Why Fiction?

*Fiction* is story of the imagination. It is the made up rather than the found, as we might consider history. Classically, the Greeks delineated “what has happened” (we would say *nonfiction* today) with “what may happen” (fiction). Both were considered valuable.

But in our lifetimes, story *genres* we understand as unrealistic have grown incredibly popular. Consider the endless stream of superhero movies today. How realistic is it that Thor, the God of Thunder, is going to grab a mugger down an inner-city alley?

As the imaginative in fiction feels ever more whimsical and unrealistic to generations steeped in science, a skepticism of fiction is growing as well. Fiction is false, many believe. Not real and, thus, not important.

This error misunderstands both fiction’s nature and its importance. Reality—which our increasingly scientific age defines as “factuality”—isn’t the point.

To be clear, fiction can provide just as tangible representation of the world as nonfiction. But it can also make the unreal feel true, which is perhaps more valuable.

In important ways, [the “real/unreal” distinction means nothing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Oi1GWxMNDORi8sibO04dTknuQEzQqkJFIYQSurLd3g8/edit). According to Susanne Kinnebrock and Helena Bilandzik, both professors of Communication Studies, “The distinction of fact and fiction… seems next to irrelevant for story experience and effects on the audience… people learn just as much about their actual world from fictional stories as from factual stories.”

Fiction’s lack of constraint by fact allows for important benefits to the human condition.

One of these is the ability to act as simulation. Just as a fighter pilot trains in a flight simulator before assuming the risk of actual hours in the cockpit, fiction provides the chance to experience an infinite variety of hypothetical experiences in a safe environment. It is similar to the function of dreams. Our mind plays out scenarios to help us figure out how we may respond physically, intellectually, or emotionally in situations we have never experienced.

Psychology is discovering that fiction’s simulation ability is far more potent than once believed. In the last decade, research has shown that mirror neurons—neurons that fire both when an animal acts and witnesses an action—respond to fiction. Thus, [in the brain’s terms, reading a fictional action can be as real as performing that action in real life](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/is-your-brain-culture/201108/stories-and-the-mirror-inside-you).

But that does not change that it is not real life. It is, after all, *not real*. So why bother with it?

Well, because it makes us more humane, for one. Research has shown that readers of fiction exhibit greater empathy for others than those who read nonfiction (Mar, Oatley, and Peterson). That’s right, stories of the unreal help us care about real people more than stories that actually happened. As Newbery-winning author Neil Gaiman terms it, in reading fiction “you learn that everyone out there is a me, as well.”

But fiction’s value is not only in how it shapes how we treat others; it is also invaluable to how we be ourselves, and determine what that really means. The father of *archetypal theory*, the mythologist Joseph Campbell, insists myths teach “how to live a human lifetime under any circumstance” (39). Fiction, our modern *mythology*, serves that function today.

[[Real Magic: How Harry Potter Changed One Life](https://www.facebook.com/notes/the-ministry-of-magic-are-morons-group-harry-potter/bellas-engilsh-essay-hp-changed-my-life/349408031744348/)]

Critics who claim fiction as being exclusively a form of entertainment sometimes call it “escapist,” a whimsical deviation from the real world and the things that really matter there. Fiction can be an escape, and given what we know about the realities of many human lives it should be obvious how precious any chance to escape can be.

But the true value of fiction lies not in the escaping but in what we bring back from fictional journeys to our captive lives: new attitudes, ideas, and approaches, weapons to fight what’s wrong in life and maps for how to actually build a better world. Positive change requires imagination; it requires going beyond mimicking what is real here and now to what *could* be real in the future. Fiction offers people tools to escape the confining prisons of now.

Albert Einstein, originator of the theory of general relativity and arguably as great a scientist as has ever lived, is often attributed the following statement: “If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales” (qtd. in Winick). But there’s ample question whether he actually said this.

[[Read an exploration into the origins of the quote on the Library of Congress Blog](http://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2013/12/einsteins-folklore/)]

We’ll likely never know the answer for certain, to know the fact of the statement. But the question is, does it matter? Does the fact of it have any bearing on its truth?

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