

Philosophy in Review



Gregory Currie, "Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction."

Rafe McGregor

Volume 40, Number 3, August 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071519ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071519ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McGregor, R. (2020). Review of [Gregory Currie, "Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 40 (3), 104–106.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1071519ar>

Copyright ©, 2020 Rafe McGregor



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Gregory Currie. *Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction.* Oxford University Press 2020. 256 pp. \$70.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199656615).

Gregory Currie is one of the world's preeminent philosophers of art and a highly respected philosopher of mind. *Imagining and Knowing: the Shape of Fiction* is his seventh book, with his conspicuous contributions to the analytic tradition of philosophy including the first systematic philosophical aesthetics in no less than two fields, film (*Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science*, Cambridge University Press 1995) and narrative (*Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories*, Oxford University Press 2010). Currie's trademark approach is the seamless integration of art criticism and aesthetic theory on the one hand, with empirical psychology and evolutionary biology on the other, and *Imagining and Knowing* follows suit. His stated aim is twofold: to make a convincing case for the significance of the imagination to the understanding of and engagement with fiction and to make an equally convincing case against the significance of fiction as a source of knowledge.

The monograph consists of an introduction, eleven chapters divided into three parts, and a coda. Part I is concerned with making a case for imagining fiction, defending fiction as an utterance over fiction as a genre (chapter 1) and the role of the imagination in the engagement with fiction (chapter 2). This role is fleshed out by means of Currie's conceptions of 'desires in imagination, or i-desires' (chapter 3) and i-emotions (chapter 4), which also provide neat solutions to both the paradox of fiction and the imaginative resistance debates (56). Part II sets the scene for the case against fictional knowledge, establishing an epistemic taxonomy (chapter 5), arguing that claims about the cognitive value of fiction should cohere with the findings of experimental psychology (chapter 6), and debunking evolutionary claims for the significance of fiction (chapter 7). Part III presents Currie's deflationary account, tackling each of what he considers to be the four most convincing arguments for learning from fiction in turn: fictional thought experiments (chapter 8), truth in literature (chapter 9), the psychology of authors (chapter 10), and the relationship between fiction and empathy (chapter 11).

Interestingly, as those who are familiar with his previous work will know, Currie is not an anti-cognitivist with regard to fiction or literature. In *Imagining and Knowing*, he reiterates his position—*contra* Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (*Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective*, Oxford University Press 1994)—that cognitive value is part and parcel of literary value (the value of a work of literature *qua* literature). His opposition to learning from literature is based on his contention that a convincing theory of the way in which that learning takes place has yet to be made—and, furthermore, that several of the existent theories conceal the likelihood that literature and fiction can be sources of misinformation as well as information. This is an important point, which has often been ignored by philosophers who are optimistic about learning from fiction: if fiction can change us, there are no guarantees that the changes are desirable.

Currie's conclusion is modest in everything but the extent of its pessimism, reflecting on his aim 'to find some specific ways we can go wrong in seeking to learn from fiction, some of which look superficially like ways very likely to go right' (217), which 'ought at least to moderate our optimism about learning from fiction' (218). As such—in keeping with what one might expect from a philosopher of Currie's reputation—*Imagining and Knowing* is exemplary of analytic philosophy at both its best and worst. His thesis is constructed on rigorous evidence and proceeds with impeccable logic, but his findings are, on a charitable reading, a limited advance in the subject area. His first argument, the case for imagining fiction, is for the most part compelling although his conclusion is, once again, surprisingly cautious: there is 'no reason for denying the importance of imagination'

in understanding and engaging with fiction (48). There are, however, at least two problems with his second argument, the case against fictional knowledge, one innocuous but the other much more telling.

Beginning with the minor issue, Currie is dismissive of Dorothy Walsh's (*Literature and Knowledge*, Wesleyan University Press 1969) innovative and nuanced conception of *knowing-what*, i.e., knowing what something is like or 'acquaintance' in his terminology (87). He relegates Walsh to a single footnote and rejects 'acquaintance-by-fiction' on the dual basis that: (a) the reader has no way to judge whether her experience of, for example, reading James Jones' *The Thin Red Line* (Charles Scribner's Sons 1962) is anything like the experience of fighting in the Battle of Mount Austen, the Galloping Horse, and the Sea Horse on Guadalcanal; and (b) there are no criteria for judging whether this knowledge, if it exists, has been acquired by the reader. With respect to (a), an obvious response is to let someone who had the same or similar experience read the book and make the judgement. The relevance of the judge's expertise whether, for example, they would have had to be on Guadalcanal or involved in a similar conflict (such as the Second Indochina War) or just have experience of contemporary combat is a separate but not insurmountable question. With respect to (b), Currie may be largely correct, but there are circumstances where criteria can be established for acquaintance-by-fiction. Drawing on the work of Tzachi Zamir in *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama* (Princeton University Press 2007), I set out precisely these circumstances in *Narrative Justice* (Rowan & Littlefield 2018), using the examples of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* (2007). Currie may well have irrefutable replies to hand, but the objections warrant an acknowledgement at the very least.

The second issue concerns the role of evidence in *Imagining and Knowing* and is more serious given that two-thirds of the monograph are aimed at first establishing the need for evidence of fictional knowledge and then discounting, discrediting, or debunking all such evidence. I shall focus on the final chapter, in which Currie suggests that not only is the evidence for a causal relationship between fiction and increased empathy flawed, but that there is similar evidence that 'the effect of fictive empathy may sometimes be to dampen or occasionally suppress its real-world counterpart' (199). His discussion of the standard evidence cited in favour of fictional empathy is brief, but cogent, comprehensive, and *au courant*. Currie is once again dismissive of a significant contribution, however, Sarah E. Worth's *In Defense of Reading* (Rowan & Littlefield, 2017) which is also relegated to a footnote. Worth is optimistic about empirical psychology, employs evidence from neuroscience, and makes a particularly strong case for the significance of the experiments conducted by Dan R. Johnson and colleagues ('Reading Narrative Fiction Reduces Arab-Muslim Prejudice and Offers a Safe Haven from Intergroup Anxiety', *Social Cognition* 31, 2013). I have myself criticized her for too much optimism (*Narrative Justice*, 2018), but Currie's brusque treatment of Worth's work reveals an oversight in his own.

While Currie's demand that philosophical arguments for fictional knowledge cohere with the empirical evidence from psychology (and, we should add, neuroscience) is beyond reproach, he does not problematize what this evidence could possibly look like. In other words, he fails to apply the skepticism he demonstrates in the question of how one might evince acquaintance-by-fiction to the question of how one might evince fictional knowledge. An experiment by Gregory S. Berns and colleagues ('Short- and Long-Term Effects of a Novel on Connectivity in the Brain', *Brain Connectivity* 3, 2013), cited by Worth, draws attention to a fundamental—and perhaps insurmountable—problem with the quest for evidence. At its root is the conflict between what Matthijs Bal and Martijn Velkamp call the 'absolute sleeper effect' ('How Does Fiction Reading Influence

Empathy? An Experimental Investigation on the Role of Emotional Transportation', *PLoS ONE* 8, 2013, 3). The idea is that the effects of reading fiction (if they exist) take time and the problem is the increase in the likelihood of one or more confounding variables as the interval between exposure and measurement increases. This combination leaves those seeking evidence of fictional knowledge in a position where they must either attempt to measure an insignificant effect accurately or attempt to measure a significant effect inaccurately. Until this tension is resolved, the empirical evidence will remain inconclusive. This claim is, of course, completely compatible with Currie's thesis, but I raise it as a criticism because it reveals his case against fictional knowledge as directed at a straw-person. Currie criticizes the empirical evidence without indicating what that evidence could hope to achieve at the outset. He has demonstrated that pessimism about learning from fiction is justified, but he has not—to use one of his preferred phrases—*mapped the territory* for further research.

Rafe McGregor, Edge Hill University