

Reading fiction is Good for Children's Cognitive, Emotional, and Social Development¹

Leer ficción es bueno para el desarrollo cognitivo, emocional y social

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Abstract. On October 3, 2013, Science published an article with the provocative title “Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind”. While the results of the study may have come as a surprise for brain researchers and cognitive psychologists, literary scholars received experiment-based confirmation of something they have known for centuries: reading fiction is good for our social and emotional development. Since then, numerous empirical studies have confirmed the findings. However, *what* has so far been largely neglected are the implications of cognitive criticism for the study of literature targeting a young audience, whose theory of mind, empathic skills and ethical values are not yet fully developed. The imbalance of the cognitive, affective and social competences of the sender and the receiver makes children's literature a unique study object. In addition, the representation of a young protagonist's consciousness and emerging empathy poses specific demands on the writer as well as the reader. In this talk I will consider how cognitive literary criticism can explain how reading fiction is particularly beneficial for young readers' understanding of the material and social world, of themselves and of other people. I will explore how fiction, through its specific construction of time, space and narrative, stimulates young readers' perception, attention, imagination, memory, empathy and other aspects of cognitive activity. Drawing on the work by Lisa Zunshine (2006) and Blackey Vermeule (2010), the predominantly theoretical argument will be illustrated by a number of classic and contemporary children's novels.

Keywords: *Children's literature; fiction; reading; cognitive development.*

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Resumen. El 3 de octubre de 2013 la revista *Science* publicó un artículo con el provocativo título “Leer literatura de ficción mejora la teoría de la mente”. Mientras que los resultados del estudio pueden llegar como una sorpresa para investigadores y psicólogos cognitivos, los académicos literarios sólo han confirmado con este experimento lo que ya sabían durante siglos; leer ficción es bueno para nuestro desarrollo social y emocional. Desde entonces, numerosos estudios empíricos han confirmado los resultados. Sin embargo, lo que se ha dejado de lado son las implicaciones de críticas cognitivas para el estudio de la literatura con un objetivo de audiencia joven, cuya teoría de la mente, habilidad de empatía y valores éticos no se han desarrollado totalmente. El desequilibrio de las capacidades cognitivas, afectivas y sociales del emisor y el receptor hacen de la literatura infantil un objeto de estudio único. Además, la representación de la conciencia de un protagonista joven y de empatía floreciente plantea demandas específicas para el escritor así como para el lector. En este trabajo se estudia cómo la crítica literaria cognitiva puede explicar que leer ficción resulta especialmente beneficioso para que los jóvenes lectores comprendan el mundo material y social, a sí mismos y a otras personas. Igualmente, este texto explora cómo la ficción mediante su construcción particular del tiempo, el espacio, la narrativa estimula la percepción, la atención, la imaginación, la memoria, la empatía de los jóvenes lectores, así como otros aspectos de la actividad cognitiva. Sirviéndose del trabajo de Lisa Zunshine (2006) y Blackey Vermeule (2010), el argumento teórico predominantemente se ilustrará con una serie de novelas infantiles clásicas y contemporáneas.

Palabras clave: *Literatura infantil; ficción; lectura; desarrollo cognitivo.*

Inicio

In her book *Transparent Minds*, narratologist Dorrit Cohn says: “Narrative fiction is the only literary genre, as well as the only kind of narrative, in which the unspoken thoughts, feelings, perceptions of a person other than the speaker can be portrayed”. To writers, readers and scholars, the main attraction of fiction is the possibility of understanding other people in a way impossible in real life. For instance, cognitive narratologist Lisa Zunshine claims that the reward of reading fiction is “our awareness of our ‘trying on’ mental states *potentially* available to us but at a given moment *differing* from our own”. Another cognitive scholar, Suzanne Keen explains that fiction “provide[s] safe zones for readers’ feeling empathy without experiencing a resultant demand on real-world action”, while Blackey Vermeule puts it simply as: “We need to know what other people are like”. The ability to understand how other people think and feel, known as empathy, is arguably the most important capacity that distinguishes human beings from other living organisms. Empathy is also one of the most essential social skills. However, this capacity does not appear automatically; it develops gradually, and it can be enhanced and trained.

As educators, we should be alert to potential ways of developing empathy in children; one of these ways is fiction, that can create situations in which emotions are evoked. Children ostensibly have limited life experience of emotions; therefore I would claim that reading fiction prepares children for dealing with empathy in real life. There is a rapidly growing area of scholarly inquiry that takes into consideration research in cognitive science to inform studies of readers’ cognitive and emotional engagement with literary texts.

In 2013, *Science* published an article with the provocative title “Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind”. While the results of the study may have come as a surprise for brain researchers and cognitive psychologists, literary scholars received experiment-based confirmation of something they have known for centuries: reading fiction is good for our social and emotional development. Since then, numerous empirical studies have confirmed the findings, for instance, in Toronto and Stanford. Psychologist Keith Oatley points out in a recent article: “If fiction is the simulation of social worlds then, similar to people who improve their flying skills in a flight simulator, those who read fiction might improve their social skills”. Oatley and his research team have demonstrated that reading fiction could impact readers’ preconceived opinions, make them more empathetic and in the long run improve their quality of life. In her insightful book *Peter Pan and the Mind of J.M. Barrie*, Cambridge neuroscientist Rosalind Ridler states: “Literature and art have always been a primary source of psychological insight and writers and painters frequently bring to our attention the way things can be, so that we come to understand the world differently”.

Based on empirical research, a number of significant theoretical studies have explored how and why reading fiction is beneficial. However, what has so far been largely neglected is the implications of fiction targeting a young audience, whose theory of mind, empathic skills and ethical values are not yet fully developed. The imbalance of the cognitive, affective and social competences of the sender and the receiver makes children's literature a unique study object.

In this talk I will focus on three aspects where cognitive criticism proves fruitful to explain how young readers engage with fiction. Firstly, how reading about fictional worlds contributes to children's understanding of and orientation in the actual world. Secondly, how texts encourage readers to use mind-modelling to understand literary characters' thoughts, feelings, beliefs, opinions, motivations, and how this potentially is useful in real life. Finally, how fiction can affect readers' ethical values.

But first a brief introduction to cognitive criticism, for those of you who are not familiar with it. Cognitive literary criticism, also called cognitive poetics and cognitive narratology, is a direction within literary studies that examines how texts of fiction engage readers cognitively and emotionally; that is, very simplified, why we care about reading fiction although we know that it is - fiction, pretence, fancy, fabulation, a product of an author's imagination. This issue is reflected in book and article titles such as "How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?", *Why We Read Fiction*, "How and What We Can Learn from Fiction", *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters* and *What Literature Teaches Us about Emotions*. Cognitive criticism builds on cognitive psychology, cognitive linguistics and brain research; it is a crossdisciplinary area within which literary scholars are inspired by cognitive and affective psychology, while psychologists turn to fiction as a vast and easily available data. Cognitive criticism offers an innovative approach to reading, literacy and literature that suggests re-thinking the literary activity as such, including interaction between readers and works of literature, but also the ways literary texts are constructed to maximise, or perhaps rather optimise reader engagement. In his overview of the field, Peter Stockwell describes cognitive narratology as "*a way of thinking about literature*". Thus understood, cognitive criticism does not deal with projected readers exclusively, but also with (implied) authors' strategies in text construction, as well as with artistic representation, including referentiality – the relationship between representation and its referent in the perceptible world. Cognitive criticism also deals with the means through which various kinds of human knowledge, from factual knowledge to emotions to ideology, can be expressed through artistic language.

Thus, with support from experimental research we can now with confidence claim that reading fiction is beneficial for individuals and for humanity as a whole. It is not altogether wrong to claim, as evolutionary criticism does, that humanity has survived thanks to our ability to tell fictional stories. Yet so far there haven't been much studies about why reading fiction is *especially* beneficial for young people, whose cognitive skills are still underdeveloped, including perception, attention, imagination, memory, self-reflection, reasoning, decision-making, and learning.

Thus, what cognitive criticism so far has not paid attention to, apart from some passing observations, is the profound difference between young and adult readers. Obviously, anything relevant for a reader with fully developed cognitive skills might prove problematic when discussing a reader whose cognitive skills are in the making. Moreover, a literary text aimed at readers with fully developed cognitive skills is likely to be different – not necessarily more complex – from a text targeting a reader with emerging cognitive skills. Children’s literature is a unique literary mode in that the sender and the receiver of the text are by definition on different cognitive levels. The implication for children’s literature scholarship is that the cognitive discrepancy must inevitably be taken into consideration.

The 2014 Nobel Prize in medicine was awarded for identifying the spot in the human brain responsible for spatial orientation. While not discovered yet, there is doubtless a mechanism in the brain that allows readers to orientate within fictional worlds. Such orientation is possible through life-to-text projection, when readers transfer their experience of real places onto fiction; and through text-to-life projection, when they learn how to navigate real worlds through reading experience.

With reference to experimental research, cognitive criticism explains that our engagement with fiction is possible because our brains can, through mirror neurons, respond to fictional events, settings and characters *as if* they were real. Therefore, when we read a book of fiction, or watch a film or play a game our brain emulates cognitive and affective responses to the actual world. Emotional engagement with fiction is not a romantic idea, but a measurable fact. We invest in fictional worlds because we believe, perhaps subconsciously, that they are a valuable source of information, indispensable for our survival. Against common belief, reading fiction is not escape from reality, but a powerful way of understanding reality.

At the same time, we can only enjoy fiction as long as we understand that it is fiction; as long as we can distinguish between fact and fiction; that is, that we have mastered the philosophical concept of fictionality. Fiction is a complex structure of arbitrary signs, signifiers, as opposed to referents, the actual objects and phenomena that they signify. Novice readers, young and adult equally, need to understand the arbitrariness of signifiers in fiction as opposed to fact. In addition, they need to understand the conventions used in literary works. The difference between fact and fiction is crucial. Unlike the actual world, a text of fiction is a constructed set of *selected* events and characters, deliberately created by the author. An immediate understanding of the actual world is based on sensory perception that sends information to that spot in the brain that won the 2014 Nobel Prize. The brain will sort this information, compare it with previous knowledge, select the salient parts of it, and store them away for future recall. Most of this information will be visual, tactile, auditory and olfactory; but the brain will also perform some complex abstract operations.

In fiction, worlds and places are created through language, a characteristic of fiction that lies at the core of any theoretical approach. In reading fiction, we have no

possibility of testing things empirically. It would seem that fictional representation can only *evoke* the sensory perception that we use to explore and understand the actual world. Yet, as already mentioned, through mirror neurons, our brains are capable of responding to fictional worlds as if they were actual; capable of making sense of a linguistically constructed world by connecting it to our empirical or mediated knowledge of the actual world. Not only that: because of mirror neurons, our perception of the fictional world is indeed sensory, embodied. We are able to experience the sense of space and place; to envision landscapes described exclusively by words; to feel cold and heat; to feel the sense of height or the darkness of a deep forest, the vastness of an ocean or the claustrophobia of narrow underground passages.

In exploring readers' engagement with fictional space, recent spatiality studies prove helpful. Human geographer Robert Tally observes that spatiality has become a prominent interdisciplinary field encompassing human geography, cultural studies, psychology, sociology, ecocriticism, and more. Literary studies of fictional places explore representations of space and place, paying attention to historical, social and cultural context, as well as to fictional characters' interaction with fictional space. Spatiality studies emphasise both space as an abstract concept and place as a concrete environment with which individuals can interact physically and emotionally. This distinction, proposed by human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, is particularly relevant in literary studies, since it offers models for examining fictional characters' existence within and experience of fictional places, in addition to analysing space as setting. In terms of fictional characters' engagement with space, cognitive narratology, particularly its direction dubbed corporeal narratology as developed by David Punday, emphasises that cognition and emotion are embodied, in real life and in fiction. The latter implies that cognitive and emotional states of fictional characters are conveyed to the reader through representation of spatiality, including characters' position in space, movement, interaction and understanding. While the concept of embodied cognition is by no means new, it has been developed in recent literary studies to theorise how readers potentially respond to fictional space and how fiction, through representation of spatiality, stimulates readers' engagement. The relationship between the actual world and its fictional representation constitutes a substantial cognitive gap that demands a number of cognitive and metacognitive skills. The assumption of my argument is that young readers do not possess these skills or have not yet fully developed them, and that fiction can potentially stimulate this development. Understanding of fiction, in turn, may create favourable conditions for learning about the actual world, physical as well as social.

A way of exploring our engagement with fiction is to employ the concept of possible worlds. It is used in philosophy, linguistics and other disciplines, and is based on modalities, that is, probability, improbability, necessity, contingency, desirability, and so on. Possible worlds have also been employed in theory of fiction to demonstrate how fictional space is constructed. From the cognitive-affective perspective, the farther a possible world is from the actual world, the more attention and imagination is required from us to engage with it.

Cognitive critics explain readers' engagement with fiction through conceptual models – schemas or scripts – that assist readers in connecting fictional, vicarious knowledge with real-life knowledge as well as with previous fictional knowledge. Very simply, a schema is a static image, while a script is an action pattern, a sequence of events. Scripts and schemas are not innate, but based on experience. Schema theory explains readers' engagement with fiction through recognition of schemas or acknowledgment of deviation from schemas, the latter demanding attention and memory that allow adjustment and restructuring. Script disruption, that fiction is frequently able to provide in creating worlds radically different from our perceptible world, is a powerful way of enhancing attention, imagination and memory.

As I have already mentioned, two cognitive functions are particularly important both for engaging with fiction and for extracting valuable factual, social and interpersonal knowledge from it: theory of mind and empathy. Theory of mind implies the ability to understand other people's thoughts, beliefs and intentions, while empathy refers to the ability to understand other people's emotions. Some recent studies employ empathy as an umbrella concept for three separate, but interconnected phenomena: cognitive empathy (understanding that other people have thoughts independent of your own); affective empathy (understanding that other people have emotions different from yours); and moral empathy, or empathic concern, that is, willingness to act upon other people's emotions. It is particularly the latter that makes it possible for readers of fiction to change their attitudes in real life.

The analytical tools provided by cognitive criticism allow a more nuanced discussion of readers' emotional involvement with fiction. Although fictional characters obviously have no thoughts or emotions, cognitive criticism explores, among other things, how human brains can, through mirror neurons, respond to fictional events and characters as if they were real, and how fiction can stimulate such responses through various narrative devices. Using empathy as a critical tool, it is possible to discern characters' interiority that explains why we engage with fictional characters in the first place, and how we make inferences about their motivations and judge their ethical choices.

The central argument of cognitive criticism is that we engage with fiction because we are interested in other people and, through fiction, can enter other people's minds in a way impossible in real life. In daily life we are constantly obliged to read other people's facial expressions and body language to understand and anticipate their actions and reactions. In real life, misreadings can be fatal. Fiction allows us to test our theory of mind without running the risk of perilous misunderstandings. Most fiction revolves around people's comic or tragic misinterpretation of actions. It provides suitable training fields for theory of mind. All storytelling is about relationships, and most scholars agree that, for instance, myths and folktales were initially instructions in human behaviour. Cognitive criticism claims that storytelling is evolutionarily dependent, meaning that it guides human behaviour essential for survival. Children's literature has traditionally been evaluated as simple, plot-oriented, with one-dimensional characters lacking

interiority. However, even in seemingly simple fiction, we inevitably engage with characters' interiority even though, or perhaps especially because there are no visible expressions of their thoughts and emotions in the text. If this is true - a hypothesis that still needs to be explored through experiments - even conventional children's stories are substantially more complex than we at present are prepared to accept; while recent children's fiction has demonstrated complexity and ambiguity typically reserved for sophisticated modernist and postmodern novels.

Empathy is arguably the most important capacity that distinguishes human beings from other living organisms (although scholars within human-animal studies strongly interrogate this position); it is also one of the most essential social skills. However, as we know, this capacity does not appear automatically; it develops gradually and can be enhanced and trained. Reading fiction prepares children for dealing with empathy and mind-modelling in real life. Mind-modelling is the term used in literary cognitive studies rather than theory of mind to denote readers' ability to understand fictional characters' consciousness.

Emotional engagement with fiction is frequently confused with identification. To avoid such confusion, I distinguish between empathic and immersive identification. The latter implies that readers get so absorbed in fiction that they are unable to liberate themselves from the subject position imposed by the text, for instance, saying: I understand this character because they are just like me. This is immature reading in which readers uncritically align themselves with the fictional characters' perception, thoughts, emotions and opinions. Such identification precludes empathy. As mature readers, we can like a character, even admire them; we can also dislike a character and find them disgusting; however, we are expected to be able to engage with a character without directly identifying with them. Empathy, thus, presupposes that the reader's subjectivity is outside the character - just as in real life our subjectivity cannot coincide with any other individual. We are supposed to be curious about what *other* people think and feel, because we can never know it for sure.

The development of empathy starts with recognising basic emotions: joy, distress, fear, anger and disgust, well-known today from the movie *Inside Out*. In adolescence, a wide range of social, or higher-cognitive emotions need to be mastered: love, hatred, envy, jealousy, pride, guilt. Unlike basic emotions, social emotions involve more than one individual. In dealing with social emotions, children learn to understand and respect other individuals as well as societal rules and practices. Once again, mind-modelling and empathy are essential social skills, and if they are not innate, but have to be trained, fiction may be the best training field for emotional literacy.

In his book *Entranced by Story: Brain, Tale and Teller, from Infancy to Old Age*, psychologist and literary critic Hugh Crago argues that the laterality of the brain dictates readers' preference either for stories based on emotions or those based on reason, and that this preference is age-related. While not fully subscribing to Crago's model, I will now discuss how children's and young adult fiction targets readers' cognitive and

affective engagement by balancing emotions and ethics. Much of Crago's argument builds on the ground-breaking study by psychologist and philosopher Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, which examines the ways cerebral hemispheres complement and compete with each other. To sum it up very briefly, the right hemisphere is emotional, while the left is rational; the right is concrete, while the left is abstract; the right sees the whole in a context, while the left attends to details out of context; the right explores, while the left categorises. Both are equally important in our perception of the world, yet each perceives the world differently, and we need to combine their views.

While I have no experimental research to lean on, it is gratifying to speculate how brain laterality potentially affects readers' engagement with narratives with a strong emotional flavour (such as romance) or narratives with emphasis on reason and duty (such as a heroic adventure). Recent brain research, accounted for in McGilchrist's and Crago's studies, has shown that the hemispheres develop at different pace and that in infancy and childhood, the right hemisphere dominates over the left. The left catches up during adolescence when young people learn to control their emotions and desires, as well as to, in some cases, prioritise other people's and a whole society's well-being over their own. While there is no firm scientific evidence, it is perhaps not far fetched to suggest, firstly, that children's fiction deliberately reflects this transition, and secondly, that it can potentially affect the target audience's cognitive and emotional development. In particular, the balance of emotion and ethics, desire and duty, egoism and altruism, seems to be a recurrent theme in children's fiction.

Seemingly, emotions and ethics appear on radically different levels of a fictional narrative. Representation of emotions is a part of characterisation, referred to in conventional narrative theory as mental, or interior representation. Ethics, in contrast, is a part of the text's ideology. However, with the emergence of cognitive criticism, interiority and ethics in fiction have been explicitly connected. In his study of affect in fiction Patrick Hogan points out that emotions are predominantly egoistic, and ethics "begins with constraint of egoistic emotion in favour of the well-being of others". Blakey Vermeule states that readers use fictional characters to "sort out basic moral problems" and, further, claims that our investment with characters is an ethical concern. Suzanne Keen promptly connects empathy and altruism, empathy and the sense of social justice. Coming from a different theoretical perspective, philosopher Martha Nussbaum views emotions as ethical categories.

One of the major findings of affective psychology is that strong emotions frequently override reason, which has been an ongoing philosophical debate for the past two thousand years. The conflict between emotions and reason, including a sense of duty, is the central theme of all world literature. An important component of socialisation is managing to control one's emotions, and again children's fiction provides many examples. Indeed, in children's fiction emotions are frequently pitched against ethical values. Yet few scholars have paid particular attention to the issue of cognitive-affective disparity

between the adult author and the young reader. Most cognitive literary studies are based on the premises that readers possess the necessary skills to engage with fiction. Lisa Zunshine does admit that less sophisticated readers may fail to employ empathy and instead identify with characters immersively, sharing uncritically their perception, thoughts, feelings and beliefs. However, the overall lack of fully developed cognitive-affective capacity in young readers creates a radically different prerequisite for reader engagement, which cognitive critics have not properly acknowledged. Given the importance that cognitive criticism ascribes to readers' ability to engage with texts, it is surprising that they have not considered what happens if this ability is absent or underdeveloped, and how texts may deliberately compensate for this obstacle.

Ethical values are omnipresent in fiction; ethics governs the fundamental rules a fictional world is built on, including power hierarchies, the principles of good and evil, and social justice. Ethical values are an essential part of any consciousness and thus motivate people's behaviour and relationships with other people, as well as with the physical and social environment. Understanding other people's ethical beliefs is therefore a vital constituent in mind-modelling and empathy. Indeed, readers may understand how fictional characters think and how this thinking motivates their actions, but they may need to go beyond the basic motives to comprehend that people can act not only against common sense, but against their own good because of their ethical convictions. Again, as Patrick Hogan claims, ethical values are closely interconnected with emotions, and the conflict between ethics and emotions is central for human existence, in real life and in fiction. Fiction creates perfect opportunities to contemplate this conflict without taking any actual risks. Finally, the system of ethical values and beliefs is an inseparable part of our identity, and identity formation includes the understanding of ethics and the development of ethical principles that will regulate our behaviour throughout our lives. Fiction offers representation of this identity formation, providing vicarious ethical experience not easily available in real life. In other words, fiction puts its characters in situations where ethical issues are inescapable, and moreover, in fiction these issues can be amplified and become more tangible.

For a young person, their own interests are inevitably prioritised over other people's. This is evolutionarily determined and has contributed to humanity's survival as a species. However, altruism and generally understanding of other people's feelings and needs are an essential part of being human and existing within a human society. The tension between desire (fulfilment of one's own egoistic needs) and duty (sacrificing one's own needs for the sake of other people's well-being) goes together with maturation and socialisation, and most of children's fiction deals with this issue in some way or other, or, by not dealing with it, denies its centrality for a young person's cognitive, emotional and social development.

Fiction typically focuses on turning points in protagonists' lives, when they are given a choice or have a choice made for them. Whenever a choice is made in fiction, there is an opportunity for the reader to evaluate the choice in terms of right or wrong,

which requires considerable cognitive and affective effort, including priority of reason over emotion. We do not necessarily make these evaluations consciously; yet equally with immersive and empathic identification we try on a situation for ourselves. Once again, in engaging with fiction, we employ life-to-text and text-to-life projections; that is, we interpret fictional situations based on our real-life experience, while we also extract from fiction experience valuable for our real life.

There is, however, a worry. Young readers are egoistic and solipsistic. For a child or adolescent, their own good will always be given priority over anyone else's. With respect to fiction, for readers who identify immersively with the protagonist, the latter's good will be unquestionably prioritised. Even with empathic identification, young readers may decide that the protagonist's goal of happiness justifies their actions. Readers may be interested in the protagonists' good rather than in any other outcome. An action will probably only be deemed wrong if it is disadvantageous for the protagonist. Any action that leads to fulfilment of individual desire will be perceived as right.

Fulfilment of desire that leads to happiness is the universal goal for children and adults equally. Yet from an ethical viewpoint, it may be necessary to abstain from pleasure out of duty, which may or may not lead to individual happiness. Young readers have a limited capacity for predicting the consequences of their actions. They may see the immediate reward for themselves, but not the wider reverberations of their actions. With fiction, young readers may believe that actions which provide immediate emotional gratification for the protagonist are more desirable than actions out of duty that may lead to later happiness or may not lead to happiness at all. The cognitive imbalance between the adult author and the young reader makes presenting a young audience with ethical issues a highly delicate matter.

It is here that the question of duty comes in. Duty is an ethical capacity to act against one's own desires if you believe that it is the right thing to do. The sense of duty may be false, and here the readers' judgement becomes crucial. A young reader, seeking immediate reward, may not understand the value of duty and decide that the protagonist either acts wrongly or is forced, for instance, by an adult or by societal norms, to act wrongly – wrongly in the sense of being against their own good. In addition, a young protagonist is likely to lack a sense of duty as such, so in order for the scenario to be plausible, they have to be placed in a situation where duty unequivocally must come before individual happiness. Saving the world is a good excuse for doing one's duty against one's own good. However, on closer consideration, in many children's novels peace and social justice are merely side effects of protagonists' individual goal of happiness.

Let's remember that happiness is one of the five basic emotions, alongside distress, fear, anger and disgust. However, in Aristotelian ethics, happiness is also a virtue. Happiness is the ultimate goal of every individual and of society as a whole. Acting in a way that will increase happiness is therefore right and noble, and this is what children's fiction depicts metaphorically in stories of the struggle between good and evil in which the good, with few exceptions, is allowed to win. The traditional happy endings of

children's literature, then, acquire a new dimension when considered from an ethical and cognitive-affective viewpoint. It seems ethical, on the part of children's writers, to conclude the story of a character's choices with a happy ending, not merely because it makes the reader vicariously happy, which is beneficial as such, but also because it presents happiness itself as a virtue. Happiness as a result of cultivating other virtues, such as honesty, courage and justice, is presented as desirable and satisfactory. Unresolved endings, prominent in contemporary children's literature, are ethically ambiguous, because, while explicitly or implicitly condemning characters for wrong choices, they leave the reader with a sense of frustration. Children's writers have frequently claimed that young readers should not be left without hope. Even in the most disastrous ending, when the protagonist has lost everything that was dear to them, there is always a tiny ray of hope, since the protagonist, in their very capacity of being young, still has time to recuperate from the loss. This is one of the great paradoxes of children's literature: a happy ending is inescapable because of the cognitive and affective capacity of the intended audience. From an ethical point of view, young readers should receive a confirmation that happiness is not merely a temporary or permanent emotion, but a virtue and a desired goal, and therefore worth the effort it takes to achieve.

A common opinion is that no matter what children read, it is important that they read. To this, I would add: read fiction. I hope I have demonstrated that reading fiction is good for young people because it stimulates their cognitive, emotional, ethical and aesthetic development. And, sadly, if they don't read fiction, their brain will, in its restructuring, close down all connections necessary for this process.