

My research internship was funded by the Fund for Innovative Teaching and Learning (FITL) and was inspired by Elif Shafak's TED talk, who argues that fiction connects and that it is able to punch holes in our mental walls, with which we guard our preconceptions and stereotypes of other people.¹ Dr. Craighill and I read a series of novels in order to find those points where the reader feels connected with the characters – the points of empathy and the way these are elicited through language, including imagery, metaphor, simile and other literary devices called defamiliarization and foregrounding. As a way of testing Shafak's claim, Indian novels constituted the scope of the investigation. A culture so different from our own, India seemed suitable for our experiment to see if one can transcend cultural barriers through reading fiction. The original focus of the research also included the question "What does it mean to be Indian based on the novels read?" Pursuing the answer soon proved to be meaningless because, as many of the authors we read including Arundhati Roy, will readily point out, "there is absolutely no way one could draw a line around it and say, 'This is India' or, 'This is what it means to be Indian.' The whole world is seeking simplification. It's not that easy."²

However, we also read about the psychology of literature and fiction and found the work of a Canadian psychologist, Keith Oatley, particularly relevant to our research project. Oatley's analogy of the experience of reading fiction is a simulation that we run in our minds, which allows us to recreate and experience complex emotions and social situations.³ In our discussions of the novels we kept returning to one work, Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*, which elicited the strongest response in us, moving us emotionally like none of the other works did. Roy's novel is so engaging because of the unique way she uses language and structure. What we ended up finding is probably nothing surprising: it is through the unique

¹ Elif Shafak, *The Politics of Fiction*. Accessed at http://www.ted.com/talks/elif_shafak_the_politics_of_fiction.html on January 30, 2011.

² Reena Jana, *winds, rivers & rain*. Accessed at <http://www.salon.com/sept97/00roy.html> on August 15, 2011.

³ Mar, Raymond A., Oatley, Keith. *The Function of Fiction*, in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. 2008.

use of language, through those innovative and surprising images (particularly sensory images) and metaphors, that we connect emotionally with the characters in the novels.

One of my greatest achievements was reading eleven novels and short story collections during my ten-week internship – some of them more than five hundred pages long – and rereading one of them for the purposes of closer examination. My final reading list included: *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster, *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling, *Burmese Days* by George Orwell, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *The Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri, *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, *The Middleman and Other Stories* by Bharati Mukherjee, *The Guide* by R. K. Narayan, *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry and *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya. I also created a Google site for this project where we posted our ideas on the different novels and could continue our in-person discussions online.

Scholarship is a discourse and one of the most important things I have learned this summer was how to engage in such a discourse. When you speak up in class, you often do not pay attention to the others while being engrossed in formulating your own ideas. However, I had to learn how to listen to what another person thinks on a given subject and then think together with her, not isolated from each other. Dr. Craighill and I met once or twice a week to discuss what we had read since we had last met. Those discussions were some of the most rewarding and disappointing experiences. I felt honored to be treated as an intellectual equal by a professor and be able to discuss literature with her, but at the same time I realized what a long way I still have to go in my scholarship and felt disappointed in myself when I felt like I could not be a partner in the conversation because of my limitations.

Nevertheless, being expert in any field takes time and practice and reading those eleven novels exposed me to a lot of new writing, different styles, and ideas. I have never read so

many novels in such a short period of time and what this experience provided me with was an opportunity to make better comparisons between them. Often times what literary scholars do is compare works to other works to establish the similarities and the differences between them. These similarities and differences, particularly in the style of the writers, became so much more pronounced and obvious when I read these novels one right after the other. Also, I gained important practice at reading for the key passages that contribute to the themes in the novels – another indispensable skill in literary studies.

Another important concept I have learned is how metaphors work. A lot of students make the mistake of thinking that identifying a metaphor is the end in itself in discussing a piece of literature. As I have been told, literary analysis begins after that identification; so, I have always tried to answer the “What effect does it create?” question, too. What I have learned during my internship from the psychological studies I read was *how* these effects are created in the mind – something I have never considered before.

Lisa Zunshine in her book *Why We Read Fiction* (2006), which was one of the first important works to explore the connections between psychology and literature, makes a case for psychologists and literary scholars branching out towards each other, meeting half way. She says that is the only way such an interdisciplinary endeavor can succeed and so far the reluctance seems to be on the literary scholars’ side. I think our focus – the use of literary devices to elicit emotion in the reader – in this vast area of connection between fiction and psychology is a relatively unexplored area. There are theories (like the theory of vivacity) to explain the effects of language in the mind but as Keith Oatley remarks in one of his articles, more empirical studies are required to delve further into how narratives “may succeed in prompting processes of the more personal and reflective kind.”⁴

⁴ Mar, Raymond A., Oatley, Keith. *The Function of Fiction*, in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. 2008

One of the low points of the internship occurred in Weeks Five and Six, when I was struggling with reading Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*, a five-hundred-and-fifty-page novel of astonishing complexity. It started out very promising. I had just been coming from a week of reading psychological studies and looking for further reading in the library, so I was actually welcoming the literary style of Rushdie, which grabs you instantly, on page one. However, as I was immersing myself in the novel, my early enthusiasm soon turned into frustration because Rushdie keeps the reader constantly at an arm's length, writes self-consciously and seems to weave his intricate tapestry of imagery of Indian life more and more complicated with his repetitions. Luckily I had Dr. Craighill to talk to. She pointed out that frustration can be a valid response to a book; but, it is important to examine the source of this frustration, which made the experience of reading *Midnight's Children* more meaningful.

The high point of my internship was probably when Dr. Craighill invited Dr. Yu and me over to her house for dinner. Dr. Yu was generous enough to offer her help and her expertise in cognitive psychology and became the psychology consultant of our research project, supplying us with articles, always ready to discuss them. We were lucky enough to have been joined by Professor Lehman for that dinner, too, and the evening turned out to be one of my most memorable times at Sewanee so far. The conversation revolved primarily around the psychology of reading fiction and was by far one of the most inspiring conversations I have had the fortune of participating in. I felt honored to be in the company of three women of such great intellect and personality.

My career dreams are to become an English professor and a writer and, through this research internship, I learned a lot about the process of writing, how literature and particularly metaphors work, and I have also gained invaluable knowledge and experience in conducting research.