

Margrit Schreier

**The world of fiction, dreams, and research:
How literature works its spell**

- Keith Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams. The Psychology of Fiction*. Malden, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2011. XIV, 275 p. [Price: EUR 19,30]. ISBN: 978-0-470-97457-5.

Keith Oatley is in the rare position of inhabiting two worlds, has won recognition both as a psychologist with a focus on emotions and as a novelist (his first novel, *The Case of Emily V.*, won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best First Novel in 1994). At the same time, he has always sought to combine these worlds: His expertise as a psychologist has shaped and inspired his fictional writing, and his passion for fiction has laid the groundwork for one of the key threads running through his academic work: understanding the role of emotion in fictional narrative. In *Such Stuff as Dreams* he takes his interest in bringing these two worlds together one step further: He transcends his previous focus on emotions¹ and – as indicated by the subtitle *The Psychology of Fiction* – takes his readers on a *tour de force* of the different areas where psychology can provide insight into fiction and the ways in which we read and otherwise make use of fiction, covering such diverse topics as the relationship between play and fiction, the effects of reading fiction, or the writing of fiction. In so doing, he skilfully weaves together concepts from literary theory, literary examples, and findings from experimental psychology.

He starts out (chapter 1) with the encompassing and basic question: What is fiction and how does it relate to the everyday world? Following a discussion of the different interpretations of mimesis as representation and as world-making, illustrated by drawing upon Shakespeare's notion of *dream* and how this notion changes throughout Shakespeare's work, he introduces his own conceptualization of fiction as simulation: »Narrative stories are simulations that run not on computers but on minds« (17). This conceptualization that was first introduced in *Best Laid Schemes*² then becomes the core of Oatley's psychology of fiction as it is developed in the following chapters:

If we take on the idea of mimesis as world-creating alongside its meaning as world-reflecting, our idea of what we do as readers or audience members can change. In this case, we don't just respond to fiction (as might be implied by the idea of reader response), or receive it (as might be implied by reception studies), or appreciate it (as in art appreciation), or seek its correct interpretation (as seems sometimes to be suggested by the New Critics). We create our own version of the piece of fiction, our own dream, our own enactment.

(18)

Oatley's conceptualization of the active, constructive and creative reader (a key concept to be developed further in the subsequent chapters) and his notion of the effects of fiction are thus based on the metaphor of fiction as a simulation running on the mind of the reader. The metaphor is further substantiated by drawing on the concept of mirror neurones in the brain – neurones that become active not only when we perform an action, but also when we see others performing that same action or, as recent research has shown, when we read about someone performing that action (cf. 19f.). There is evidence, Oatley argues, that a network of interrelated brain regions are involved in functions such as perspective taking, imaginative thinking, and in story comprehension.

In chapter 2, Oatley examines the relationship between childhood play, especially pretence play, and fiction. Relevant concepts include, for example, metaphor and metonymy, which are presented as fundamental operations of the mind, mental models, transitional objects, social intelligence, and theory-of-mind. Together, these concepts and the research surrounding them provide different facets of the overarching and well-substantiated argument that many of the cognitive operations and functions that form the basis of reading and understanding fiction are acquired in the context of childhood play. Oatley also makes a case for evolutionary readings of both play and art, arguing that both have evolved and persisted because they are adaptive and thus of advantage to the human species. Overall, this is a highly diverse chapter, providing a very broad overview of some of the pertinent concepts and research linking childhood play and fiction. At the same time, the exact relationship between these various concepts is not always clear. This applies in particular to the evolutionary perspective which might be considered yet a different facet of the psychology of fiction, warranting its own chapter and connected to the relationship between fiction and childhood play mostly by an association of *beginnings* in both ontogenesis and phylogenesis.

Oatley now moves on to what happens when we read fiction, when we run that simulation provided by an author on our own minds, and he does so by drawing on yet another characteristic that links reading fiction to childhood play: creativity (chapter 3). Here, the core argument is that in reading and understanding fiction readers are involved in a creative act, in making the story their own, generating their own understanding of the story based on the background of their individual memories, thoughts, and emotions. To substantiate this argument, Oatley draws on, for example, Iser's theory of the implied reader (cf. 72f.), the Formalist distinction between ›fabula‹ and ›syuzhet‹ (story and plot; cf. 68ff.), to which ›dhvani‹ is added, the suggestion structure (cf. 71f.), and a number of studies from both cognitive psychology and reception research. From a psychological perspective, a classic study by Frederic Bartlett is described, demonstrating how the recipients of an indigenous story in the re-telling increasingly assimilated it to their own schema of what a story should be and entail. From the angle of (literary) reception studies, another classic study was conducted by Richards, where he collected students' responses to 13 poems. Unlike Richards, who considered many of the – especially negative – responses to the poems as evidence of the students lacking in understanding of the true meaning of the poetry, Oatley argues in line with reader response theory that the students' comments are a reflection of their effort to engage with the poems and make them their own, resulting in a potential multitude of different understandings (58). Drawing on Barthes, Oatley further posits that this potential multitude of meanings is in fact supported and encouraged by the simultaneity of the different codes carried by a given literary text (62f.). Further evidence of readers' creativity and of how they make use of both textual offers such as foregrounding and their own memories and emotions in creating individual understandings of literary texts are presented.

Overall, chapter 3 again impresses by the large variety of concepts and materials that are brought to bear upon the topic. At the same time, the notion of creativity may be stretched somewhat too thin here.³ Moreover, one might argue that what is subsumed here under creative thought might be just as well or better described as an example of cognitive constructivism – a key concept in present-day cognitive psychology, referring to the interaction between top-down and bottom-up processing in thinking and (textual) understanding: how, for example as readers, we bring together our own previous knowledge, memories and emotions on the one hand and what is offered in a text on the other hand. This concept of cognitive constructivism, however, is unfortunately absent from the chapter and in fact the entire book.⁴ One might argue here that cognitive constructivism is well-suited to describe what happens when we engage with factual material, but falls short of covering what happens when we engage with fiction. Research has indeed shown that we read fiction differently from factual texts,

that the inferences we draw based on fictional texts are more elaborate, more *polyvalent*, and contain more metatextual references than those drawn based on factual texts.⁵ But is this a difference in quality that justifies labelling the one type of thought process as creative, but not the other – or is it a matter of degree?

In a next step, the book moves on to some of the ›key ingredients‹ of fiction: character and plot. Again, Oatley succeeds at integrating concepts and theories from literary studies and psychology so as to mutually elucidate each other. The notion of character, for example, is discussed in the context of mental models, increasing our understanding of how fictional characters are cognitively represented, drawing attention to how we engage with characters or entire books, how we may indeed even become attached to them. Attachment to fictional characters has so far been little discussed in the psychology of literature, although it has received much attention in media psychology, both conceptually and empirically, under the heading of ›parasocial relationships‹ and ›parasocial interactions‹.⁶ In future research it would be well worth integrating Oatley's considerations of the phenomenon with existing theories and findings from media psychology on how parasocial relationships to both liked and disliked characters are formed and maintained.

The topic of attachment provides for a seamless transition to a chapter on emotion which – not surprisingly, considering Oatley's outstanding expertise in this field – is easily the most advanced and conceptually elaborated chapter in the book. Here Oatley goes back to the assumption of fiction as a simulation running on minds and takes up again the notion of mirror neurones introduced in the first chapter. This is the starting point for a tour of the various emotions that have been discussed in the context of literary reading, including familiar ones such as empathy, identification, sympathy, as well as the lesser-known concept of the ›rasas‹ (cf. 120ff.), emotions based on our memories that have the potential to re-experience events from our lives in new and potentially self-transforming ways.

While a fair amount has been written on the psychology of reading fiction, the processes and devices of writing fiction have only rarely been explored from a psychological perspective. This is where Oatley now turns (chapter 6), and it is one of the great merits of the book that it brings together these diverse facets of the field. Based on Tom Wolfe's conceptualization of new journalism (136), Oatley first identifies and discusses four key devices of writing fiction which, he argues, allow the reader to construct a mental model which can then serve as that simulation that runs on minds: scene-by-scene construction, dialogue, point-of-view, and status life. This is followed by an overview of empirical studies of writing, resulting in a conceptualization of writing as problem solving that rests on an interplay of expertise and different kinds of knowledge and use of memory functions. The chapter concludes with an illustration of the writing process drawing on Flaubert, both his theory and his practice of writing. The chapter thus touches upon different aspects of writing fiction by drawing upon both the assumptions and concepts of literary writers themselves and on the small but growing body of empirical research on the topic. In addition, it would have been interesting to know why the theories and assumptions of those particular writers were chosen and how other writers' assumptions about writing fiction fit in with Oatley's model of fiction as a simulation that runs on the mind.

In a next step, Oatley returns to the reader and to the comprehensive topic of the effects of fiction (chapter 7) that he already touched upon in chapter 3, discussing the creativity of the reader, and in chapter 5, when focusing on the reader's emotions. To begin with, several empirical studies are described that support the assumption that reading fiction increases social intelligence, such as understanding of others or understanding of relationships, and can serve as a vehicle for self-improvement. Indeed, Oatley even goes one step further and argues,

based on the argument made by Lynn Hunt, that fiction has positively influenced the establishment of human rights (168). He then turns to ›transportation‹, a concept developed by Richard Gerrig to capture the extent to which a piece of fiction transports us to a different world, as a factor that mediates the effects of fiction, such as the extent to which we are prepared to believe the information we read.

Again, Oatley provides a wide-ranging overview of the many diverse aspects of the effects of fiction. But because the effects of reading fiction can be so manifold, structuring of the topic along conceptual lines would have been useful. A helpful distinction in this context refers to the difference between the reception of a text and its subsequent effects, where reception relates to the reception process itself (here: the actual process of reading) and where effects refer to consequences that set in at a later point in time.⁷ Transportation, for example, refers to the reception process, as do the inferences we make during reading, whereas changes in the way we perceive ourselves would be an example of later-time effects. In analogy to the persuasive effects of reading non-fiction, effects can be further subdivided into emotional, cognitive, and conative effects, i.e. effects on the way we act. Changes in our belief system, for example, would count among cognitive effects, whereas joining a nationalist movement following the frequent reading of certain story themes would go one step further, with reading fiction having an effect on how we act in the world. Finally, effects can occur on the individual level, as when we gain a better understanding of ourselves as a result of reading fiction, or on the social level, as in long-term changes of the human rights legislature.

Effects of fiction that transcend the individual and take place on an overindividual or group level are at the centre of the final chapter of the book (chapter 8), with a focus on communicating about fiction. Oatley makes a distinction here between the interpretation of texts in literary criticism and the interpretation of texts by ordinary readers, arguing with Bill Benzon that the interpretation by other readers allow us to assess »how texts work in the mind and brain« (185). In discussing fiction with others, we do not only compare ourselves and our life worlds to the characters and their life worlds in the fictional context, but we moreover compare our understandings of those texts and how they relate to our everyday lives to those of others. This entails an – in line with reader response theory and a very deliberate – move away from the concept of the one correct interpretation to the acceptance of a variety of interpretations.⁸ To substantiate his claim, Oatley draws on empirical studies of reading groups, his own experience of being a reading group member, and a number of social initiatives making use of reading groups, such as »Changing Lives through Literature«, or »Changing Lives through Literature for All of Us«.

Such Stuff as Dreams is a remarkable book in several ways. It stands out by the breadth of the topics covered, extending beyond the reader to also include the writing and the communication about fiction, and by the diversity and richness of the many different concepts and studies brought to bear upon the topic. Throughout the book, Oatley never loses his footing as the inhabitant of the twin worlds of literature and of academe, both in the concepts he draws upon and in his writing where he takes the reader along on a journey to the different areas that make up the psychology of fiction. As a result, the book has much to offer to different kinds of readers: The academic from Literary Studies will learn much about the current state of empirical studies in psychology that substantiate many of the claims that have been made of the positive effects of fiction. The academic from Psychology will learn about the literary grounding and analogies of many of the concepts used in empirically studying the reading of fiction. And the interested layperson will find the writing easily accessible and will gain a broad overview of fiction, its various aspects and effects.⁹

At the same time, the main strength of the book, namely the breadth and diversity of the topics that are covered here, are also closely related to what may be considered its main drawback: Among the multiplicity of concepts and research available in the field, the reason for selecting some for inclusion and not others does not become sufficiently clear. This concerns in particular the rich body of research summarized under the heading of the empirical study of literature. Some relevant studies are mentioned, such as van Peer's research on foregrounding (74ff.), Hakemulder's study on the effects of reading fiction on attitudes towards minority groups (172f.), or the work of Green and collaborators on the role of transportation in mediating the cognitive effects of fiction (172). But Oatley does not refer to the research tradition as such. This strikes me as a notable omission, considering that the field has yielded both theoretical conceptualisations of the process of reading literary texts, such as the theories put forward by Norbert Groeben and by Siegfried Schmidt, and a large number of empirical studies, emphasizing the constructive processes on the reader's side as well as investigating the interaction between specific textual features and text comprehension.¹⁰

It would also be helpful to see the diversity of concepts integrated to a larger extent. The effects of reading fiction on empathy and social understanding, for example, are discussed in chapters 2, 7, and 8 – but how do these different facets of the topic relate to each other? And how exactly are character, action, and incident (chapter 4) taken up again in writing fiction (chapter 6)? Finally, I at times found myself wondering about the type of fiction to which Oatley's observations apply. He occasionally mentions genre and that some genres are more limiting than others (cf. 62), but he does not go into detail here. Some assumptions seem to apply to all fiction, regardless of genre, such as the conceptualization of fiction as a simulation that runs on minds. Other assumptions, such as the potential of reading fiction for self-improvement, seem limited to literary fiction with a capital L, raising the question of the boundaries of literature and the question of the potentially different effects of different kinds of writing and different genres. With *Such Stuff as Dreams* Oatley lays a solid foundation for further work exploring these more specific questions both conceptually and empirically.

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Notes

¹ For example: Keith Oatley, *Best Laid Schemes: The Psychology of Emotion*, Cambridge 1992; –, *The Passionate Muse: Exploring Emotion in Stories*, New York 2012.

² See footnote 1.

³ In the first place, the use of the term ›creativity‹ in this context raises the question how creativity is conceptualized. Presumably this use of the term is situated within so-called little-c models of creativity which emphasize the creative and potentially transformative aspects of everyday thinking and understanding: James C. Kaufman / Ronald A. Beghetto, *Beyond Big and Little: The Four C Model of Creativity*, *Review of General Psychology* 13 (2009), 1–12. This is an important notion, but would gain by additional elaboration, especially with a view to readers who are not familiar with psychology.

⁴ Oatley presents a detailed account of some of the groundbreaking studies that have shaped cognitive constructivism, notably Bartlett's study on remembering: Frederic Bartlett, *Remembering, A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*, Cambridge 1932, but he does not refer to the concept.

⁵ Helmut Hauptmeier/Dietrich Meutsch/Reinhold Viehoff, *Literary Understanding from an Empirical Point of View* (LUMIS Schriften 14), Siegen 1987.

⁶ For an overview cf.: David Giles, Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research, *Media Psychology* 4, 279–305.

⁷ Here and in the following: Norbert Groeben/Peter Vorderer, *Leserpsychologie: Lesemotivation – Lektürewirkung*, Münster 1988.

⁸ In this, Oatley does not explicitly discuss criteria for comparing and potentially evaluating differing interpretations of the same text. It is only in passing that he mentions what he considers a disadvantage of much (though not all) literary criticism and, conversely, an advantage of bringing together different interpretations in a group of interested readers: “[...] in reading the critic’s piece, one is not so much enabled to think and feel about the text in a new way, one is being induced to vote.” (185)

⁹ It should also be noted that Keith Oatley’s book is to be seen within the tradition of the psychology of literature, elaborated most prominently by Norbert Groeben. His work on the topic has not been translated into English and was therefore not available to Oatley. The reader who would like a more comprehensive overview of the field should also refer to Groeben’s work, such as: Norbert Groeben, *Literaturpsychologie*, Kohlhammer 1972; Norbert Groeben/Jürgen Landwehr, *Empirische Literaturpsychologie (1980–90) und die Sozialgeschichte der Literatur: ein problemstrukturierender Überblick*, *IASL (Internationales Archiv für die Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur 1991)* 16, 143–235.

¹⁰ For example: Norbert Groeben, *Rezeptionsforschung als empirische Literaturwissenschaft: Paradigma- durch Methodendiskussion*, Athenäum 1977; –, *From Theory to Practice: The Empirization Program in the German Science of Literature 1972–1977*, *Poetics Today* 2 (1980), 159–169; Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Grundriß der Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft. Teilband 1: Der gesellschaftliche Handlungsbereich Literatur*, Vieweg 1980; in translation: –, *Foundations for the Empirical Study of Literature. Vol. I: The Components of a Basic Theory*, Buske 1982; for an overview cf.: Dick Schram/Gerard Steen (eds.), *The Psychology and Sociology of Literature*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2001.

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