



Empathy and the Novel

By Suzanne Keen

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Does empathy felt while reading fiction actually cultivate a sense of connection, leading to altruistic actions on behalf of real others? *Empathy and the Novel* presents a comprehensive account of the relationships among novel reading, empathy, and altruism. Drawing on psychology, narrative theory, neuroscience, literary history, philosophy, and recent scholarship in discourse processing, Keen brings together resources and challenges for the literary study of empathy and the psychological study of fiction reading. Empathy robustly enters into affective responses to fiction, yet its role in shaping the behavior of emotional readers has been debated for three centuries. Keen surveys these debates and illustrates the techniques that invite empathetic response. She argues that the perception of fictiveness increases the likelihood of readers' empathy in part by releasing them from the guarded responses necessitated by the demands of real others. Narrative empathy is a strategy and subject of contemporary novelists from around the world, writers who tacitly endorse the potential universality of human emotions when they call upon their readers' empathy. If narrative empathy is to be taken seriously, Keen suggests, then women's reading and responses to popular fiction occupy a central position in literary inquiry, and cognitive literary studies should extend its range beyond canonical novels. In short, Keen's study extends the playing field for literature practitioners, causing it to resemble more closely that wide open landscape inhabited by readers.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*Empathy and the Novel* belongs in the company of Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot* as an exciting and lucid reflection on empathy in the novel and on the empathetic effects of narrative on readers. Working at the cross-section of literature, neuroscience, and psychology, the book is a stunningly original, broad-ranging contribution to narrative ethics and to the meanings of emotion in literature, life, and human society."-Susan Stanford Friedman, Virginia Woolf Professor of English and Women's Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison

"Drawing on cognitive science, narrative theory, and the sociology of reading, *Empathy and the Novel* challenges the received wisdom about the ethical effects of novel-reading. That identification leads to empathy and empathy to altruism has been one of the axioms of novel criticism, repeated in different terms from the eighteenth century to the present. Keen replaces those easy pieties by a subtler account of emotional response which nonetheless accounts for the centrality of empathy to ordinary readers' accounts of their own experience."-Leah Price, author of *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel*

"*Empathy and the Novel* . . . helps us read more distinctly the written record of the nineteenth-century novelists and critics who put overwhelming faith in the sympathetic work of the novel as a form."-*Victorian Studies*

"Suzanne Keen calls into question the widespread assumption that imaginative engagement with fictional works can help us become more empathetic and more ethical persons. Lively, incisive, sobering, and deeply instructive, *Empathy and the Novel* will prove of great interest to those working on narrative, on the psychology of reading, on ethics and literature, and on popular fiction, while making a key contribution to the new field of cognitive literary studies."-Alan Richardson, Professor of English, Boston College

About the Author

Suzanne Keen, Thomas H. Broadus Professor of English at Washington and Lee University, is the author of *Narrative Form* (2003), *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (2001), *Victorian Renovations of the Novel: Narrative Annexes and the Boundaries of Representation* (1998), and a volume of poetry, *Milk Glass Mermaid* (2007).

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Kimberly Foley:

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