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Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction

Keith Oatley. (2011). UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Keith Oatley is Professor Emeritus of Cognitive Psychology at the University of Toronto. He is co-author of text books (e.g. 2006), and is also a novelist (1994). This book results from 20 years involvement in various research groups interested in finding out how fiction works in the mind and why we enjoy engaging with it. His particular focus has been on how literary art can improve social abilities, move us emotionally and prompt changes of selfhood. His focus group has an on-line magazine <http://www.onfiction.ca/>

Oatley's central proposition is that while fiction has an important role in our lives as entertainment, at its core it is like a guided dream, a model that readers construct in collaboration with the writer. This dream or simulation created by the author then runs in and is modified by the reader's mind. 'So we create our own version of the piece of fiction, our own dream, our own enactment' (p18). I found this idea plausible and satisfying as a way of describing our very different reactions to books. How we notice and recall different things so it can seem we haven't read the same book. How a work I once found inspirational might bore me now and vice versa. We bring our own concerns and find to some extent what we're looking for. Or as he puts it in psychological terms, 'we assimilate what we read to a schema of what we know, while retaining only salient details' (p178) which is of course how we perceive the world generally.

His is not a new idea but newly presented and updated. He attributes inspiration for this view of fiction to Shakespeare, Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson amongst others. Reminding us that fiction derives from the Latin *ingere* meaning to make, it can be seen as constructed rather than not true. Fiction is about what could happen. Fiction can offer enlightenment about ourselves and others and what is going on beneath the surface of everyday life. Oatley suggests it grew out of conversation and stories of possibilities, vicissitudes, intentions and emotions that can

illuminate truths about the human condition.

The book is very wide ranging. Over eight chapters he discusses literary structures (models, world-building, simulation), the beginnings of fiction in childhood play and make-believe (and how as Freud suggested the pleasures of play are exchanged in the adult world for other activities including fiction), creativity and imagination (and their importance in feeling fully alive), character (mental models of people and their doings), emotions (as prompted in fiction), writing (literary constructs, purposes and devices), effects of fiction (is it good for you?) and how we like to talk and compare notes about fiction. He encompasses novels, films, plays and poetry and explores what is actually going on in our heads when we engage in fiction. For example, when we read about an action in a novel, our understanding depends on making a version of the action ourselves inwardly. This refers to the discovery of mirror neurons, when we understand a sentence areas of the brain activated include those concerned with making the same action ourselves as well, the areas concerned with language and hearing.

He claims a ‘big insight’ in realising that fiction is about a relatively specific area of knowledge – of selves in the social world (p158). Just as London taxi drivers develop an enlarged hippocampus (an area concerned with spatial knowledge), something similar may happen with people who read a lot. Oakley’s research group has found that certain brain regions are involved in skills of understanding the social world. In addition to enhanced skills in vocabulary, general knowledge and verbal reasoning, in proportion to the amount of reading done, it is possible that reading develops greater skill at understanding others with better abilities in empathy and theory of mind, although it does depend on the kind of reading. Fiction is more likely to help develop expertise in these areas whereas non-fiction leads to greater expertise in others areas of life. I would add the caveat that autobiography is a significant area of non-fiction which is also about selves in the social world so is arguably on the borderline between the two.

Oakley’s stated aim is to be ‘brief rather than a tome’ and herein lies a problem with the book, as its wide scope and brevity mean it inevitably at times feels brief to the point of superficial, and at other times is a hard abstruse read because it is so dense. He has set himself a huge challenge in attempting to precis 20 years experience and insights into what is, he suggests, the first book of its kind. He says in his preface that fiction has not been studied much as a serious topic in psychology, so I assume he is breaking new ground in this book. It is aimed at ‘the general reader, psychologists, literary theorists and students’. So a wide audience too, and impossible to please everyone.

He says he offers the book as a narrative flow, having some of the qualities of fiction so earlier parts lead to realisations that come later. Unfortunately this did create for me a reading experience of wondering

what it's about. I would have liked a less discursive style and more focus whereas the book offers the psychology as it goes along leaving the reader to pick out the bones. I'm conscious in saying this that I'm demonstrating the points made earlier about reading – that we are frustrated if we don't find what we're looking for and if we can't fit it into our schema. We also have style preferences. I prefer Austen to Dickens. So it is always hard to do justice to a book on its own terms and to readers of reviews who have different needs from mine.

Oatley includes in his book a plea to psychologists and educationalists to take fiction more seriously for its potential effects on developing certain social abilities, understanding of moral predicaments and of the provisional, contingent nature of life. As he says, where else can we find analyses of life as affected by accidents? (p165). I agree with him, but I wouldn't want to overstate these benefits of fiction as I have clients who read voraciously but are still mystified by others and surprised when 'stuff happens'. I'm much the same myself. Forever mystified, surprised and outraged when misfortune strikes in spite of having been a lifelong avid reader.

Nonetheless, I found it rewarding reading, especially the second time. His psychological analysis of Jane Austen's work was spot on for me. He raises many topics (or 'sets many hares running' to use a dream-style metaphor) that would be good fodder for discussion groups. I am interested in fiction for myself and for clients. I find it is invariably helpful to explore with them why they do or don't like particular books, plays, films etc, and this book has given me more food for thought when engaged in this exploration with clients.

I like to retreat into crime fiction and am now intrigued to read Oakley's novel *The Case of Emily V* in which he imagines Sigmund Freud and Sherlock Holmes investigating the same problem. It will be interesting to see how his academic insights have been worked into this novel. It sounds like a good read for addicts of crime fiction and psychotherapists. Perhaps the subject of my next review!

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Diana Pringle

Pluralistic Counselling and Psychotherapy

Mick Cooper and John McLeod. (2011). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

This is an important book for therapists, partly because it looks to the future of psychotherapy, particularly within the NHS. The view presented