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Don't Underestimate the Power of Pleasure Reading

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Don’t Underestimate the Power of Pleasure Reading

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A recent study by David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Cas­
tano of the New School for Social Re­search in New York City argues that reading literary fic­tion (as compared with reading popular fiction, or nothing at all) temporarily enhances one’s ability to understand others’ mental states and deepens em­pathy. The study—published in the jour­nal Science in October—grabbed a lot of attention, including a front-page article in The New York Times.

What makes the claim noteworthy is its scientific support. After all, the no­tion that reading literature has a civi­lizing impact has been with us at least since Matthew Arnold wrote on liter­ary criticism in the late 1800s. The idea that literary fiction is superior to popular fiction has been around for an equally long time.

Indeed, the charge so often leveled at mass-produced literature is that it is not simply bad, nor even worthless, but that it is “capable of degrading, indeed, of cor­rupting those who enjoy it,” as literary and cultural studies scholar Janice A. Radway sums up the critique in a 1986 essay. That argument may be a long-stand­ing one, but our recent study of the se­cret reading lives of young people con­vinces us that it is wrong. Young people explained to us why they read what they read recognized that their parents and their teachers often looked askance at their (the students’) reading choices. Yet the students were remarkably articulate about the benefits they derived from their reading.

Here’s 18-year-old Kylie talking about her reading love affair with romances: “And you see the good [in romances], but you have to be careful about not being a teenager is partly about struggling to be more adult and have more adult relationships. . . . I think a real struggle like to do in the hope that kids are being asked to pursue something ‘better.’ Adults should listen hard to the wis­dom of young readers of marginalized texts, who, as they read these texts, are deepening their understanding of them­selves in the world and expanding the possibilities of who they might become.

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