# Commentary on *Fiction: A Philosophical Analysis*, by Catharine Abell; and *Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction*, by Gregory Currie

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*Each of these books offers a richly developed and nuanced account of the nature of fiction. And each poses major challenges to a view about which there is a near-consensus. Catharine Abell draws on a theory of the institutions of fiction to advance a systematic re-envisioning of the metaphysics and epistemology of the contents of stories. Gregory Currie argues that fiction's relationship to the imagination, and the way stories communicate their contents to readers, seriously undermine fiction's cognitive values.*

## The Epistemic Objection

I start with Abell's target: the widely-held view of fictional content as generated via a certain kind of reflexive communicative act. In this account, modelled on Paul Grice's (1957) theory of ordinary cooperative communication, the content of a fictive utterance is determined by its author's aim to elicit in audiences an imagining with that content, audiences' recognition of that intention, and that recognition serving as a reason to form that imagining. Here, authors have communicative intentions much like those of ordinary speakers. But whereas ordinary speakers' utterances function to communicate their beliefs and other attitudes about the world, authors' utterances function to communicate their imaginings.

Abell's powerful objection to modelling the communication of imagining on that of belief begins by observing that the two attitudes do not share the same direction of fit. Truth is normative for beliefs and, thus, they have a mind-to-world direction of fit. By contrast, Abell notes, 'imaginings lack any direction of fit' (p. 62). Consequently, while in ordinary communication, I can infer what belief you intend to communicate by placing your utterance against a background of beliefs we share, I cannot perform an analogous inference to what imaginings you want to communicate. If imaginings do not aim to be true, there 'are no rational constraints on how the imaginings authors intend to elicit are related to the way the world is' (p. 66). Thus the communication of imaginings is seriously challenged by a coordination problem that doesn't beset the communication of beliefs.[1]

1 I don't discuss here Abell's argument that the communication of imaginings also faces a distinctive problem owing to the lack of referents of some fictive representations.

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There must be an alternative means by which we rationally work out the fictive content made by an author's utterance. That content, Abell proposes, is best characterized by a 'code' model, wherein rules supplied by institutions of fiction determine what fictive content a given author's utterance contains.

Imaginings as a kind do not have an essential mind-to-world direction of fit. However, the relevant imaginings here do have a mind to *the-world-as-represented-by-a-fiction* direction of fit.[2] And that direction of fit may supply rational constraints on (i) the imaginings that authors communicatively intend to elicit in their audiences, and (ii) the identification by audiences of those imaginings, sufficient to satisfy Abell's epistemic desideratum. Let me first survey some constraints and then note objections to their utility.

One constraint on the attribution of fictional content to a given utterance is imposed by a presumption of consistency with what is already accepted as constitutive of a fiction's content. This does assume that the process gets started somewhere (how does the first utterance get understood?), but that worry seems exaggerated in that much of what audiences are elicited to imagine is conveyed via utterances' literal meaning. Many potential contents could be attributed to the phrase, 'it was a dark and stormy night', but a predictable, if defeasible, understanding is that it's intended to elicit an imagining that it was a dark and stormy night.

Another constraint on the fictive content of an utterance is an author's intention to produce a work in a particular genre. However, rather than seeing the content of the author's utterances as *determined by* a rule referring to the genre (per Abell's institutional theory, p.81), a defender of the inferential model could say the content is determined by the author's intention to elicit an imagining conducive to successfully realizing a work in that genre.

More generally, an audience's attribution of content to an utterance follows what is taken to be consistent with the author's goals. Access to these goals may depend on, for example, extra-textual evidence and inferences to the best explanation of the content and form of the fiction, including content attributed to other utterances in the work.[3]

Of course, these proposed constraints present problems. The claim that a norm of consistency can provide a constraint on an audience's attribution of fictive content suggests such attribution is always provisional, waiting on ascriptions to other utterances, and thus until audiences finish reading a work (p. 74). But I don't see this implication's implausibility, if we allow that some attributions of content are made with more confidence than others, and confirmatory evidence builds as a story unfolds. Citing a passage from Raymond Chandler's *The High Window*:

> In and around the old houses…there are ratty hotels where nobody except people named Smith and Jones sign the register and where the night clerk is half watchdog and half pander (Chandler 1984, 62).

2 See Currie below on 'representation-dependent' states

3 See Stock (2017), pp. 76–7.

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Abell observes that 'Chandler's fictive utterance has the content that people go to the ratty hotels at issue to engage in illicit activities of which they want no record, not that the hotels at issue are frequented by a proliferation of Smiths and Joneses' (p. 70). It may be, as Abell's theory explains, that audiences recognize that content via their implicit awareness of a governing rule that, say, tells them to understand the utterance not wholly literally, but as representing what would be meant if it were uttered in a non-fictional context. But audiences also, or instead, might be able to recognize what its content elicits them to imagine by internal evidence—for example, the reference to the night clerk as 'half pander' implies illicit purposes, in which false names would be employed.

Do we mistakenly assume there is always such consistency among the fictive contents furnished by a work's utterances, such that a provisional attribution of some fictive contents can constrain attribution of others? In the naturalistic genre, one reliably presumes that fictive contents of distinct utterances will be mutually consistent. Even if in other genres (e.g. fantasy) that consistency may not be as stringently observed, some significant coherence among fictive contents must exist for a fiction to be intelligible as a representation at all.

We might also ask how to determine which genre a work belongs to. Must we determine the fictive content of an utterance before concluding in what genre that utterance lies? Or does knowledge of the genre help restrict the potential fictive contents we could attribute to the utterance? Plausibly, the answer is the determinations work in both directions, with hypotheses about fictive content emerging in reflective equilibrium with hypotheses about genre.

Finally, Abell rejects the proposal that an appeal to an author's goals may constrain the fictive contents attributed to her utterances. She rightly notes that it is implausible that audiences '*invariably* have the evidence required to identify' an author's goals (p. 68, my emphasis). But perhaps *sometimes* knowledge of fictional content arrives through appeal to such goals, just not always, and particularly not when highly conventional or formulaic stories make it unnecessary.

Abell also objects that if such goals played a role in audience's inferences about the content of the author's utterances, these would not be common goals—as in contexts of cooperative communication—but personal goals: 'authors do not conform to any cooperative principle in their pursuit of those goals. Instead, they pursue them in whatever way seems to them most likely to result in their achievement'. (p. 67). It is unclear why, among those means by which an author chooses to achieve her goals, conforming to a cooperative principle isn't sometimes a possible strategy.

I raise these potential constraints on what content audiences attribute to an author's utterances—hence what grounds there can be for audiences to infer the imaginings an author intends them to engage in—only to weaken Abell's claim that audiences that appeal to communicative intentions never have the resources available to satisfy her highly plausible epistemological constraint. I now turn to some features of her positive proposal.

## Intentions vs Institutions

In Abell's theory, an author's intentions have two roles to play in determining fictive content. The first is in determining which institution of fiction governs the author's utterance.

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Audiences rely on knowledge of the rules of fiction institutions to recognize what imaginings are prescribed in response to certain utterances (p. 10). Thus, when authors intend to elicit particular imaginings, they can exploit those rules to produce fictive utterances with particular contents: '[a]n author's intention … determines which institution of fiction regulates her fictive utterances and therefore which content-determining rules govern those utterances' (p. 60). Abell's formulation explains how one can be an anti-intentionalist about fictive content without being forced to adopt the implausible claim that, absent appeals to an intention, a sentence in a fiction means just whatever rules of its language entail for such a sentence in a non-fictional context. Specifically, by virtue of the rules governing fictive utterances, the fictive content of a given utterance need not be identical to the literal meaning of that utterance. Abell's account also has the major virtue of obviating 'silly questions' that bedevil other accounts of fiction, such as, Why does Othello speak in verse? Governing conventions prevent such features of an utterance from being part of its fictive contents.

How broadly should we understand the scope of an author's intention that a given institution of fiction regulates her utterance? My worry is that the narrower the scope of the intention—that is, the more specific its content—the less distinction there is between the source of the utterance's meaning being the intention and the source being an institutionally given rule. After all, any expression of non-natural meaning depends on some convention. And there is a difference between saying the convention is necessary for the meaning and saying, as Abell does with fictive content, it is the exclusive determinant of the meaning.

Abell argues, however, that in the production of fictive content, an author's intentions are trumped by the rules governing their utterances: 'the contents of authors' fictive utterances can differ from the contents they intend them to have' (p. 10). I find this possibility counterintuitive for three related reasons.

(1) It implies an author may furnish utterances, the contents of which prescribe imaginings that she could not intend—say because of limits to her knowledge. Unaware of the rules that govern her utterances, an author can create a meaningful fiction without a privileged access to its meaning.

(2) If audiences have access to knowledge of an author's intentions to mean *x* via her utterance *u*, why should that meaning be put aside in favour of that furnished by the relevant institution of fiction that applies to *u*? William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* contains a chronology inconsistent with the chronology one can draw from the narrator's account. Perhaps the conflict between the two representations is intended to express a thesis about time and historical memory, or perhaps Faulkner made a mistake. In ordinary communication, we ignore slips of the tongue, flawed word choice, grammatical errors, and so on, as irrelevant to a speaker's meaning. On the code model of fictive content, there doesn't appear to be room to adjust our understanding of an utterance to correspond with how it was intended; there is only the content of the utterance that is determined by the relevant rules.

(3) It isn't clear how Abell's scheme accommodates *sui generis* and idiosyncratic modes of creating fictive content. Suppose there was no institution of fiction

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> governing the particular utterances in George Perec's *La disparition*in which the absence of the letter 'e' elicits an imagining of loss and mourning. We would still want to say those utterances contributed to the story's content, even if during its composition they fell under no existing regulative rules.

No doubt, much of our determination of fictive content doesn't require any inference to an author's intentions, communicative or otherwise.[4] Here, an appeal to our knowledge of conventions of fiction can explain our understanding of an utterance's content. However, in the cases above, we can see that there is an implicit role for appealing to intentions when the grounds for attributing fictive content are uncertain or disputed.

## Interpretative Fictive Content

Abell assigns the author's intentions a second role in distinguishing *Fictive Utterance Content* (CFU)—which we've seen is a function of what content-determining rules govern an author's utterances—from *Interpretative Fictive Content* (IFC), a function of the inferences that audiences make to further contents that an author intends to convey via the production of CFU. In *The Secret Agent*, for example, that a newspaper declares the death of a female passenger on a ship is an instance of CFU, but that the woman is Mrs. Verloc (which readers infer as what Conrad intends them to imagine via his description of the newspaper) is an instance of IFC. IFC also includes standard interpretative inferences such as to the symbolic meanings of what a fiction represents, and the attitudes a fiction expresses about the states of affairs it describes.

However, this characterization of IFC is too narrow if it is to capture all of a work's content that doesn't belong to CFU. For some of what seems prima facie to qualify as IFC can be determined only by appeal to factors beyond those that its author could have intended. These include explanations of the work's content appealing to the style and tradition the author works in (where, e.g., there was a market for certain kinds of fictions); constraints imposed by the author's medium (e.g. that of silent film); artistic conventions unrecognized as such (e.g. that violence in classical drama occurs off-stage); an author's beliefs, points of view, and desires, of which they are unaware, among others.

The inferential model is attractive for providing an all-purpose tool to determine CFU. Once learnt in response to one kind of fiction, the procedure can be applied more generally. Abell's epistemic objection suggests the inferential model cannot work as reliably as its proponents claim. However, her model of institutionally given regulative rules can appear epistemically taxing, as authors and audiences need to (implicitly) master the relevant rules, as well as rules governing which rules apply in particular cases. If there are problems explaining how audiences have access to every code required to rationally attribute content to fictional utterances, the institutional approach may not be in better shape than the inferential model as an *exclusive* explanation of fictive content. If audiences must

4 Note that Grice acknowledged that speakers reliably make utterances and audiences reliably respond without either party always reasoning in ways they would have if they had taken the inferential steps specified in his analysis. See Grice (1957), reprinted in Grice (1989).

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infer to an author's intentions to identify the rule applying to a given utterance, why not dispense with the appeal to rules and appeal straight to the intentions?

One might accept that, as Abell writes, there are no 'general strategies that audiences can pursue in order to identify the imaginings they are intended to engage in' (pp. 76–77). And that an intentionalist is in a poor position to claim institution-given rules *always* 'maximize our chances of imagining in accordance with authors' intentions' (pp. 76–77). However, it is consistent with those points that a mixed strategy, drawing on both inferential and institutional accounts, can explain the determination and recognition of CFU. For example, one might propose that an author intends, via a given utterance, to elicit a particular imagining in an audience and for that audience to recognize that intention. But only *sometimes* is that intention realized through the audience recognizing that the utterance is governed by a content-determining rule. Perhaps the epistemic problems facing both the inferential and institutional approaches can be ameliorated through seeking a convergence in the answers they provide.

## Correct Emotions and Representation-Dependent States

Now let me turn to one of Currie's targets: the view that we learn from fictions through emotionally engaging with their contents. Its proponents hold, inter alia, that fictions allow us to clarify and refine our emotions, develop our capacity for emotional appraisal, and discover what merits certain emotions. Such approaches rely on some commitment to what it is for affective responses to a fiction to be appropriate, fitting, or in some other way correct—how else would we know our responses to stories track what there is to learn in them? And all presume some answer to how feelings about fictions relate to those about real life, such that the former shapes the latter. Here, I focus first on Currie's discussion of the epistemic relevance of affective and evaluative engagements with fictions. I then turn to his diagnosis of why affective and other responses to fictions appear to provide significant cognitive values—without their really doing so.

Currie introduces two criteria that govern the representational correctness of our emotional responses: 'A rule of truth constrains aptness for the emotions of life; a rule of representational correspondence—correspondence between how the emotion represents its object and how the fiction does the same—constrains fictive emotions' (p. 62). The first of these asks whether an emotion represents an object as it is. The second asks if an emotion represents a fictional object in a way corresponding to how the fiction represents the object.

As Currie explains, this difference between what we expect of emotions about real life and the contents of fictions reflects the fact that fictional states of affairs are constituted by how they are represented. Thus, Peter Lamarque notes of Dickens' obnoxious characters, there isn't 'some other perspective on the Veneerings under which they subsist as decent, honest, kindly, altruistic folk who have somehow been falsely captured by the mocking tone of the narrator' (Lamarque, 2007). Fiction-directed emotions thus answer to not only features of the object, but how that object is inflected through the style, technique, tone, and so on, of a fictional representation. They instantiate what Currie calls

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representation-dependent states, the satisfaction conditions of which are internal to a representation of their objects (p. 67). Still, differences between targets of fiction-directed and real-life-directed emotions aren't the only explanation of differences between such criteria of representational correctness. Differences in those criteria are also owed, I want to suggest, to differences in the respective aims of our engagements with fictions and (representations of) real life.

Consider a case where a documentary's beauty causes viewers to take pleasure in some unjust events it records. There, our (let's assume) truth-seeking purposes in viewing the documentary make the pleasurable emotion—in presenting a bad state of affairs as good—unjustified. By contrast, pleasure caused by the beauty of a fictional representation of that state of affairs is justified in virtue of that response being part of properly engaging with the fiction.

Unlike emotions about real life, which aim for correctness in their evaluative appraisals, emotions elicited by fictions can be normatively governed by overriding non-factive purposes such as absorption or entertainment. Currie's distinction between a rule of truth and a rule of representational correspondence appeals to the difference between targets of emotions across life and art. However, if emotions can fit fictional objects even when evoked via means that would not justify—would not serve as evidence for—those emotions in response to real life, then the analogy between emotions fitting real things and represented things, respectively, breaks down. We have not two kinds of correctness conditions for one kind of emotion, but two different kinds of emotions. One kind admits only reasons, or reason-like considerations, as justifications; another allows mere causes—insofar as they serve what the fiction aims to do—as justifications. The different functions of our engagements with, respectively, fictional and real-world states of affairs mean that the elicitation of an emotion in one context may not allow us to infer much about its counterpart's evocation in the other.

## Quasi-Emotions

Currie classifies emotions felt for fictions as representation-dependent states in virtue of their conditions of satisfaction—to be found in the contents of a representation, not the real world (p. 67). I've suggested that epistemic limits of fiction-directed emotions are better explained via attention to how they are governed by norms of appropriateness different from those of ordinary emotions. Here I address a different distinction between representation-dependent and ordinary emotions. Such representation-dependent emotions are not located, like ordinary emotions, outside the scope of what's imagined or pretended; instead, they are constitutive of episodes of imagining or pretence. In that latter role, affective states are often called 'quasi-emotions'; the implication for some theorists is they are pretend forms of affective states (Walton 2015).

Currie is agnostic whether quasi-emotions are genuine kinds of emotion or only their imaginative counterparts (pp. 67, 72–73). For many explanatory purposes—such as understanding why one's blood pressure rises at a scary movie—the distinction doesn't

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matter. However, for Currie's purposes in addressing the cognitive value of fiction, how we characterize such representation-dependent states matters in both explanatory and evaluative terms.

Fiction-directed emotions must sufficiently resemble ordinary emotions for the exercise of the former to have certain kinds of influence on the exercise of the latter, or for the former to be legitimately subject to criticism for lacking what we associate with the latter's proper functioning. For a runner, good training leads to good racing—although the activities aren't similar in just any respects, they are in respect of the physiological systems that matter. We thus need to ask whether quasi-emotions are sufficiently similar to ordinary emotions—along the dimensions that matter—for elicitations of the former to make a difference in the latter.[5] If, for example, the relevant dimension is a capacity for evaluative appraisal, the cognitive defender of fiction should worry about *discrepant affects*: we often find something funny in a fictional scenario that would pain us in real life, or admire and root for a fictional character we would despise if they lived among us (Nichols, 2006). Conversely, perhaps we learn something from those non-normative responses, such as our susceptibility to evaluative perspectives of others—even of fictional characters and narrators—supplanting our own.[6]

A critic of the epistemic benefits attributed to fiction-directed emotions might argue (see above) that, qua *representation-dependent states*, they entrain different standards of justification than their counterparts formed about the real world. Fear, caused by the eerie music of a horror film, has the ultimate function of entertainment, not representing danger as we find with ordinary fear. There, we would be wrong to expect the constraints governing the proper functioning of the two kinds of representations to be invariant across imagined and real contexts because they can have different purposes.

Or a critic might argue that, despite being representation-dependent states, fiction-directed emotions are subject to the same normative constraints as ordinary emotions. Unfortunately, they're insufficiently similar to ordinary emotions along dimensions that matter (as, e.g. in discrepant affects) to serve as reliable representations of how things are or ought to be.

Currie's account appears to advance both criticisms of epistemic claims made on behalf of emotions elicited by fictions. However, it isn't clear if he can consistently make both objections. For each attributes a different explanatory roles to emotions in responses to stories. From one perspective, emotions elicited by fictions don't aim to do what ordinary emotions do; from the other, they aim to do what ordinary emotions do, but fall short. In any case, either account would support his diagnosis of why people think they learn from fictions, which I turn to now.

5 An analogous question can be raised about other representation-dependent states that Currie discusses, e.g. i-*desires* and *quasi-empathy*.

6 Currie notes the dangers posed to ourselves and others if 'imagining alien values carried with it the possibility that we may actually come to have those values … ' (Currie, 1995).

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## Learninglike

A familiar description of understanding a fiction is that it prompts us to engage in the pretence of learning about certain (fictional) states of affairs, people who populate them, and what they say and do. Currie proposes extending the pretence's scope to include that we learn from the fiction—not further fictional things—but truths that obtain outside the fiction: 'So the thought is that, in pretending that we are learning about a restricted range of things from the utterances the text presents us with, we are naturally led to include within the scope of the pretence a wider range of pretended learning that takes in the sorts of things we often claim that fiction really can teach us' (p. 108).

If our experience of fictions is what Currie calls *learninglike*, and not genuinely educative, that helps explain the prima facie plausibility of intuitions that we gain insight, understanding, and other epistemic benefits from fictions, without conceding the intuitions' truth.[7]

A consideration in favour of this thesis is that the understanding of a fiction appears to rely on standard modes of cooperative communication. Perhaps, Currie suggests, this process doesn't stop at inferences about what is fictionally true—as we fill out a fiction's contents on the basis of what is directly stated—but moves on to inferences about what is being conveyed (e.g. insights into human nature) via the provision of those fictional truths. It is unclear why the conclusions of those further inferences would not be recognized as within the pretence's scope, along with other indirectly supplied information. I take it that Currie means what we ultimately infer to are assertions that we construe the fiction or author to be presenting about the *real* world. Perhaps when stripped of reference to particular fictional entities, such claims appeal to concepts (love, time, justice) sufficiently general that their extension necessarily includes real things.

Currie acknowledges the potential undesirability of this revisionary description. 'To say that people who appear to be open to fiction to change their beliefs and practices are "only pretending" sounds like an accusation of bad faith' (p. 109). But he rejects the implication that audiences are being disingenuous. Instead, he suggests, people err in their descriptions of their mental states. Nonetheless, I want to suggest that the concept of learninglike poses a serious challenge for a defender of fiction's cognitive value, even as the concept may indemnify certain of fiction's putative cognitive defects against complaint.

A substantial theme in theories of the imagination addresses how we often learn about actual states of affairs through imaginative and pretence representations. We might employ a model of an aeroplane in a wind tunnel to learn what stresses the real aeroplane will face in the open air. Or we might better perform some elaborate behaviour, say hitting a golf ball or playing a sequence of piano keys, by pretending to do those things. In these cases, imagining or pretending is sufficiently similar in relevant respects to the real thing—that what we could acquire through the real thing we get at least some of through its mere representation.

However, if Currie is right that literature gives us not learning but an experience that is learninglike—that is, a pretence of learning—this won't be an imaginative experience

7 Currie (109) drawing on Miller (1998).

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of some state of affairs *S* that tells us about the real *S*. We've already seen reasons to doubt that certain representation-dependent states are good rehearsals for encounters with their objects in real life. With fictions that count as literature, Currie writes, 'Readers end up having hedonically inflected imaginative experiences which are the resultant of three distinct forces: the (fictional) events represented, their representing vehicles, the qualities of the representing agent' (p. 134). But readers cannot always or easily isolate what is a response indexed to the events represented by a fiction from what is an effect of the representing vehicle and agent. Our imaginative experiences of literary fictions don't make salient which dimension of a represented scenario counts as a genuine anticipation of the real thing.

So, we may have an experience phenomenologically akin to learning in following a fiction but one that isn't constrained by what is required for actual learning. A fiction's relation to facts often reflects Aristotle's injunction that, in devising a plot, 'what is impossible but can be believed should be preferred to what is possible but unconvincing'.[8] Narrative satisfactions override concerns about truths exportable from the fiction to the real world.

Currie allows that there are occasions when readers learn from fictions about such things as human nature: not all claims to epistemic benefits via pretence evince what is merely learninglike. But that doesn't offer much hope of mitigation. For if affective and cognitive responses to fiction only sometimes reveal the truths they purport to, such responses as a class cease to be an epistemically *reliable* means of improving emotions and beliefs. An emotional response to a fiction might reveal a deep insight into human affairs, but how would we know, without confidence in our emotions' reliability, that we should take that insight on board? Plausibly, if the diagnosis of fictional experience as learninglike is true, it would show the situation is even worse than what sceptics about literature's cognitive value propose. For the mere experience of thinking one is learning about *S*, without learning about *S*, can leave one more ignorant in relevant ways than one who hasn't had that experience at all. Someone who doesn't know whether a medicine will cure a disease is in a better epistemic position than one who falsely believes the medicine will work.

On the other hand, if we are justifiably sceptical about a systematic connection between an experience being contained within the scope of imagining and its capacity to provide epistemic benefits, perhaps we should also be sceptical about the potential for imaginative experiences to impose epistemic costs. Currie notes that there's an asymmetry in how two debates over fiction's effects proceed: scholars expect arguments about the harms that fictions cause to be sensitive to the degree of evidence available; yet, arguments in favour of fiction's benefits are often presented free of concern for serious empirical support (p. 5). Yet, Currie's arguments against the cognitive reliability of fiction may give us theoretical reasons to discount some of the empirical findings that suggest fictions can pose epistemic harms. To the extent that we have an experience that is only learninglike, not genuine belief-change, then we don't acquire false beliefs or distorting perspectives, only perhaps an imaginative experience of doing so. This, indeed, might

8 Aristotle. *The Poetics of Aristotle,* ch. 24.

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properly characterize the discrepant affects referred to above: we don't really adopt those non-normative perspectives; we only (unwittingly) imagine that we do. Perhaps that is true of some of the lessons we say we've drawn from stories. One important consequence of Currie's argument is that, sometimes, being epistemically corrupted by fiction is as much a pretence as learning from it is.

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