

Gregory Currie:
Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction.
Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2020

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MedieKultur 2020, 68, 147-149

Published by SMID | Society of Media researchers In Denmark | www.smid.dk

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When you last read a literary novel or watched a challenging fiction film—say, Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* or Welles’ *Citizen Kane*—did you learn anything substantive about the real world? Did you come to know or understand important things of which you were previously ignorant? Many people would answer such questions affirmatively and assuredly: “Of course I did! How could I not learn something important about human affairs by engaging with these monumental works of human creativity?” If pressed to say what *exactly* it is that they learned, however, their answer would likely be neither assured nor very exact. They might claim to have gained insight into something called “the human condition.” Or perhaps they will suggest that they now know, in some richer and fuller sense, how power corrupts.

Gregory Currie, a professor of philosophy at the University of York, thinks not. In *Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction*, he takes critical aim at the many ambitious claims that have been made for fiction’s educative potential—its capacity to reveal deep human truths, build skills, and refine sensibilities. He starts by noting an evidential double standard:

Those who condemn various kinds of fiction as leading to ignorance, error, or bad behaviour are rightly challenged to provide evidence for their claims, and the few philosophers who have taken up the cause have generally been careful to seek evidential support for

their case. By contrast, we find books extolling the improving powers of fiction which fail to provide, or even consider providing, any evidence. (p. 5)

Most of the book is devoted to critical discussion of what would count as good evidence that we learn valuable lessons from media fictions, and to showing that, in many cases, there are philosophical and psychological reasons to be skeptical that we do. "One reason for a cautious attitude to the idea that we learn from fiction," as Currie rightly notes, "is that we want it to be true" (p. 4). Other reasons range from the analytic and conceptual to the grittily empirical. Currie argues, for example, that our fictional engagements are often marked by low epistemic vigilance. We are typically not motivated to inquire into whether this or that depicted experience is actually anything like the real deal. Compounding the issue, fiction's institutional structures—its departments, its publishing practices, its awards—are generally not very concerned with the truthfulness and verisimilitude of narrative depictions. Or at least they are nowhere near as concerned with truth as are the institutions of science. On the empirical side of things, Currie shows, among other things, that the oft-touted causal link between narrative experience and empathy is actually weak and tenuous.

These arguments notwithstanding, many people are genuinely convinced that they learn important lessons from fiction. Are they fooling themselves? Currie's surprising answer is that they may well be, literally! His argument—the book's weakest—starts with the philosophically respectable idea that fictional engagements involve

a pretence that is carried on in imagination rather than acted out in behaviour [...] What I suggest now is that fiction engages us in a further act of pretending: the pretence that we are learning from the story, not just about its characters and their doings, but, in some indirect way, about things which lie beyond the events and characters of its story, which are suggested by them and which may be intended to be communicated by means of the story. (p. 107)

I find this suggestion puzzling. To what presumed fact about human psychology would the claim correspond? As Currie realizes, friends of learning from fiction certainly do not believe that their own learning is merely pretended. What fact about them makes them pretend, then? As far as I was able to tell, Currie does not identify such a fact. He does, however, provide two considerations in favor of his suggestion. The first is that when we pretend that fictional characters exist and interact, "we are naturally led to include within the scope of the pretense a wider range of pretended learning that takes in the sorts of things we often claim that fiction really can teach us" (p. 108). In other words, the pretended learning may just come along for the ride. But the fact that something is learned within the scope of some pretense does not show that the learning is itself pretended. Currie's second point is that "as theories of what we might call broadly artistic engagement go, this is not an eccentric suggestion" (pp. 108-109). Maybe so, but that does not

make the suggestion true. In the end, I doubt there is much substance to the idea that learning from fiction is a form of pretense.

Some critics might fault the book for a lack of focus. Part I looks closely at the connection between fiction and the imagination, whereas parts II and III deal with the connection between fiction and knowledge. Those are very different sorts of connection, in that the former is entirely internal to the fictional engagement whereas the latter is not. However, the arguments made in the two latter parts lean on the conceptual groundwork set out in the first part, where Currie convincingly refutes recent attempts to discount or deflate the role of the imagination in our fictional engagements. It is precisely because fiction relies on the imagination, and because there is no simple route from imagining to knowing, that learning from fiction proves such a vexing question.

Still, in this reviewer's judgment, the affinity between fiction and the imagination may also provide some grounds for optimism. For perhaps it is exactly by expanding our imaginative capacities that fictions earn their esteem. How fictions might do this remains understudied, both philosophically and psychologically. We need to know much more about how different media may guide or "scaffold" the human imagination—not just how they work, but how they work *on us*. Such imaginings as are licensed by film are mainly and richly cognitive; they are about perceiving and understanding what happens on the screen. By contrast, video games may also accommodate the user's conative states to generate self-involving, desire-driven imaginings. Film and video games thus scaffold the human imagination in very different ways. If indeed fictions teach us anything useful and important, those teachings should have something to do with the disparate kinds of imagining licensed by their implementing media. And if indeed any such teachings go through the imagination, then it might be worth focusing, first, on fiction's effects on the imagination, before then deciding where and when we should expect to find any behavioral evidence.

Imagining and Knowing represents a strong challenge to weakly supported claims for the educative powers of fiction. While the book focuses on literature and film, it is a worthwhile read for any media scholar with a general interest in its subject.

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