

Unraveling the effects of literature on Theory of Mind

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This study investigates the effect of literary fiction on Theory of Mind (ToM): the capacity to identify and understand others' mental states. Kidd & Castano (2013) found a positive effect of reading literary fiction on ToM compared to reading popular fiction or nonfiction. Why exactly this effect was obtained is not currently clear, however. We hypothesize that the distinct stylistic characteristics of literary texts make readers work harder to understand author and character intentions and thereby stimulates their ToM.

To test this hypothesis, participants completed two ToM tasks after being presented with one of four texts: an unadapted literary fiction text, an adapted text in which the literary stylistic characteristics had been wholly or partially removed, or a non-fiction text. In contrast to previous research, participants exposed to different text types did not differ in their ToM performance. However, the results do show a positive relationship between ToM ability and general frequency of exposure to fiction and the extent to which the participant was transported into the literary text.