn more about a study Zoë conducted (Walkington, Wigman and Bowles, 2020) to explore 'The impact of narratives and transportation on empathic responding'. This included looking at whether reading either a narrative or non-narrative account about a young woman experiencing difficulties related to drug-use might lead the reader to assimilate any of the characteristics of an individual involved in drug-use. In other words, can a narrative make us respond more emphatically towards someone we previously might have felt negatively towards. This was tested by asking participants to rate their own personalities against a series of 'assimilation items', such as:

- Compared to the average person, I engage in more risky behaviour
- I have a more addictive personality than the average person

You are now going to create some assimilation items for yourself. Read the following passages taken from Bram Stoker's novel, *Dracula*, which feature The Count talking about his upcoming move to England:

> Well, I know that, did I move and speak in your London, none there are who would not know me for a stranger. That is not enough for me. Here I am noble. I am a Boyar. The common people know me, and I am master. But a stranger in a strange land, he is no one. Men know him not, and to know not is to care not for. I am content if I am like the rest, so that no man stops if he sees me, or pauses in his speaking if he hears my words, 'Ha, ha! A stranger!' I have been so long master that I would be master still, or at least that none other should be master of me. You come to me not alone as agent of my friend Peter Hawkins, of Exeter, to tell me all about my new estate in London. You shall, I trust, rest here with me a while, so that by our talking I may learn the English intonation. And I would that you tell me when I make error, even of the smallest, in my speaking. I am sorry that I had to be away so long today, but you will, I know forgive one who has so many important affairs in hand.
>
> I am glad that it is old and big. I myself am of an old family, and to live in a new house would kill me. A house cannot be made habitable in a day, and after all, how few days go to make up a century. I rejoice also that there is a chapel of old times. We Transylvanian nobles love not to think that our bones may lie amongst the common dead. I seek not gaiety nor mirth, not the bright voluptuousness of much sunshine and sparkling waters which please the young and gay. I am no longer young, and my heart, through weary years of mourning over the dead, is attuned to mirth. Moreover, the walls of my castle are broken. The shadows are many, and the wind breathes cold through the broken battlements and casements. I love the shade and the shadow, and would be alone with my thoughts when I may.

If you were conducting research on assimilation, what assimilation items might you construct to test whether your participants who read the above passages had taken on any of the characteristics of Dracula? It might help to think of the personality traits that are being revealed in the text; and remember to phrase your items in the first person like the ones used above, which means using the first person and a

structure something like ‘I have/am/feel/desire … more than is normal/the average person’.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Here are the assimilation items that you might have come up with:

- I have an above average desire to travel and have new experiences
- I strive for perfection more than the average person
- I feel the weight of responsibility more than is average
- I desire to be alone more than is normal
- I like to go unnoticed in crowds more than the average person
- I try to hide my feelings by using pleasantries more than the average person
- I think about death more than is normal
- In some ways I operate at a higher level than the average person
- I have more sensibilities than the average person

3.3 Vampires, wizards and the narrative collective assimilation hypothesis

The research and concepts described in the previous sections, particularly that on belonging, led Gabriel and Young (2011) to propose that engagement with narratives can provide the same sense and positive experience of being part of a social group or collective. They referred to this idea as the ‘narrative collective assimilation hypothesis’. The important point is that not only does this hypothesis involve the idea that a fictional story can provide many of the benefits associated with being part of a social group but that it actually predicts ‘collective assimilation’, namely that a reader will psychologically adopt key characteristics of the social group depicted in the story.

Gabriel and Young came up with a fascinating method of testing their hypothesis using passages taken from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (known as *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* in the UK) (Rowling, 1999) and from *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005). As they were testing their hypothesis, that readers will adopt characteristics of the social groups in the narrative, this meant that their prediction was that reading about Harry Potter and Hogwarts would lead participants to feel like they had ‘become’ wizards, and

that reading about the Cullen family in *Twilight* would lead to participants feel like they had 'become' vampires!

Before you go any further, take a moment to consider this. Do you think it is possible that readers can become so immersed in a story and develop para-social relationships with the characters to the extent that they (psychologically at least) start to feel like they had become a wizard or a vampire?

Next you'll take a quick (heavily abridged) look at how they went about testing this hypothesis. The participants were 140 undergrads from the University of Buffalo (with an average age of 19) who were asked to read *either* a passage from *Twilight or* from *Harry Potter* as they would as if they were reading a story normally for their own pleasure. The passage from Twilight was Chapter 13 ('Confessions'), in which Edward (a vampire) describes what it is like to be a vampire to Bella (a human). As you may know, the romantic relationship between Bella and Edward is one of the main plotlines of the series. The passage from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* was both Chapters 7 ('The Sorting Hat') and 8 ('The Potions Master'), in which Harry and friends are first sorted by a magical hat into one of four school houses (and all end up in Gryffindor House) before starting their lessons including Defence Against the Dark Arts, History of Magic, Charms and then a double period of Potions with Professor Snape.

Once they had read their passage, the participants completed what is known as an identity Implicit Association Test (often abbreviated to IAT), which uses decision time (literally how long it takes you to answer the question) to assess how strongly someone identifies with a particular social group. In this case the social groups in question were vampires and wizards. As predicted by the collective-assimilation hypothesis, the IAT revealed that the participants who read the *Harry Potter* chapters tended to associate themselves with wizards, while those that read the *Twilight* chapter tended to associate themselves with vampires. The authors concluded that this is evidence that narratives can alleviate loneliness by providing the reader with access to a collective identity which they can psychologically assimilate.

If you would like to find out more about IATs, please visit Project Implicit.

3.4 The Twilight/Harry Potter narrative collective-assimilation scale

As well as the IAT, Gabriel and Young (2011) also made use of a more explicit measure, which they referred to as the 'Twilight/Harry Potter Narrative Collective-Assimilation Scale'. This consisted of three questions, embedded among a number of other questions, to measure collective assimilation of Twilight vampires, which were:

- Compared to the average person, how high do you think you could jump?

- How long could you go without sleep?
- How sharp are your teeth?

And three questions to measure collective assimilation of Harry Potter wizards, which were:

- How British do you feel? [Remember that the participants were from the University of Buffalo]
- Do you think, if you tried really hard, you might be able to make an object move just using the power of your mind?
- Do you think you might ever be able to make yourself disappear and reappear somewhere else?

Again, before you go any further, what do you think the results of this more explicit test will reveal? Can reading *Twilight* really make someone think their teeth are sharper, and can reading *Harry Potter* really make you think you could move objects using your mind?

Analysis of the data collected in response to the six explicit questions did indeed reveal that the participants who read the *Twilight* chapter tended to self-identify more with the traits associated with vampires (e.g. being able to jump higher than average) and those that read the *Harry Potter* chapters tended to identify more with the traits associated with wizards (e.g. being able to disappear). This means that the *Harry Potter* readers were more likely to believe they could make objects move with their mind and the *Twilight* readers thought their teeth were sharper! In other words, there was clear support for the Twilight/Harry Potter Narrative Collective-Assimilation Scale.

This study clearly shows the power of narratives and of the para-social relationships that we form with fictional characters. These relationships provide a way for us to connect socially and to be part of social collectives to the extent that we assimilate the characteristics of that collective … and that can mean believing ourselves capable of telekinesis when the collective we are reading about are wizards.

In conclusion, Gabriel and Young state that:

> The pleasure of immersing oneself in narratives is not surprising or novel to anyone who has ever been lucky enough to get lost in a good book. However, the current research suggests that books give readers more than an opportunity to tune out and submerge themselves in fantasy worlds. Books provide the opportunity for social connection and the blissful calm that comes from becoming a part of something larger than oneself for a precious, fleeting moment.
>
> (Gabriel and Young, 2011, p. 993)

Next week, you will explore more impacts that forming relationships with fictional characters can have on a reader, by looking further at how such relationships can change our own self-concept and how they can also change our attitudes towards other people.

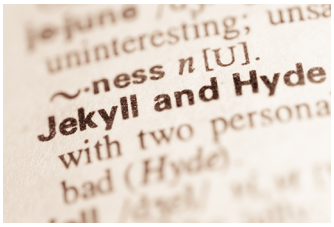
4 Week 3 summary

This week you have learned about the different sorts of relationships we might form with fictional characters including para-social relationships and collective assimilation. You have learned a little about the theories psychologists have developed about why we might form such relationships, and how the relationships we form with fictional characters share many of the elements that are usual in ‘real’ relationships, such as the importance of likeability and wanting to find out more about someone. You also explored some of the positive impact that relationships with fictional characters can have, including reducing loneliness and providing us with a sense of belonging. Importantly, throughout this week you looked at research which has demonstrated the power of fictional relationships, including that they can affect our body image, increase our strength and that we can even assimilate the characteristics of vampires and wizards.

You can now go to Week 4.

Week 4: ‘Treat ’em mean, keep ’em keen’: engagement with villains

Introduction



So far in the course you have learned about relationships with fictional characters and started to get a sense that psychologists believe that such relationships can have significant impacts on the reader. This impact can be to our levels of loneliness and sense of belonging; but also in our behaviours and attitudes towards others. This week you will build on this knowledge and consider some views of both authors and academics about the implications for the self of reading about, or hanging out with, characters who are unlikely to be considered role models: in other words, villains. In real life people are generally repulsed by the idea that they might be similar to people who act immorally, or are negatively viewed (Wan and Wyer, 2019). Yet, as you will learn this week, the same is not always true if the character is fictional.

By the end of this week, you should be able to:

- understand a little about the views of both authors and academics about the risks and rewards of our relationships with fictional villains
- understand what is meant by self-expansion, and how this might relate to fictional characters
- consider how hanging out with fictional villains might have a relationship with your sense of self
- consider that greater empathy with fictional baddies might be a positive thing.

1 Crime authors’ views on fiction versus reality

Before you start to find out more about a couple of the academic theories regarding how people are able to develop a fondness for villains that are fictional, as opposed to real villains, first let’s hear from two of our crime writers about their own thoughts and experience about the differences between fictional and real criminals.

1.1 Sir Ian Rankin

Watch the following video of Sir Ian Rankin.

Video content is not available in this format.

Ian’s interview makes clear that for him there is a clear separation between his willingness as a writer to ‘hang out’ with villains that are fictional and criminals in reality. There is a very clear moral element to Ian’s decision, as well as a palpable revulsion towards the idea of spending time in the company of a real murderer.

1.2 Craig Robertson

In a similar fashion to Ian Rankin, Craig Robertson also discusses the morality of both crime writing but also reading crime fiction the video below, and talks about the influence reader feedback has on his writing.

Video content is not available in this format.

1.3 Gordon Brown

Authors often take part in writing panels (or author panels). These typically take place in book shops, or at conferences or literary festivals. Normally they involve several different authors with a moderator who facilitates the audience, who are able to ask questions of the authors. In this interview Gordon Brown talks about a question he is often asked at such events by his readers.

Video content is not available in this format.

The crime writers therefore all have a clear awareness that their work is very much viewed as fictional by their readers, and give a sense, if you like, that different rules apply in the fictional world. There isn’t a sense that writers are worried that readers will copy what they do, and there is an awareness from the authors that one of the benefits of reading might be to connect readers (safely) to worlds they don’t inhabit.

One of the potential benefits of fictionally inhabiting worlds we might not want to access in real life is that this experience, obtained through reading, leads to the potential for growth, which is what you will learn more about in the next section.

2 Self-expansion

One of the theories concerning how we might change to become like the characters we read about is the theory of self-expansion. As you learned last week one of the advantages of relationships with fictional characters is that they are a safe space, as there is no risk that the fictional friend will reject us (Nell, 2002) unlike in our face-to-face relationships. On top of that, and importantly for what you will learn this week, this means that fictional worlds can be good spaces to foster connections with people that you wouldn’t necessarily connect with in real life, or in settings that you might consider too dangerous to inhabit in reality. The idea that reading therefore allows us to ‘live dangerously’ in a way that we might not want, or be able, to in reality, is probably not something you have considered before, but it becomes especially important when you consider that these fictional connections might provide an opportunity for self-expansion.

2.1 What is self-expansion?

Self-expansion is the idea that through our interpersonal relationships we actually gain resources (both physical resources but also social resources) that help us to achieve the things we want to achieve in life (e.g. Aron and Aron, 1997; Lewandoski and Aron, 2002). While this might sound rather mercenary when put on paper, a good way to reflect on this is by selecting an example from our own experience.

Activity 1 What’s in it for me?

Take a moment to select one of your close personal relationships. The first one that pops into your head is fine for this activity.

Write a list of the ‘resources’ you have gained as a result of your friendship with that person. This doesn’t just mean physical things that they have given you but instead try to think more broadly about things like social connections, interests, hobbies or knowledge they might have that you are able to access, and so on.

For example, your friendship with Sandra might have started because you first met in the woods walking your dogs, which could sometimes be a little lonely but you now have a friend to share some of the walks with. Sandra might also have put you in touch with a friend of hers who does dog sitting, and that might have changed your life because you now have someone reliable to dog sit, meaning that you can join the darts team you were interested in playing in on a Tuesday night.

The examples you select don’t have to be quite so practical as this one. They might include a particular friend having introduced you to other people who have since become friends and so on.

Note down your thoughts. Spend just ten minutes on this activity.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

It’s likely that the resources you have listed above are examples of how you might have expanded your own sense of self through your relationship with someone else in the real world.

Self-expansion opportunities gained through our relationships in the real world are argued to be so important that they might actually contribute to our initial attraction towards other people, as well as the motivation to continue the relationship. This is particularly argued to be the case when the person provides experiences that are novel or challenging (Mattingly, McIntyre and Lewandowski, 2012). It is likely that to be attracted to someone initially you need to be sufficiently similar to that person and also to have a sense that the person can also offer you the potential for growth. In short, we want people to be similar enough to make us think that we will get along, but different enough to make us find them interesting. Not only that, but the experience of the growth we obtain from other people is said to improve how we feel, which then translates to how happy we feel with the relationship (Reissman, Aron and Bergen, 1993).

2.2 Self-expansion and fictional friends

In the video that follows in the next section Lin Anderson will give an example of how a form of self-expansion might happen in our relationships with fictional characters.

Lin Anderson

In the following video Lin Anderson gives a great example of the types of self-expansion she hears about from her readers

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This is a great example of self-expansion through fiction, where reading a particular novel might inspire career progression in a particular direction.

The inclusion of other in self

Given the parallels between real world relationships and our relationships with fictional characters, Shedlosky-Shoemaker, Costabile and Arkin (2014) proposed the idea that self-expansion might also be possible through our relationships with fictional characters. In a series of studies, the researchers measured cognitive overlap between people’s sense of themselves and the characters they read about using the ‘inclusion of other in self scale’, which was developed by Aron, Aron and Smollan (1992). This picture below is the measure that Aron *et al*. developed and that shows various differing degrees of cognitive overlap of the self and the other. If you were asked to use this scale, you would be asked to circle the picture which best describes your relationship (i.e. how the degree of overlap between yourself and another person) from the seven options shown.

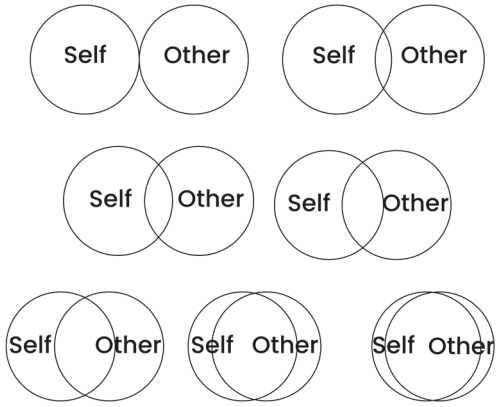

Figure 1 The inclusion of other in self scale by Aron, Aron and Smollan (1992).

This simple visual representation is one you can use to think about your own relationships. If you are in a close romantic relationship with someone you might feel it is best depicted by the sixth or seventh images where the self and the other person are almost completely overlapping. Your relationship with a colleague at work might be more at the opposite end of the scale, depicted in the first or second image on the top line, where there is a much clearer separation of your identities.

Shedlosky-Shoemaker *et al*. asked participants to select the set of circles they felt best represented their relationship with the fictional character, to measure the degree of cognitive overlap. They also measured ‘self-expansion’ via a short questionnaire which asked questions such as ‘Reading about the character has helped expand my sense of the kind of person I am’ (2014, p. 561). Their results suggested that just like with real people fictional characters did offer readers the opportunity for self-expansion. They also found that with books this effect was mediated by transportation into the text. They viewed transportation as a form of ‘para-proximity’ (2014, p. 559). The more transported into the story world readers felt, the greater cognitive overlap they felt with the character, and the greater perceived self-expansion they felt. This study again supports the importance of transportation (or para-proximity) into the story world as being a vital part of any changes in the self.

3 Am I like a villain?

The idea of self-expansion sounds like a positive thing, but you might already be wondering about what you heard from Lin Anderson, Craig Robertson and Ian Rankin in the videos earlier. What might the effects be of self-expansion if the character involved is not a pro-social role model, but instead is a villain? Might reading about villainous characters actually be bad for us?

3.1 Villainy and our concept of self

There is no doubt that many people actively enjoy reading about villainous characters, indeed the genre of crime fiction is a very successful one, even despite there being something unsettling about seeing any sorts of similarities between yourself and a villainous character in a book. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry himself expressed his own revulsion to the idea of being like Lord Voldemort:

> ‘I don’t think I’m like him!’ said Harry, more loudly than he’d intended.
>
> (Rowling, 1999, p. 332)

According to psychology, humans want to maintain a positive view of themselves, or to hold what is called a positive **self-concept**. Making and maintaining a self-concept is a demanding activity both in terms of thinking and behaviour (Siegel, 1999). To maintain a positive sense of self we tend to support positive self statements more than negative (Benenson and Dweck, 1986). Our self-concept is not only tiring to maintain, it can also be quite limiting, for example we are limited to experiences we can realistically have, so the opportunity to escape from both the effort and the constraints of our self-concept might mean that the experience of stories is inherently attractive, as a form of ‘holiday’ from the self and one in which we are able to temporarily abandon our own limits (Slater *et al*., 2014).

In the real world, then, people avoid information that threatens their sense of self, for example by association with others who are similar to us but who have negative traits, physical features or values. It is argued (e.g. Miller, Downs and Prentice, 1998; Krause and Rucker, 2020) you are likely to want to keep a distance from negative others, in case it reveals something negative about the self. As you have learned previously though, books are an example of a safe space, and both Krause and Rucker (2020) and Slater *et al*. (2014) both suggest that this separation from the real world (through fiction) might mean that self-threat is mitigated in instances when we are dealing with characters who are fictional.

Activity 2 My villain and me

In Week 1 you made up your own fictional villain. Dig out your notes for that activity and look down the list of what you had written down. Take a few moments to go

through the list and underline any similarities you had written into your own villain that you can also see in yourself.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

This activity might have reminded you of the quote from last week from author Ian Rankin who started to follow his own fictional villain around Edinburgh! Of course though, readers of fiction are more interested in the characters they consume (by reading about them) rather than those they create.

It has been found that in real life similarity to a bad person tends to feel threatening to the self and is likely to lead to us avoiding such people. Krause and Rucker (2020), however, conducted an interesting study to illustrate that this is not the same when the characters we engage with are fictional. They used a data set from Charactour What and Who to Watch. This is a website that is a fan site for characters, allowing users to choose their favourite characters, and also allows the user to take personality tests (please note that you do need to join the site to be able to do this). Their analysis across both data from this fan site, and several subsequent laboratory studies, found that people expressed a preference for villainous characters who were similar to themselves, as long as they were fictional and not real people.

4 It’s complicated: our relationship with complex characters

Enjoying villainous characters is common among the population (Hall, 2019), and you will have heard our crime authors are very aware that their audiences really enjoy their villainous creations. Of course, villains are not unambiguously bad, instead, as you will have heard the authors allude to, they tend to be complex characters who behave in morally questionable ways, rather than being out and out evil characters.

Konjin and Hoorn (2005) drew from the disciplines of art, aesthetics and psychology when they developed a ‘Perceiving and experiencing fictional characters’ theory which is a useful framework when considering why we might find ourselves simultaneously drawn to, yet morally critical of, the same character. Their framework suggests that our desire for involvement with characters and our desire to keep a distance from them is not on a binary continuum. In other words, it is not the case that you are either involved (you wish to invest in the character) or you are distant (you wish to avoid the character). Instead, they argue our wish for involvement with, and for distance from, characters run in parallel as experiences and that both involvement and avoidance together explain our appreciation of fictional characters. In short there can be an enjoyable tension between the desire to approach and avoid.

Interestingly, Konjin and Hoorn suggested that in comparing characters to ourselves, both involvement and distance are informed by: aesthetics (ugly vs beautiful); how realistic the character seems; and ethics (bad vs good) alongside. What was particularly interesting in their findings was that characters that were presented as more complex, with some positive and some negative elements (for example someone ethically bad, but beautiful and realistic) were more likeable than characters who were unilaterally good or bad. Konjin and Hoorn’s concept of involvement (measured by items such as ‘I want to be friends with the fictional character’) also captures the concept of identification, which you will look at in the next section (Black *et al*., 2019).

4.1 Identification

The concept of identification with characters brings together a few of the related concepts that you have already learned about. According to Black *et al*. identification is ‘understanding their point of view, empathizing with their plight, and/or finding them similar to the reader’ (2019, p. 2). Identification can also be described as almost feeling that you have become a particular character, or experiencing the characters world vicariously. Identification with characters allows us to see the world from their point of view and to literally access what they are thinking (as authors often explain the thought processes of fictional characters in ways that we can never access when conversing with someone in real life). This access into the interior world of villains might have a number of consequences.

Activity 3 Inhabiting Hannibal

Choose one of the following literary villains:

- Hannibal Lecter
- Count Dracula
- Lord Voldemort
- Nurse Ratched
- Cruella de Vil
- Mr Ripley
- Morris Gerald ‘Big Ger’ Cafferty

If you do not know these villains well then using a search engine will give you some ideas to go on.

Take a moment to write a letter, written in the first person (I/me) as if you were actually that character. Start the writing with one of the following three phrases:

- People ask me the reasons, I’ll tell you the reasons …
- If I could explain to my children, I would explain to them this …
- Finally, I have been caught. This is my last letter. You will not hear from me again. Before I go I must tell you this …

Write for ten minutes.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Having done that activity you may have noticed that some of what you have written might relate to the predicaments the villain you were inhabiting found themselves in. You might also remember what you learned about in Week 1 regarding ‘situational’ and ‘dispositional’ explanations of behaviour. Look over what you wrote and see how much of it focused on the situations the character you selected found themselves in.

Psychologists argue that identification better helps us buy into a character’s motivation (Black *et al*., 2019). Because the task you have undertaken asked you to inhabit that character, it is likely you wrote some information regarding that characters motivations, and it is also likely that such a first person account would encourage you to think about situations, rather than dispositions.

4.2 Craig Robertson

Before you move on to consider a little more information from the psychological research about the idea of identification, you’ll return to a couple of our crime authors who will give you their view on how they try to encourage readers to identify with their characters. In the following video Craig Robertson gives his view on identification with criminal characters in his writing.

Video content is not available in this format.

4.3 Gordon Brown

Next you’ll hear again from Gordon Brown.

Video content is not available in this format.

In these videos, you can hear that the authors are interested in creating characters who are a combination of good and bad, who are complex and have depth. Relatability and characters that readers can identify with are also important to the authors.

4.4 Identification with villains

The reasons people identify with particular characters are not currently well understood, but the research and theories that do exist suggest two main suggestions that relate to liking and similarity, both of which you have already covered in this course.

One interesting finding in the research literature is that the longer a person spends in fictional spaces (such as avid readers for example) the more likely they are to identify with villains (Sanders and Tsay-Vogel, 2016). This is one potential explanation for experimental research which has suggested that some people do identify with villains, while others don’t.

5 What can I learn from a villain?

In this week you have so far looked at hanging out with fictional characters largely from the point of view of the risks such friendships might entail. However, research evidence suggests that in fact there might be plenty of benefits from our villainous friendships, and that we can learn from fictional villains through the act of taking their perspective. It is also possible that this perspective taking might have impacts for us in the real world.

In Zoë’s own research (Walkington, Ashton Wigman and Bowles, 2020), people either read two chapters of a novel that was about a fictional character who had a drink and drug problem, or they read a factual account containing the same information. Following the reading, participants took a questionnaire regarding their empathy levels and were then presented with a short case study about another offender. They were told that that this offender had carried out a robbery in a shopping centre and knocked over an elderly citizen during the escape, all while under the influence of drink and drugs. The participants who read the fictional group, particularly those who were the most transported into the story world, were more likely to select empathic questions to ask the offender and showed higher levels of empathy in general on the questionnaire. Empathic questions were questions like ‘I understand that the situation you find yourself in in this interview must be very difficult for you, and I am happy to give you time to consider your responses so please do not rush’. This research suggests that by reading fictional accounts about offenders, our empathy towards such marginalized groups can be improved. This might have all sorts of benefits within society in terms of, for example, improving relationships with, and empathy towards, ex-offenders in the community.

Similar findings have been obtained by other researchers who have looked at how literature might lead to the reduction of prejudice. Following the release of the seven *Harry Potter* books by JK Rowling, a plethora of research followed that investigated various aspects of the novels, which are not only understood as fantasy books with magic, romance and adventure at their centre, but also as detective stories (Saunders, 2020). The novels drew particular attention because they are full of social groupings and hierarchies, with all the attendant prejudice you might expect in the real-world also being paralleled in the books. Stigmatised groups within the stories include ‘muggles’ who are non-magical individuals, elves (who are servants or slaves of wizards) and ‘mud-bloods’ or ‘half-bloods’ who are witches and wizards born out of a family with one magical and one non-magical parent. Researchers Vezalli *et al*. (2015) found that reading these novels improved attitudes to real world stigmatised groups, such as immigrants and refugees, but interestingly this was only the case when the children identified with Harry. Those that identified with Voldemort showed no effect, which led Wimmer *et al*. (2021) to conclude that identification is more likely to improve moral cognition that impair it, because while identifying with the hero had a positive impact by reducing prejudice, identifying with the villain did not have a negative impact. This research of course considered prejudice rather than empathy or self-concept (which this course has focused on), but gives a further illustration of the plethora of research that has been carried out into studying our relationships with fictional characters.

6 Week 4 summary

This week you have considered some of the differences between real and fictional characters and why our reactions to villains who are not real are different to those who are real. You have considered the idea that fictional characters might offer the opportunity for self expansion, and have also considered how we might experience changes in our self concept, expanding into the friendships that we make with fictional characters. You have also learned about a few different theories that scholars have about how we relate to villains and what implications this might have for us outside our own reading, in the real world. You have also heard a little more from fiction writers about how they find readers relate to their characters.

7 Course summary

In this course you have heard from both crime writers and psychologists about some of the ways in which we relate to the fictional characters that we read about. The academic research in this area is complicated and fascinating, and is contributed to by scholars from a wide range of disciplines. Hopefully the course showed you some of the highlights of this diverse and contested research area. Specifically, you have considered a few of the psychological processes involved in our relationships with fictional characters such as identification and transportation. You have considered the impact that reading about characters can have on your own sense of self. You have also considered some of the ways in which your relationship with fictional individuals might have knock on effects in the real world.

Well done, you have achieved a lot and, more than anything, hopefully this course has been an enjoyable introduction to some of the varied thinking that exists about our relationships with people who aren’t real.

Crime fiction authors: further information

Here you can find some further information about the crime fiction authors featured in this course. You can also find their full interviews.

Lin Anderson

Lin Anderson is a crime novelist and screenwriter, known for her character Rhona MacLeod, a forensic scientist. Unlike some other crime writers, her villains tend to change from story to story. She is one of the founders of a festival for crime writers in Scotland called ‘Bloody Scotland’.

Video content is not available in this format.

Gordon Brown

Gordon Brown is a crime thriller author, and tends to set his novels in Scotland, Spain and the USA. He is also a board director of the crime writing festival Bloody Scotland.

Video content is not available in this format.

Val McDermid

Val McDermid is a best selling, and international award winning Scottish crime writer. She is perhaps best known for her *Wire in the Blood* series which features a clinical psychologist (Dr Tony Hill) and DCI Carol Jordan, but she has written three other series of crime fiction. Alongside crime fiction Val has written graphic novels, non-fiction and a children’s picture book, as well as writing for both radio and theatre.

Video content is not available in this format.

Sir Ian Rankin

Sir Ian Rankin is a best-selling Scottish crime writer who created a series of books based around a fictional Scottish Detective named John Rebus. The fictional detective was born in the late 1940s in Fife and joined the army before joining the police. His antagonist, the ruthless Morris Gerald Cafferty, is an Edinburgh organised crime gang boss. The two characters meet in several of Ian’s novels.

Video content is not available in this format.

Craig Robertson

Craig Robertson is a former journalist and now full-time author writing crime novels based in contemporary Glasgow. His crime series centres around DS Rachel Narey and police photographer Tony Winter. His first novel, *Random*, was a *New York Times* bestseller.

Video content is not available in this format.

Where next?

If you have enjoyed this course and are interested in further learning opportunities, explore the links below.

Free courses

There are other free courses from The Open University that might interest you, specifically:

What happens to you when you read?: This course is considered to be the ‘sister’ course to the one you have just studied.

Investigating a murder with forensic psychology and Forensic psychology: These two courses are psychological rather than literary based, but do focus on criminal psychology.

If you’ve enjoyed the creative writing aspect, you might be interested in Start writing fiction: characters and stories.

Qualifications

If you have enjoyed this course, and wish to study more fomally with The Open University then the following qualifications might be of interest. The Open University has undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in psychology, forensic psychology and creative writing.

Undergraduate:

- BSc (Honours) Psychology
- BSc (Honours) Forensic Psychology
- BA (Honours) Arts and Humanities (Creative Writing)

Postgraduate:

- MSc in Psychology
- MSc in Forensic Psychological Studies
- MA in Creative Writing

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Acknowledgements

This free course was written by Zoe Walkington, Graham Pike and Siobhan Campbell.

The authors would like to thank the Open Psychology Research Centre for supporting the development of this course, Hannah Parish for her expertise and kind help, Andrew Rix for his filming expertise, and Lin Anderson, Gordon Brown, Val McDermid, Sir Ian Rankin and Craig Robertson for their time and insights into the creative process.

Text

Activity 2: adapted from Davis, M. H. (1983) ‘Measuring individual differences in empathy: Evidence for a multidimensional approach’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44(1), pp. 113–126. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.44.1

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Glossary

first person

writing from the perspective of one of the characters in a story. For example, ‘I saw the dragon approaching’ would be an example of first person, while ‘The dragon approached the knight’ would be an example of writing using the third person.

meta-analysis

a technique in which a statistical analysis is carried out which combines the results from several different studies, in order to establish the answer to a specific question

scale

a psychological scale is a form of measurement (often a questionnaire) that measures some sort of construct that is of interest to psychologists. Psychological scales might measure things like ‘separation anxiety’ or ‘self esteem’ or ‘empathy’

self-concept

how we conceptualise and think about ourselves, or the image we hold of ourselves

self-concept

how we conceptualise and think about ourselves, or the image we hold of ourselves.