Aesthetic Responses to the Characters, Plots, Worlds, and Style of Stories

Marta M. Maslej

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Psychiatry

Joshua A. Quinlan & Raymond A. Mar

York University, Psychology

ABSTRACT

In this chapter we review empirical research on aesthetic responses to stories, organizing our review around characters, plots, worlds or setting, and stylistic choices. We begin by outlining various responses to characters and how they influence us. Next, we discuss emotional, cognitive, and physiological reactions to plot events. We also touch on the confusing appeal of stories that elicit negative emotions, suggesting that they inspire insight. Next, we focus on the worlds in which stories take place, outlining how engagement in story worlds affects enjoyment and story-related beliefs. We also review our tendencies to re-visit narrative worlds, and how different worlds map onto different genres. Finally, we discuss how characters, plots, and settings can be portrayed in different ways, based on stylistic choices. We explain how adopting a unique style of presenting stories captures attention and invites reflection and engagement. Lastly, we discuss future challenges and goals facing this field.

Keywords: stories; character identification; parasocial relationships; plot; self-modifying feelings; transportation; narrative persuasion; genre; foregrounding; defamiliarization.

As humans, we spend an inordinate amount of time engaging with narratives. A large chunk of our leisure time is spent watching television, reading novels, going to movies, seeing plays, reading comic books or graphic novels, listening to podcasts, or playing videogames (Statistics Canada, 2011). What many of these activities tend to share is a narrative element; they are all different ways of telling stories. A story can be defined as the representation of causally- and temporally-organized events that take place within a context or world, centred around a relatable goal-based agent. These events typically begin with an inciting incident, which leads to rising action in terms of a succession of progress and setbacks, culminating in a resolution of the central conflict, followed by a brief denouement (Rumelhart, 1975; Stein & Glenn, 1975). Every human culture produces stories and their universal appeal would seem to reflect an intrinsic human interest in social relations: we are social animals and stories inevitably portray the complexities and difficulties of social interactions (Boyd, 2009; Hogan, 2003; Oatley, 1999). In addition, stories are frequently objects of aesthetic appreciation. There is a beauty to be found in these varied representations of human psychology and human experiences. Moreover, because stories contain multiple facets, each aspect of a story can be an object that elicits an aesthetic response. Considering our definition of a story, it would seem that our appreciation of stories might well be organized around the various components of a story: its characters, the plot events portrayed, the world in which the story takes place, and finally the style in which all of these different aspects are represented. In this chapter, we provide a very brief introduction into the empirical investigation of our aesthetic responses to each of these facets of a narrative, before closing with a discussion of the challenges and goals for this field moving forward.

CHARACTER

Arguably, the most important feature of a fictional narrative is its characters (Hogan, 2003; Miall, 1988). Our interest in a story depends quite a lot on whether it depicts people we care about (Jose & Brewer, 1984), and this is perhaps why so much of a novel or film is dedicated to

introducing and developing its protagonists. Through stories, we get to know fictional characters extremely well, with unheralded access to their experiences, relationships, goals, and dreams. In fact, we may well know familiar characters better than we know our close friends and relations. When we get to know characters in this way, we become more invested in what happens to them. For example, *Titanic* (1997) is one of the highest grossing films of all time, accumulating over 135 million views in North America alone. And this is despite the fact that the film takes three hours to tell a story about a sinking ship, the outcome of which almost all viewers already know. So, the interest in this film does not derive from a curiosity regarding the outcome, or how the film ends. Of course, the Titanic is not just a story about a ship. Half of the movie is spent acquainting viewers with its two protagonists, Jack and Rose, and revealing their forbidden love affair. Rather than watching what happens to the ship, viewers stay tuned to observe the development of Jack and Rose's relationship and its tragic end. It is the characters in narratives like *Titanic* that attract and maintain our attention, and our reactions are primarily in response to what these characters do and what happens to them (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Liebes & Katz, 1990).

We might care so much about characters in part because we tend to perceive and respond to them as if they were real people. For example, we might feel as though these fictional characters have an actual physical presence, and change our own behavior as we would in front of other people. In a set of clever experiments exploring this idea, Gardner and Knowles (2008) found that when participants were exposed to images of their favourite television characters, they exhibited a psychological phenomenon known as social facilitation. Social facilitation occurs when our performance improves on a well-learned task (and worsens on a novel task) in the presence of other people. And so, when their participants were in the presence of their favourite television character, they responded in the same way they would if they were among real people. Importantly, participants did not exhibit this effect when exposed to images of non-favourite characters, which

they reported as being less "real" than favourite characters (Gardner & Knowles, 2008). Since television characters are represented by actors, it is easy to see why we might think of them being real. However, it appears that we also attribute book characters with life-like physical characteristics. In one qualitative study, readers stated that they could easily imagine how characters sound, and most reported hearing characters' voices in their inner speech as they read (Alderson Day, Bernini & Fernyhough, 2017). Perceptions of characters' voices were rich and dynamic, varying in volume, pitch, and tone, and fluctuating in response to characters' emotional states. Some characters even spoke in accents the readers themselves could not speak, suggesting that our tendency to think of characters as real people with bodies and voices is not limited to characters we see on-screen. Writers have also described a similar sense of characters being "real" and independent, even when they have created that character. Marjorie Taylor and her colleagues (2003) interviewed creative writers and found that many reported that the characters they created while writing at some point became very real to them, even independent of them and resistant to their wishes.

Wishful Identification

If we tend to experience our favourite characters as being real, it is perhaps not surprising that we react to them as we would to people we meet in our day-to-day lives. We assess their personalities, evaluate our similarities to them, and can even find them attractive (Cohen, 2001; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). In other words, unsurprisingly, we can find beauty in the portrayal of characters, much like we can find beauty in our intimate partners and close relations. Sometimes, we might imitate or model them, which is referred to as wishful identification. Given the influence of role models in early development, the research on wishful identification has focused a fair bit on children and youth. Adolescents have been known to change their appearance, attitudes, and behaviours to become more like the celebrities they admire, such as dressing a certain way or dyeing their hair (Boone & Lomore, 2001; Murray, 1999). This drive to appear like a desired other, even

one we do not know personally, strikes us as an aesthetic response. One topic of concern is how wishful identification might promote unhealthy habits or behaviours. For example, links have emerged between wishful identification with thin characters and disordered eating in college women (Harrison, 1997) as well as between wishful identification with aggressive characters and aggressive behaviour in children (Huesmann, Eron & Lagerspetz, 1984). However, characters can model positive behaviours as well. Dore and colleagues (2017) reported that children who listened to a script told from the perspective of a professor spent longer playing with an analytical toy (i.e., a Rubik's cube) than children who listened to the perspective of a cheerleader (Dore, Smith & Lillard, 2017).

To better understand the factors affecting wishful identification, researchers have conducted interviews and administered questionnaires asking both adults and children about their favourite television characters (Hoffner, 1996; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Perhaps not surprisingly, similarities between characters and viewers emerge as important factors when it comes to wishful identification. Children tend to be influenced by demographic similarities (e.g., gender and race; Austin, Roberts & Nass, 1990; Greenberg, 1972; Hoffner, 1996; McDonald & Kim, 2001; Miller & Reeves, 1976), and participants of all ages tend to wishfully identify with characters that resemble them in personality and attitude. This effect appears across all kinds of different narratives, extending even to video games as well (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; McDonald & Kim, 2001). Wishful identification also occurs in response to characters that exhibit valued traits. Children tend to emulate male characters that are intelligent, powerful, and strong (Hoffner, 1996; Miller & Reeves, 1976; Reeves & Greenberg, 1977; cf. Reeves & Lometti, 1979), whereas attractiveness is the only predictor of wishful identification with female characters (Hoffner, 1996). In late adulthood however, both men and women are more likely to identify with characters that are intelligent, with women additionally identifying with characters that they find attractive (Hoffner &

Buchanan, 2005). In sum, people appear drawn to characters who are already somewhat like them, but also characters that represent who they would like to be.

Parasocial Interactions and Relationships

Because story characters can feel so real to us, we not only want to be like them but we also feel as though we can interact with them. We might even talk to them, for example, cheering them on as they score a winning goal or urging them not to go to the basement to investigate a scary noise, if even only in our heads (Bezdek, Foy, & Gerrig, 2013). We might also feel betrayed or offended when we find out that they have done something distasteful, or chastise them when we disapprove of their actions. Our tendency to interact with characters as if they were real is known as parasocial interaction (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Over time, we might begin to consider characters as friends or people we know, discussing them with others, seeking out information about them, and even missing them when they are not there (Dibble & Rosaen, 2011; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). This enduring bond with a character that continues after we watch a movie or read a book is called a parasocial relationship (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). Perhaps because parasocial interactions and relationships were first observed with media personalities, such as gameshow hosts and news broadcasters (Horton & Wohl, 1956), they have been primarily studied with on-screen characters, reality stars, and celebrities. Recently however, parasocial relationships have been investigated with book characters as well (Liebers & Schramm, 2017).

Initially, researchers assumed that people formed parasocial relationships because they were lonely or had difficulties forming relationships in the real world (Rubin & McHugh, 1987), but this assumption has not been fully supported empirically. Although it is true that, on average, people who are shy and lonely are more likely to form parasocial relationships (Schiappa, Allen, & Gregg, 2007), watching a favourite television program is one of the most common things people do when feeling lonely (Gardner & Knowles, 2008; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). So people who are lonely

might form parasocial relationships simply because they watch more television, and not because they lack closeness with others. Furthermore, there is also research that seems to directly contradict this idea that parasocial relationships emerge from loneliness. For example, parasocial relationships are linked with characteristics that predict sociability, such as empathy, extraversion, and positive self-esteem (Tsao, 1996; Turner, 1993).

Although loneliness or poor social skills are not prerequisites for parasocial relationships, these relationships can buffer against social rejection. In a set of studies, researchers manipulated opportunities for participants to write about their favourite television program after being reminded of a social rejection (i.e., a time when they fought with a close other) (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009). As compared to participants who wrote about their favourite program, participants who did not have this opportunity reported decreased self-esteem and increased feelings of rejection. These participants also filled out a word stem completion task with more words related to social exclusion, suggesting that unlike those who wrote about their favourite television program, their thoughts were still occupied with the social rejection. Although these researchers did not ask participants to focus their writing on characters, they noted that many of the participants did so anyway, so it is possible that parasocial relationships are motivated by a need to feel included or to belong.

Rather than thinking of parasocial relationships as substitutes for those we might have in the real-world, researchers consider them to be extensions of real-world relationships, perhaps because the two have many parallels (Cohen, 2004). As with real-world relationships, we are more likely to bond with characters we consider attractive or similar to us (for a meta-analysis, see Schiappa et al., 2007). Both real-world and parasocial relationships also seem to develop by way of uncertainty reduction. Berger and Calabrese (1975) argue that over the course of interacting with others, our ability to predict their behaviour increases, which strengthens our relationships with them. Perse and

Rubin (1989) proposed that the same process might occur when we watch or read about characters. In their study, the longer participants knew a person in their social group, the better able they were to predict his or her behaviour, which was related to the strength of their relationship. Importantly, the same was true of the connection between participants and their favourite soap opera characters. Furthermore, parasocial relationships are affected by attachment styles. Attachment styles are stable tendencies in the way in which we respond to close others, which develop out of early experiences with our primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). These attachment styles can also predict the strength of parasocial relationships (Cole & Leet, 1999), as well as participants' reactions to the dissolution of these relationships (e.g., the death of a character or the cancellation of a television program) (Cohen, 2004). In general, these parasocial "break-ups" can have real-world negative outcomes, such as stress, depression, and loneliness (Cohen, 2004). Our relationships with fictional characters therefore seem to have a meaningful impact, and this suggests they are not just lesser versions of the relationships we have with other people in our lives. Much as we find deep appreciation in our close relationships with real-world peers, we find a similar sort of appreciation for the fictional characters we visit in narratives.

Identification

Another widely-studied response to fictional characters is identification. Although identification is defined differently by literary critics or cultural theorists, researchers in psychology typically view it as a temporary process of imagining ourselves as being a character. During this time, we share this character's knowledge about the narrated events, adopt the character's goals, understand events according to these goals (i.e., cognitive empathy), and share the character's emotions (i.e., emotional empathy) (Altenbernd & Lewis, 1969; Cohen, 2001, 2006; Jose & Brewer, 1984; Oatley 1994; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). A distinguishing feature of identification is that we become so absorbed into the text that our own identity and self-awareness is diminished: we

experience a temporary loss of ourselves (Cohen, 2001).

As with wishful identification and parasocial relationships, our tendency to identify with characters is influenced by different factors. We are more likely to identify with characters we perceive as being real, ones that we like or find physically attractive (Cohen, 1999; Hoffner, 1996; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991), and ones that carry out good deeds (Jose & Brewer, 1984; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). We might identify with characters that have these positive characteristics because we tend to think of ourselves as resembling good characters more than bad ones (Jose & Brewer, 1984), and similarity is a consistent predictor of identification (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). This includes similarity in demographic characteristics like gender (Jose & Brewer, 1984), as well as in attitude and emotional reactions to events (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957; Turner, 1993).

In contrast to parasocial relationships, much of the work on identification has focused on characters from books (for a review, see Cohen, 2001), and some researchers argue that it is difficult to identify with on-screen characters. When watching television or a film, we sit opposite of the screen and see the characters, which could make it difficult to imagine being them (Houston, 1984). Texts, on the other hand, can use first-person narratives to facilitate identification, giving readers complete access to the perceptions, feelings, and thoughts of a character (Oatley, 1999; Sanders & Redeker, 1996). However, this claim regarding the benefits of first-person narration in writing has received mixed empirical support. Some researchers have successfully manipulated identification using first-person narration in stories (e.g., De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders & Beentjes, 2012; Kerr, 2005), but other research suggests that the consequences of using first- or third-person narration are the same (Hartung, Hagoort, & Willems, 2017). In film and television, directors may be able to use camera angles to create perspective and foster identification (Cohen, 2001). An interesting direction for future research involves examining how manipulating camera angles affects identification. For instance, programs or films shot from the point of view of a protagonist in such a way that the

audience sees what the character sees might be very successful at promoting identification. On the other hand, having a character address the viewer might elicit parasocial interaction, such as when a character "breaks the third wall" to confide in the audience.

Identification influences our appreciation or enjoyment of a story. Given that it requires us to adopt a character's goals, identification can make us more emotionally invested in how the narrative will be resolved. Since a story's success depends, in part, on the degree to which it rouses our emotions (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982), it is not surprising then that identification with a character can make the experience of reading or viewing more enjoyable. Many studies suggest that the more we identify with a film's characters, the more likely we are to enjoy the film (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; de Wied, Zillmann & Ordman, 1994; Igartua & Paez, 1997; cf. Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010) and this effect does not appear to depend on genre. Iguarta (2010) interviewed participants leaving a movie theatre after they watched different films and found that that this was true for comedies, thrillers, and dramas.

One important feature of identification is that it provides opportunities for vicarious experience. We enjoy identifying with different characters because it allows us to take on different and exciting identities, such as that of a millionaire, a high-powered attorney, or an international spy. In this way, identification can open us to new perspectives (Basil, 1996), and it can even lead to shifts in attitudes. In a set of experiments, participants who read stories from the perspective of one character (e.g., a disabled job applicant or a woman against euthanasia) identified more with that character, and they demonstrated opinions on relevant topics that were consistent with the experiences or opinions of those characters (De Graaf et al., 2012). Importantly, identification mediated the effects of the character's perspective on attitudes. In a different experiment, Iguarta (2010) measured participants' beliefs about immigration either before or after watching a film about the lives of Mexican immigrants. Participants assessed after the film were more likely to express

positive attitudes about immigration, agreeing that immigrants make valuable contributions to the economies of host countries, for example. Individuals that were more likely to identify with characters in the film also expressed more positive attitudes towards immigration (Iguarta, 2010). These studies suggest that identification with book and on-screen characters may promote positive attitudes about people who often face discrimination or marginalization. Identifying with a character requires us to imagine what it would be like to have different feelings, thoughts, and goals, and in doing so we might engage in deeper reflection about the experiences of other people who are different from us (Iguarta, 2010). Identifying with characters facing hardships that we would not otherwise experience (e.g., being disabled or immigrating to a new country) can help us form a richer representation of their experiences, which perhaps can lead to us being more positive, open, and sympathetic to others. In this way, identification might be useful for reducing prejudice and improving social relations (Paluck & Green, 2009).

PLOT

Another important aspect of a fictional narrative that can evoke an aesthetic response is the plot, or the way that story events are structured over narrative time. Aristotle posited that a successful story is composed of two parts: complication (i.e., the onset of conflict, an obstacle or problem) and unravelling (i.e., its eventual resolution) (Butcher, 1907). Another widely-held conceptualization of plot is Freytag's pyramid, which divides Aristotle's story structure into five parts. First, the exposition introduces the elements of the plot, such as the setting and its characters. Next, a series of events (i.e., the rising action) leads to a climax, or the point of greatest interest in the story. At this point, the climax unravels and the protagonist's fate is revealed in the falling action, which concludes with a denouement (Freytag, 1863).

Plot Structures

The theories of Aristotle and Freytag identify one type of plot structure, but theorists and

researchers have since argued that there are a variety of plot structures and that these types can be revealed through empirical investigation. In a lecture entitled *The Shapes of Stories*, the writer Kurt Vonnegut (1995) describes several differentiable plot structures. Some resemble Aristotle's complication and unravelling, such as a plot he refers to as *Man in a Hole*. Other plots describe a nearly opposite unfolding of events. In *Boy gets Girl* for example, the protagonist leads an average or dull existence, acquires something wonderful (e.g., falls in love), but loses it, and in some variations of this plot, he eventually gains it back. Other writers and researchers have also vouched for the existence of many plot structures, identifying from three to over thirty different types (Booker, 2004; Harris, 1959; Polti, 1916; Tobias, 1993).

Like many others, Vonnegut suggested that a story's ups and downs, or its positive and negative events, can be arranged in different ways, but he pioneered the notion that these arrangements can be "fed into computers", or graphed to reveal stories' shapes. Archer and Jockers (2016) implemented this suggestion to analyze the plots of over 40,000 English novels. Using a statistical program (Jockers, 2015), they graphed each novel's sentiment (the positive or negative tone of the content) over the course of the narrative, using a mathematical formula to account for different text lengths. Based on the graphed data, they created a matrix of the distance between every pair of novels, and from it, generated a tree diagram. The two primary branches of the diagram resembled Vonnegut's *Man in a Hole* and *Boy gets Girl* plot structures, which further branched into what Archer and Jockers interpreted as six or seven fundamental plot shapes (Archer & Jockers, 2016). Although the computer-derived sentiment plots are rough proxies of plot development, they seem to closely resemble the shapes produced by human coders (Gao, Jockers, Laudun, & Tangherlini, 2016). Researchers are increasingly using computational methods to better understand plot and other literary topics (e.g., Mohammad, 2011). For instance, rather than categorizing novels into groups, Piper (2015) analyzed structural similarities within novels to identify the presence of a

single plot type, and Schmidt (2015) showed that this method can be applied to the study of plots for different television genres.

Although the temporal arrangement of positive and negative events differs across stories, every story seems to involve a negative event, obstacle, or conflict. Conflict (either in love or political power) is a universal property of narratives found across different cultures and geographies (Hogan, 1997), and stories without some aspect of tension or complication are considered boring and unsuccessful (Fiedler, 1960). Our preference for conflict in fiction may be part of a well-evidenced negativity bias in our attentional and cognitive processes (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs, 2001), which is thought to have evolved so we can quickly react to aversive or threatening circumstances in the environment (Ohman, Flykt, & Esteves, 2001). We might learn from stories that depict difficult or challenging circumstances because they provide us with information on how best to cope with them (Nabi, Finnerty, Domschke, & Hull, 2006; Zillmann, 2000). This is perhaps why we consider stories that depict evolutionarily-relevant topics like social relationships to be of a higher quality than those that do not (e.g., espionage) (Carney, Wlodarsky, & Dunbar, 2014). The degree to which negative events in fiction elicit our enjoyment or interest is a direction for future research. Incorporating computational methods, it may even be possible to empirically examine our preferences for certain plot structures, and how these preferences might interact with our personal histories and individual differences.

Emotional Reactions to Plot

Researchers have long argued that emotion is central to the experience of fiction (Frijda, 1989; Mar, Oatley, Djikic, & Mullin, 2011; Tan, 1994) and that good stories must succeed in both arousing and resolving our emotions (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982). However, these emotions may be subtler than the types of emotions we feel in our daily lives (Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Oliver, 1993). When consuming fiction, we can experience evaluative feelings (e.g., deriving enjoyment or

satisfaction from reading or watching), or narrative feelings, which are evoked by aspects of the plot, such as feeling sad when reading about a funeral (Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Passages towards the beginning of a fictional work (i.e., in the exposition), or those that are descriptively dense, tend to evoke relived emotions, which are emotions that we feel when we remember a personal experience (Cupchik, Oatley, & Vorderer, 1998). Descriptive passages might prompt relived emotions because of their role in creating rich mental representations of situations or scenes (Mar et al., 2011). In contrast, fresh emotions, which occur when readers are surprised or taken aback by a new realization they have made about the story, tend to occur toward the end of a story (Cupchik et al., 1998; Miall & Kuiken, 2002).

Some research on evaluative and narrative feelings has been dedicated to understanding the appeal of negative content in stories. It seems intuitive that we might seek out stories to make us feel happy (Bryant & Zillmann, 1984; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977), yet the research suggests otherwise. For example, Iguarta (2010) and Oliver (1993) found that when participants elected to view a dramatic or sad film (i.e., a "tearjerker"), the more negatively they felt while watching the film, the more they reported enjoying it (Oliver, 1993). Similarly, a video game that includes a dangerous or threatening backstory, as compared to a pleasant one, induces feelings of suspense, and importantly, enjoyment (Klimmt, Rizzo, Vorderer, Koch, & Fischer, 2009). There are many reasons why we might enjoy stories that arouse negative emotions. When we feel unhappy, observing a protagonist who is in a bad situation may make us feel better about our own circumstances (Mares & Cantor, 1992). Experiencing negative emotions in response to plot events (i.e., negative narrative feelings) may also be cathartic, offering an opportunity to express negative feelings we have about our own lives in a safe way (Cornelius, 1997). These negative narrative feelings may therefore elicit positive evaluative feelings, such as enjoyment or gratification (Oliver, 1993), with our ability to control the narrative feelings possibly playing a role. By experiencing and resolving a manageable version of a negative

emotion, readers might gain control over the emotion and feel a sense of mastery (Nell, 1988). For these reasons, we might seek out stories that make us feel sad or scared, especially if we know that we can put down a book or stop a movie, if necessary.

Part of the reason we enjoy negative narrative feelings might be due to our anticipation of a happy or uplifting ending and the positive feelings associated with it, like relief for a character we like. Indeed, in a story, resolving emotions may be as important to us as their arousal (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982). However, as Oliver (1993) points out, there are many popular stories that do not end happily. In fact, Archer and Jockers' (2016) analysis yields various plot structures that end on a negative note, suggesting that there is more to our enjoyment of these negative emotions than the promise of a positive outcome. This enjoyment might instead depend on how we feel about its characters. Specifically, we might enjoy stories in which characters we like succeed and ones we dislike fail (Chatman, 1978; Friedman, 1975). Jose and Brewer (1984) examined whether this principle holds among elementary school children in different grades. Children in the sixth grade enjoyed stories with happy endings but only when they featured characters they liked, but children in grade two enjoyed stories with happy endings, regardless of how they felt about the characters. Thus, we might develop a sophistication in our enjoyment of story outcomes over time, which eventually involves making moral judgments about what the characters deserve. Consistent with this finding, other research suggests that the ability to abstract morals or lessons from stories develops only in late childhood (Walker & Lombrozo, 2017).

Cognitive Reactions to Plot

Our reactions to narratives are not just based on our feelings. Stories can inspire us to think and reflect, changing our understanding of the story events and perhaps even of ourselves or human nature (Koopman & Hakemukder, 2015). These types of reactions are referred to as self-modifying feelings (Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Researchers usually study these reactions by asking participants to

read stories and mark in the margins whenever they have an emotion, thought, or memory. After reading, participants return to each mark and report on what they experienced (Kuiken & Miall, 2001; Larsen & Seilman, 1988). This research suggests that although stories evoke different experiences across readers, the emotions, thoughts, and memories do tend to occur in similar places. That is, the sequences of plot events seem to guide readers' reactions (Miall & Kuiken, 2002).

Self-modifying feelings might contribute to the appeal of stories that make us feel sad or experience other negative emotions. Oliver and Raney (2011) argue that we have an intrinsic need to gain insight into human nature by deriving meaning, truth, or purpose from the world around us, which includes narratives. Gaining this insight can be unpleasant when exploring topics such as failure, frailty, or mortality. Since characters that grapple with these types of circumstances tend to pose questions about human nature and gain these insights, sad films may be more likely to fulfill our need for self-modifying feelings. In other words, we might seek out stories that make us feel sad because we wish to better understand ourselves and human nature, at the expense of our enjoyment.

Not all people achieve insights or self-modifying feelings when reading narratives however (Miall & Kuiken, 2002), which suggests that these reactions may depend on individual differences, such as in personal experience. By making connections between our experiences and the text, we can come to a deeper or renewed understanding of ourselves (Miall, 2004; Miall & Kuiken, 2002) but this understanding may require some personal experience with the story content. In two studies, readers who experienced a significant loss were more likely to report self-modifying feelings when they read a poem or story about loss than readers who had not experienced a loss (Kuiken, Miall & Sikora, 2004; Sikora, Kuiken & Miall, 2010). Interestingly, readers were less likely to report these feelings when the loss was recent, as compared to a loss that occurred over two years ago, suggesting that the recency of personal experience might also be important. When individuals are recently bereaved, they may react negatively to memories of the deceased, preventing self-modifying feelings

during reading (Sikora et al., 2010). In another study, participants were randomly assigned to read a text about either depression or grief one week, then read the un-read text the following week (Koopman, 2015). These texts were either literary narratives, life narratives, or expository texts. The literary narratives evoked more and longer-lasting thoughts and reflections compared to the other text types. Furthermore, people who experienced a past bout of depression reported more reflection when reading the texts about depression, and the same was true for texts about grief. Thus, it seems that insightful and reflective thoughts might be elicited by personally relevant stories. Perhaps stories about conflict and negative experiences resound with most of us because they document a universal feature of the human experience. We can probably easily think back to a negative situation or problem we once encountered, and stories might help us to work through or come to terms with past difficult experiences of our own.

Physiological Responses to Plot

Another empirical approach to studying our cognitive and emotional responses to stories involves looking at the underlying physiology behind these responses. One way that researchers have examined the ups and downs of a story's plot is by measuring peripheral physiology, such as heart rate and respiration, with physiological arousal tending to mirror the shape of a plot. The association between plot and arousal is not clear-cut, but there seems to be a correspondence between evaluative or narrative feelings and peripheral physiology. Nell (1988) found increases in heart rate, respiration, and facial muscle activity when participants read passages of stories they enjoyed, but this effect was rather weak. In a different study, the emotional intensity of a story influenced heart rate variability, an index of emotional arousal (Wallentin et al., 2011). In that study, the participants rated the emotional valence and arousal in a version of *The Ugly Duckling*. Based on these ratings, the researchers identified the most emotionally intense parts of the story (e.g., the duckling turning into a swan). Interestingly, these emotionally intense passages were associated with increased heart rate

variability in a different group of participants who listened to the story.

Measures of peripheral physiology have also been useful in examining the effects of plot twists, or surprising events in stories. When we read a story or watch a television program, we create and update mental representations, also known as situation models, for the plot (Johnson-Laird, 1983). These situation models help us understand the text and infer what will happen next (Glenberg & Mathew, 1992). However, when new information does not match our situation models, in the form of a plot twist for example, we are forced to orient to this information and update our models. These types of narrative surprises are associated with slower reading times, perhaps allowing for deeper processing of the incompatible or surprising information (Rapp & Gerrig, 2006). Interestingly, plot twists are also associated with a specific pattern of autonomic activity called the orienting response. The orienting response is comprised of reactions we might have when we are startled or surprised, including an increase in heart rate and skin conductance (i.e., having sweatier palms) (Sukalla, Shoenberger, & Bolls, 2016). Thus, specific events in a story's plot (i.e., that are emotionally intense or surprising) can reliably elicit physiological responses. Future studies might examine whether other emotional reactions (such as fear or sadness) in response to reading a book or watching a film can be detected in our peripheral physiology, or perhaps if individual differences in our physiological reactions predict whether we will enjoy a certain genre, like horror or drama.

WORLD

A major aspect of any narrative is the world in which it takes place. Narrative worlds can be dark and gritty noir cityscapes, colourful and fantastic alien domains, or familiar and banal suburbs; the tone of these worlds will invariably colour the audience's experiences and appreciation of character and plot. Visiting these narrative worlds can offer us new and exciting adventures (without the associated risks) or familiar and soothing experiences to escape the stressors of the real world. The role of the world in narrative also seems to be expanding; our media is increasingly built around

extensive shared narrative worlds that invite us to revisit familiar realms but with novel characters and plots (e.g., the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which currently comprises more than 15 films and a dozen television series). When we engage with these narrative worlds, we are not just passively reading about (or watching or playing in) an alternative reality. Instead, we often feel absorbed into the world, focusing our attention on the narrative and losing awareness of the (non-narrative) world around us. This feeling of absorption is likely to impact enjoyment, emotional responses, and any other aesthetic evaluation of a narrative, and is thought to be "the key determinant of narrative impact" (Green & Brock, 2000; p. 703). However, different narrative worlds are likely to elicit different responses from different people, and thus the role that the world plays in affecting aesthetic responses is subject to individual differences.

Transportation

To describe the experience of being strongly immersed in a narrative, Gerrig (1993) uses a metaphor of transportation: we travel some distance to a narrative world, are partially absent from the world of origin, and return from the journey changed (p. 10). In this way, Gerrig suggests that we actually feel present in the narrative world and can be meaningfully affected by what transpires therein. Green and Brock (2000) expanded on this work by describing transportation as a "distinct mental process, an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings" (p. 701). That is, a transported individual's attention becomes focused on the narrative such that they lose some awareness of the world around them, becoming less likely to notice someone walking into the room or to recall a fact that contradicts the narrative. A transported individual also has vivid mental imagery of the narrative's world, characters, and plot. Lastly, transported individuals respond emotionally to narratives as if they were experiencing them directly, despite knowing it is not the case.

This theorising has since received considerable empirical support. Green and Brock (2000) developed a scale to measuring state transportation, which featured items such as "I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the narrative" and "The narrative affected me emotionally." This measure was found to include three separate factors, which the authors labeled as cognitive, affective, and imagery. In support of Gerrig's (1993) suggestion that the traveler can be changed by the narrative world, Green and Brock (2000) also suggest that transportation is likely to facilitate persuasion, leading transported individuals to form and endorse beliefs that are consistent with the narrative. For example, in one study, Green and Brock (2000) had participants read a story about a psychiatric patient murdering a child in a mall. Participants who were more transported endorsed story-consistent beliefs, such as the need to restrict the freedoms of the mentally ill, more strongly than did participants who were less transported. This effect of transportation on narrative persuasion has since been frequently replicated (for a review see Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013).

One of the ways that transportation promotes persuasion is by making the virtual seem real. Because a transported individual feels as if she is experiencing the plot and narrative world directly, the narrative feels like a personal experience and is thus influential in affecting beliefs and attitudes (Green & Brock, 2000). Transportation correlates positively with the perceived realism of a story, and experimentally encouraging transportation in the reading instructions increases this perceived realism (Green, 2004). Thus, in addition to describing a feeling of engagement with a narrative, transportation encourages us to process that narrative as if it represented real personal experiences. In this way, transportation is a major determinant of the impact of a narrative. For fantastical and banal worlds alike, if a narrative does not *feel* real, then we are unlikely to enjoy engaging with it or find much appreciation or beauty in it.

This relationship between enjoyment and transportation has also been a focus of research, with Green and colleagues (2004) identifying transportation and enjoyment as closely-related

concepts. They propose that transportation can be used to explain how and why we enjoy engaging with narratives: transportation allows us to become fully concentrated on visiting a new world, achieving a flow-like state while leaving behind our worries and self-consciousness. These researchers also observe that lack of enjoyment for media is often defined as an absence of transportation: "I just couldn't get into it" (p. 314). Transportation and enjoyment have also been found to be highly-correlated, providing empirical support for this idea (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004). This account also helps to explain the apparent paradox of enjoying negative affective responses to narratives, such as fear or sadness: transportation gives us an ultimately-safe opportunity to vicariously experience thrilling, dangerous, or tragic events and the cathartic responses that they elicit. In this way, we can use narratives to explore nuanced emotional experiences and to contemplate grand questions about existence, mortality, and the meaning of life (Oliver & Raney, 2011).

Ultimately, transportation describes one of the dominant aspects of the experience of engaging with a narrative. Regardless of what type of narrative world we are encountering or the modality through which we are visiting it, we are unlikely to really enjoy a narrative if we do not feel "sucked into it." Transportation describes this feeling of escape, which is one of the most attractive features of narratives. It allows us to lose our awareness of ourselves and the non-narrative world, explore new worlds as if they were real, and experience vivid emotions in a safe environment.

Revisiting Narrative Worlds

Although visiting narrative worlds can certainly offer us novel experiences and perspectives, we also interact with narrative worlds in other ways. Rather than constantly seeking out new worlds to visit, we often re-visit the same worlds, either through other media set in the same universe (e.g., watching *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* because you enjoyed the *Harry Potter* films), through re-exposing oneself to the same media (e.g., re-reading the *Harry Potter* books), or through engaging

with the same narrative in a different format (e.g., watching the *Harry Potter films* because you enjoyed the *Harry Potter* books). Revisiting the same story has an apparent disadvantage of reducing suspense, since one already knows how the plot will develop. However, if novel experiences were the only draw of visiting narrative worlds, then we would seldom re-read books, re-watch movies or television shows, or ever engage with narratives whose endings we already know (e.g., *Titanic*)[1]. Instead, there appears to be other things that are attractive about revisiting narrative worlds. One possibility is that revisiting a familiar narrative world helps us to feel less lonely and gives us a sense of belonging. Derrick and colleagues (2009) found that people report turning to their favourite television shows when they feel lonely, with these familiar and beloved shows helping to ease this loneliness. They also found that thinking about one's favourite show helped to protect oneself against the threats to self-esteem and feelings of rejection. This suggests that revisiting narrative worlds can be beneficial in a way that visiting new narrative worlds might not be.

That said, it is not completely accurate to claim that one does not have novel experiences when revisiting a narrative world. Although the content of the narrative has not changed, our perspective on that world may have. When revisiting a narrative world we typically have a richer holistic understanding of the world from the outset, allowing us to process information about it more fluently and thereby free up resources to detect information that might be more subtle (Dixon, Bortolussi, Twilley, & Leung, 1993). For example, we may better understand the quaint serenity of the Shire in *The Lord of the Rings* after seeing the turmoil that engulfs the rest of Middle-Earth. This experience is commonly reported as "picking up on new things" on a second viewing or feeling like revisiting a world has helped one "better flesh it out." In this way, revisiting the same narrative may

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[1] Although it is popularly-believed that the suspense created by an unknown ending is crucial to the enjoyment of a narrative, there is empirical evidence that suggests that this is not always the case. Leavitt and Christenfeld (2011) randomly assigned participants to read a story whose ending was either unspoiled or spoiled in the story's introduction. Across three different stories, participants enjoyed the spoiled version of the story significantly more. However, a later study showed that this effect is moderated by individual differences, such that those high in need for affect prefer unspoiled stories (Rosenbaum & Johnson, 2016).

offer novel experiences in the form of a richer understanding of a narrative world. This phenomenon may also help to explain the surge in popularity in shared narrative universes (e.g., the Marvel Cinematic Universe). Revisiting familiar narrative worlds that have new plots may offer the best of both worlds, so to speak: we can further deepen our understanding of a narrative world in addition to experiencing new plots and character interactions.

Genres

One of the primary ways narrative worlds are defined is through genre. To say that a novel is a fantasy book, for example, tells us much about the content and tone that is likely to appear. Empirical work has shown that people are generally familiar with most common genres (e.g., sci-fi) and what type of content to expect from each (e.g., futuristic technologies in Sci-Fi) (Dixon & Bortolussi, 2009; Piters & Stokans, 2000). Genre preference is likely to be the primary determinant of whether we enjoy visiting a given narrative world. However, regardless of preference, different genres are likely to elicit different aesthetic responses due to their differences in content and tone. For example, Gavaler and Johnson (2017) manipulated a short story to make it seem like a sci-fi narrative by changing its setting to a space station. Despite no major changes to the text's content, tone, or plot, participants randomly assigned to read the sci-fi version rated the story as lower in literary quality. Additionally, participants who thought they were reading a sci-fi short story expended more effort in making inferences about the world and less effort in making inferences about the characters' mental and emotional states. This was likely due to the readers' assumptions that a sci-fi story would focus more on a new and unfamiliar world compared to focusing on interpersonal relationships. This study illustrates that even small cues about the genre of a narrative can affect how we engage with that narrative. Assumptions about genre may determine which aspects of a narrative we attend to, how likely we are to identify with characters in the story, or what emotional responses we have to a narrative.

Genre is also an important determinant of other aesthetic responses to narrative. For example, although lifetime exposure to literary fiction is positively associated with interpersonal sensitivity (Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela Paz, & Peterson, 2006; Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009), the strength of this relationship differs between genres (Fong, Mullin, & Mar, 2013). Specifically, exposure to romance or suspense/thriller narratives is more strongly associated with interpersonal sensitivity than exposure to domestic fiction and sci-fi/fantasy. Fong and colleagues (2013) suggest that the relationship between literary fiction and interpersonal sensitivity is stronger for genres that focus on portraying social experiences and interpersonal relationships. Building upon Gavaler and Johnson's (2017) finding that cues about genre may determine how we attend to different aspects of a narrative, it may be that these genres differ less in how much they portray interpersonal relationships and more in how they direct the attention of the audience to such aspects of the story. The audience of a fantasy narrative, for example, may focus more on developing an understanding of the narrative world than on the interpersonal relationships portrayed in the narrative, even if the relationship-related content in the narrative is plentiful. Genre may operate in a similar way with regard to affective responses. Different genres may be more or less likely to elicit certain emotions, regardless of content. For example, a stranger knocking at the door in the middle of the night may elicit fear in a horror or thriller narrative, but mere curiosity in a fantasy narrative. In this way, previous knowledge of a genre may affect how we engage with a given narrative and what aesthetic responses that narrative is likely to elicit.

STYLE

The appreciation of narrative extends beyond the characters, the events they experience, and the world they inhabit, to the formal characteristics of how all of these things are portrayed. We refer to the various ways in which narrative elements are portrayed as *style*, recognizing that the same event, involving the same characters in the same world, can be represented in a broad variety of

ways. These choices on the part of a creator regarding how to tell a story, as opposed to what story to tell, are perhaps the most obvious target of aesthetic evaluation and most likely elicitor of aesthetic responses. Not surprisingly then, most of the empirical work to date on narrative has typically focused on style. This is no more pronounced than in the case of literary narratives, where the unique use of language in telling a story is known as foregrounding.

Foregrounding and Literary Narratives

Recognizing that the contents of a story can be communicated in unique ways, and that these unique stylistic choices can have various effects on a reader, has a long history in literary theory and elsewhere (Miall & Kuiken, 1994a). Employing language in novel ways has come to be known as foregrounding, with Koopman (2016) providing a concise review of its origins, identifying Mukařovský (1976) as the source of the term and Shklovsky (1965) as the progenitor of its most commonly-associated outcome: defamiliarization. Defamiliarization refers to the sense that familiar concepts and experiences can become strange and unfamiliar once they are foregrounded by use of a unique portrayal. Essentially, something as banal as a conversation between two people can be highlighted and experienced as somewhat strange and new once it is described as a "meeting of the minds," for example. Creative language choices serve to draw a reader's attention (Sanford & Emmet, 2012), inviting pause and reflection on both the meaning being communicated and its relevance to the reader (Miall & Kuiken, 1994a). Moreover, content can be foregrounded by creating deviations from the norm along several dimensions, including phonetic, grammatical, and semantic conventions (Miall & Kuiken, 1994a; Mukařovský, 1976). Leech and Short (2007) provide an extensive discussion of the different stylistic choices available to writers, all of which may be employed to foreground story content.

Although it has long been recognized that literature embraces novel language-use and that these unique constructions are salient or foregrounded, empirical research into foregrounding and its

effects is comparatively nascent. Willie van Peer's (1986) book, *Stylistics and Psychology: Investigations of foregrounding,* was one of the first empirical investigations into literary style. The empirical studies by van Peer (1986) confirmed that foregrounded portions of a text do indeed succeed in drawing a reader's attention. This finding has proven to be robust, with other studies also reporting that readers take longer to read portions of a text that include more foregrounding (Miall & Kuiken, 1994b; Sopčák, 2007). Importantly, there may be some differences in how reading time relates to foregrounding depending on the type of foregrounding being employed (Sopčák, 2007). Deviations in writing with respect to grammar slow reading times as one might predict, but deviations along phonemic dimensions might actually result in faster reading times. This result that makes sense in hindsight when one considers the fluency afforded by techniques like alliteration (Sopčák, 2007).

Choosing a unique style to represent narrative content not only draws a reader's attention, it also serves to elicit aesthetic responses to the text (Miall & Kuiken, 1994a). In empirical studies of foregrounding, readers routinely identify passages that contain more novel uses of language as more striking or notable in nature (Miall & Kuiken, 1994b). Moreover, experimentally manipulating the level of foregrounding in a text appears to produce the same effect, with greater aesthetic responses observed in response to text that has been manipulated to include more foregrounding (Hakemulder, 2004; Van Peer, Hakemulder, & Zyngier, 2007). These aesthetic responses often emerge upon second encounter with a text, based on a re-reading procedure in which texts or passages are presented more than once (Dixon et al., 1993). In light of the fact that foregrounding involves the introduction of novelty to a representation, it is intuitive that responses to this novelty might only emerge over time or after re-encountering the portrayal: our minds often need time or repeated exposure to adjust to novelty. Very much along these lines of thinking, Fialho (2007) has described a process of refamiliarization, in which content that has been defamiliarized through foregrounding is re-integrated into our schemas for familiar representations. One open area of

inquiry is whether foregrounding might draw us out of a story, reducing our transportation and engagement, or whether foregrounding helps to facilitate our engagement and absorption with stories (Bálint, Hakemulder, Kuijpers, Doicaru, & Tan, 2017).

Not all of the research in foregrounding has revealed consistent findings. An interesting question regarding foregrounding is whether these effects are tied to expertise in any way: are individuals who read more often, or perhaps trained to read more critically, more or less susceptible to foregrounding effects? Would literary scholars be more likely to experience an aesthetic response to a passage rife with unique metaphors and alliteration? Empirical investigations of this possibility have produced rather mixed results. Some studies find that foregrounding effects emerge regardless of past training or experience (Miall & Kuiken, 1994b; van Peer, 1986), other studies have found that those with more experience or expertise are more sensitive to foregrounding (Andringa, 1996; Hakemulder, 2004), whereas still other studies find the exact opposite: that experienced readers are less sensitive to foregrounding (Koopman, 2015). In order to reconcile these divergent findings, it will likely be necessary to more closely distinguish between the identification or perception of foregrounding and the various different kinds of responses to foregrounded texts that readers might have, in addition to the different dimensions along which foregrounding varies.

One of the most promising directions for work in this area is the incorporation of a wider variety of methodological approaches and tools. For example, neuroimaging research on foregrounding has begun to emerge, confirming past demonstrations that unique stylistic choices attract attention (Bohrn, Altmann, Lubrich, Menninghaus, & Jacobs, 2012). This work has also provided new insight into foregrounding, demonstrating that aesthetic responses to foregrounded text appear to occur spontaneously, even when readers are not explicitly asked about them (Bohrn, Altmann, Lubrich, Menninghaus, & Jacobs, 2013). Importantly, this sort of insight into the spontaneity or automatic nature of aesthetic responses can be derived from psychophysiological

measures that do not rely on explicit report. In addition to neuroimaging, studies employing eye-tracking have shown similar promise, once again confirming past reports that foregrounding results in slower reading times, but also providing some unique insight tied to this methodology, for example informing us that readers are more likely to return their attention to foregrounded segments of a text (van den Hoven, Hartung, Burke, & Willems, 2017). Moreover, this same study has revealed that there are substantial differences between individuals in how they respond to foregrounded text, which highlights a very promising avenue for future investigation. Future investigations into how individual differences relate to foregrounding could perhaps build on past work showing that the moderating role of experience and expertise on foregrounding appears to be rather complex, as well as intriguing work on possible cultural differences when it comes to the influence of foregrounding (Zyngier, van Peer, & Hakemulder, 2007).

Foregrounding in Other Media

Although the bulk of empirical research on foregrounding has been devoted to understanding reader responses to literary texts, there is no *a priori* reason to believe that stylistic choices are not also important for other narrative media. That said, applying empirical approaches to the study of audio-visual or multi-modal narratives brings additional challenges relative to studying text alone thanks to the additional dimensions that must be considered. Despite these challenges, a number of researchers are exploring the nature of film, including the role of stylistic choices in foregrounding narrative elements. Cutting (2016), for example, has analyzed large sets of films in order to determine the basic dimensions in which they differ and how these dimensions co-vary. This provides a promising launching point for studying deviations from various norms in film, which would constitute cinematic foregrounding. There are also direct investigations of foregrounding in film, such as the study by Hakemulder (2007). He found that foregrounded scenes from films are rated as more enjoyable by viewers, as well as more significant or noteworthy, based

on a re-watching paradigm. These findings parallel the most robust results from foregrounding studies of literature, raising the intriguing possibility that foregrounding may produce similar effects across different narrative media. In all likelihood, however, there are likely to be foregrounding effects that are both universal across media and also some that are unique to specific narrative forms.

FUTURE GOALS AND CHALLENGES

In this chapter we have reviewed how people respond to various aspects of a story, and how empirical techniques have been employed to study these responses. Although brief, we have hopefully communicated the wide-ranging nature of these types of investigation. Despite the wealth of research in this area, there are many exciting directions for future work along with some puzzling aspects of our current understanding that require further investigation.

In taking a very broad perspective of aesthetic responses to stories, we have somewhat glossed over a major distinction that has been put forth in the literature between emotional responses tied to aspects of the story content (e.g., identification with characters, emotional responses to plot events, transportation into story worlds), known as narrative emotions, and the appreciation of beauty for the form or foregrounding in a story (e.g., responses to stylistic choices), known as aesthetic feelings (Miall & Kuiken, 2002; see also Tan, 2000). We chose to discuss all of these responses because not all aesthetic responses are affective in nature (they can also be cognitive; van Peer et al., 2007), because many of the responses to story content struck us as possible forms of positive evaluation or aesthetic appreciation, and because narrative and aesthetic emotions have been found to be rather closely related, empirically (Koopman, 2011; Koopman, Hilscher & Cupchik, 2012). Whether and how these two types of responses to narrative diverge, as well as how they relate to similar outcomes, is a challenge for future research.

 Despite the diverse set of empirical studies reviewed, there are some coherent themes that have emerged with respect to future directions. This field is blessed in its diversity of empirical approaches that have been adopted, with qualitative interview studies contributing just as much as neuroimaging investigations. It would be beneficial to see things continue in this direction, with more researchers adopting a wider variety of tools and perspectives to study this fascinating topic. Naturalistic observation in the field, for example, would likely provide some fascinating nuance to our understanding, as would more qualitative interview studies, case studies, and investigations using eye-tracking and psychophysiological measurement. Similarly, researchers have begun to branch out from literary texts to explore other narrative media, and we would love to see more investigations of aesthetic responses to videogames, graphic novels, podcasts, film, and theatre, among others. Although narrative has often been treated in a somewhat monolithic fashion in most studies to date, greater nuance with respect to types of stories (e.g., plots) and different genres of stories would certainly be welcome. Lastly, there is a growing acknowledgement that individual differences in aesthetic response, as well as cultural differences, are all going to be important when it comes to understanding when and how people appreciate stories. Overall, the future for empirical investigations of aesthetic responses to narrative appears very bright, and we remain excited and optimistic about what is to come.

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