



Why is reading imaginative literature important?

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It's when we fool about with the stuff the world is made of that we make the most valuable discoveries, we create the most lasting beauty, we discover the most profound truths. (Pullman, 2005, p. 8).

Stories are central to our meaning-making processes. Imaginative fiction also motivates us to engage in exploring possibilities. We bring our own life experiences to a narrative but, at the same time, the imaginary world of the story sheds light on the real world. And we now know that the brain responds to fictional characters' emotions and dilemmas as if they were happening.

Over the last decade a range of research has explained why imaginative fiction is important for adults and children alike.

For example:

- Kidd's and Castano (2013) asked adults to read a range of fiction (genre-fiction, literary-fiction and non-fiction). Their findings suggested that reading literary fiction improves the reader's capacity to infer and understand what others are thinking and feeling.
- Nikolajeva (2014) looked at children's literature such as *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963); *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Lewis, 1950-6) *His Dark Materials* (Pulman, 1996-2000). She synthesised neuroscientific and psychological theories to suggest that literary texts (including picture books, fantasy, fairy tales and realistic and historical fiction) can help children develop their knowledge of self, others and the world more broadly. Most of all she emphasised how such reading fosters empathy and the understanding of different perspectives.
- Koopman's (2015) findings from her online survey with 282 participants suggested that exposure to literary work elicited more empathetic understanding about depression and grief than other genres read.
- A recent doctoral dissertation examined what we gain in reading literary fiction. Jon Phelan (2017) argues that the *process* of careful reading of quality literary works disrupts our expectations and stereotypes. We are also encouraged to fill in the gaps to understand the characters' intentions, motivations and inner conversations.

Imaginative fiction must therefore be a central feature of early childhood, primary and secondary classrooms. An imaginative story is intellectually challenging and richly evocative. The vocabulary and language structures are appropriate rather than contrived so that the language used makes sense.

In some early reading classrooms, however, there is a renewed and concerning focus on the use of contrived texts based on the synthesised sequences of sounds addressed in synthetic phonics programs. Freire's early work (1985) argued that such limited and inappropriate use of contrived reading materials with controlled vocabulary and syntax restrict learners from engaging actively and creatively in the learning process.

An over privileging of contrived texts will fail to nurture children's imaginations. If we want to nurture empathy in our learners so they can understand different perspectives and explore alternative ways of doing and being, we must make sure rich literature is at the heart of every classroom.

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Bio

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