

# Reading literary fiction improves emotion recognition

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This research was conducted by **Jessica E. Black and Jennifer L. Barnes** at the **University of Oklahoma, USA**

## Summary

This study aimed to replicate previous findings that have shown reading literary fiction to enhance people's Theory of Mind (the ability to infer and reason about our own and others' beliefs, desires and intentions). At the same time it also investigated whether reading literary fiction, versus non-fiction, influenced people's understanding of intuitive physics. They discovered that participants performed better on the emotion recognition test after reading literary fiction (versus non-fiction), regardless of differences in the order of narrative presentation, familiarity with fiction, or the extent to which readers become involved in a story, and existing autism traits. However, reading literary fiction did not affect performance on the physical reasoning test.

## Emotion recognition was used as a proxy for Theory of Mind, while physical reasoning was used as a proxy for intuitive physics understanding

60 students were randomly assigned to read a short piece of either literary fiction or non-fiction and were, subsequently, presented with either an emotion recognition or physical reasoning test. They were then assigned to read a second narrative, similar to the first (fiction or non-fiction) and took whichever of the two tests they had not already taken in the first session.

## Another finding was that familiarity with non-literary fiction indicated improved physical reasoning

This may be due to the differences between the way we learn content and the skills needed to engage with fictional narratives. Another explanation may lie in the potential for non-literary fiction to imitate physical reasoning abilities, were a central character to figure their way through a physical dilemma.

The authors highlight a few shortcomings in study design to be addressed in future research: particularly the small (and predominantly female) sample.

This summary is by **Anna Kolliakou, King's Knowledge Exchange Associate**

### Keywords

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

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