

Escaping Fiction

NELLIE WIELAND

California State University Long Beach, California, USA

In this paper I argue that a norm of literary fiction is to compel the reader to form beliefs about the world as it is. It may seem wrong to suggest that the reason I believe p is because I imagined p, yet literary fiction can make this the case. I argue for an account grounded in indexed doxastic susceptibilities mapped between a fictional context and the particular properties of a reader, more specifically the susceptibilities in her beliefs, attitudes, and psychological states. Works of fiction can be about different things at the same time, some of which are fictive and some of which are factual. Since belief can be weak or strong, partial or complete, tenuous or robust, opaque or clear, there are susceptibilities throughout a doxastic set out of which new beliefs are formed. Skillful works of fiction exploit these susceptibilities and create new ones. This is an aesthetic achievement of such works: they take what should be a norm-violating practice of belief-formation on the basis of imaginative engagement and they make it so.

Keywords: Cognitivism; fiction; imagination; belief.

“The duty of literature is to fight fiction. It is to find a way into the world as it is” (Knausgaard 2018).

What moves you most in a book? “The skilled and gradual unveiling of hidden truths” (Feiffer 2020).

“Fiction is a lie, and good fiction is the truth inside the lie” (King 2000).

“Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you the illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion” (Williams 1945).

1. *Norms of belief, norms of fiction*

Here is a commonsense claim: I have failed to apply the norms of belief when I come to believe that someone loves me just because I imagine that he loves me.¹ I will almost be arguing against this commonsense claim in what follows. I will argue that, in some cases, the acceptance of belief on the basis of acts of imagination is both common and reasonable, for some content. It is, in fact, a norm of literary fiction. And when it works, it is both an aesthetic and an epistemic achievement.

The first epigram of this paper is that it is the duty of literature to fight fiction and to find a way into the world as it is. I am softening this in a couple of ways: first, I will not be talking about *fighting* fiction, but instead *escaping* the epistemic limits of fictional contexts. Second, I will not be talking about the *duties* of literature, but rather aesthetic goals or *achievements*, including achievements that are unintentional. It will be important for my argument to acknowledge the plurality of goals of any work of fiction. These goals may include the imparting of truths, but may also include engagement, entertainment, profit, and others. One of the mistakes in discussing how we might learn from fictions is getting distracted by the other elements in fictional texts with parallel goals, which are only sometimes relevant. Finally, I argue that all of this is more plausible when our attention is on the reader. The consumer of fiction makes possible the justification for believing-that-*p* on the basis of imagining-that-*p* because of what I will term their indexed doxastic susceptibilities. A fair amount of attention has been paid to how works of fiction can or cannot convey knowledge, and in this it is easy to get distracted by the intentions of the author, the perspective of the narrator, and the position to reality. Since I argue that a reader can learn from imaginative engagement alone, we do not—in principle—need to worry about how the work is constructed or the attitudes it may be advancing.² There will be cases of learning from fiction independently of the intentions of the author and the construction of the world. Nevertheless, I argue that the crafting and construction of the work by a skilled author is typically what facilitates the development of beliefs about the actual world in accomplished literary fiction.

For the purposes of this argument, my primary attention is not on the attitudes of the author, narrator, or characters. While all of that is, in principle, irrelevant, it is still the case that a well-constructed piece of literary fiction finds a way to escape its limits and create a map from the epistemic space of the fiction to the reader's epistemic space by

¹ Nothing will turn on it here, but we can take truth to be the norm of belief, or we can take the functional properties of belief to be such that they are clearly distinct from imagination—in functional behavior and inferential relations (Sinhababu (2012); cf. Velleman (2000); and objections in O'Brien (2005), Noordhof (2001), and Van Leeuwen (2009)).

² For the noncognitivist position, with a view quite opposed to what is defended here, see Stolnitz (1992), as example.

way of her imagination. This is central to the argument that is developed here: learning from fiction depends on the interaction between the epistemic susceptibilities of a reader and the craftwork of an author in identifying those susceptibilities.

Returning to that commonsense claim: we can suppose that truth is the norm of belief, or something similar to this. It is, after all, better to have true beliefs than false ones. As such, the norms of belief are clearly distinct from the norms of the imagination (whatever those may be). It may be that truth is not a norm of the imagination, and that it is no better or worse to have truth-oriented imagination. But could truth be a norm of fiction? Can fiction be truth-oriented? *Should* it be? These are somewhat odd questions. A standard answer, for most fiction most of the time, is that if a work of fiction says something true, it is, at best, accidentally true.³ How we take this is often a matter of genre conventions. We expect that much of the story in a work of historical fiction will be factual in many respects: dates, places, primary actors, major events. But we also assume that it is merely fictional in others: private conversations, internal thoughts, compressing or collapsing of characters or events for storytelling purposes. It seems reasonable that we abide by unspoken norms here about what fictions are permissible: the setting and time period of Thomas Cromwell's rise to power could not be other than what it was, even though the private conversations are surely entirely contrived in *Wolf Hall*. In *Shuggie Bain*, the story is said to be only very loosely autobiographical, so it is reasonably assumed that the dates, places, primary actors, and major events of the story are entirely fictional. But not the characterization of Glasgow in the 1980s. Surely that should bear a great deal of resemblance to the real place. As such, in reading *Wolf Hall* or *Shuggie Bain*, I can quite reasonably learn something true—acquire a true belief—about political events in sixteenth century England or life in 1980s Glasgow. I do not want to go too far afield here, but rather I want to sow the first seed of doubt that works of fiction ought not be truth-oriented (Friend 2008). I want to push this doubt quite a bit further, by arguing for a much more general sense in which readers learn from literary fictions such as *Shuggie Bain*, and beyond just those background features of the city in which it takes place. But before pressing on let us review other ways in which beliefs are changed on the basis of fictional engagement.

Two caveats before proceeding. Throughout I will use terms like “learning” and “belief-change” and I will refer to coming to have new beliefs and knowledge. Obviously, these claims have to be made with

³ Gregory Currie (1990) describes it in this way. See Friend (2008) for a helpful discussion. Fictional works often state that any resemblance to real persons and events is merely coincidental and that what one is reading or viewing is a pure fiction. Of course, readers recognize that this is said largely to avoid liability and not because the author believes it. It would be odd, to use the example below, if fictional Glasgow resembled real Glasgow *accidentally*. The former is, of course, based on the latter.

care. However, learning, as a process, may not always lead one clearly or directly toward truth, even if, as a process, it may increase understanding, and change beliefs as it goes along. Learning is somewhat untidy in this way. Its untidiness may be especially pronounced in the context of imaginative engagement or in thinking about the actual world as reflected in fictional entities. It would be a mistake to treat this kind of learning as of a piece with other kinds of learning. I will flag the messiness as I go without scrubbing it entirely.

The second caveat is that, throughout, I am only considering literature, and not fiction generally understood. While the arguments herein could apply to any fictional work, readers will have a harder time seeing the application to *The Walking Dead* or *Friday the 13th*. The argument is not meant to conclude that every work of fiction imparts substantive belief change; in fact, it is explicitly not that. Rather, it concludes that readers' epistemic engagement with works of fiction is particular to them and to the extent the work represents the world in ways that exploit readers' epistemic vulnerabilities. It is in virtue of a work's literary ambitions that it identifies these epistemic vulnerabilities successfully.

2. *Fiction and belief change*

There are many ways in which beliefs can change on the basis of imaginative engagement with fictional contexts. I am setting aside elemental belief change—such as developing beliefs about the fiction itself. Instead, I am interested in belief change about the actual world. The most obvious is the acquisition of *propositional* knowledge, either particular or general. I may form the belief that *Baker Street is a street in London* (Lewis 1978). This is an instance of the kind of propositional knowledge that a reader can acquire when a work of fiction has endeavored to present a historically accurate presentation of a person, place, or event.

I may also enter into *crossover* states. These are states where my doxastic attitudes in real and fictional contexts are blended, albeit irrationally. For example, I may come to believe that the local waters are more shark-infested than they are after watching *Jaws*. Or I may be more susceptible to stories of exorcism based on my religious upbringing. These crossover states, compellingly described by Richard Gerrig (1993) are not truth-oriented (see also Currie 2020). A reader's beliefs about sharks and demonic possession change (Smuts 2010), but they *ought* not, and they do not for many readers. Most readers and viewers will experience a heightened emotional state while engaging with a fiction, and that heightened emotional state may be heightened again in similar settings (for example, on a boat), but only occasionally do their beliefs change. I will return to this phenomenon below and offer a more detailed model.

Finally, readers experience belief change about *what something is like*. It is plausible to think that authors and artists are better at char-

acterizing actual people, or people types, than anyone else. It is part of what it means to be an aesthetically skilled author or artist that one is better at seeing the actual as it is. The rest of us may be distracted, or indifferent, or perceptually and epistemically stubborn. Charles Dickens, on the other hand, captured the essential properties of person types in very precise distillations, often captured (famously) in their names alone—Scrooge, Dodger, M'Choakumchild come to mind. I may construct or affirm a *what it is like* of late-stage alcoholism through a viewing of *Leaving Las Vegas*. This may be the mimetic sense of “true” that we commonly have in mind when we describe fictions as true-to-a-type of person or experience. They tell the truth insofar as they are better at representing the actual than even the actual presents itself. A minor, partially drawn but particularly evocative character may better identify that which is real about certain complete and living persons in the actual world. All experience and representation is cultivated, but good literature is just better at it. We have never lived enough to know all of what there is (Nussbaum 1990). Of course, this is nothing new; those who engage with a lot of literary fiction know that this can be the case and are especially distressed when it fails.

These three forms of belief change are relevant to a fuller and, I think, more interesting, model of belief change on the basis of imaginative engagement. Readers form beliefs about the actual on the basis of their doxastic susceptibilities and to the extent that the work's pure fictions are true-to-on the relevant parameters. I will draw out this claim in a few ways.

3. *What fictional works are about*

However we think learning from fiction occurs, we should assume that there are content constraints. For example, it may be easier to accept learning from fiction with respect to psychological content, emotional content, or ethical assessment, but more difficult to accept with respect to other kinds of content about the world. I may come to believe that it is a psychological or emotional fact that people are disposed to respond in certain ways on the basis of certain treatment given my imaginative engagement with some fiction. I may also come to believe that such treatment of one another is not ethical, again, on the basis of my imaginative engagement with that fiction. What I do not come to believe is that the fictional persons or places or events are real on the mere basis of my imaginative engagement—or at least I ought not if my epistemic system is functioning.

Works of literary fiction have layers of content, or layers of *aboutness*. A given story can be about its characters, and their relations, about the place and time in which they live, and the events that transpire between them. It can also be about concepts, ideas, feelings, or sensations. A work can be entirely fictive in the construction of characters, relations, places, times, and events and as such invite the fictive

stance for its internal coherence and interpretation. It can also invite the fictive stance about something real, such as Glasgow in the 1980s.⁴ This is not uncontroversial. The nature of fiction can be characterized to preclude such a possibility and can call the correspondence to the real “accidental.” This is counterintuitive. *Ceteris paribus*, a fictional Glasgow is based on the real Glasgow, and unmotivated deviations from a true representation inhibits make-believe. For example, it may drive a fiction forward to describe Glasgow as having warm and sunny winters, but if this is assumed in the fiction without motivation it would distract and confuse readers’ ability to incorporate it into their make-believe.

There is a concrete sense in which a given work is *about* these purely fictive constructions, and any fictionalized real elements. For example, there is the straightforward answer to the question “what is *Shuggie Bain* about?” It is about a boy named Shuggie, growing up in poverty with his alcoholic mother, Agnes, whom he loves immensely, set in Glasgow in the 1980s. This is one level of the *aboutness* of the work.

It is also about growing up, a relationship between mother and child, the cruel economics of the time and place, and the despair of addiction. The story is about Agnes and Shuggie, but also about mothers and sons. It is about Shuggie getting enough to eat, and about Thatcherite policies. This is another level of the *aboutness* of the work. Finally, it is also about love, loss, and belonging. This is a third level of abstraction. It is about Shuggie’s love for Agnes, sons’ love for mothers, and about love, an unbounded love, more generally. This is another level of the *aboutness* of the work. Any of these act as answers to the question, “what is *Shuggie Bain* about?” It is about Shuggie and Agnes in Glasgow, *and* it is about mothers and sons and alcoholism and poverty, *and* it is about love and loss and belonging. These layers of content have dimensions of internal and external coherence and correspondence. For example, depending on the goals of the work, there should be some internal consistency to the character Shuggie, and some kind of accuracy in the depiction of poverty, but this should extend to accuracy in this particular experience of poverty in 1980s Glasgow, under the particular social and economic policies that were in place in the real world. This hardly makes it historical fiction; rather it is a means of presenting the *what it is like* to a pure fiction. It requires internal and external coherence

⁴ See Currie (1990); see also Davies (1996), Lamarque and Olson (1994), and for discussion Friend (2008). If there is something like a fictive stance it is not reserved for what we take to be fictional constructions within the arts. Within philosophy we talk about many forms of fictionalism, but versions of fictive stances are required for things like quotation, reference at a distance, and other forms of storytelling and representation, even about the actual (Wieland 2021). More germane to this discussion is that I do not think a fictive stance reflects the sum of how fictional contexts are approached. Our doxastic susceptibilities, and the levels of content in a work, make it so that only some aspects of any given fictional context are taken-as fictive, and not taken-as something with which we can engage as we do the actual (Matravers 2014). The catch is that whether something should be taken-as fictive is only sometimes a property of the work or a component of the author’s intentions.

and consistency to build out the true. The building out of this through line is what will take the reader, via her imagination, from the purely fictive spaces, to belief change about the actual world.

This is quite a bit different from standard cognitivist and noncognitivist formulations of the question. That approach is to look to the use of any given sentence as fictive, as metafictional (Currie 1990), as expressing a meaning or a secondary meaning (Weitz 1943), or as being interpreted in a narrow or broad context (Kaplan 1989). I am starting from a different initial position that is reflective of the reader's stance. The reader's stance for any given work of fiction is indexed to her doxastic set. As will become clearer below, I do not think that the fictive stance or the fiction/non-fiction distinction is definitive here (Matravers 2014). This is because any given work, or sentence within that work, can be about pure fictions, real world entities, and real, but abstract, ideas and concepts at the same time. Part of the problem with trying to capture this through a distinction between direct and indirect speech acts is that it may be stipulating what is being directly and indirectly said (García-Carpintero 2019; Voltolini 2021) (for example, why think that claims about unbounded love are indirectly rather than directly stated in *Shuggie Bain*), and it is unclear how to delineate which speech acts are said or are emergent across an extended work.

We should be careful here. It would be wrong to say that any given work, such as *Shuggie Bain*, needs to depict real economic history just so in order to capture the *what it is like* of the story. Authors are, of course, allowed license in just this area; Glasgow could be reimaged as a sunny and tropical city, alcoholism as a romp. But there are limits, I will argue, and these limits are just where we can learn in the most interesting way from fiction. These limits are in this third level of aboutness in the case of this example. Insofar as a work is about love, loss, and belonging, or grief, pain, friendship, childbirth, and other grand themes, these are not fictive. They are not, in an important sense, malleable by the license of the author. Wanting to belong is something real, and a story about wanting to belong is a story about something real. It can be taken as belief-directed, as true to the world. Of course, it can (and often does) go wrong. Not getting this wrong is what makes great works great. The aesthetic achievement, as I will characterize it below, is when the fictive presents the real. The fictive utterances create a work of imagination which is a characterization of something which is real or true across the levels of its content. This characterization of the real and true, when presented through these fictive means, is only realized in the susceptibilities in a reader's doxastic set.

4. *Susceptibilities in belief*

Every doxastic set is uniquely formed. It is not just a set of beliefs, but beliefs counted in various ways: along axes of retrievability, certainty, completeness, and relation to attitude or emotion. The suggestion here

is that any given doxastic set is a such a combination, $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots, p_n$. When asked to identify a belief, say for pedagogical purposes, we tend to lead with something simple and clear, easily retrievable, and not laden with emotion: I believe *that snow is white*. We have many such beliefs, most of which are so evident that we never attend to them at all. Within this belief set there are also “susceptibilities”—this is a deliberately vague term to capture the range of weaknesses in a doxastic set. These beliefs can be weak or strong, partial or complete, tenuous or robust, opaque or clear.⁵ A susceptibility can be present merely because of ignorance: *I have never heard of Thomas Cromwell*, but those are the less interesting cases. A more interesting case is a susceptibility due to weak credence or because of incomplete doxastic or inferential networks: *This experience was like x, but I do not know whether that means that I should believe p, or whether I should believe that this experience is shared by others or has F additional characteristics*. There are beliefs which we hold as certainties, and others for which we have some justification but could use more. There are also doxastic states that are not fully accessible to us, and which we can come to realize that we believe.

Doxastic susceptibility is also due to intersections between doxastic and conative states or sets. For example, a person may want to believe p_1 , but lack the confidence to do so, or be fearful of what it entails, or is moved by her desires and positive affect to ignore countervailing evidence. There can be beliefs that the holder is embarrassed by or regrets; and beliefs that are arrived at by way of courage or conviction. This is difficult to see for more particular beliefs about the world: I believe *that snow is white*; but easier to see for beliefs which are less concrete or more diffuse across states or time: I believe *that you can be disappointed in motherhood*; or are about a what-it-is-like: I believe *that even late stage alcoholics want to keep living, even from their own first-person perspective*.

As such, there are strengths and susceptibilities throughout a doxastic set. A given reader has a belief set $p_1, p_2, p_3, [\dots, p_n$, containing within it gaps and conative overlays. A given literary work constructs a fictional context in which there are elements that are meant to be taken fictively, and which are typically taken as such. The craftwork of their construction is what moves the reader to take other claims factually. Those factual claims may be at other layers of aboutness, although presented concurrently in the fictional context. These factual claims can then change a reader’s beliefs about the actual world at those places where her beliefs are susceptible to change—these are doxastic susceptibilities. Think about this thematically—a great work of literature typically deals with those very themes which intersect at the points where our beliefs and attitudes are vulnerable. There are more techni-

⁵ Suits (2006: 383–384) offers a compelling case regarding degrees of belief with respect to imagining fictions, and how beliefs can be “pushed” and “pulled”, “peripheralized”, and brought into attention.

cal ways of thinking about this: as pragmatic encroachment or pragmatic conditions on justification (Fantl and McGrath 2002; Stanley 2005) or belief (Weatherson 2005), or as imprecise credences (Armendt 2013), as a partial list. The clarity with which we hold beliefs, the extent to which they are retrievable or evident to us, and the interactions between our beliefs, desires, values, and aspirations, are all relevant when engaging in make-believe or imagining a fiction. Similarly, there is conceptual content, events, ideas, or histories, to which we stand in various conative relations, or have various attitudes toward (Gendler 2008). At some points in a life, one can be unmoved by stories of family, and at other times, deeply moved. These attitudes and states, of course, change throughout one's life as one accrues experiences, and sheds convictions and memories.

Many of our most important beliefs are partially formed, vague and inchoate. These can include our beliefs about the duties of friendship, what is fair in wartime, how to raise a child. There is a reason that philosophers find depth in the basic questions about a life. We also have doxastic states and doxastic sets that have become disjointed and faded snippets (perhaps about trigonometry or, famously, what childbirth is like). Some of this can be recalled with effort and concentration. Yet a dim and fragmented set of mathematical beliefs are not unlike beliefs a reader may have about many other things. He may believe that mothers let you down but let themselves down more. He may have beliefs about the depths of grief, or loving and not being loved, what it might feel like to be willing to die for someone, or what it would feel like if someone died for him. In such examples, the reader is likely to have an incomplete or indeterminate belief overlaid with emotional force. And they rise and fall in clarity and salience throughout one's life.

Readers, viewers, and audiences are all bringing these doxastic sets to fictional contexts. And each one of these sets has hard spots, where convictions are obvious, evident, and clear, that to which one has given much careful thought and study, or around which one organizes one's life. Each set also has soft spots along axes of retrievability, certainty, completeness, and relation to attitude or emotion. We are susceptible in those cases where we are apt to change our minds, or where we cannot yet tell, or cannot yet retrieve, what we believe. Coming to form or find these beliefs is a kind of self-revelation.

Self-revelation can be understood as the change in beliefs about *one-self* on the basis of imaginative engagement with fictional works. We can cast this as something that emerges from the properties of certain forms of literary fiction and of individual persons. Yet, I do not want to claim that the kind of learning with which we should be primarily concerned is self-knowledge, merely in the narrow sense. All belief change is personal in the sense that it happens from the first-person perspective. A reader can take in new information or entertain imaginative states, and in both cases come to form new beliefs. Either way,

the inferential process is internal to the reader and as such all learning is self-revelation. It need not be confined to belief change about one's own state or identity: *I now understand why I am lonely, I think I may be lovable*, but can also include general inferences: *Motherhood and childhood contain uniquely structured forms of disappointment*. This can still be a revelation to a person insofar as it changes their beliefs about the world.

5. *Inference out of fictional spaces*

Let's imagine that I read a fiction in which a person with a certain set of characteristics faces long odds at finding love, but does find love. In imagining this fiction, in engaging in this act of make-believe, I come to realize that *if that unlucky and doomed person can find love, then I can too*. Take it to be the case that this is revelatory to me and constitutes genuine belief change and, perhaps even knowledge. And why not? There are many ways in which belief can change and imaginative engagement is one of them. Before thinking that this is some empty self-discovery, or one that was realized outside of the fiction, it is worth considering more nuanced cases and what makes these possible.

In our example of Shuggie, his mother is an alcoholic who eventually drinks herself to death and in the process deprives Shuggie of even the rudimentary securities of home. But she is also a magnetic and compelling person whom he loves deeply. Some readers, with some set of properties, may conclude on reading the work *that they have been extraordinarily fortunate in life's material circumstances but also that they have also never experienced such a deep and abiding love for another person*. So, fortunate in circumstance but unfortunate in love. These inferences are simple, but they can be quite complicated, drawn on the basis of a very particular mapping between the properties of the work and the properties of the reader. They may also be revelatory. It may be revelatory for a reader to come to realize that her circumstances, however wanting, could have been worse in very particular ways; and, correspondingly, that her love for her family members, however strong, pales in comparison to the love evinced in Shuggie. These inferences can be just as particular as the intersecting epistemic spaces—the reader's and the fiction's—allow. They need not be only general claims about the human condition (*things could be worse!*) but may be much more specific (*I am lucky to have never had to take money from the pockets of men visiting the house in order to buy enough food to eat*). A reader may draw further conclusions about themselves, or about the universality of their own disappointments as a child, or failures as a parent. And that in turn may offer despair or relief. These conclusions may be quite particular about unique faults and have nothing at all to do with what the author of *Shuggie Bain* intended. If a reader progresses from a nascent to fully-formed belief about her own alcoholism or her own child or any number of other things, these are not explicitly

or implicitly implied by the work; they are neither conversational nor conventional implicatures of the work or any sentence within it. The reader can come to have a new belief—which may be revelatory—and it will not be based merely on her prior beliefs about the actual world. It will be a form of learning, and learning about the particular.⁶ It will not always be intended by the author or present in the work, except for the fact that the work is written with an open texture that allows for the exploitation of a reader's opaque beliefs about childhood, parenthood, addiction, love, etc. The “open texture” is the construction of a fictional world which allows for these throughlines to the soft spots in a reader's doxastic sets. A work that circumscribes this too narrowly, by closing off imaginative possibilities, or leaving no room for the interpolation from the fictive to the actual, one which fails to build layers of content that are both fictive and factual, is a work that will accomplish less literarily. This is a fine line, argumentatively, that I am trying to draw here. On one hand, I am presenting this from the reader's side: learning from fiction is something grounded in the susceptibilities of a reader's doxastic set. On the other hand, I am positing that that these susceptibilities are identified through an author's craftwork: the factual claims about the actual world emerge out of the skilled construction of the fictive elements, which, if done well, identify just those doxastic weaknesses which are central to most readers. This is no small feat.

Inference out of fictional spaces can be approached by thinking about the epistemic spaces that fictional works exist in. The idea of the “fictive stance” and the “fictional epistemic space” retains utility for certain kinds of analysis. But it is not as helpful or as informative as it might be on its own, as I have argued here, and it stymies efforts to understand the varieties of truth-telling and belief-change that take place. An alternative proposal is that fictional epistemic space is important for the world-building that makes first-order belief or make-believe possible. In the fictional epistemic space of a particular work we learn about the members of a family, their relations, their employment, and so on. We understand what is the case in this space and we build inferential networks between the facts and events that are built up. Similarly, we do the same thing in our actual epistemic spaces, learning about actual people, their relations, their employment, what

⁶ This same revelation in imagining a fictional context is just what could explain the rationality of choosing a transformative experience. Choosing a transformative experience is said to be irrational since a transformative experience by definition is an experience you have not had which will make you a person you are not now (Paul 2014). And that person may have entirely different values which guide different decision-making. Spending time in imagining fictional contexts, especially those told from the first-person perspective, is exactly the kind of justificatory throughline which obviates the irrationality of choosing a transformative experience. For example, a reader may imagine transformative experiences in fictional contexts such as parenthood, or re-locating one's sexual orientation or gender, or deep grief or loss, or living through wartime, and has a reasonable claim to mitigating the irrationality of making certain choices.

is and is not the case, and the inferential networks between the facts and events that are built up in those spaces.

These spaces are overlapping.⁷ They are overlaid on one another in configurations indexed to individual readers.⁸ They overlap exactly at the susceptible places, and these are not fixed.⁹ In my examples above about childhood and parenthood, they overlap at the places where readers may have opaque, weak, soft, ambivalent, or undiscovered and unarticulated beliefs about aspects of these life experiences.¹⁰ This will be true for many people since everyone has experienced a version of childhood and many people have experienced a version of parenthood. On the other hand, these texts will likely be read quite differently before and after parenthood, just as literature about grief, loss, love, wartime, poverty, or disaster will reveal different doxastic strengths and weaknesses depending on one's indexed relations to those events. It depends on how the fictional manages to find groundedness in individual feelings about childhood, marriage, loss, loneliness, self-esteem, and so on.

I want to emphasize that the features of the spaces I am mapping does not have to do with what one has experienced, or how one identifies, but has more to do with the robustness of one's prior beliefs and commitments. So, the shared epistemic space between the fictional and the actual is mapped in just this way and emerges from the facts around particular belief sets. A good fictional construct exploits these doxastic susceptibilities in readers. A really good fictional construct creates new doxastic susceptibilities. The justificatory through-line is the mapping between the epistemic space of the fictional world—including the facts of the fiction, and how they are assembled—and the prior doxastic and conative states of the reader. Learning from fiction is easier to accept once we see how much of it depends upon the reader and not the writer and not the work. The skill lies with the writer and manifests in the work, but the epistemic processes depend largely on the prior doxastic states of the reader and the inferential work that she puts in. The shared epistemic space—between the fictional and the actual—comes from this, and not from a fictive stance. Moreover, this explains why readers have such varied epistemic experiences in their engagement

⁷ For a skeptical analysis of the possibility that these epistemic spaces are overlapping in the way that would allow for inference, see Nichols (2006).

⁸ See Suits (2006) for an account of how readers do not have to have exclusive beliefs about fictions. He rejects what he calls “doxastic exclusivity.” This notion is relevant here in that I argue that one can have make-beliefs about the world of the fiction alongside beliefs about the actual world as represented in the fiction. This is a consequence of the levels of aboutness in any given fictional representation.

⁹ And the corresponding may hold in response to the paradox of fiction in *Fictional Emotional Spaces and Actual Emotional Spaces*.

¹⁰ See Stock (2016) for an account of how fictional works provide testimony that compels belief about the actual world. In the argument of this paper, fictional works could provide testimony, but they also could merely provide a representation which is “true-to” in such a way that it compels inferences on the part of the reader, even if not directly testified to, implicated, or intended by an author.

with fictional and literary works. The indexing to readers alters the configuration of doxastic susceptibilities but it also alters inferential power. Inference, like imagination, and the adoption of perspectives outside of our own, are skills unevenly distributed.

6. *Aesthetic achievement*

Finally, I would like to return to the claim I made at the outset about aesthetic achievement. If truth is not a norm of the imagination, and, if truth is the norm of belief, then it is an epistemic achievement if a person adopts a new belief on the basis of imagination in a fictional context. The epistemic achievement is aesthetic if this occurs using the craft of make-believe (Eaton 2012; Kieran 2006). This is the significance of the story and the craftwork in telling the story. Since stories have levels of aboutness and interpretation, it is an achievement to produce a story that makes the particular about something more general, and for it to have a texture that is open enough to find overlay with many different doxastic sets. Some of this is done through fairly obvious means: it is not accidental that so much notable literature deals with themes common to most lives (love, loss, betrayal, coming of age, etc.). The more difficult piece of craftwork comes in the construction of the fictional elements of a work as true-to in just the way that allows the reader to move from the fictional epistemic space to her beliefs about the actual.

Belief change, and the inculcation of knowledge, should not be the goal of imaginative engagement, nor should it be normative. Yet it occurs. This is explained by the craftwork of the fiction-building as better at displaying the real along some relevant parameters than the actual world is. It is also explained by content constraints as indexed to individual persons with some set of doxastic susceptibilities. In this paper I have narrowed my focus on content constraints down to inferences based on some mapping that creates unified epistemic spaces, but that is not the only content available for such mapping. The aesthetic achievement is the exploiting and creating of these soft spots.

7. *Learning from fiction*

I started by considering the claim that the goal of literature is to “fight” fiction, or to escape fiction. And I have drawn out a particular way in which this occurs through inference which can be specific and revelatory, that happens on the basis of what I have called indexed doxastic susceptibilities on the reader-side, and craftwork on author-side, and finally how this can be an aesthetic achievement since it overcomes the norms against forming new beliefs or drawing new inferences merely on the basis of imaginative engagement. While I have softened and qualified a number of claims along the way, it should still sound counter-intuitive. The intuitive claim is that the goal of literary fiction is to get the reader to make-believe parts of the work, to represent the

fictional world, to understand the inferential relations within the fictional world, to be entertained, or moved, or challenged. I have instead offered a way of thinking about the goal of literary fiction as exploiting and creating soft spots in a reader's doxastic and conative systems such that they change their beliefs about the actual world.

Part of the reason that we get hung up on learning from fiction is that the model of knowledge comes from philosophy. When we look at the plurality of goals in a creative work it seems like knowledge is sidelined. Similarly, when we compare the kind of knowledge derived from philosophical thought experiments in contrast with the much more complex thought experiments of fiction it does not seem like they could possibly be knowledge-oriented. But, that is in part because of the narrowness of goals. Philosophy is not aiming to be true-to. Neither is it constructed with a kind of open texture which allows for exploitation of doxastic susceptibilities in a way that is indexed to particular audiences under particular epistemic circumstances.

I will close with something that I think is obvious to all serious readers or consumers of art and literature: that of course we learn from fiction and from engaging our imagination. While we may not always use our imagination to explicitly derive knowledge from fiction, we do build our imaginative capacity itself by seriously engaging with fiction. This strengthening of the imaginative muscle makes us better able to be knowers, and recognizers of the truth, in all epistemic spaces.

References

- Armendt, B. 2013. "Pragmatic Interests and Imprecise Belief." *Philosophy of Science* 80 (5): 758–768.
- Currie, G. 1990. *The Nature of Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Currie, G. 2020. *Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davies, D. 1996. "Fictional Truth and Fictional Authors." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36: 43–55.
- Eaton, A. 2012. "Robust Immoralism." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (3): 281–292.
- Fantl, J. and McGrath, M. 2002. "Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification." *Philosophical Review* 111 (1): 67–94.
- Feiffer, J. 2020. "By the Book: The Novel That Made Jules Feiffer Ignore His Family on Vacation." *The New York Times*, May 28, 2020.
- Friend, S. 2008. "Imagining Fact and Fiction." In K. Stock and K. Thomson-Jones (eds.), *New Waves in Aesthetics*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 150–169.
- García-Carpintero, M. 2019. "Assertions in Fictions: An Indirect Speech Act Account." *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 96: 445–462.
- Gendler, T. 2008. "Alief and Belief." *Journal of Philosophy* 105 (10): 634–663.

- Gerrig, R. 1993. *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*. Yale University Press.
- Kaplan, D. 1989. "Demonstratives: An Essay on the Semantics, Logic, Metaphysics and Epistemology of Demonstratives and other Indexicals." In J. Almog, J. Perry and H. Wettstein (eds.). *Themes From Kaplan*. Oxford University Press, 481–563.
- Kieran, M. 2006. "Art, Morality and Ethics: On the (Im)moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value." *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2): 129–143.
- King, S. 2000. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. New York: Scribner.
- Knausgaard, K. O. 2018. "Karl Ove Knausgaard Looks Back on *My Struggle*." Interview by Joshua Rothman. *The New Yorker*, November 11, 2018.
- Larmarque, P. and Olsen, S. 1994. *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lewis, D. 1978. "Truth in Fiction." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15: 37–46.
- Matravers, D. 2014. *Fiction and Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nichols, S. 2006. "Just the Imagination: Why Imagining Doesn't Behave Like Believing." *Mind and Language* 21 (4): 459–474.
- Noordhof, P. 2001. "Believe What You Want." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 101 (3): 247–266.
- Nussbaum, M. 1990. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- O'Brien, L. 2005. "Imagination and the Motivational View of Belief." *Analysis* 65 (1): 55–62.
- Paul, L. A. 2014. *Transformative Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sinhababu, N. 2012. "Distinguishing Belief and Imagination." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 94 (2): 152–165.
- Smuts, A. 2010. "The Ghost is the Thing: Can Reactions to Fiction Reveal Belief?" *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 34 (1): 219–239.
- Stanley, J. 2005. *Knowledge and Practical Interests*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Stock, K. 2016. "Learning from Fiction and Theories of Fictional Content." *Teorema: International Journal of Philosophy* 35 (3): 69–83.
- Stolnitz, J. 1992. "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (3): 191–200.
- Suits, D. 2006. "Really Believing in Fiction." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 87 (3): 369–386.
- Van Leeuwen, N. 2020. "Imagining Stories: Attitudes and Operators." *Philosophical Studies* 178 (2): 639–664.
- Velleman, D. 2000. "On the Aim of Belief." In *The Possibility of Practical Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 244–281.
- Voltolini, A. 2021. "What We Can Learn From Literary Authors." *Acta Analytica* 36: 479–499.
- Weatherson, B. 2005. "Can We Do Without Pragmatic Encroachment?" *Philosophical Perspectives* 19 (1): 417–443.

Weitz, M. 1943. "Does Art Tell the Truth?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 3: 338–348.

Wieland, N. 2021. "Metalinguistic Acts in Fiction." In E. Maier and A. Stokke (eds.). *The Language of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 301–324.

Williams, T. 1945. *The Glass Menagerie*. New York: New Directions.