

# Reading literary fiction improves people's theory of mind

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This research was conducted by **David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano** at the **New School for Social Research, USA**

## Summary

This paper reports the results of five experiments designed to test whether reading literary fiction can improve people's theory of mind. People with an effective theory of mind have an emotional literacy that allows them to form complex social relationships and a developed sense of empathy. The experiment found that after reading literary fiction, people have an improved theory of mind in a way that does not occur after reading non-fiction, popular fiction, or not reading at all.

## They define literary fiction as a genre that is designed to destabilise and provoke the reader

By contrast, popular fiction tends to simply entertain and reinforces people's image of the world. By offering up a multiplicity of possible meanings literary fiction forces the reader to consider the world anew by using their theory of mind. The books chosen to represent literary fiction in the experiment had all won literary prizes and were broadly considered to be part of the canon.

## The five experiments

In the first experiment 86 people were randomly assigned to read three short pieces of literary fiction or three short non-fiction pieces. All were then subjected to a range of validated tests for theory of mind development. The second experiment randomly assigned 114 people to read three excerpts from literary fiction or three excerpts of popular fiction, or to read nothing. The third

and fourth experiments replicated the second one but with different source material and a different set of tests for theory of mind, respectively. The fifth experiment replicated the fourth but with a much larger group of people (356). The final experiment also allowed the researchers to control for factors such as age, gender, education, literary knowledge and the affect of the work.

## Keywords

**theory of mind** **fiction** **experiment** **reading** **literature**

Title	Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind
Author(s)	Kidd, D. C. & Castano, E.
Publication date	2013
Source	Science, Vol 342, pp 377-380
Link	<a href="http://www.sciencemag.org/content/342/6156/377">http://www.sciencemag.org/content/342/6156/377</a>
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By **Culture.Case** | 10 April 2014 | **Other social impacts of arts and culture**  
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