The Literary Fiction Conjecture: Re-evaluating the Link Between Reading and Theory of Mind Through Cognitive Poetics

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Abstract:

This paper re-evaluates the influential "literary fiction conjecture," which posits a causal link between reading literary fiction and enhanced Theory of Mind (ToM). This claim, first empirically demonstrated by Kidd and Castano (2013), is now mired in a significant replication crisis, with high-powered studies finding no such effect. This impasse, it is argued, stems from the conceptual weakness of "literary fiction" as a monolithic experimental variable. This paper synthesizes cognitive psychology with the literary-linguistic field of cognitive poetics to propose a new, mechanistic framework. It argues that the observed effect is not a product of *genre*, but of specific *textual features* (e.g., Free Indirect Discourse, high "levels of intentionality") that function as a *cognitive demand* on the reader's ToM faculties. This process, however, is critically *moderated* by the reader's psychological state of Narrative Transportation. The paper presents a three-phase Literary-Cognitive (L-C) model that traces the pathway from (1) Textual Triggers, through (2) Narrative Transportation and Social Simulation (engaging the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC) network), to (3) Cognitive Exercise and temporary ToM enhancement. This model resolves the apparent contradiction between the original finding and its subsequent failures, providing a more precise, testable, and durable account of narrative's influence on social cognition.

Keywords—***Cognitive Poetics, Theory of Mind (ToM), Narrative Transportation, Replication Crisis, Literary Fiction, Free Indirect Discourse, Social Cognition, Narrative Persuasion***

I. INTRODUCTION

The belief that engaging with narrative fiction cultivates a more refined understanding of human social life is a foundational, if often unexamined, premise of the humanities.[11] Thinkers from Aristotle to Martha Nussbaum have posited that literature, by inviting us to inhabit the perspectives of others, trains our faculties for empathy and moral judgment.[11] For most of its history, this claim remained an intuitive conjecture, residing firmly in the domain of literary criticism rather than empirical science.

This paradigm shifted in 2013 with a groundbreaking study by David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano published in *Science*.[1] Their research provided the first major empirical evidence for a *causal* relationship between the act of reading fiction and a temporary enhancement in Theory of Mind (ToM), the cognitive capacity to attribute, infer, and understand the mental states, beliefs, desires, and intentions of others.[1] The "literary fiction conjecture" at the heart of their paper was its most critical distinction: this social-cognitive benefit was found *only* for participants who read *literary fiction* (defined by expert evaluations and excerpts from works like PEN/O. Henry Prize winners).[1] Participants who read *popular fiction* (defined by Amazon bestseller lists) or *nonfiction* showed no significant ToM enhancement. The proposed mechanism was that literary fiction, with its complex, ambiguous, and "incomplete" characters, requires the reader to engage in active inferential work to "fill in the gaps" and reconstruct character consciousness, thereby "exercising" their ToM faculties.[1]

This electrifying finding, however, quickly ran aground on the shoals of the replication crisis. Subsequent high-powered, pre-registered replication attempts by large, independent teams; most notably Panero et al. (2016) and Samur et al. (2018), failed to find any causal effect of reading a single passage of literary fiction on ToM performance.[2, 3] This has mired the field in a contentious methodological impasse. The original authors have argued that the replications contained fatal flaws, such as failing to ensure participants were sufficiently engaged with the texts,[4] while the replicating authors have stood by

their null findings, pointing to the low statistical power of the original study.[2, 13]

This paper argues that the current debate is stalled at a cognitively shallow level, locked in a dispute over a poorly defined independent variable. Both sides of the debate treat "literary fiction" as a monolithic "black box," defined by extrinsic, *sociological* metrics (awards, critical consensus) or *commercial* ones (sales data) rather than by its intrinsic, *cognitive-linguistic* properties. The very rebuttal from the original authors that the *quality* of reading engagement was not controlled for[4] inadvertently points to the true, unmeasured variable: the psychological state of the reader.

This paper proposes a solution to the conjecture by synthesizing two disparate fields: social psychology's **Narrative Transportation Theory** (NTT) [6, 10] and English literature's **Cognitive Poetics**.[6] NTT provides the framework for understanding the *state* of deep immersion, which has been shown to be a crucial *moderator* for fiction's pro-social effects.[9] Cognitive poetics, in turn, provides the *mechanisms*, the specific, analyzable textual features that are architected to invite this state of transportation and demand specific cognitive work from the reader.

Therefore, this paper argues that the "literary fiction" conjecture can only be resolved by discarding the vague genre distinction and replacing it with a specific, mechanistic model. This model posits that "literariness," in this context, is a measure of a text's *demand on a reader's ToM*, a demand enacted through specific linguistic features (e.g., **Free Indirect Discourse**, **complex focalization**) that require deep **narrative transportation** to be processed. This "cognitive-literary" model explains *why* the effect was found in the first place, *why* it systematically fails to replicate in sterile lab settings, and *why* a robust *correlational* link between lifetime reading and ToM persists.

To construct this argument, this paper will unfold across four subsequent sections, following the structure of the model journal article.[6] Section II will conduct a comprehensive literature survey, bridging the psychological conjecture and its crisis with the durable findings on transportation and the linguistic-cognitive frameworks of poetics. Section III will present this paper's central contribution: a synthesized three-phase socio-cognitive model of narrative influence. Section IV will apply this model to illustrative exemplars from literature to demonstrate its analytical utility. Finally, Section V will offer a conclusion, summarizing the model's implications and charting directions for future interdisciplinary research.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

This section erects the theoretical scaffolding for the paper's central model by reviewing four distinct but complementary bodies of research. It first details the foundational psychological conjecture and its subsequent crisis. Second, it examines the *durable* evidence linking reading to social cognition via narrative transportation and simulation. Third, it introduces the core tenets of cognitive poetics as the "architectural" framework for immersion. Finally, it identifies the specific linguistic mechanisms hypothesized to engage ToM.

A. The Psychological Conjecture and Its Crisis

The 2013 Kidd and Castano (K&C) study consisted of five experiments that manipulated reading material and measured subsequent ToM performance. The authors used established measures of social-cognitive ability, most notably the "Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test" (RMET), which assesses affective ToM (detecting others' emotions), and the "Yoni test," which measures both affective and cognitive ToM.[1, 3] The key manipulation contrasted "literary" excerpts (e.g., from PEN/O. Henry Prize winners like Don DeLillo's *The Runner*) 1 with "popular" excerpts (e.g., from Amazon bestsellers like Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* or Danielle Steel's *The Sins of the Mother*) [1] and nonfiction articles.[1] Across all five experiments, they found that a brief session of reading "literary" texts produced a small but significant *temporary* enhancement in ToM performance compared to all other conditions.[1] This finding was immediately challenged. Panero et al. (2016) conducted a large-scale (N=792) replication attempt across three independent research groups. They found *no significant advantage* in RMET scores for participants in the literary fiction condition compared to popular fiction, nonfiction, or no-reading conditions.[2] This was followed by an even more definitive challenge from Samur et al. (2018), who conducted four high-powered (N=1006) and pre-registered experiments. Using the same texts

and mentalizing tasks, they also found *no causal effect* of reading literary fiction on mentalizing.[3]

This discrepancy created a methodological impasse. K&C (2017) published a rebuttal,[4] arguing that "Failure to replicate methods caused the failure to replicate results".[4] They alleged two critical flaws in the Panero et al. study: (1) a failure to ensure participants were actually exposed to the manipulation (i.e., not excluding participants with reading times too short to have read the text), and (2) a failure of random assignment in two of the studies.[4] Panero et al. (2017) issued a reply, arguing that even when K&C reanalyzed their data using their preferred exclusion criteria, the original pattern of results did not reappear.[13] This entire exchange, while contentious, is highly generative: it reveals that the *real* mechanism is not the *text alone*, but the *interaction* between a text and a specific, engaged *mode of reading*, a factor that was not measured or controlled for in any of the studies.

B. The Durable Link: Correlation, Transportation, and Simulation

While the *causal* effect of a single, brief exposure remains contested, the *correlational* link between *lifetime* reading and social cognition is exceptionally robust. The very studies that failed to find a *causal* link *did* replicate this durable correlation: lifetime exposure to fiction, often measured by the Author Recognition Test (ART), consistently and positively predicts performance on ToM and empathy tasks.[2, 3] This has been corroborated by meta-analyses, which find a small but significant positive relationship between reading fiction and social-cognitive abilities.[11] This suggests that any effect of reading is likely one of long-term "practice" rather than a temporary "priming" effect.

The missing link between the text and this long-term effect is provided by **Narrative Transportation Theory (NTT)**. Originating in social psychology, NTT defines transportation as a distinct psychological state of immersion, an "integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings".[6, 10] Drawing on Gerrig's metaphor of a "traveler," the reader "leaves their world of origin behind" to journey into the "text world," returning somewhat changed.[6] Crucially, research demonstrates that transportation acts as a *moderator* for narrative's pro-social effects.[9] Studies have found that fiction's influence on empathy is *contingent* upon this state: the effect *only* occurs for readers who report high levels of emotional transportation.[9] In fact, reading without transportation (i.e., disengaged or critical reading) can even lead to *lower* empathy scores.[9] This provides a powerful explanation for the replication crisis: participants in a sterile lab, forced to read a short excerpt for an experiment, are unlikely to achieve the deep transportation necessary for the effect to manifest.

While NTT describes the *state* of immersion, **Simulation Theory** explains *what the brain is doing* in that state. Reading fiction is understood as a form of social simulation, a "practice" space for social cognition.[11] This is no longer a mere metaphor; it is a neurocognitively documented process. Functional neuroimaging (fMRI) studies reveal a direct overlap in the neural networks recruited during story comprehension and ToM tasks.[5] This activity is centered in the **Default Mode Network (DMN)**, a network that supports self-projection, mind-wandering, and simulating hypothetical scenarios.[5] A pivotal fMRI study [5] had participants read fictional passages that varied in social content. It found that the **dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC)**, a core subnetwork of the DMN and the brain's primary "engine" for ToM, was robustly activated when participants simulated *social content*. Most importantly, the level of activity in this ToM network *mediated* the relationship between participants' lifetime fiction reading habits and their performance on social cognition tasks.[5]

C. The Social Mind: Narrative's Role in Social Cognition

If narrative transportation and social simulation are the *psychological processes* of narrative influence, **Cognitive Poetics** is the discipline that explains the *linguistic architecture* that triggers them. As an interdisciplinary field, cognitive poetics applies cognitive science to literary analysis, bridging the gap between linguistic structures and the reader's mental operations.[6]

A foundational framework within this field is **Text World Theory (TWT)**, which posits that readers, as they process discourse, cognitively construct a mental representation of the world delineated by the text (the "text world"), which is distinct from their immediate physical reality (the "discourse world"). The portal from the discourse world to the text world

is opened by specific linguistic cues that function as "world-builders".6

Two of the most critical cues are deixis and focalization. **Deixis** refers to linguistic "pointers" ('I', 'you', 'here', 'now') whose interpretation depends on context. **Deictic Shift Theory (DST)** argues that immersion begins when the reader performs a "deictic shift," cognitively transposing their own center of consciousness (or *origo*) from their physical chair (the discourse world) to the spatio-temporal and personal anchor point of the narrator within the text world.[6] This is the fundamental cognitive act of "entering" a story.

Once inside, **focalization** dictates the reader's experience. A concept from narratology, focalization refers to the perspective or viewpoint through which the narrative's events are filtered.6 A text with *external* focalization describes characters only from the outside, as a camera would. A text with *internal* focalization, by contrast, filters the narrative *through* a character's consciousness, granting the reader access to their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. This technique is the primary textual invitation to empathetic simulation and ToM engagement.

D. The Specific Cognitive-Literary Engine: Free Indirect Discourse and 'Levels of Intentionality'

This survey reveals a clear explanatory gap: the psychological studies use a vague, sociological variable ("literary fiction"), while cognitive poetics provides a suite of precise, linguistic mechanisms (focalization, deixis).[6] This paper's central conjecture is that "literary fiction," in the K&C sense, is simply a proxy for texts with a high density of specific, cognitively demanding features that force ToM engagement.

The most potent of these features is **Free Indirect Discourse (FID)**. FID is a sophisticated narrative technique that blends the third-person, past-tense voice of the narrator with the first-person thoughts, feelings, and voice of a character, all without quotation marks or explicit dialogue tags. This creates a "dual voice." The cognitive-literary hypothesis is that processing FID is a ToM exercise: it demands that the reader constantly disambiguate the source of the consciousness, requiring the "ability to identify and differentiate between separate viewpoints at the same time", thereby directly engaging their "mind-reading" faculties.[10]

The work of cognitive literary scholar Lisa Zunshine provides a quantifiable method for measuring this ToM demand through "levels of intentionality".[8, 9] ToM is, at its base, a second-order intentionality (e.g., "I believe that you are sad ").[7] A more complex social thought might require three levels (e.g., "You know that I know that you are sad ").[7] Zunshine's research demonstrates that authors like Jane Austen are "different" because their prose routinely operates at four, five, or even six levels of intentionality (e.g., "Jane can see that Lizzie thinks that Mr. Darcy isn't concerned about what Lizzie thinks about him").[7] This level of complexity is rare in most popular fiction, which tends to prioritize clarity and plot over the ambiguous representation of consciousness.[1]

This synthesis resolves the conceptual problem: K&C's (2013) "literary" texts are "literary" because they are rich in these high-demand features (FID, complex focalization, high levels of intentionality). Their "popular" texts are "popular" because they eschew this ambiguity. The replication crisis, therefore, is a direct and predictable result of psychologists failing to operationalize their independent variable at this granular, mechanistic level.

III. A RE-INTEGRATIVE MODEL: FROM TEXTUAL FEATURE TO COGNITIVE EFFECT

Building upon the theoretical foundations established in the preceding section, this paper proposes a three-phase socio-cognitive model of narrative influence. This **Literary-Cognitive (L-C) Model** synthesizes cognitive poetics, narrative transportation theory, and social neuroscience to resolve the literary fiction conjecture. The model posits that the link between reading and ToM is not a simple "A-to-B" causal arrow, but a moderated-mediation pathway, contingent on textual features, reader engagement, and cognitive processes.

Phase 1: Textual Triggers & Reader Engagement

The process of narrative influence commences with the *text itself*, which provides *affordances* for social simulation. "Literariness," in this model, is not a binary genre label but a continuous measure of a text's density of **ToM-demanding features**. These features function as a cognitive invitation to the

reader, demanding they engage in social simulation to make sense of the narrative.[11]

Key features include:

1. **Free Indirect Discourse (FID):** The blending of narrator and character consciousness, forcing the reader to differentiate viewpoints.[10]
2. **High "Levels of Intentionality":** Narrative construction that requires the reader to track multiple, embedded mental states simultaneously.[8]
3. **Complex/Internal Focalization:** Filtering the text world through a character's subjective consciousness.[6]
4. **Characterological Ambiguity:** The "incomplete" characters noted by K&C,[1] which compel the reader to perform inferential work.

Phase 2: Narrative Transportation & Simulation (The Moderator)

The reader must *accept* the text's invitation by entering the psychological state of **Narrative Transportation**.[6, 10] This state is the *critical moderator* of the entire process.

If transportation is *not* achieved (e.g., the reader is distracted, skeptical, or in a sterile lab setting reading a short excerpt), the textual triggers from Phase 1 are not processed with sufficient depth. The cognitive "workout" does not occur, and the model *fails*. This mechanism provides a parsimonious explanation for the replication crisis.[2, 3]

If transportation *is* achieved, the reader's cognitive resources are re-allocated from the "discourse world" to the "text world".[6] This immersive state is characterized by three crucial cognitive events:

1. **Reduced Counterarguing:** The reader's critical faculties and reality-testing are temporarily suspended, making them more receptive to the narrative's premises.[6]
2. **Social Simulation:** The reader actively "practices" social cognition, using the text as a problem space.[11]
3. **Neural Activation:** This simulation process is not metaphorical. It corresponds to the physical activation of the brain's **Default Mode Network (DMN)**, and specifically the **dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC) subnetwork** - the core neural engine for Theory of Mind.[5]

Phase 3: Cognitive Exercise & Temporary Enhancement (The Outcome)

Once immersed within the transported state (Phase 2), the reader's mind actively grapples with the specific ToM-demands presented by the text (Phase 1). The act of processing FID,[10] tracking five levels of intentionality,[8] and disambiguating an ambiguous character's "dark side"[12] *is* a "cognitive workout".[11]

This *exercise* of the dmPFC network is what produces the *temporary, measurable enhancement* in ToM tasks (like the RMET) that K&C (2013) originally detected.[1] The effect is real, but it is *contingent* on the successful integration of a specific kind of text (Phase 1) with a specific mode of reading (Phase 2).

This model also explains the durable *correlational* finding. The robust link between *lifetime* fiction exposure and ToM [2, 3, 11] is the cumulative result of *chronic* engagement in this three-phase loop. Lifetime readers are individuals who have self-selected for this experience, accumulating thousands of hours of this "ToM exercise," which plausibly strengthens the underlying neural pathways over time.

IV. DISCUSSION: APPLYING THE MODEL TO LITERARY CASE STUDIES

The L-C Model provides a robust framework for analyzing *how* specific literary works function as engines of social-cognitive change. By moving past the "literary" label, we can apply the model to specific authors and texts cited by cognitive critics as exemplars of ToM engagement.

A. Jane Austen's 'ToM Laboratory'

Jane Austen is a frequent subject for cognitive literary critics [8] precisely because her novels function as "ToM laboratories." The narrative engine of a novel like *Emma* or *Persuasion* is not *action* but *misattribution*; a series of cognitive errors and failed ToM judgments.[7] The plot of *Persuasion* is driven entirely by Anne Elliot misreading Captain Wentworth's mental state, just as he misreads hers.[7]

Applying the L-C model demonstrates how this functions:

- **Phase 1 (Trigger):** Austen was a pioneer of **Free Indirect Discourse**, using it to provide the reader with intimate, non-tagged access to her characters' consciousness. Furthermore, as Zunshine's research shows, Austen's prose *routinely* operates at four or five "levels of intentionality".[7] The reader of *Persuasion* must simultaneously track: (1) What Anne *thinks* Wentworth is thinking, (2) What Wentworth is *actually* thinking (based on subtle cues), (3) What Anne *thinks* others (like Lady Russell) think of her, and (4) What Wentworth *thinks* Anne thinks of him.[7]
- **Phase 2 (State):** This complex cognitive demand (Phase 1) *requires* the reader to become deeply transported (Phase 2) for the narrative to be pleasurable rather than merely confusing. The reader must *care* about the characters to expend the cognitive effort.
- **Phase 3 (Outcome):** The *aesthetic pleasure* of an Austen novel *is* the pleasure of the "a-ha!" moment, the final chapter where all ToM puzzles are resolved, and the reader's own social simulations are confirmed or corrected. This alignment of cognitive exercise with aesthetic reward is a clear example of the L-C model in action.

B. Modernist Consciousness and the Social Brain

The L-C model can be extended to Modernist writers like Virginia Woolf, who took Austen's internal focalization and FID to their logical extreme. Woolf's "stream of consciousness" technique is a radicalization of FID, plunging the reader entirely into the subjective, moment-to-moment processing of her characters. Woolf herself theorized this, describing the human mind as having a "light side" (exposed in company) and a "dark side" (exposed in solitude), and arguing that novelists should explore this "dark side".[12]

This literary technique finds a remarkable and direct correlate in the neurocognitive evidence. The fMRI study by Tamir et al. [5] provided a seemingly puzzling finding: the ToM network (dmPFC) was *most* active not when reading vivid, action-oriented passages, but when reading passages that were both **social** and **abstract**. From a purely psychological perspective, this is counterintuitive; one might expect vivid social scenes to be more engaging.

From a cognitive-literary perspective, however, "social and abstract" is a *perfect* description of Modernist stream of consciousness. A passage from *Mrs. Dalloway* is not "vivid" in the *action* sense (like popular fiction); it is an *abstract representation* of *social thoughts*, memories, and perceptions. The fMRI data thus provides a direct, empirical, neurocognitive explanation for *why* Woolf's style is a uniquely powerful ToM-trainer. The "literary" texts K&C used in their 2013 study[1] are "literary" precisely because they share this Modernist DNA, a focus on representing abstract consciousness (Phase 1) which maximally activates the dmPFC (Phase 2), leading to a temporary, measurable ToM enhancement (Phase 3). This is a far more precise and testable mechanism than K&C's original "incomplete characters" hypothesis.[1]

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has advanced a socio-cognitive model to resolve the "literary fiction conjecture." The central argument is that the conjecture, while pointing to a real phenomenon, is *fatally underspecified*. The subsequent replication crisis [2, 3] is not a simple "failure" but a *symptom* of a model that lacks interdisciplinary sophistication. The binary variable of "literary" vs. "popular" is a poor proxy for the complex cognitive operations involved in reading.

The Literary-Cognitive (L-C) model proposed here resolves the crisis by providing a testable, mechanistic pathway. The effect is not *generic* ("literary") but *mechanistic*. It is a function of specific *textual features* (FID, high levels of intentionality) [8,10] being processed in a specific *psychological state* (narrative transportation)[9] which, in turn, *exercises* specific *neural networks* (the dmPFC subnetwork of the DMN).[5]

This reframing has significant implications. We must stop asking, "Does literary fiction improve Theory of Mind?" and start asking, "What *specific textual features*, under *what reading conditions*, engage *which social-cognitive processes*?" This approach moves beyond a simplistic defense of the humanities and reframes literature as a sophisticated *cognitive simulation technology*; a tool

designed by authors to guide the reader's mind through complex social scenarios.

Future Directions

The theoretical model proposed herein opens several promising avenues for future research, echoing the call for empirical validation in the model paper.[6]

- **Neurocognitive Studies:** The L-C model is highly testable. Future fMRI or EEG studies should move beyond genre labels and *control for the literary mechanisms*. Researchers could create two versions of a single narrative: one rich in FID and internal focalization, and one rewritten in simple, direct prose with external focalization. The model predicts that *only* the FID-rich version, when read by *transported* participants, will show significant activation in the dmPFC network.[5]
- **Cross-Disciplinary Experimental Design:** Future psychological experiments on this topic *must* be designed by *interdisciplinary teams* of psychologists and cognitive literary scholars. The "literary" variable must be rigorously operationalized, perhaps by using Zunshine's "levels of intentionality" [8] as a quantifiable metric to score texts for their ToM-demand *before* the experiment.
- **Educational and Clinical Implications:** If this model holds, its implications for social-emotional learning (SEL) are profound. Educational curricula could be designed to "train" ToM and empathy by strategically scaffolding students, moving them from narratively simple texts to more cognitively complex, ToM-demanding texts like those by Austen or Woolf.[11] This approach could also inform interventions for populations with ToM deficits, using narrative engagement as a tool for cognitive rehabilitation.

By pursuing these lines of inquiry, scholars can bridge the divide between the humanities and cognitive science, building a more comprehensive and empirically grounded understanding of the profound power of stories to shape the human mind.

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