

Mental models in the novel

The workings of fiction offer plenty to fascinate psychologists. In portraying how minds operate alone and in interaction, novelists show that they are interested in many of the same questions as their counterparts in the psych lab and clinic. Far from being obviated by the advance of cognitive science, the novel's particular powers in portraying human subjectivity make this literary form more relevant than ever.

Keith Oatley is unusually positioned to speak for both enterprises. An eminent psychologist and accomplished fiction writer, he has devoted much of his recent career to understanding how fiction works in the minds of readers and writers. His honed instincts as a novelist give his examination of the psychology of fiction an impressive range and nonreductive subtlety. He understands that an art form that is as rich as life itself can only be understood through the broadest possible variety of methods.

He starts his new book on this topic by focusing on what he sees as the most important principle in cognitive psychology: the idea of mental models. Art reflects reality, but more importantly it simulates or creates a world with which we, the audience, can engage. These simulations – narrative fictions – run not on computers but on minds. Rather than misrepresenting the world, like a lie does, they represent the world as it could be; they deal in counterfactuals.

The simulations of fiction – Oatley's 'waking dreams of the imagination' – are constructed through a special collaboration between reader and author. They involve characters in interaction, with motives, plans and secrets that the reader must monitor. Each person's reading is unique, because each reader's collaboration with the author brings a distinct pattern of knowledge, interests and emotions to the negotiation. Engaging with stories in this active way gives us a cognitive workout that can, Oatley argues, ultimately enrich our understanding of what makes people tick.

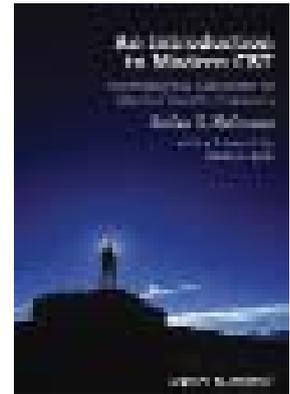
This idea of fiction as a mental simulation has a pedigree that stretches back at least as far as William Shakespeare. Oatley spends some time describing Shakespeare's view of fiction as a 'dream' that articulates both 'shadow' (observable actions) and 'substance' (characters' underlying thoughts and feelings). Also important to Shakespeare was the idea that fictional simulations work through our coming to grasp the relation between the model and the reality of the world. These are starkly physical metaphors, and they are sometimes too simplistic for the task at hand. Fiction is often much more complex than a relation between inner and outer realities. Novelists constantly have fun with protagonists feeling one thing, thinking a second, saying a third to one character and a fourth to another, and behaving in a manner that belies a fifth. As Lisa Zunshine has pointed out, fiction can reach a baroque exuberance in its embedded layers of mental representations. It is not immediately clear what is 'inner' and what is 'outer' in such cases, and Shakespeare's conceptual apparatus cannot always bear the weight placed upon it.

This may explain why Oatley's analysis is somewhat tentative in places. An impressive range of empirical evidence is marshalled, and he consistently demonstrates how thoroughly steeped he is in both literary theory and experimental psychology. But he sometimes sounds as though he is thinking out loud, unsure what to make of his subject matter. I was unpersuaded by some of the empirical evidence that purports to show cognitive benefits to reading fiction, such as claims for improvement in mentalising performance. It is not easy to explain what 'better theory-of-mind' actually means in adult participants, and the studies reported here tend not to grapple with these complexities. There is a less than convincing discussion of attachment and its relation to character, and the treatment of neuroimaging findings sometimes falls victim to errors of reverse inference.

These quibbles aside, *Such Stuff As Dreams* is a welcome and well-informed foray into a neglected research area. As someone who has thought very hard about the making of fiction as well as the creative engagement with it, Oatley is an excellent guide to the science of an art form whose value, in this brave new world of cognitive neuroscience, is undiminished. His claim is that fiction, like other art forms, allows us to experience emotions in new contexts, and thus learn more about those emotions and ourselves. His achievement is to show us many ways in which this is true.

| Wiley-Blackwell; 2011; Pb £16.99

Reviewed by Charles Fernyhough, academic psychologist and author; his new book, *Pieces of Light: Memory and Its Stories*, will be published in July. To support his next project, see tinyurl.com/boxofbirds



Excellent core text

An Introduction to Modern CBT
Stefan G. Hofmann

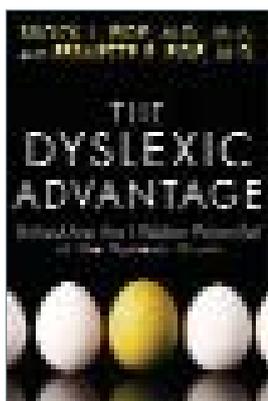
This well-produced book is clearly written and nicely illustrated. It starts off by presenting the basic tenets of CBT, and then describes how the approach can be applied to some of the most common mental health issues. There are chapters on phobias, panic, social anxiety, OCD, generalised anxiety, depression, alcohol, sexual problems, pain and sleep.

In each chapter there is a useful schematic diagram, illustrating how that problem can be represented using the usual conventions. This will undoubtedly be useful to new practitioners, since clients frequently find this way of representing their problems to be helpful. Besides these schematics, each chapter covers the key points about working with that particular condition. For example, the chapter on phobias covers exposure, cognitive restructuring, situation modification and breathing techniques.

By its own admission the text does not cover some more complex topics, such as working with psychosis. A chapter signposting such possibilities might have been useful. Nevertheless, this book would make an excellent core text for introducing trainees to the fundamentals of a CBT approach to common mental health conditions.

| Wiley-Blackwell; 2011; Pb £29.99

Reviewed by Tony Ward who is Head of Psychology, University of the West of England



Utterly convincing

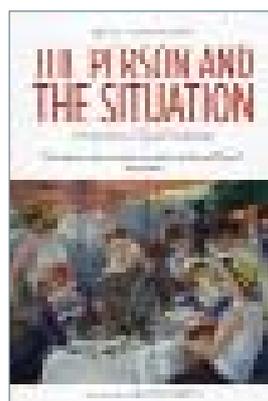
The Dyslexic Advantage
Brock L. Eide & Fernette F. Eide

In a challenge to dominant discourse regarding dyslexia, neuro-learning experts Brock and Fernette Eide espouse that dyslexic individuals not be characterised as disordered but as travelling down different, legitimate developmental paths to non-dyslexics. They suggest that neurological differences predispose dyslexic individuals to many overlooked talents. They go on to argue strongly for changing the way society assesses and educates so that ultimately those who are identified as dyslexic are no longer handicapped by their environments.

Whilst the first half of the book was heavy reading and could have been improved by the inclusion of graphical media, the latter half was engaging and provided many practical suggestions for educators, parents and dyslexics.

All round this was a very good book. As a dyslexic myself, I found it enlightening and refreshing. A particular strength was its excellent use of metaphor and inspirational case material throughout. Despite my initial suspicions that the authors might be being tokenistic in their positivist view of dyslexia, upon reaching the epilogue I was utterly convinced that, as the title suggests, there is a 'dyslexic advantage'.

| *Hay House*; 2011; £12.99
Reviewed by **Adam Orchard**
who is a clinical psychologist,
West Sussex



Reissued but not updated

The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology
Lee Ross & Richard E. Nisbett

This reissue, 20 years after the first edition, includes a new foreword, preface and afterword. Acting on my impulse to start at chapter eight, ('Applying social psychology'), I discovered this is not a book to dip in and out of without a recent grounding in social psychology.

The first chapter gives an overview of the three main tenets of the subject: situationism, construal, tension systems. Each is described with examples from classics, including experiments by Lewin, Asch and Milgram, all so familiar and reminiscent of undergraduate psychology. Apart from chapter one, which takes more effort, it is very readable. The authors helpfully provide anecdotes to ensure concepts are easily understood. My favourite is the one about the three umpires.

I think it has wide-ranging application and appeal: undergraduates, professional psychologists, lay persons. I wish the authors had not resisted their temptation to update it. I think the afterword did not do justice to the last 20 years' worth of research. It did however leave a strong urge to read more. In that sense, perhaps it served its purpose.

| *Pinter and Martin*; 2011;
Pb £12.95
Reviewed by **Sarah Woodburn**
who is a Chartered Educational
Psychologist



House is overrated?

House and Psychology: Humanity Is Overrated
Ted Cascio & Leonard Martin (Eds.)

House and Psychology is written by fans of the TV medical drama *House*, for fans of *House*. It aims to exemplify various psychological theories and conditions through reference to the show not to increase the readers knowledge and understanding of psychology, but to enhance their enjoyment of the show. If we learn some psychology along the way then so much the better.

The characters in *House* seem to display a conveniently broad range of psychologically relevant conditions for various authors to discuss. The first chapter, for example, discusses 'helping behaviours'. Various perspectives, informed by psychological theories, are offered, expanded upon and problematised through reference to different episodes of the series.

Caution should be urged however, as the show's writers

main aim is to entertain their audience. They have no obligation to write consistent, accurate or thoughtful characters. The psychological traits exhibited by each character – for example Gregory House's 'authenticity' in voicing his obnoxious and ill-tempered opinions – may not actually reflect any aspect of his personality and desire to be 'authentic' to himself, as he has no personality and is not a person. It may instead simply be a convenient way to tell a compelling story. This issue is neatly sidestepped, however, by the list of suggested scholarly readings that each chapter ends with.

This book is an enjoyable, light read, made all the more accessible through its tie-in with a popular TV show. If it encourages readers to delve deeper into psychology too then that's good too.

| *Wiley*; 2011; Pb £11.99
Reviewed by **Bryn Coles** who is
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