CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Perspective taking is believed to be a central component of reading literature. It is critical to responses that make reading meaningful and enjoyable, such as the feeling of being transported into another world, identification with and empathy for characters, vicarious emotion, and a sense of heightened awareness and understanding. Therefore, any analysis of these processes must include perspective taking in a central fashion. Perspective taking is also crucial for interpersonal interaction in real life, and many of society's persistent problems can be traced to an inability to understand how others think and feel. An intriguing and as yet unanswered question is whether skillful perspective taking on the part of readers carries over to real life or vice versa. Before this question can be answered, though, it is necessary to examine the relationship between the two. One of our theses is that they are fundamentally related: Perspective taking in literary reading depends on the same processes that are involved in real-life social interaction. To date there is no systematic study of literary perspective taking that avails itself of the decades-worth, rich body of psychological research on perspective taking in real life. Thus, in this book we take up that challenge and draw from that research to inform our study of perspective taking in literature.

A second thesis is that perspective taking in both life and literature entails making a personal connection between oneself and the perspective-taking target, be it another individual or a literary character. As we relate in succeeding chapters, this personal connection is an essential component of understanding another's perspective and is based on making use of one's own personal knowledge and experience. Our theoretical analysis is that this use of personal experience is at its core a process of constructing an analogy between some aspect of one's own life and that of the target. As we describe in Chapter 2, such an analogy entails finding corresponding relationships rather than mere superficial similarity. Thus, in order to understand what it means to take a perspective, we need to understand

the process of analogical reasoning and its processing components. These two ideas – that literary perspective taking is like perspective taking in life and that both depend on personal analogy – provide the core message of this book.

In this introductory chapter, we discuss the importance of perspective taking, both in reading literature and in real life, and describe our goals for this book in more detail. We close with a roadmap of what we will cover in the balance of the book.

Importance of Perspective Taking

Importance of Perspective Taking in Literature

Engaging with fictional minds may well be the single most important determinant of literary enjoyment. How-to-write-fiction manuals explain what every writer and every lover of fictional narratives knows: Although good stories consist of many components – including intriguing plot and setting, witty or revealing dialogue, evocative descriptions, and effective tropes and symbols – the principal element responsible for maintaining readers' interest, for that "getting lost in a book" experience, is engaging characters. Literature is fundamentally about human experience. That is what we, as readers, crave and what narrative plots are about. Arguably, it is narratives about unfamiliar human experiences lived by memorable characters that satisfy our curiosity and attract us the most. However, it is not so much what characters do that piques our interest as what drives their actions: why they do what they do, how they reason about themselves and others and the world around them, and how they experience their reality. In other words, we are interested in their motives, goals, aspirations, desires, fears, and decisions – in short, their minds.

Barring perhaps experimental fiction that sets out to violate traditional storytelling norms (Richardson, 2015), fiction is about the functioning of minds and patterned on real minds (Palmer, 2004). Important as other aspects of narrative are, they are effective only insofar as they enhance that human element. Well-crafted, suspenseful plots are crucial in spy and detective fiction but it is the devious and masterful minds of its characters that excite us. Eerie, foreboding environments are a staple of gothic horror, but it is the sensations and thoughts of characters caught in those environments that generate emotion in us. People read fiction for the enjoyment it imparts. For some, that enjoyment may be the aesthetic pleasure afforded by elegant or poetic language and artistic style, others may thrive on the

intellectual stimulation of philosophical content, and still others may seek to satisfy their curiosity about social problems, historical issues, or cultural scenarios. Naturally, these motivations and forms of enjoyment are not mutually exclusive, but intrinsic to all of them is the human dimension. Without engaging characters, style and philosophical or historical content would be insufficient to keep readers turning the pages of a novel.

However, the enjoyment derived from engaging with characters may be only one explanation for the allure of fictional narratives; it may be that there is an actual need that drives people to seek out reading experiences. Literary critic Zunshine (2006) argued compellingly that the allure of fiction lies in its potential to engage and challenge our mind-reading tendency, which she equates with theory of mind. Echoing evolutionist arguments, she claims that we enjoy reading fictional minds because interpreting "observed behavior in terms of underlying mental states" (p. 7) is a natural human propensity. Daily acts of interpretation such as figuring out what "makes others tick," what could have led so-and-so to do this or that, guessing "what was she thinking?", or trying to infer if the look on someone's face is indicative of scorn or simply surprise are a natural, fundamental ability we have developed as a species for navigating our social environment. They constitute the basis of all our interactions: gossip, judicial procedures, managerial communication, and earnest endeavors to better understand others. Given this natural tendency, it is entirely plausible that the enjoyment of reading fiction is owing to "the cognitive rewards of pretend play" and the opportunity to "try on" different mental states (p. 17). Narrative fiction exposes minds and invites us, metaphorically, to enter into them, thus affording us the opportunity to exercise this natural tendency. Activating our mind-reading faculty to decipher characters' minds as they evolve throughout the story could be a form of satisfying a need. Exercising this cognitive skill might result in enhanced interpersonal skill in real life.

Based on our own pleasurable reading experiences, we can reasonably take for granted that engaging with fictional minds is enjoyable for readers. What is less obvious is what that process of engagement entails or what other effects it might engender. In this book, we argue that if reading fiction is immersive or absorbing, it is because it affords the opportunity to involve the self through an extended comparison between the reader and characters. In other words, it is not just the need to objectively understand other minds that constitutes the pleasure of engaging with fiction minds, but the involvement of oneself in that process. Readers bring to the text their own lives and experience, with all the knowledge and doxastic

baggage that that entails. Fictional texts often present characters very different from ourselves, in very unfamiliar situations. How we evaluate, judge, and interpret characters is a function of how we deal with the challenge of relating the unfamiliar to our own knowledge and experience, how we bridge the gap between the two. In this book, we argue that this active process of identifying and constructing relations between the reader and the characters constitutes the core of perspective taking, and we describe the precise nature and mechanism of that process.

Importance of Perspective Taking in the Real World

The ability to understand the perspective of other people is unquestionably a fundamental social skill (e.g., Piaget, 1932; Davis, 1983a). There is evidence that the skill leads to a more favorable judgment of others (Epley et al., 2002), produces feelings of sympathy and compassion for the target (Davis, 1983a; Batson et al., 1989), contributes to moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1976), inspires empathy and altruism (Batson et al., 1997), and reduces aggression (Richardson et al., 1994) and stereotyping (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000) by virtue of greater empathy. It has also been shown to improve an advantaged social group's evaluation of a disadvantaged group, thereby increasing the former's understanding of the latter, improving intergroup relations (Galinsky & Ku, 2004; Cakal et al., 2021), and increasing willingness to engage in intergroup contact (Wang et al., 2014).

Given the myriad of interpersonal contexts that require the ability to understand and consider others' points of view, one can easily imagine how a deficiency in this general competency could impede or damage interpersonal relations. Social scientists with an evolutionary bent – anthropologists, psychologists, biologists – have argued that over time, humans have developed a variety of cognitive and emotional capacities as adaptive measures for survival in collective, social environments (Buck, 1984; Dunbar, 2006). Several interrelating and partially overlapping terms have been coined to refer to these skills: mind reading, perspective taking, theory of mind, simulation, and empathy. Given their potential evolutionary basis, these skills are plausibly a part of the genetic makeup that ensures our social survival.

However, despite what our long evolutionary history might suggest, it does not appear that we have mastered the skill of perspective taking. Research in several fields has led to the conclusion that humans can be notoriously poor perspective takers and that it is difficult to overcome our own egocentric perspective. There is evidence that humans are not born

with the skills required to take another's perspective easily but rather develop them over time and to differing degrees (Epley & Caruso, 2009). Perspective taking is not a simple, measurable skill that reaches maturity and can be applied unfailingly in all situations. It is rather a complex, effortful, cognitively demanding process, the adequate execution of which is far from guaranteed. It is this unreliability that led Epley and Caruso (2009) to conclude that "the only general conclusion one can render is that the ability to accurately adopt someone's perspective is better than chance but less than perfect" (p. 298). Further, it depends on a wide range of personal and contextual variables. In particular, cognitive processes such as decision making, working memory, moral reasoning and judgment, attention, inferencing, and critical and analogical thinking are pivotal.

Because perspective taking is such an important aspect of social competence, yet so difficult to master, it is hardly surprising that interest in the topic has attracted attention both in popular and academic circles. Perspective taking has been the subject of countless self-help articles, books, and blogs that attempt to describe what it entails and what the many factors are that influence our ability to successfully infer, consider, reason about, and understand another person's perspective or state of mind. As any cursory web search reveals, the same issues have also been the object of intense scholarly scrutiny in fields as varied as evolutionary psychology (de Waal, 2008), history (Kohlmeier, 2005; Chapman, 2011), ethnography (Naaeke et al., 2011), psychotherapy (Day et al., 2008), developmental psychology (Bailey & Im-Bolter, 2020), social psychology (Mead, 1934; Sevillano et al., 2007), psycholinguistics (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2004), neuroscience (Ruby & Decety, 2004), education (Abacioglu et al., 2020), business management (Platt, 2020), philosophy (Nussbaum, 2001; Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002), and empirical literary studies (Hakemulder, 2000; van Peer & Maat, 2001; Weingartner & Klin, 2005; Dore et al., 2017; Salem et al., 2017; Creer et al., 2019), among others.

However perspective taking may be conceived and whatever it may entail, there is no shortage of advice on how to acquire it. The internet abounds in "self-help" blogs: For example, our last simple Google search for "perspective taking" (in December 2021) brought up more than 3.5 billion hits, a large proportion of which were dedicated to providing advice and even exercises to strengthen perspective-taking skills in children and adults in order to help autism, improve intimate relationships, succeed in business, and so on. In developmental psychology and educational circles, children's role taking and theory of mind are often treated as

fundamental skills that can be taught to children through a variety of games and activities. Numerous popular books on perspective taking present the skill as the solution to social harmony. For example, Dalai Lama and Cutler (1998) discussed the importance of mastering strategies often associated with perspective taking – such as overcoming egocentric biases, prejudices, and stereotypes – in order to achieve happiness in a troubled world. Writing from within the field of public policy, Molix and Nichols (2012) advocate the necessity of taking the perspective of Muslims in order to understand radicalization. By extension, the lack or failure of this ability is blamed for many personal, socio-cultural, and political problems. For example, Sillars (1998) studied how misunderstanding others' perspectives could adversely affect close relationships. This is perhaps justified: Many of the agonizing human crises that persist in our twenty-first century – such as xenophobia, racism, homophobia, and misogyny – bespeak intolerance or indifference at best. It is no wonder that we seek solutions to societies' perspective-taking failures.

Can Literature Promote Perspective Taking in Everyday Life?

Given our thesis that real-life perspective taking shares processes with literary perspective taking, it is natural to ask: Can literature help us improve our perspective-taking abilities? It is commonly claimed that literature has the power to affect readers and sometimes effect changes in society. A famous example is Lincoln's alleged remark to Harriet Beecher Stowe that she was the "little lady who started this great war" (Kane, 2013, p. 20) with her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe, 1891/2021). The publication of *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens, 1843/1992) is said to have revived the diminished "Christmas spirit" (Standiford, 2008) and to have led to an increase in charitable donations, especially among members of the wealthiest class. It has been claimed that children's stories published in 1923 containing achievement imagery were positively correlated with economic growth up to 1950; similarly, it has been argued that achievement imagery in Spanish and English literature of specific periods was also related to economic growth in those same countries (McClelland & Winter, 1969). If true, we might hypothesize that the effect is due to readers' connection with characters' goals and achievements.

Many have suggested that literature provides a tool for solving problems of perspective taking in society. How engagement with fictional minds affects readers beyond the immediate reading experience is a question that has interested not just literary specialists but also social and political

authorities for centuries. Literary history is replete with examples of prohibited fiction and of works banned out of fear of their ability to change readers' perception, to alter minds, and to be a threat to established norms. Book banning in the USA is a recent example of the same fear. On the positive side, it has always been assumed that literature "opens our eyes" to new dimensions of human reality, sharpens our understanding of human nature and behavior, and in this sense widens our mental horizons. An age-old belief in literary studies is that transporting readers into other times, situations, and circumstances allows them to experience characters' plights and minds; thus, literature expands readers' horizons, allegedly sharpening their ability to understand reality from other points of view. Hayawaka (1990) claimed that literature could profoundly change readers by enabling them to experience many different "alternative lives and personas" (p. 1). Hakemulder (2000) argued that reading fiction could make readers more sensitive to, understanding of, and empathetic toward others' distress. Nussbaum (2001) expressed the conviction that fiction can help us better connect to real minds. Gottschall (2012) urged us to "read fiction and watch it. It will make you more empathic and better able to navigate life's dilemmas" (p. 198). Sommer (2013) suggested that intercultural novels "may encourage readers to change perspective, to cope creatively with clashes of mind-set . . . and to become more sensitive, as mind readers, to the variability of cultural norms and expectations" (p. 171).

Empirical scholars have provided modest support for these claims. On the basis of some psychological findings, Mar and Oatley (2008) conjecture that reading fiction "may be helpful for reducing bias against outgroup members" and could train us to "extend our understanding toward other people, to some extent embody, and understand their beliefs and emotions" (p. 181). There is some evidence linking exposure to fiction and social ability (Mar et al., 2006; Johnson, 2012). For example, fiction reading has been found to be related to performance on an empathy task (Mar et al., 2009; Djikic et al., 2013), suggesting that it may increase empathy in general. However, the task used to measure empathic capacity – the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test – is limited to a single component of perspective taking, and it is possible that the direction of causation is reversed: Empathy leads to an interest in reading fiction. Johnson (2013) provided some evidence that reading fiction reduces prejudice against and increases empathy for other ethnic groups. Kidd and Castano (2013, 2016) found evidence that reading literary texts (as opposed to popular fictional texts) improved performance on theory-of-mind tasks (although this result is not always replicated). As we discuss

further in Chapter 8, the generality of the effects on these improved performance measures is still unknown.

Firm belief in the power of fiction to strengthen understanding and tolerance of others, and ultimately to improve society, has inspired some individuals to promote fiction for social purposes. After the Second World War, Jella Lepman, founder of the International Board of Books for Young People, believed that children's literature could lead to the creation of a better world insofar as it could increase readers' understanding of the plight, life, and worldview of others (Lepman, 1969; Pearl, 2007). With this goal at heart, her organization promoted the production of books about the experiences of children in remote and troubled parts of the world and the distribution of these to children of the Western world. Literary stories have been hailed for their ability to promote moral development (Vitz, 1990). More recently, former Barack Obama adviser William Bennett strongly recommended the inclusion of fiction in the school curriculum for the same reason. His bestseller *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* (Bennett, 1993) had a powerful impact in pedagogical circles. In it, he argued that exposure to literary classics can build moral character in children, presumably because readers take the perspective of the heroes and assimilate their ethos: Reading "[g]ood stories [that] invite us to slip into the shoes of other people is a crucial step in acquiring a moral perspective. Stories about friendship require taking the perspective of friends" (p. 269). In Latin America, publishing companies such as Ediciones Ekaré have emerged to promote children's picture books that focus on the dire plight and suffering of poor and marginalized children in order to foster understanding, altruism, and, ideally, social change.

Intuitively, optimistic claims about the power of fiction make sense. Were it not for literature, we might never imagine the plight of an abused child in rural post-revolutionary Mexico, the terror experienced by ethnic minorities during the Rwanda genocide, the mental anguish that led victims of the Spanish Civil War to spontaneous violence, the self-loathing that southern American Black people experienced after the Civil War, or the despair of refugees in their new host environments to which authors such as Rulfo, Jensen, Matute, Chopin, and Thompson-Spire exposed us. This literature "opens our eyes" in the sense of allowing us to experience new realities and arousing emotions, and these experiences could potentially change our attitudes. If it is in fact true that engaging with fictional minds makes readers better perspective takers, then we have good reason to rejoice that literature provides the solution to many of the world's current problems. A work that depicts our shared humanity with

"the other" and allows us to experience reality from that character's perspective could arouse our empathy and alter whatever biased perceptions we may harbor. Optimistic faith in the power of fiction to make us better people by enhancing our perspective-taking skills is understandable from a creative and academic perspective; the livelihoods of authors and publishers and the existence of university literature programs are grounded on faith in the enlightening, transformative power of literature. Evidence that fiction has such power would certainly cement the role of literature programs in the humanities as an indispensable social and educational necessity. So important is perspective taking for social survival, and so dangerous the painful lack of it in the world around us, that understanding how it can be promoted should be a social and political priority. Therefore, it is crucial that we understand how perspective taking in literature occurs and how it is related to perspective taking in the world. Without such basic knowledge of the underlying processes, we would be at a loss to make serious recommendations about how to use literature to effect such social changes. Our goal with the present work is to further the development of this knowledge.

Toward an Interdisciplinary Account of Literary Perspective Taking

Optimistic intuitions aside, the truth is that we know very little about how readers engage with fictional minds, let alone the longer-term effects of that engagement on readers; perspective taking is really still a little-understood aspect of literary response (Caracciolo, 2013; Dore et al., 2017). In fact, there is a dearth of evidence as to whether perspective taking is even required for engaging with fictional minds and for meaningful reading experiences (Currie, 2020). We believe that an interdisciplinary approach can help us advance our understanding of how we go about making sense of characters. Such an approach combines research on literary response with psychological evidence on real-life perspective taking as well as knowledge and understanding of cognitive processing. Psychological research on perspective taking in real life, while emphasizing its vital importance for social survival, also imparts some less optimistic caveats that obligate us to rigorously examine how literary perspective taking works, what kinds of texts promote it best, what kind of readers are most or least successful at it, what factors may enhance or inhibit it, and what mental processes it actually entails. Literary and empirical studies of literature have examined a variety of components assumed to be central to perspective taking; however, they have been largely uninformed by this

wealth of relevant research on perspective taking in everyday life. To date, evidence on the impact of perspective taking during the reading of any given narrative on life is scant. There is limited evidence that a history of reading fiction is correlated with the capacity to experience empathy and social acumen (Mar et al., 2006). However, as Hogan (2003) spelled out, no life activity such as reading can be "torn out of a large network constituted by many other life practices" (p. 1); this requires the examination of other variables. Although some behavioral impact has been found immediately after literary reading, much of this is inconclusive (Koopman, 2015), and there is no evidence of the long-term effects of taking characters' perspectives. Given the findings of psychological studies, there is good reason to suppose that perspective taking in literature is subject to as many constraints as in real life, and it may not be as unequivocally successful as might be assumed. Until we have a solid grasp of the cognitive mechanisms of perspective taking in reading, we are not in a position to draw the grandiose conclusions that reading literature improves people's ability to willingly put aside their own views to consider how others perceive reality, or that this ability has broad, generalizable effects on behavior. Furthermore, it may well be the case that reading literature does not so much affect real life as the contrary; that is, meaningful reading is a function of the skills and conditions upon which real-life perspective taking depend. We hope that a detailed understanding of perspective taking in literature and life will help resolve these issues and that the present work contributes to this understanding.

Goals and Anticipated Contributions

Advancing our understanding of what perspective taking is and how it functions in the context of reading literary fiction is the main goal of this book. Understanding how readers engage with characters' minds during the reading process is a first step to understanding how the reading experience affects the mind. There are many reasons for investigating this issue.

First, the research could be of enormous benefit to educators at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels. We have seen how important activists and educationalists have earnestly endorsed the optimistic belief in the power of fiction. However, there are not many reliable follow-up studies. Furthermore, bold claims such as Bennet's (1993) have been seriously criticized. One argument is that there is no necessary correspondence between what is in a text and what a reader might get out of it