YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE AND EMPATHY

By Madeline Day Price

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Abstract: Scholars from various disciplines have theorized a relationship between reading fiction and empathy. Research in cognitive studies suggests that understanding fiction requires Theory of Mind, or the cognitive ability to understand the feelings and motivations of others. Some studies build on this research to suggest reading fiction helps to promote empathy, while others posit that more empathetic individuals are more likely to enjoy reading fiction. Education scholars have drawn on this conflicting research base to suggest that the use of young adult literature in the classroom can help promote student empathy. The few studies that have examined the relationship between young adult literature and empathy have focused primarily on adult rather than adolescent populations. This literature review finds that studies in education that posit a link between empathy and the reading of young adult literature cannot support that link as they rely on a limited research base, imprecise definitions of empathy, and divergent pedagogical approaches. Recommendations for classroom literature instruction engaging empathy are provided.

Keywords: young adult literature, empathy, narrative empathy, transportation theory, critical pedagogy

I remember the day I learned empathy. It was in Becky Cooper's English language arts (ELA) class and we were reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Ms. Cooper stood at the front of the classroom and read aloud from a scene of utmost horror, as the monster

> held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped and rushed downstairs. (Shelley, 1818/2008, pp. 39-40)

Ms. Cooper asked us to reconsider the scene and to question what else, in a scene of creation or birth, might make sounds, smile, and reach out to the nearest person?

It was a revelation that struck like lightning—a baby! Frankenstein's monster was perhaps not a monster at all, but akin to a newborn, and we, the readers, were prejudiced against him through his creator's first-person narrative. The rest of our unit was characterized by this shifting perspective-taking: whose view were we reading? How might events be understood otherwise? At the end of the book, we were even invited to write scripts in the style of Dr. Phil, with the TV therapist guiding Victor Frankenstein and his creation through restorative family conversation. For me the impact of this unit was foundational; I remember it still as the originating moment of my own empathy and still consider it in many ways the birth of my politics and engagement with the world.

Given the available research on the connections between reading and empathy, my experience of the power of fiction may not be exceptional. In the last two decades, researchers across disciplines have become increasingly interested in the ties between reading fiction and measures of empathy, and some connections have

been established (Djikic et al., 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar et al., 2006). However, even as scholars from narrative theory, neuroscience, psychology, and social work examine and tease out the connections between reading fiction and the formation, or habit, of empathy, scholars promoting the use of young adult literature in schools speak of causality as established dogma.

On a personal note, as a former ELA teacher and a current teacher educator, I sympathize with the wish to solidify the role of good fiction in developing one's humanity. I was a voracious reader as a child, studied literature both as an undergraduate and graduate student, taught literature to high school students, and continue to view reading as my primary form of leisure. Which is to say, it is perhaps unsurprising that my own personal narrative of development places reading fiction in a central role. It is possible that this form of participant bias is at work on a larger scale in the educational literature connecting reading, especially the reading of young adult literature, to the development of empathy. By temperament, experience, or vocation, literacy educators are particularly likely to understand literacy as deeply connected to the construction of the self and to prosocial behaviors or dispositions such as empathy.

This literature review seeks to synthesize peer-reviewed empirical research across the fields of psychology, education, and narrative theory to answer the research questions *Does reading young adult literature support or promote empathy?* and *What reading and/ or pedagogical conditions are conducive to supporting empathy?* Since the research base on young adult literature and empathy in particular is still small, I have contextualized it within the larger discussion about literature and empathy. Implications of the research base for classroom instruction are also addressed.

Young Adult Literature: An Empathetic Genre?

As young adult literature (YAL) gains prominence in popular culture, there is increasing scholarly interest in YAL, with some scholars even positing that it is time to solidify a canon of the genre (Hunt, 1996; Malo-Juvera & Hill, 2020). Despite the attention it receives, YAL remains a somewhat nebulous and hard to define category: it presumably occupies the space in the literary market between children's fiction and adults' fiction, aimed at the ages of approximately 11-18 year-olds, and yet news reports suggest that it is primarily consumed by adults over the age of 25 (Gilmore, 2015; Kitchener, 2017; Pattee, 2017). Scholars generally agree around a few formal consistencies within YAL. YAL tends to feature teenage protagonists (often with first-person narration), use language that is familiar and typical of teenagers, and focus thematically on issues surrounding growing up and discovering one's place in the world.

YAL is most often defined in terms of its relatability for teens, a position that is somewhat troubled by its adult authorship and, increasingly, readership (Hunt, 1996; Kitchener, 2017). In his oft-cited white paper adopted by the Young Adult Library Services Association in 2008, Cart advocates for the value of YAL, claiming

> its capacity for fostering understanding, empathy, and compassion by offering vividly realized portraits of the lives— exterior and interior—of individuals who are *un*like the reader. In this way young adult literature invites its readership to embrace the humanity it shares with those who—if not for the encounter in reading—might forever remain strangers or— worse—irredeemably "other." (2008, p. 2)

Cart is not the only scholar who ties the genre of YAL to potential for prosocial behavior; recent book titles like *Engaging Empathy and Activating Agency: Young Adult Literature as a Catalyst for Action* and *Reading for Action: Engaging Youth in Social Justice Through Young Adult Literature* place the genre at the center of

pedagogy aimed at developing desirable worldviews and behaviors in young people (Boyd & Darragh, 2019; Hays, 2021).

Beyond the age range of its intended audience, scholars seem to be defining young adult literature, at least in part, by its ability to elicit character identification, emotion, and empathy from young people. But on what basis?

Empathy and Literature

Before examining the connections between empathy and reading YAL in particular, this section will review the research base positing a correlation between empathy and reading fiction.

Theory of Narrative Empathy

The past twenty years have seen the rise of interdisciplinary research into the complex process of reading and enjoying literature, often integrating the perspectives of cognitive psychology, neuroscience, literary studies, and narrative theory. Pioneers of the field of cognitive literary analysis include scholars Zunshine and Keen, who sought to integrate scientific understandings of how we understand other minds with literary analysis' knowledge about fiction. In *Why We Read Fiction*, Zunshine (2006) discusses "mind-reading" (p. 6), the common human practice of attributing a person's behavior to their assumed internal state (such as assuming a person who is crying while speaking about the death of a loved one is grieving). Psychologists call such "mind-reading" the Theory of Mind, and Zunshine (2006) argues that novels not only offer a rich realm for readers to practice Theory of Mind but that the pleasure of reading other minds is one of the primary reasons that humans enjoy consuming fiction.

Keen (2006; 2007) expands on Zunshine's idea that at the heart of reading fiction is the practice of reading other minds to consider how fiction also calls upon readers to *feel* with others, to be empathetic. Though in her theory of narrative empathy she considers how different narrative techniques and authorial choices can predispose readers to greater or lesser spontaneous outbursts of simultaneous feeling, she maintains that no single text, nor any single narrative structure of technique, can be claimed to be empathetic in nature (Keen, 2006). There is wide diversity not only of reader responses, but also of individual capacities for empathetic response (Keen, 2006). Going further, Keen recognizes that while empathy has been theoretically connected to prosocial behavior (called the empathy-altruism hypothesis, and implicitly, the goal of most pedagogy aiming to increase student empathy), "empathetic reading experiences" that result in socially positive results "are exceptional, not routine" (2007, p. 65). Keen's (2007) persistent skepticism of the causal links between narrative empathy, character identification, and positive behavioral outcomes stands in contrast to the enthusiasm of many literacy scholars about the transformative potential of YAL texts.

Quantitative Approaches to Reading and Empathy

A growing body of research (Djikic et al., 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Kidd et al., 2016; Panero et al., 2016) has investigated the connections between reading fiction and empathy. The experience of empathy while reading, called narrative empathy, can be cognitive or affective: trying to understand characters' motivations and decisions engages cognitive Theory of Mind; while character identification, or feeling emotions with a fictional character, is an affective process. The relationship between both these experiences of empathy resulting from reading and empathetic outlooks leading to changed behavior in the world is unknown (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015).

An early study by psychologists (Mar et.al., 2006) found a correlation between lifetime exposure to reading fiction, as opposed

to nonfiction, and higher empathy. This original study, and others like it, have been used by some scholars (Junker & Jacquemin, 2017; Shastina et al., 2020; Webber & Agiro, 2019) to argue that fiction has been shown to increase empathy, which is a misreading of the evidence. It's not possible to know whether a lifetime of exposure to narrative empathy, engaging readers' Theory of Mind, increased their empathy or if individuals disposed to be empathetic are more likely to find pleasure in reading.

Since causation cannot be determined in studies which measure lifetime exposure to fiction (Mar et al., 2009), subsequent work examined the immediate effects of reading fictional or nonfictional texts upon performance on empathy measures (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Kidd et al., 2016). A range of experiments reported that reading an excerpt of fiction produces temporary improvements in Theory of Mind/empathy. Participants' ability to correctly predict characters' emotions and identify facial expressions (measures of Theory of Mind) were stronger when they read literary fiction rather than genre fiction (such as romance, horror, or mystery). These results are exciting, as they suggest that even short periods of reading good books help us to understand other minds; however, a replication study by other researchers with over 700 participants failed to reproduce increases in empathy as a result of reading fiction (Panero et al., 2016), casting doubt on the validity of previous findings (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Kidd et al., 2016).[1]

Other research has sought mediating factors in the relationship between reading and empathy, such as personality Openness (Djikic et al., 2013) and narrative absorption (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Stansfield & Bunce, 2014). Transportation Theory holds that readers, when deeply absorbed in a narrative, enter a state where they feel lost in a book, and all cognitive processes become focused on the events and situations within the storyworld (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Green, 2008). Bal and Veltkamp (2013) replicated some effects from previous research (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Kidd et al., 2016), suggesting that reading fiction can result in higher measures of empathy but only when readers feel transported. Stansfield and Bunce (2014) found that readers who report frequently feeling transported in fiction experience higher empathy while reading but do not differ from the general population in overall levels of empathy. A recent study in the adolescent population found that after controlling for personality variables (i.e., Openness), there was no statistically significant relationship between narrative transportation, reading, and measures of empathy (Lenhart et al., 2022). The literature suggests that narrative absorption or transportation makes the experience of empathy while reading more likely, though its effects on adolescents in particular remain unclear.

Effects of Text Characteristics on Empathy

What types of fictional texts are best able to create the temporary increases in empathy measures found in some studies? Kidd et al. (2016) argued that literary texts, with their complex characters, dense foregrounding, and polyvocality, promote empathy more than typically simpler genre fiction. To test this idea about the heightened impact of literary over genre fiction on readers' narrative empathy, Kuzmičová et al. (2017) randomly assigned participants to read two different versions of a literary short story by Katherine Mansfield, "The Fly." Mansfield's story is a complex piece of literary modernism, the type which typically causes students in literature class to sigh and ask why writers never just say what they mean. The

altered version of the story was written by a Norwegian author of YA suspense fiction[2], and was made much easier to read in line with the conventions of today's popular fiction. Previous work (Kidd et al., 2016) led Kuzmičová et al. (2017) to believe that the literary story, with its difficult foregrounding and complex representations of characters' emotions, would require more readerly effort and thus more strongly engage participants' Theory of Mind. In fact, readers demonstrated significantly more markers of empathy when reading the non-literary, YA version of "The Fly" (Kuzmičová et al., 2017). These results suggest that perhaps literary fiction's focus on character, rather than its complexity, contributes to the experience of narrative empathy, or, perhaps, readers are able to respond with more empathy when given more accessible texts.

Running a similar experiment with more and less literary versions of the same story, Koopman (2016) found higher empathy scores for those who read the more complex literary version, unlike Kuzmičová et al. (2017). Across the studies investigating text features, definitions of literariness vary, so it still remains unclear how thematic content, focus on character vs. plot, complex syntactic and semantic features, and relative accessibility of text interact with cognitive and affective narrative empathy. However, YA fiction's characteristic concerns of the growth of the individual and protagonist's emotions, as well as its accessibility to young readers, indicate its potential to engage readers' narrative empathy.

Studies of Young Adult Literature's Effects on Empathy

Despite the orthodoxy of the claim that young adult literature has a unique capacity to promote or engender empathy in young readers (Arnold & Sableski, 2020; Banks, 2009; Campbell & Clark, 2019; Deakin & Eastman, 2019; Jensen, 2020; Kurtts & Gavigan, 2008; Richmond, 2014; Ward & Warren, 2020; Webber & Agiro, 2019; Wolk, 2009), I was able to identify only six empirical studies which examined young adult literature and empathy. Three of these studies were conducted in undergraduate courses for future professionals (preservice teachers and future social workers; Glenn, 2012; Schieble & Kucinskiene, 2019; Sherr & Beise, 2015), two were conducted in a middle or high school classroom (Boatwright & Allman, 2018; Malo-Juvera & Hill, 2020), and one with a self-selected queer affinity group of adults aged 18 to 30 (Herb & Betts, 2022). All of the studies (save Malo-Juvera & Hill, 2020) set out to look for empathy in participants as a result of engaging with YAL, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, all found it. Each of the six studies collected qualitative data, and two of them used a treatment-control experimental design and collective quantitative data as well (Malo-Juvera & Hill, 2020; Sherr & Beise, 2015).

These studies into the effects of reading YAL in the classroom conceptualized the empathy in varying ways. For some, empathy looked like character identification, when students expressed emotion with the characters they read about or commented on shared universal humanity (Boatright & Allman, 2018; Glenn, 2012; Herb & Betts, 2022); in other cases, empathy took form in statements like "I could never imagine . . ." the trauma or experiences of characters living through profound injustice, such as genocide (Schieble & Kucinskiene, 2019). Sherr & Beise (2015) used a quantitative measure of general empathy similar to those used by cognitive psychologists (Mar et al., 2006; Stansfield & Bunce, 2014), and empathy was shown in Malo-Juvera (2014) through increasing rejection of rape myths after reading a YA novel which deals with sexual assault. Of the five studies which took place in a classroom, three used a reader-response type pedagogy which focused on

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[1]Panero and colleagues (2016) did confirm the correlation between lifetime exposure to fiction and empathy (as reported in Mar, et al. 2009). This suggests that more empathetic individuals are predisposed to enjoy fiction, rather than that fiction has an agentive function in promoting empathy in readers.

[2]Though Mansfield's original was written in English, both versions of the story were translated into Norwegian, the first language of the participants.

encouraging students to make text-to-self connections (Glenn, 2012; Malo-Juvera & Hill, 2020; Sherr & Beise, 2015). One study (Boatwright & Allman, 2018) adopted a democratic critical literacy approach, which aimed to move students beyond mere absorption or identification with a narrative in order to critically question "the norms and values" (p. 3) forwarded explicitly and implicitly by the author. Notably, despite the stated pedagogical goals of critical analysis aimed at YAL and the world it portrays, evidence of empathy was reported only in the shallow terms of character identification.

Implications for Practice

Literature, and perhaps especially YAL, is capable of producing immediate empathetic responses in adolescents and adults, exercising Theory of Mind, and mirroring emotions felt by fictional characters. These effects are more likely to be produced by texts which are emotionally dense, driven by character development rather than plot, and are accessible and legible to the reader. Readers are also more likely to experience narrative empathy when they are transported, or feel fully absorbed within the story. However, these conclusions are still tentative, as the research base includes contradictory evidence.

Limits of (Narrative) Empathy

There is reason to question the value of empathy as a goal. Founded in reflections on rational and moral philosophy, Boler suggests that the empathy that emerges from readerly identification is fundamentally passive and opposed to social change. She explains that the empathy involved in identifying with characters (cognitive and affective narrative empathy) will always be passive empathy because it is with "a fairly distant other, whom we cannot directly help" (Boler, 1997, p. 257). Building on this idea, Keen claims that narrative empathy may in fact be facilitated by the fact of its passivity: fictional characters cannot demand anything from us (Keen, 2006); to relate emotionally to a character composed of words on a page can never require emotional or material sacrifices. There is a necessary distance between the reader and the fictional character that will never be crossed; this distance makes empathy easier than it is with another human, but it also reduces its value.

Further critiques of narrative empathy think through its potential complicity in unequal societal conditions. While some may tout the ability of diverse texts about marginalized groups to increase students' empathy for members of those groups (Deakin & Eastman, 2019; Richmond, 2014; Ward & Warren, 2020; Webber & Agiro, 2019; Wolk, 2009), critics would lambast that readerly empathy as ultimately morally vacant. Boler (1997) critiques the idea that it is possible to *truly* know the other, especially when the fictionally

represented other belongs to a marginalized group while the reader does not. She claims that in models of character identification, the self is not asked "to identify with the oppressor, and not required to identify her complicity in structures of power relations mirrored by the text" (Boler, 1997, p. 258). These theoretical limits to narrative empathy were present in a study by Glenn (2012): when White participants read counterstory YA featuring Black and Mexican protagonists, they discussed their universal shared humanity with the characters, but simultaneously complained that the books seemed to want to make them feel ashamed or guilty of being White. Narrative empathy is a private emotion that is by its nature non-political and unengaged from the world; even when texts deal with social topics, it has been argued that the practice of reading with emotion is inimical to public participation (Jurecic, 2011).

Suggestions for Classroom Practice

Students deserve to read a variety of texts that center varied perspectives along lines of race, class, gender, disability, sexuality, and religion. However, critiques (Boler, 1997; Patel, 2016) of the value of empathy, especially in the service of the goals of justice, offer warnings as to the power of diverse texts in themselves of creating socially desirable outcomes. Passive narrative empathy is insufficient as a goal in and of itself, but educators have the opportunity to mobilize it in service of students' critical evaluation of the world around them. YAL should be taught alongside nonfiction text sets which contextualize fictional characters and situations within current events, controversies, and ongoing injustices. Additionally, students can be asked to reflect not only what they have in common with sympathetic protagonists, but to what extent they can see themselves in antagonists or as complicit "in structures of power relations mirrored by the text" (Boler, 1997, p. 258). This activity has the power to shift the passivity of narrative empathy into action, and students (and possibly teachers) consider the times and ways they could have unintentionally played an antagonistic role in the story of others' lives.

The *Frankenstein* anecdote in the opening is an example of empathy but not of affective narrative empathy, the spontaneous deep feeling with a character. My memory of the experience of empathy is explicitly one formed by the critical distance of literary reading, made available by the literariness of the text (multiple perspectives, framing narratives, and convoluted/nested narratives). As such, perhaps it qualifies not as narrative empathy at all but resides in the difficult to study realm of real-life empathy, existing as a moral and ethical construct which drives behavior accordingly. This empathy of critical reflection is a difficult one—emerging not from the emotional closeness of transportation while reading (though perhaps impossible without it) but from distanced formalist analysis. I bring up this contradiction between absorptive reading and my own experience because it, too, appears in discussions about reading and empathy in the classroom.

There is an implicit tension in the varying reasons given to advance the use of YAL in the middle and high school classroom to promote empathy. On the one hand, it is argued that when students are given texts featuring protagonists their age (and often using less sophisticated language), they will be more interested, engaged, and absorbed in the texts. These accessible stories will create an empathy of absorption; when students are immersed within the story world, they feel along with the protagonists (derided as passive empathy by critics above). Simultaneously, many pieces (e.g., Boatwright & Allman, 2018; Wolk, 2009) tout the potential of critical readings of young adult literature: students should be taught to question the world as it appears in books, compare it to their own, and think about whose experiences are depicted, how, and why. Such critical distance removes students from the absorption of the text, offering an altogether different sort of empathy. This critical distanced

empathy could be said to be cognitive more than affective, but has not been tested for in laboratory or classroom settings.

It should be possible to engage both forms of empathy in a unit on the same text, though they would require alternate pedagogical approaches. The narrative empathy of emotional closeness with fictional characters requires readers to be deeply absorbed in and transported by a text. Allowing students independent reading time to enjoy YAL at their own pace, and in a medium of their choice (including audiobook), could help promote this narrative transportation. Literature discussion would be led by students and prioritize their interests and questions about YAL, and writing assignments would focus on text-to-self connections. Distanced empathy, on the other hand, would require students to remove themselves from the story world and consider authorial choices and manipulations through both formalist and critical lenses. This would include discussions about the power of words to shape our perceptions and opinions about people and events in literature, as well as the function of gendered and racialized language historically and in the present. Prompts for writing would be more likely to encourage text-to-world questions than to ask why characters behaved as they did or how the reader would respond in similar situations. Assignments could push students to consider what behaviors and ways of being are presented as "normal" within the literature, and which characters or behaviors are positioned outside of this category. Character identification, and reading for absorptive narrative empathy, can help to build student engagement in texts, while the distanced empathy of critical analysis can bring passive narrative empathy into the world.

For many educators like me, the tie between the power of language, and perhaps fiction in particular, and the capacity for empathy seems writ large upon the world. Experiments in cognitive psychology have begun to flesh out tenuous connections between reading fiction and empathy, though questions remain. Lifetime exposure to reading fiction has been correlated with higher social competencies and empathy (Mar et al., 2006), and while we cannot know if fiction has agentive power in that relationship, there is no harm— and a good chance of benefit—in promoting a love of reading in our students. Adolescents deserve the chance to encounter a wide variety of texts that they find interesting and relatable for their lives, portraying diverse worldviews and characters. As educators, we are lucky to have a wide array of rich, character-driven YAL that fits that bill. Fictional characters may never ask anything of us, but in a classroom, passionate readers can ask for (and give) empathy from one another, and from our world.

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