Category choice in creative writing

Manuscript accepted for publication at *New Writing* (Routledge)
doi: 10.1080/14790726.2020.1855200

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Accepted at *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*
doi; 10.1080/14790726.2020.1855200

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Abstract: Would-be writers of fiction face choices as soon as they start thinking about how to get published: What sort of a work is this? Where will the book sit on the shelf? What does the publisher tell the reader about what to expect? And then, where does it sit in company of other works, and where do you sit in the company of other writers? This paper examines three such questions of category choice: plot versus character, genre versus literary, psychology versus philosophy. It asks how do writers – and audiences – make sense of a work of fiction, and with what implications for the process of writing? It suggests how writers might use the differences between them to enhance the experience of reading beyond the expectations set by the categories to which the works have been placed.

Introduction

Fiction is a form of writing with seemingly infinite variety. It can appear at any length and be translated into any language. Its inputs can be drawn from fact or imagination or a combination of the two. Its outputs can come in many different forms: text, audio, drama, film. The processes that connect inputs and outputs can be as varied as human intelligence permits, from the very simple to the extremely complex.

For the would-be writer, this infinite variety presents opportunities for the imagination to thrive. But it also creates obstacles to getting published, getting the work into the hands of readers, and then gaining critical appreciation. Take novels: In the first, literary agents need to be won over, and then publishers. Each wants to know not just what the book is, but also what else it is like. These categories help booksellers target the merchandise by specifying in which field of the database or on which shelf the work should sit. If the writer aspires to success beyond the commercial, the work must in some way address critical, theoretical concerns. These issues point to categories, and the writer faces pressure, almost from the outset, to choose the categories in which the work will fit.

To make sense of this variety, the chain of actors in publishing and criticism often depict the choices writers make, and the experiences readers encounter, in terms of dichotomies. This

Accepted at *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*
doi; 10.1080/14790726.2020.1855200

paper looks at three of them: plot versus character, genre[1] versus literary, philosophical versus psychological. They may be offered as antitheses, dilemmas, or scales. Such simple classification systems appeal by simplifying complexity, making manageable the unruly, and reducing the infinite variety of meanings to something the brain can comprehend. They help us make sense of the world. These categories are not exclusive, as we shall see, nor comprehensive, as we can imagine. But together they give a sense of the variety of approaches to how we make sense of this form.

This essay explores these dichotomies as they are represented in three forms of theorising about literature: scholarly studies of fiction, popular criticism informed by publishing paradigms, and how-to guides for the would-be writer. It draws out similarities and differences between them and seeks to answer the question: How does category choice help us – writers and readers – make sense of the complexity of fiction, and at what potential risk?

We look first at the psychology of choice and how categorisation creates heuristics that aid decisions, in this case what to read and therefore what to publish. We then examine the three such dichotomies – commonplace labels that lead reader decisions about what to read and their expectations about what they will find in fiction. The analysis shows that while the three levels of dichotomies have some parallels, their differences matter, as they bring us increasingly subtle distinctions and greater nuances in setting and fulfilling reader expectations. These pairs of categories and the close but imperfect parallels them have implications for the works of writers and for how the experience of readers may differ from their expectations.

Heuristic thinking in writing and publishing

Categorising fictional works can help readers determine where to devote their time and help publishers decide where to invest their effort. It provides such shortcuts for decisions by establishing heuristics, that is cognitive paths or rules of thumb for making decisions under uncertainty and overcome the indecision inherent with bounded rationality (Kahneman 2002; Simon 1990). Heuristics inform intuition in subtle ways, for good or ill, by embedding algorithmic instructions that guide choices (Kahneman and Klein 2009). In this way the formulas through which we categorise works of literature can guide writer decisions and reader

[1] NB: In this paper, the term "genre" is used most often as an adjective, with the narrow meaning that publishers and practitioners often deploy to describe science fiction, thrillers, detective novels, etc. It is not meant, therefore, in the more general, theoretical way that would see the romance, the lyric poem, the epic, etc., as overarching genres of literature, as in Frye (1957/2000, 95), or for forms of fictional writing like the novel, the short story, the play, as in McKeon (2000, xiv).

expectations, and thus influence the decisions may along the chain of actors in publishing. And the process is dynamic: decisions about what to publish influence writer decisions and reader expectations.

In the terms used by psychologists Tversky and Kahneman (1974, 1124), heuristics are "highly economical and usually effective, but they lead to systematic and predictable errors". They provide three ways to make decisions when information is limited: by signalling whether an option is representative of a type; if it is easily available, because what is present is more likely to seem "right"; and what adjustments from an anchor-point, often the initial position, the phenomenon requires. Tversky and Kahneman describe the concept of the anchor as useful mainly in computational analysis – as in back-of-the-envelope calculations. However, it has a helpful analogue in literary analysis when considering how much the hallmark features of a work deviate from expectations of the form of writing to which it ostensibly belongs. In short, heuristics help us to see things as typical of a class, infusing those individual things with characteristics of the class in absence of much specific information.

In fiction, Culler argues that such categorisation aids reading when its "reality is grounded in the expectations and procedures of readers". He illustrates his point with the example of a short newspaper report of a traffic accident, showing how its meaning changes radically simply by breaking the lines and labelling the text a poem. Form is content. Taxonomies are "singularly unhelpful" if used simply as descriptive artifices, he asserts, but they can tell us how to read a text and begin to interpret it. In Culler's view categorisation also helps to explain reader puzzlement and discomfort when reading "disquieting works" that fall outside the established categories. Although he does not write directly in these terms, his depiction of the function of categories as norms for understanding resonates with the signalling power of heuristics (Culler 1975/2000, 52).

In psychology, heuristics may speed decisions, but they create biases (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). By leading us to expect similarities to a class, heuristics make we see greater similarity than we might otherwise detect. For example, if we are familiar with a romance, and a work presents itself in those terms, we are half-way to a decision whether to read it. Such considerations loom large in the marketing decisions of publishers and distributors, the inform decisions of literary agents and other gatekeepers in publishing. While heuristic thinking often leads to "good enough" decisions (Kluver, Frazier, and Haidt 2014, 151), it tends to reinforce the status quo. In a form as flexible as fiction, there must be a risk that in following heuristic prescriptions, writers may stifle their own innovation and creativity.

Categories and heuristics in fiction

Despite such reservations of how categories work, merely descriptive classifications persist, each with its related biases and resulting normative pressures. Yet the distinctions implied in all three dichotomies this paper examines, and the heuristics they inform, are less than clear. Both plot and character are present is virtually every narrative, but how do we know if one is driving? The genre-literary divide is contested. And the psychology-philosophy split can be difficult to sustain when the philosophical tradition a work presents valorises the empirical (e.g. pragmatism, utilitarianism) over the systematic. Let us look at each in turn.

Plot versus character

A first category choice a would-be writer of fiction confronts is the decision to emphasise plot or character. Writers find it in how-to guides to writing, and readers see it repeated in popular criticism. Writing in *The Guardian*, the critic John Lucas bemoaned the state of fiction when efficient plotting comes at the expense of character development (Lucas 2011). More recently, in a review of a new television adaptation of an Agatha Christie novel, the *Sunday Times* critic Camila Long highlighted the tension between plot and character as the director failed to acknowledge their conflicting imperatives: "Christie didn't do personalities; she felt any hint of psychology could distract from the plot" (Long 2020).

Websites advising would-be authors about how to create their novels or screenplays and advise a choice between characters and plot. For example, the US-based publishing services has a commentary titled "Character Driven v. Plot Driven Writing: What's the Difference?" It states: "character-driven writing focuses on the inner conflict of the characters that you've created.… Plots that are character driven are commonly referred to as 'literary fiction' due to the fact that they feature characters that possess multiple layers that are exposed as the story develops." By contrast, plot-driven stories focus on plot twists, action, and external conflict. "In plot-driven novels, the characters are usually forced to make quick decisions and, as a result, the development of the characters takes a back seat to the rapidly evolving story" (Dorrance Publishing 2014).

An editors' blog draws the distinction from the writer's point of view: "Some writers prefer building an external world focused entirely on action. These writers enjoy strategically scattering breadcrumbs for the reader to follow. Other writers love delving into the psyche" (NY Book Editors 2017). Matthew Rettino, a self-declared "plot-driven storyteller", tells a story about his conversion to character-driven writing.

> My characters used to be subservient to the plot, rather than drive it. For the longest time, I just didn't have it in me to write a character-driven story.… My characters had to comply with my plot, come hell or high water…. Learning to write character well is crucial, especially if you have literary ambitions (Rettino 2019).

Another writer-coach, Rachel Geseil Grimm, states: "Literary fiction writers tend to avoid plot. We're trained to be plot snobs, focused only on character development and description and point-of-view" (Geisel Grimm 2016).

Another such website urges would-be authors to concentrate on the choice between "plot arcs" and "character arcs" (Kiefer 2018). Yet another says the way to build plots in character-driven fiction is to imagine the worst thing that can happen to the character and start from there (Duke 2014). Robyn DeHart, who describes herself as a "serious plotter", says that character-driven stories identify the arc – the lesson the protagonist will learn – and then plot the points needed to create that (DeHart 2007). That the character learns suggests character development, but DeHart's emphasis is on the theme of the story and its premise/hypothesis. The character may learn, but lesson (plot) does the driving.

In heuristic terms, the choice between plot and character as the focus falls in the first instance on the writer, with consequences for the techniques of expression. Driving by plot points to structure, following roadmaps drawn from prior works, and thus increasing the work's representativeness of the class. In such works characters are led by the circumstances they encounter. By contrast, driving through character points to agency and learning.

The choice creates biases for the writer in choosing between depicting building structures or developing character, often from the outset. Reader expectations are often set in the first few pages. What these and similar accounts seem to claim is that authors need to choose which element dominates the attention of the audience, and which yields to the other in determining the story's directions into our hearts, minds, and guts. These accounts suggest a clear choice, but they also point towards a second, more disputed dichotomy, focused primarily on reader expectations: the choice between genre fiction and the literary.

Genre versus literary

Several of these practitioners draw an explicit connection between the character-driven and the literary, and implicitly between plot-driven and genre fiction. As explained above, the term "genre" is used here to embrace a variety of story types with recognisable characteristics. The word has an important other use in theory, which may confuse analysis. For the sake of

clarity, let us look briefly at that usage before moving our focus to the dichotomy under examination.

According to a classic definition, a work of literature fits in a genre because it adheres to formal, external conventions (Fowler 1971). Traditional notions of genre arise from textual regularities, distinguishing in poetry between odes and sonnets (Freedman and Medway 1994). Lodge draws a link to the notion of genre fiction in this paper by distinguishing between the genres of *romance*, which aims to delight, and *allegory*, which instructs (Lodge 1969).[2] This emphasis on the rules of a type help us understand how the term genre came to be applied in a different sense.

Textual similarities, including diction, plot devices, and character archetypes also characterise works grouped together in each of the sub-forms of what in contemporary usage we call "genre fiction": e.g. thrillers, mysteries, science fiction, fantasy, and stories in which a central idea dominates. Literary fiction is often used in opposition to genre (e.g. Marcus 2003; McCracken 2005); whatever is not genre is literary. The novelist and critic John Lanchester puts it this way: "Nobody wants to define 'literary fiction' for fear of sounding stupid or philistine, but at the same time everybody knows what they mean by the term" (Lanchester 2000). That "everyone knows" suggests a consequence of category choice: access to market.

Agents and publishers often channel writers to adopt the genre approach because the category and its subcategories are easier to position with booksellers and readers. Wilkins states that genre authors have to "grapple with unique complexities regarding how their work is positioned in a literary community" (Wilkins 2012, 37), in ways that includes whether they are writing art or for a market, often seen as mutually exclusive. This focus on market rather than literary imperatives is reflected as well in a column in the *London Review of Books* that highlighted how blockbuster books subsidise literary fiction. "The state of publishing – in particular of the kind of fiction which is politely called 'literary', meaning not 'easy reading' as in 'easy listening', or necessarily story-led, not bestselling before it is published – is dire" (Diski 2012).

If the works we label genre novels have a different feel and approach from what is termed literary fiction, the boundary between the categories is blurred. Critics and scholars find it difficult, even churlish, to apply a genre label at the expense of deeming the work to be of literary quality. Some of the most widely read authors of "genre" fiction – e.g. the spy thrillers

[2] This echoes and abbreviates the concept of genre in Frye (1957/2000, 303-14)

of John Le Carré (see the comments by Boyd 2015), murder mysteries of Ian Rankin (and comments by Massie 2015) – defy this distinction. Few would argue that Margaret Atwood's dystopian *The Handmaid's Tale* deserves the accolade of "literary" quality. But the distinction persists. The attack on the genre-literary divide works on several dimensions. For example, Hoberek explores the cross-over territory, analysing two novels that seem to play on the controversy, using the formats and symbology of genre fiction with literary intent. He recounts how postmodernist writers have embraced elements of genre writing in saying "that postmodernism and other late-twentieth-century writing traffics in 'meta-genre fiction'" (Hoberek 2017, 64). Jameson (2017) devotes a book to the literary side of Raymond Chandler's work.

Such hesitation in embracing category distinctiveness is less evident in experimental psychology studies, however, which seem to be able to create a clear-enough separation of the two to conduct experiments on cognition. One study showed that reading the events in narrative fiction – the plot – facilitates social communication and understanding (Mar and Oatley 2008). Kidd and Castano (2013) found that reading literary fiction improved theory or mind – the ability to impute mental states of others – more than reading either non-fiction of popular fiction.[3] In a third study, separating results for works identified as literary fiction or nonfiction, the researchers found more ambiguous results (Black and Barnes 2015).[4] In yet another experiment, those researchers found that characters in popular fiction were perceived as more predictable that those in literary fiction (Kidd and Castano 2019). Summarising such work, the psychologist Barnes claims that literary fiction requires higher levels of "imaginative engagement" than reading popular and genre fiction (Barnes 2018, 127).

In heuristic terms, this discussion suggests parallels to those in the plot-character dichotomy, which affect the writer but seem focused more on setting reader expectations. The sub-forms of genre fiction set out with formulas that tell the reader what to expect, i.e., its representativeness. The better established a genre the more available it is to readers. These heuristics set expectations, establish audiences, and feed markets. The create a bias towards the status quo, as we see in works may stick to these conventions.

Discussions of genre fiction often highlight cases where the works diverge from the convention, however. Examples of genre fiction that cross over into the literary category pull

[3] In a later paper, Kidd and Castano (2017) equate popular fiction with genre writing.

[4] The "literary fiction" used in this study was short stories by Don DeLillo and George Saunders. DeLillo, as we shall see, is sometimes considered a crossover genre-literary writer, while Saunders work can defy classification along this dimension. Neither can be termed a mainstream writer of popular fiction, however.

away from established structures to create surprise and irony. Characters gain traction, exerting agency against controlling structures, and sometimes preventing the seeming inevitable. Applying the concept of the anchor-point in heuristic theory, they pull away from the anchor of genre conventions. They thus enter the zone of reader experience that blurs into the literary, with its agentic, developing characters as the basis of representativeness, and its defiance against convention providing the anchor-point in the unconventional. The greater the divergence from the heuristic anchor, the more the reader is pulled away from the biases of the heuristic into the uncertain.

As uncertainty grows, readers may lose their mooring but then find another anchor-point in the heuristics of the literary, with its requirement for greater "imaginative engagement". The literary, in the complexity it promises, gives hope of agency through its characterisation, but often shapes its plots in recognisable and yet unfamiliar ways, asking readers to imagine something out of the ordinary. That complexity suggests a third distinction, widely evident in academic criticism and theorising, the even more problematic distinction between the philosophical and the psychological.

Philosophical versus psychological

The third dichotomy is less directly discussed in practical guides or popular criticism, and in scholarly studies it comes up with a variety of labels. What is at stake is whether the force driving the writing lies in exploring the psychological development of fictional characters or in explicating a philosophic stance through fictional narrative.

The psychological dimension involves perspectives of both writer and reader. For writers, it is linked to the field chosen for the work to examine. Psychologically focused works look at interiors, inside the characters' minds and at the relationships between characters, what MacMahon (2018, 221) calls "interiority". For readers, Caracciolo (2014, 29) argues that such "internally focalized texts encourage readers to simulate characters' experiences in a first-person way". This approach, therefore, has strong resonances with literary theorising associated with theory of mind. From the writer's perspective, the work uses textual devices to portray events and reactions as ways to allow the reader to imagine what the character is thinking. From the reader's perspective, the work allows such "mind reading" to explain one's own behaviour and that of others as the product of mental states (Zunshine 2015).

Philosophically focused works, by contrast, look at contexts and abstract concepts. As such, they focus on exteriors, and in particular how ideas manifest in stories and the actions of the characters they portray. Mikkonen (2008, 130) argues that some works may be rightly

called "philosophical fiction", in which the author and reader enter a "literary and philosophical pact" to engage in a cognitive exercise, that is, in thought experiments. That exercise is not limited to entertainment but may involve either "serious philosophical consideration or just playful speculation". In *Middlemarch* and *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot is said to have been one of the first women to undertake such fiction writing (Henry 2008). Perhaps a more commonly used term for such works is the novel of ideas.

In heuristic terms, this dichotomy operates from the perspectives of the writer, reader, and critic-theorist. In much of the literary criticism cited here, the distinction between the psychological and the philosophical seems quite sharply drawn: interiors versus exteriors, personality versus system, the workings of an individual mind versus principles for the organisation of society. Representativeness, availability, and the anchor-point are rarely in doubt. However, works under either label point to complexity, albeit of different things. That suggests that both will demand cognitive attention. Philosophical fiction may seem to evoke dominantly cognitive responses, but it does so by engaging sympathy or antipathy with characters through affective means. In so doing, they draw readers into the interiors. Psychological fiction may help us feel the emotions of the characters, but it does so through an exploration of the working of the mind. Reader expectations are set in both for a workout. For writers that poses the question of whether these mechanisms operate by design or accident.

Parallels and divergence between the dichotomies

These three dichotomies and the associated heuristics have elements in common, and at first glance they might seem to involve three sets of labels for the same pairs of mechanisms and meanings. Yet the distinctions between them can help us better understand the range of readers responses and the options open to the writer. In this section, we examine the parallels and divergences between, on the one hand, plot-driven, genre, and philosophical fiction; and on the other, the character-driven, literary, and psychological.

The discussion above suggests parallels between the structures of plot, the mechanisms and formulas of genre, and the guiding ideas of philosophical fiction. Similarly, character-led writing shares a more humanist orientation with what we expect in literary fiction. Both work by bringing readers inside the minds of the characters and watching them develop. They become explorations of psychology. These similarities point to two meta-categories, one structural, the other agentic. As we explore here, that depiction is problematic.

These connections are drawn unevenly among the coaches, critics, and scholars who comment on these dichotomies, however. Scholarly studies may pay little attention to what

the "how-to" coaches mean by the terms and almost none to the problem the dichotomy is meant to pose. Plot and character, as central elements of narrative, feature in much academic discussion of literature, and not always in clear opposition to each other. Even in those, however, we see discussion about the degree of emphasis on one or the other. For example, Smith, in her analysis of Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*, discusses the "flat characterization" in postmodern novels written against a backdrop of political ideology in which plot dominates (Smith 2018, 303). This depiction echoes the classic formulation of character in E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, which called characters "flat" when they were caricatures, or "humours" in 17th century parlance (Forster 1927).

Smith's statement suggests that postmodernist writers, with their emphasis on the interconnectedness of things and the resulting constraints on human agency, do not portray rounded characters who undergo psychological development, choosing instead to depict a philosophical stance or dilemma, which the characters navigate. The ideas they enact suggest that the focus of attention, of writers and readers, is how the philosophical system, which the character inhabit, operates.

The problems plot-driven fiction addresses are typically how to escape danger (emotion), get to the destination (cognition), or discover where blame lies (moral instinct), but such stories do not entail much change in these dimensions. These sorts of stories point towards the theorising that a small number of ur-plots can explain much fiction (Booker 2004; Gardner 1998). Works considered to be character-driven and literary, for example, Jane Austen's novels, are those in which psychological development impels the story.

Critics who distinguish between these types of writing suggest they use narrative elements with different weights and to different effects. In genre writing, plot is often said to be the driving force; characters take on an instrumental role in bringing the audience to the resolution of the plot, but those characters undergo little psychological development. This can be seen, though with some irony, in an interview the American novelist Jonathan Franzen gave, in which he spoke disparagingly about E.M. Forster's theorising about the novel, "as if the writer were trying to distance his work from the mechanistic plotting of genre novels" (Franzen 2012).

This discussion points us towards parallels between the plot-character dichotomy and those of genre-literary and psychological-philosophical. If, in general, plot-focused fiction flattens characters, perhaps to the point of caricature, then we might expect to see plot associated more with genre fiction and both with philosophical fiction. Similarly, having a character focus may relate more to works deemed "literary" or "psychological".

However, when we look closer, the parallels wobble and the distinctions blur. One of the few explicit discussions of plot-driven fiction in a mainstream academic journal is this: In analysing William Gibson's science fiction writing, Tobeck (2010, 379) comments how the author seems to test "whether character can be successfully reimagined and re-empowered without having to abandon the popular plot-driven narrative form". This suggests that Tobeck sees a trade-off between character development and maintaining a plot-centric orientation associated with science fiction. Moreover, Gibson's dystopian themes engage with major societal issues, which has led his work to be included in among those considered philosophical fiction. Here, character breaks into the dominance of plot, and genre breaks into the realm of the literary, yet the work is anchored in the philosophical.

If the parallels between the dichotomies are a little too neat, they become more problematic as we examine the subtleties that scholars see in the form of fiction. Consider the genre of detective novels, which are clearly plot-driven – crime leads to discovery of clues, leading to detection. Yes, the character of the detective matters to readers, the personal background and underlying traits and biases generate and help to sustain reader attention. But rarely does the detective undergo a change his/her moral stance or personality through interaction with the crime. Perpetrators may exhibit many character flaws, but they are static. But it does not have to be that way. Jameson (2017, 1) writes that to Raymond Chandler, "the detective story represented something more … than a mere commercial product, furnished for popular entertainment purposes." "Commercial" and "entertainment" are watchwords for what makes a genre sell.

Some theorists (e.g. Marcus 2003) argue that detective fiction deserves an elevated status because it generates complexity through its dual demand on readers' attention – first, to the crime itself and the moral issues it raises; then, to the process of detection. Here theories of justice and ethics meet theory of mind. It is the complexity that matters, and that is similar in cognitive effect to the multiple layers of character seen in what is typically called literary fiction. In this argument, what distinguishes genre and literary in common parlance may be different from what makes a work of fiction worthy of attention literature. Detective fiction, so construed, is psychological as well as philosophical fiction. And Jameson (2017, 86) writes, as *The Big Sleep* draws to a close, "suddenly the purely intellectual effect of Chandler's construction formula is metamorphized into a result of unmistakable aesthetic intensity". In the hands of the master, pulp is art.

Palmer discusses how plot builds from the intentional interactions of agents. "When characters undertake joint actions, their embedded narratives overlap during the extent of their

joint purpose before diverging again" (Palmer 2004, 168). But having intentions does not preclude that characters develop and that intentions may change over the course of plot events. As we have seen above, the psychological dimension is often applied to a focus in fiction on exploration of a character's mind. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the academic discussion of character-driven fiction comes in studies focused on psychology and often in psychology journals.

We can also see a blurring of categories in the some of the experimental research into the psychology of reading cited above. In their overview of experimental research using fiction as a prompt for social sensitivity, Mar and Oatley point to a social purpose in reading fiction. They explore how the events portrayed in narrative fiction simulate the social world, providing "a model when access cannot be direct" (Mar and Oatley 2008, 174), allowing readers a route to infer the intentions and attitudes of others. The authors contend that by simulating abstraction, simplification, and compression – processes used in neuropsychology and memory studies – narratives help us to understand people who are different from ourselves, increasing empathy and the ability to make inferences from social signals. Moreover, plot abstracts events, concentrating sequences into meaning-making series that illustrate characters' intentions and how they reach their aims. This allows readers to test their affective responses to arenas of concepts, ideals, and emotions they would not normally experience.

In this way, plot becomes a vehicle for condensing phenomena into meaningful experiences. What happens to the character on the exterior shows us what happens in the interior. This suggests plot, like character, plays a role readers' enhanced ability to see another person's perspective, often referred to in both psychology and literary studies as theory of mind (Baron-Cohen 2000; Kidd and Castano 2013; Call and Tomasello 2008; Zunshine 2012; Boyd 2009). By engaging affective and cognitive mental processes, both character and plot can create layers of meaning that we associate with the richer experience of so-called literary fiction.

According to psychologist Barnes, "the effect of fiction on social cognition may depend on the degree to which the reader contributes imaginatively to the text and that, although drawing meaning from literary fiction may *require* high levels of imaginative engagement, popular and genre fiction may *allow* for engaging in this way. This stance is discussed with respect to the role that emotional investment in a story and its characters might play in influencing readers of popular fiction to read in a 'literary' way" (Barnes 2018, 125, emphasis in the orginal).

Genre fiction is said to have less psychological content than literary fiction. But Mar and Oatley (2008, 185), argue: "Although it may be that less emphasis is placed on character and significantly more emphasis is placed on plot for these novels, stories of this type often involve the monitoring of a multitude of characters and their motivations." The "multitude" creates complexity for readers, enriching the psychological experience even in absences of much character development.

Psychologists Rapp and Gerring conducted experiments to determine how readers analyse narratives; they identified two distinct types, which they label plot-driven and reality-driven. The former were selected because they located "the origin of the processes and representations in readers' strategic contemplation of the possibilities of the plot" (Rapp and Gerrig, 780), for example, by developing preferences for particular outcomes. Reality-driven analysis, by contrast, is "guided by appropriately general expectations about properties of the real world, such as ordinary constraints of space, time, and human behaviour" (Rapp and Gerrig, 779). Plot-driven outcome preferences lead readers to think that their desired outcomes might have happened, despite evidence to the contrary; readers to suspend judgement of the realities and time and space.

In an earlier experimental study, Allbritton and Gerrig found that when readers' desired outcomes were disappointed, they were slower to accept the fact than those whose expectations had been fulfilled (Allbritton and Gerrig 1991). This too may suggest that absent other factors, high levels of engagement with plot create mental blind spots. Plot as well as character, and genre as well as the literary, therefore, provide avenues of psychological exploration for readers; some of that will exploration be cognitive and conscious, other parts affective and pre- or subconscious. If layers of meaning, like depth of character and complexity of mental processes, are what create what we experience as richness in fiction, then the reasons why the dichotomies blur become more apparent. They also help us to understand better where philosophical fiction might sit in this fuzzy typology of fiction. The dichotomy between the psychological and philosophical may itself arise from attempts to identify fashions in fiction more than describing how fiction works. In positing alternative worlds – whether explicitly, as in science fiction, or the imagined extensions of fictional realism – all works of fiction involve philosophy, at one level or another. Yet there is a class of work that is more self-conscious of its philosophical underpinning, whether in moral or political philosophy, or in questioning the nature of reality or truth. It is perhaps for this reason

that some critics equate philosophical fiction with the novel of ideas.[5] LeMahieu (2015, 181), for one, equates them, in saying that "philosophical fiction also flourishes in the contemporary period. … these novels of ideas are animated by an organizing concept or question".

But stories with such a central idea need not be what the publishing work counts as genre fiction, with the pejorative meaning the term has acquired. Central ideas have provided the backbone of novels like *1984* and *Animal Farm* (Orwell) or *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad). These works enact moral arguments about the nature of power through strong and memorable characters; those characters may even transcend plot in our memories, but they do not develop even as they ascend or descend with the plot. Through their plots – that is, the steps through which we rehearse their arguments and understand their oppositions and resolutions – such works employ characters to embrace initial stances, which then win or lose the argument, and sometimes their lives. Reading them is a largely cognitive exercise; the emotional element arises when the idea-embodied-in-character is confronted by logic but also by moral instinct. One example of the problem in their storytelling technique is cited by LeMahieu (2015, 179):

> No matter how movingly, brilliantly, or convincingly achieved – those alpine exchanges between Naphta and Settembrini in Mann's The Magic Mountain (1924), for example – such devices always risk appearing crude, forced, contrived. They tell more than they show.

These examples, from literary theory and explorations into the psychology of reading, suggest that we should treat parallels between plot, genre and the philosophical, and between character, the literary and the psychological with caution. The heuristics which each generates have some elements in common, but also important differences. Their distinctions, and the resulting biases for writer and reader, warrant greater attention.

Implications for creative writers and writing

Categories and their labels set expectations. The heuristics they generate guide purchase decisions and decisions whether to publish, and if so with what effort. The formulaic, even algorithmic implications of this approach flies in the face of the infinite variety of opportunities possible for prose on the page, let alone the sequences in other media. Having three different pairs of possibility, in which the heuristics of half of each pair can seem similar risk creating a strong bias that could narrow the practical possibilities of the form. Agents,

[5] This position is adopted in Wikipedia, where "novel of ideas" redirects to "philosophical fiction".

publishers, and booksellers all know what sells, and would like more of it. But what sells and endures is not the similarities but the differences.

In terms of heuristics, the representativeness of a work to its class create recognition and sets expectations. It opens the possibility of easy recognition and with it, perhaps, easy reading. The more familiar the devices of plot and character, the more available a work can seem. The biases associated with these heuristics bend decisions towards the status quo when the work is known only by its labels. Insofar as the three dichotomies are viewed as parallel, the stronger the association with the familiar.

This paper points towards a view that writers, and readers, can break out of this cycle of sameness, and foster the "imaginative engagement" of readers (Barnes 2018), by considering the implications of heuristics, and in particular of anchor-points. First, the unfolding of a story over time means that a work may look like genre fiction and then stray from its conventions as it unveils its concern with theory of mind develops ambiguities as the narrative progresses. Echoing LeMahieu in the obverse, narrative devices that show more than they tell open possibilities for differing experiences of the events, and with them different interpretations of their meaning. Second, the earlier the break from the anchor, the sooner the reader is oriented to look for the less obvious. What is available early in a text but less representative shifts the anchor-point and allows readers to grow accustomed to the less- and unconventional. Doing so may also shift the writer's anchor-point, permitting greater experimentation within the conventions. Third, and from a critic's perspective, these approaches may help us explain how works differ, not just in how the mechanisms operate, but also in the way they change the experience of reading and meanings we derive from it.

What's missing

This analysis is based on a partial taxonomy of fiction, three dichotomies rather than all the categories, labels, and heuristics associated with them. In a sense the category of "literary", with its distinct lack of definition (NB: quote above from Lanchester 2000) warrants further examination than this paper has attempted. It includes works that defy the conventions even when sometimes associated with a category (e.g. *Tristram Shandy* as novel of ideas) or categorisation at all (e.g. *Finnegan's Wake*). Less conventional genres like magical realism, or labels like postmodern without clear categories, include works that have generated commercial appeal while escaping denigration as "popular entertainment". Critics sometime refer to such works as "experimental" when they cannot find a more meaningful label. Understanding how such writing works, and why some texts appeal to readers while others do

not, may yield insights that can help writers, readers, and the various part of the publishing industry spot hidden gems.

Conclusions

This paper has depicted three dichotomies that writers and readers face, enforced in part by the imperatives of publishing, but also by a human desire to categorise as a way of making sense of the world. Doing so involves heuristics, decision rules that help us create categories through the representativeness of a member to the class, its availability, and the distance its object is from the anchor-point.

The paper also illustrates the parallels between the three dichotomies, and how they provide an over-simplified correspondence, on the one hand, of plot-driven fiction, genre writing, and the novel of ideas; and on the other of the character-led and the literary with the psychological. The former set is based on an underlying assumption that structure matter more than agency, the latter on the reverse. But in simplifying, these categories also ignore the complexity and richness that fiction affords. Because the associated heuristics have biases, by closely following the conventions of one set of categories or the other the writer risks missing out the possibilities of experimentation and exploration and of engaging the imagination of readers.

In an interview, the novelist Dana Spiotta circled around all three dichotomies. She rued the distinction often made between literary fiction, where people "write about emotional things in which the movement is character driven" and others who "write systems novels, or novels of ideas". She adds, however, that "no good novels are divisible in that way" (Johnson 2006). Making such a "false division" of literary fiction involves ignoring the many "authentic, moving characters" in systems novels, and overlooking the "deep structural ideas" in character-based fiction.

Divisions help us see differences, but they can mask similarities. Similarities can disguise the sources of distinctiveness. One of the questions left unanswered in this is how fiction works when the ideas are present but uncertain, when plot is an open route, not a predestined path, and when the text starts with the representative of a class but then diverges from it. An undercurrent of this analysis is that violating category distinctions is good for us, as writers, readers, and critics. Deviating from anchor-points bring novelty to novels, telling the reader that what follows is not predictable. Imaginative engagement of readers involves more than linguistic devices that create irony or signal difference.

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