

# *Literature and the experience of dark empathy*

Ana Margarida Abrantes

CECC | Universidade Católica Portuguesa



CATOLICA  
CECC - CENTRO DE ESTUDOS  
DE COMUNICAÇÃO E CULTURA

LISBOA

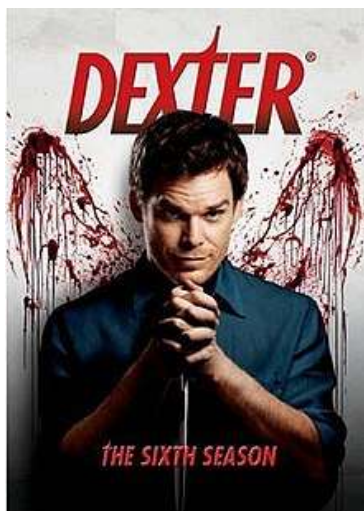
# If

- empathy is good for the empathizer
- empathy is good for the person receiving empathy
- empathy enables conflict solving



# then

- What is the impact of cultural works that lead us to empathize with the villain?



*Dexter*, Season 6,  
Oct.-Dec. 2011



*Stockholm*, 1973, film by Robert  
Budreau in the aftermath of the  
Stockholm bank robbery



Stories of crime,  
guilt, punishment.  
Fiction?



CATOLICA  
CECC - CENTRO DE ESTUDOS  
DE COMUNICAÇÃO E CULTURA

# Outline

1. What is empathy?
2. Is empathy good?
3. Where do we learn empathy? Empathy in real life vs. empathy in fiction
4. Empathizing with the villain: what does it say about me?
5. Why we read fiction: dangers and implications



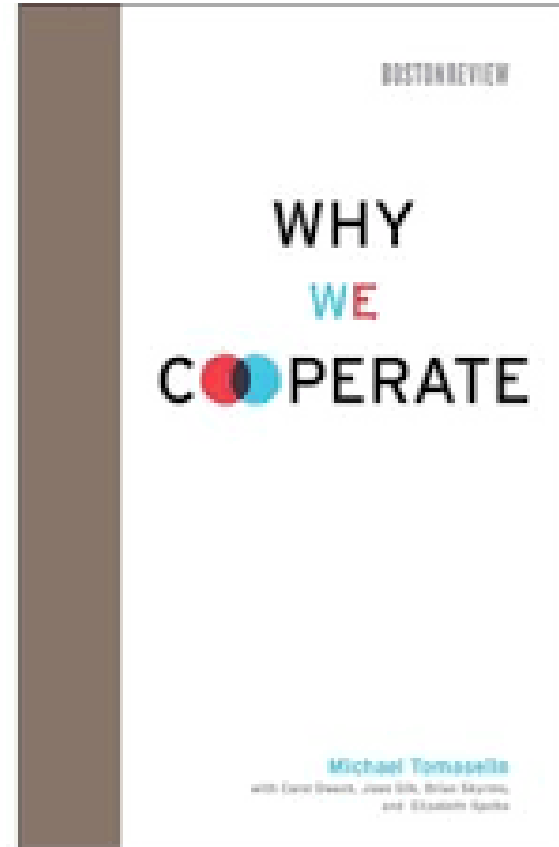
# What is empathy?

- Robert Vischer, 19<sup>th</sup> century: *Einfühlung*, the subjective experience evoked by the aesthetic appreciation of a work of art
- Theodor Lipps: from an object to an Other
- E. B. Tichener: English translation of *Einfühlung* as *empathy* (from Greek: in+pathos)



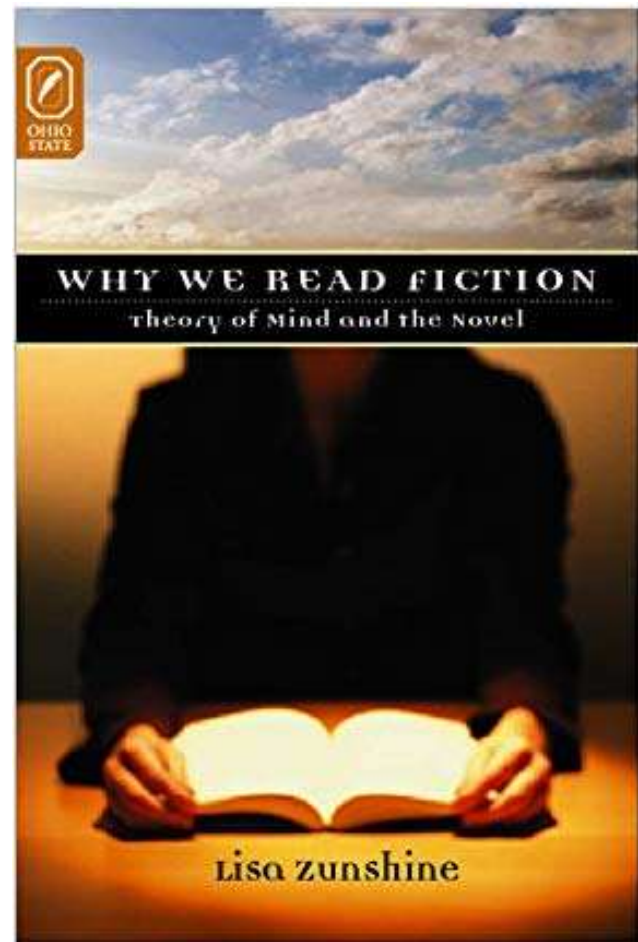
# What is empathy today?

- Evolutionary theory:  
cooperation



# What is empathy today?

- Philosophy, linguistics:  
Theory of Mind  
(ToM)



# What is empathy today?

- Neuroscience:  
Feeling of Body  
(FoB)

## The Roots of Empathy: The Shared Manifold Hypothesis and the Neural Basis of Intersubjectivity

Vittorio Gallese

Dipartimento di Neuroscienze, Sezione di Fisiologia, University of Parma, Parma, Italy

### Key Words

Empathy · Intersubjectivity · Shared manifold hypothesis · Mirror neurons · Phenomenology · Autism · Schizophrenia

### Abstract

Starting from a neurobiological standpoint, I will propose that our capacity to understand others as intentional agents, far from being exclusively dependent upon mentalistic/linguistic abilities, be deeply grounded in the relational nature of our interactions with the world. According to this hypothesis, an implicit, prereflexive form of understanding of other individuals is based on the strong sense of identity binding us to them. We share with our conspecifics a multiplicity of states that include actions, sensations and emotions. A new conceptual tool able to capture the richness of the experiences we share with others will be introduced: the *shared manifold* of intersubjectivity. I will posit that it is through this shared manifold that it is possible for us to recognize other human beings as similar to us. It is just because of this shared manifold that intersubjective communication and ascription of intentionality become possible. It will be argued that the same neural structures that are involved in processing and controlling executed actions, felt sensations and emotions are also active when the same actions, sensations and emotions are to be detected in

others. It therefore appears that a whole range of different 'mirror matching mechanisms' may be present in our brain. This matching mechanism, constituted by mirror neurons originally discovered and described in the domain of action, could well be a basic organizational feature of our brain, enabling our rich and diversified intersubjective experiences. This perspective is in a position to offer a global approach to the understanding of the vulnerability to major psychoses such as schizophrenia.

Copyright © 2009 S. Karger AG, Basel

### Introduction

We are social animals. The pervasive social habits of primates are likely the result of a very long evolutionary path, in that these habits are patently not peculiar to primates. They are indeed diffuse across species as spaced apart in evolutionary time as humans and ants. Social interactions play different roles according to different modalities in different species. Nevertheless, transversal to and at the basis of all social species and all social cultures, of whatever complexity, is the notion of *identity* of the individuals within those species and cultures. As humans, we implicitly 'know' that all human beings have 4 limbs, walk in a certain way, and act in peculiar ways. Identity is articulated on many different levels of complexity. It can be subjected to increasingly complex tests

KARGER

Post + 41 51 306 12 34

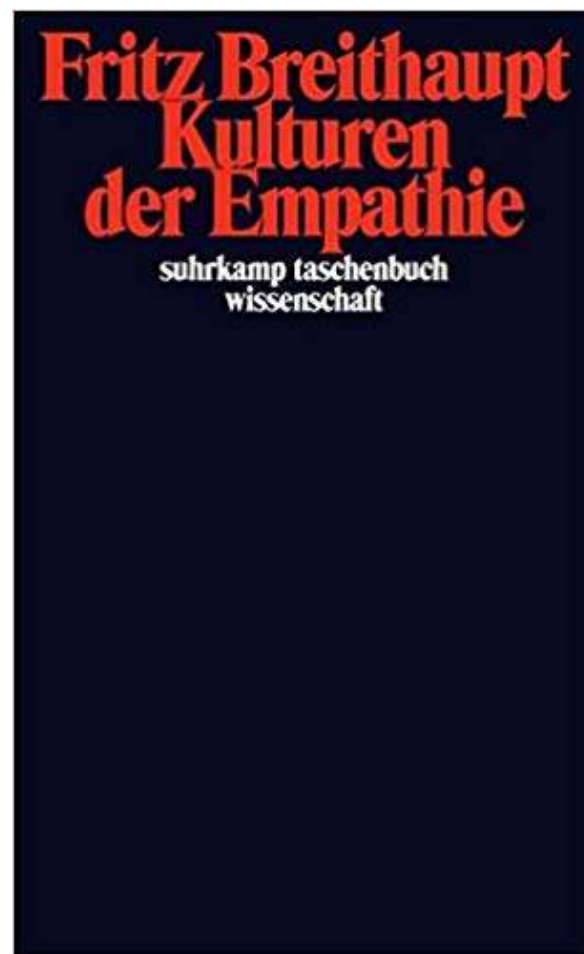
© 2009 S. Karger AG, Basel  
0254-4962/09/3004-3178\$9.50/0

Vittorio Gallese  
Dipartimento di Neuroscienze, Sezione di Fisiologia  
University of Parma, Via Volturno 39



# What is empathy today?

- Phenomenology:  
Co-experiencing  
the situation of  
others



# Two kinds of empathy

- ToM
- Cognitive empathy
- Cold empathy
- Affect
- Affective empathy
- Hot empathy



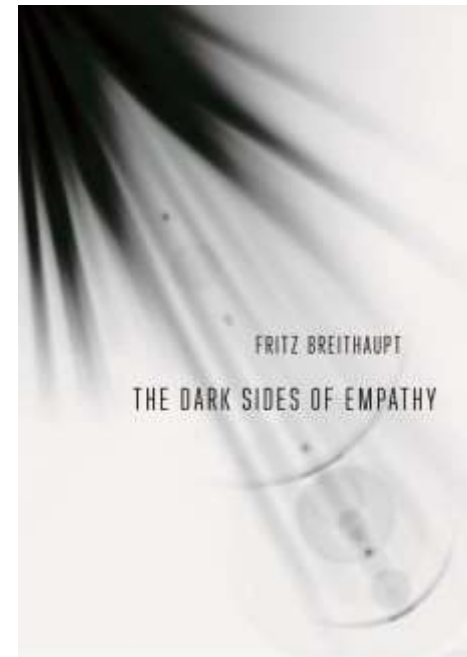
## 2. Is empathy good?

- Common assumptions:
  - Empathy leads to pro-social behavior; good for empathizer and target of empathy
  - Empathy important for conflict solving
  - Empathy should be promoted
- But: is there another side to this story?



# “Dark Empathy”

- “False or filtered empathy”
- “Sadistic empathy”
- “Empathetic vampirism”



Breithaupt, Fritz. 2019.  
*The Dark Sides of  
Empathy*. Ithaca: Cornell  
Univ. Press.



CATOLICA  
CECC - CENTRO DE ESTUDOS  
DE COMUNICAÇÃO E CULTURA

LISBOA

# 3. Where do we learn empathy?

## Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind

David Comer Kidd\* and Emanuele Castano\*

The New School for Social Research, 80 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011, USA.

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: kidd305@newschool.edu (D.C.K.); castano@newschool.edu (E.C.)

Understanding others' mental states is a crucial skill that enables the complex social relationships that characterize human societies. Yet little research has investigated what fosters this skill, which is known as Theory of Mind (ToM), in adults. We present five experiments showing that reading literary fiction led to better performance on tests of affective ToM (experiments 1 to 5) and cognitive ToM (experiments 4 and 5) compared with reading nonfiction (experiments 1), popular fiction (experiments 2 to 5), or nothing at all (experiments 2 and 5). Specifically, these results show that reading literary fiction temporarily enhances ToM. More broadly, they suggest that ToM may be influenced by engagement with works of art.

The capacity to identify and understand others' subjective states is one of the most stunning products of human evolution. It allows successful navigation of complex social relationships and helps to support the empathic responses that maintain them (1–5). Deficits in this set of abilities, commonly referred to as Theory of Mind (ToM), are associated with psychopathologies marked by interpersonal difficulties (6–8). Even when the ability is intact, disengagement of ToM has been linked to the breakdown of positive interpersonal and intergroup relationships (9).

Researchers have distinguished between affective ToM (the ability to detect and understand others' emotions) and cognitive ToM (the inference and representation of others' beliefs and intentions) (7, 8). The affective component of ToM, in particular, is linked to empathy (positively) and antisocial behavior (negatively) (7, 8). It is thus not surprising that we foster ToM in our children by having them attend to the emotional states of others: "Do you think he is happy or sad as a consequence of your action?" Such explicit encouragements to understand others usually diminish when children appear to skillfully and empathically engage in interpersonal relationships. Cultural practices, though, may function to promote and refine interpersonal sensitivity throughout our lives. One such practice is reading fiction.

Correlations of familiarity with fiction with self-reported empathy and performance on an advanced affective ToM test have been reported (10, 11), and limited experimental evidence suggests that reading fiction increases self-reported empathy (12, 13). Fiction seems also to expand our knowledge of others' lives, helping us recognize our similarity to them (10, 11, 14). Although fiction may explicitly convey social values and reduce the strangeness of others, the observed relation between familiarity with fiction and ToM may be due to more subtle characteristics of the text. That is, fiction may change how, not just what, people think about others (10, 11, 14). We submit that fiction affects ToM processes because it forces us to engage in mind-reading and character construction. Not any kind of fiction achieves that, though. Our proposal is that it is literary fiction that forces the reader to engage in ToM processes.

The category of literary fiction has been contested on the grounds that it is merely a marker of social class, but features of the modern literary novel set it apart from most best-selling thrillers or romances. Miall and Kuiken (15–17) emphasize that through the systematic use of phonological, grammatical, and semantic stylistic devices, literary fiction defamiliarizes its readers. The capacity of literary fiction to unsettle readers' expectations and challenge their thinking is also reflected in

Although readerly texts, such as most popular genre fiction, are intended to entertain their mostly passive readers, writerly, or literary, texts engage their readers creatively as writers. Similarly, Mikhail Bakhtin (19) defined literary fiction as polyphonic and proposed that readers of literary fiction must contribute their own to a cacophony of voices. The absence of a single authorial perspective prompts readers to enter a vibrant discourse with the author and her characters.

Bruner (20), like Barthes and Bakhtin, has proposed that literature engages readers in a discourse that forces them to fill in gaps and search "for meanings among a spectrum of possible meanings" (p. 25). Bruner argues that to elicit this writerly stance, literary fiction triggers presupposition (a focus on implicit meanings), subjectification (depicting reality "through the filter of the consciousness of protagonists in the story" (p. 25)), and multiple perspectives (perceiving the world simultaneously from different viewpoints). These features mimic those of ToM.

Our contention is that literary fiction, which we consider to be both writerly and polyphonic, uniquely engages the psychological processes needed to gain access to characters' subjective experiences. Just as in real life, the worlds of literary fiction are replete with complicated individuals whose inner lives are rarely easily discerned but warrant exploration. The worlds of fiction, though, pose fewer risks than the real world, and they present opportunities to consider the experiences of others without facing the potentially threatening consequences of that engagement. More critically, whereas many of our mundane social experiences may be scripted by convention and informed by stereotypes, those presented in literary fiction often disrupt our expectations. Readers of literary fiction must draw on more flexible interpretive resources to infer the feelings and thoughts of characters. That is, they must engage ToM processes. Contrary to literary fiction, popular fiction, which is more readerly, tends to portray the world and characters as internally consistent and predictable (21). Therefore, it may reaffirm readers' expectations and so not promote ToM.

To test our general hypothesis that literary fiction would prime ToM, we first compared the effects of reading literary fiction with reading nonfiction (experiment 1) and then focused on testing our predictions about the different effects of reading literary and popular fiction (experiments 2 to 5).

Difficulty in precisely quantifying literariness notwithstanding, some works are considered particularly good examples of literature and are recognized with prestigious awards (e.g., the National Book Award). Although selected through an inherently inexact process, prize-winning texts are more likely to embody general characteristics of literature than bestsellers of genre fiction (e.g., romance and adventure stories). In the absence of a clear means of quantifying literariness, the judgments of expert raters (i.e., literary prize jurors) were used. Accordingly, to study the effects of reading literary fiction, we selected literary works of fiction by award-winning or canonical writers and compared their effects on ToM with reading nonfiction, popular fiction, or nothing at all.

In experiment 1 (22), 86 participants were randomly assigned to read one of six short texts (three literary fiction and three nonfiction). Next, participants completed a false-belief test as a measure of cognitive ToM

Study by Kidd&Castano  
2013 suggests that reading  
literary fiction improves  
ToM:  
“[R]eading literary fiction  
temporarily enhances ToM.  
More broadly, they suggest  
that ToM may be  
influenced by engagement  
with works of art.”



# Contradictory evidence: no evident correlation between experiencing fiction and becoming more empathetic

This document is copyrighted by the Institute Technological Association in view of its social purposes. This article is intended solely for the personal use of the individual user and is to be deleted after the reading.



# So, what is the experience of empathy?

- Connected with aesthetics and emotional development
- Empathy intensifies our experience by making us view reality from another's perspective
- It engages our intersubjectivity



## 4. Empathy for the villain?

When reading a novel, looking at a visual art work, or attending a theatrical play or a movie, our embodied simulation becomes *liberated*, that is, it is freed from the burden of modeling our actual presence in daily life. We look at art from a *safe distance* from which our being open to the world is magnified. In a sense, to appreciate art means leaving the world behind in order to grasp it more fully.

Gallese, V., & Wojciehowski, H. (2011). How Stories Make Us Feel: Toward an Embodied Narratology. *California Italian Studies*, 2(1). Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3jg726c2>





## 5. Why we read fiction: dangers and implications

- If empathy is correlated with morality
- If literature improves empathy
- Then we should read fiction
- But:
- What fiction?



## 5. Why we read fiction: dangers and implications

- If empathy is not correlated with morality
- If literature does not (necessarily) improve empathy
- Then we should (still) read fiction
- Because through fiction we can:
  - enhance intersubjectivity
  - experience more than one perspective

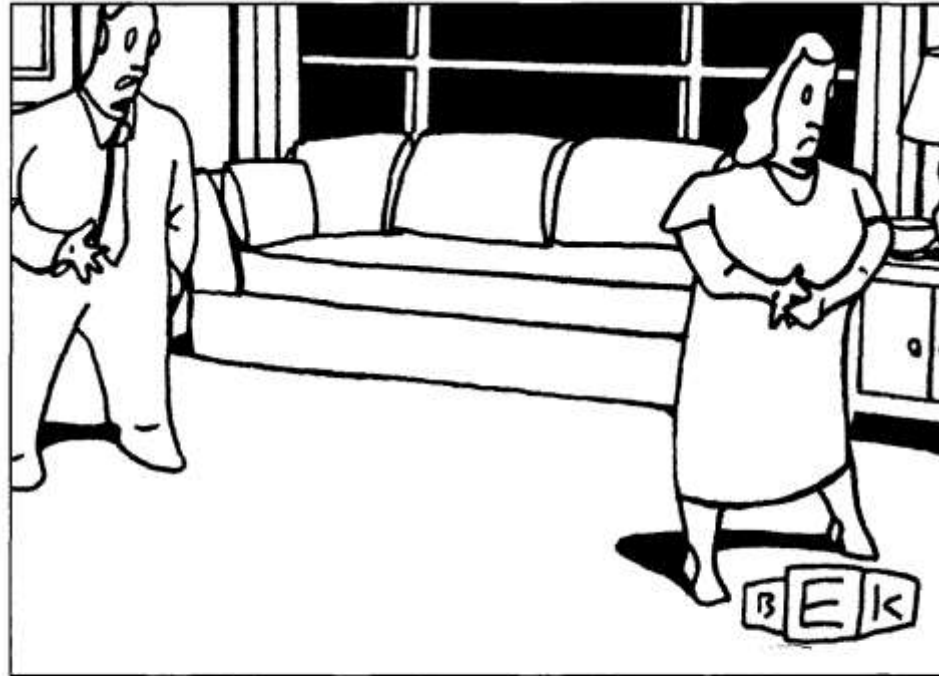


# Where we go from here

- Empathy and related concepts: immersion, identification, performativity, simulation
- Studying textual and linguistic correlates of empathy
- Studying narrative strategies for enhancing the experience of empathy
- Creating a database of examples of “dark empathy”



# Thank you!



*"Of course I care about how you imagined I thought you perceived I wanted you to feel."*

FIGURE 1. "Of course I care about how you imagined I thought you perceived I wanted you to feel." © The New Yorker Collection 1998 Bruce Eric Kaplan from cartoonbank.com. All Rights Reserved.



## References

- ABRANTES, Ana Margarida. 2014. Narrativa e Empatia. Lições do Cérebro e da Literatura, *Povos e Culturas*, 18 - O Cérebro: O que a ciência nos diz!, Lisboa: CEPCEP, 195-207.
- BRANDT, L. & BRANDT. 2005. Cognitive Poetics and Imagery. *European Journal of English Studies*, 9(2), 117-130.
- BREITHAUPT, F. 2009. *Kulturen der Empathie*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- BREITHAUPT, F. 2019. *The dark sides of empathy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- BRUNER, J. 1991. *The Narrative Construction of Reality*. *Critical Inquiry*, 18, 1–21.
- COPLAN, A. 2004. Empathic engagement with narrative fictions. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 62(2), 141–152. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-594X.2004.00147.x/full>
- GALLESE, V. 2001. The “Shared Manifold ” Hypothesis. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8(5-7), 33–50.
- GALLESE, V., FADIGA, L., FOGASSI, L., & RIZZOLATTI, G. 1996. Action recognition in the premotor cortex. *Brain*, 119, 593–609. Retrieved from <http://brain.oxford-journals.org/content/119/2/593.short>
- KEEN, Suzanne. 2014. *Empathy and the novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- KIDD, D. C., & CASTANO, E. 2013. Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind. *Science* (New York, N.Y.), 342(6156), 377–80. doi:10.1126/science.1239918
- MAR, R. A., & OATLEY, K. 2008. The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(3), 173–192.
- MAR, R. A., OATLEY, K., HIRSH, J., DELA PAZ, J., & PETERSON, J. B. 2006. Bookworms versus nerds: Exposure to fiction versus non-fiction, divergent associations with social ability, and the simulation of fictional social worlds. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 40(5), 694–712. doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2005.08.002
- SINGER, T., & LAMM, C. 2009. The social neuroscience of empathy. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1156, 81–96. doi:10.1111/j.1749-6632.2009.04418.x
- WOJCIEHOWSKI, H. C., & GALLESE, V. 2011. Embodied Narratology. *California Italian Studies*, 2(1). Retrieved from <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/3jg726c2>

