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Don't Underestimate the Power of Pleasure Reading

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By Jeffrey D. Wilhelm & Michael W. Smith

A recent study by David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano 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. And 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. The young people who 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 also the possibilities in others, despite their shortcomings, because the hero has to be helped, transformed in some way. And you do, too, really, so the book helps you think about this and consider it.”

Here's Kennie, also 18, talking about the impact of her vampire books: “Being a teenager is partly about struggling to be more adult and have more adult relationships. ... I think a real struggle of more adult relationships is making sure they are life-giving in both directions. I mean, we all have these needs so you have to be careful about not being a vampire and sucking someone else dry, or hurting and discarding them. But you have to be really careful not to let someone do it to you, too, like dominate you, just because you like being liked or feeling attractive or whatever. I think it's a real danger.”

And here's Helen, 14, on the fantasy novels that she devoured: “Sometimes when big stuff happens in my life, I'll think about what my favorite characters would have done, the ones I admire most. ... They all have different approaches, different ways they approach things, and then I try to apply that to my life, to see which way works for me. Characters are just ways of thinking, really.”

We received similar testimonials from readers of horror and dystopian fiction as well, two genres that are characteristically dismissed as “popular.” We'd stack the powerful and long-lasting benefits of the reading our participants did against the temporary impact found in the New School study—any day!

But there is more at stake here. Kidd and Castano report that their participants enjoyed literature less than they did popular fiction. Reading literature then becomes something like taking cod-liver oil: You might not like it, but it's good for you. The danger is that dismissing pleasure as unimportant runs afoul of a remarkable new analysis done as part of the British Cohort Study, which is following the lives of more than 17,000 people born in England, Scotland, and Wales in a single week of 1970.



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A recent report making use of the data from that study found that children's reading for pleasure outside school had a significant impact on their educational attainment and social mobility. Moreover, it found that this impact is a function of what the researchers termed “increased cognitive progress over time.”

Reading for pleasure outside of school has real and long-lasting benefits. The research from the British Cohort Study seems to us to create a policy imperative to encourage students' out-of-school reading—regardless of which genres and authors they choose.

If teachers and parents are to pursue a policy of supporting and encouraging the pleasure reading of young people, they must develop a deep understanding of its nature and varieties. They must avoid dismissing the reading kids like to do in the hope that kids will read 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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