# Truth and trust in fiction[[1]](#footnote-1)

Marcel, narrator of Proust’s novel-cycle recalls his mother: “She had often teased my grandmother who could never write to her without quoting some phrase of Mme de Sevigne or Mme de Beausergent…”[[2]](#footnote-2). The better readers of Proust know, of course, that Mme de Sevigne was a French aristocrat and celebrated letter-writer of the seventeenth century. Knowing that, they may conclude that Mme de Beausergent was also real, though presumably less celebrated. But Proust was amusing himself at the reader’s expense: Mme de Beausergent was fictitious. It would then be hard to fix any blame on Proust, who never asserted anything about the reality of either woman; readers, he will say, drew their own conclusion and it was wrong. In an environment full of opportunities for error and with few sanctions against those who encourage it, can one speak of learning? Can one learn, that is, from fiction?

## Learning from fiction

Those familiar with the practice of fictionare not tempted by their reading of *War and Peace* to believe in the reality of Natasha, Prince Andre and their adventures; they understand that what is on offer is a story to be imagined. But their reading may give them beliefs about other things: about Tsarist society, the experience of battle; also, perhaps, about love. And there is more-than-anecdotal evidence for the idea that fiction does affect belief. Studies have found that viewers acquire enduring beliefs about medical issues from the medical drama *ER*, and that readers’ beliefs are influenced by statements made by characters in stories – even statements as implausible as “Chocolate aids with weight loss”.[[3]](#footnote-3) The literature on what psychologists call “Transportation” indicates that absorbed readers are influenced by the evaluative opinions fictions implicitly suggest,[[4]](#footnote-4)with pro-worker beliefs seemingly enhanced by viewing *Norma Rae.*[[5]](#footnote-5) As we write, a debate continues about the responsibility of historical fictions for forming beliefs about the characters and actions of agents such as Thomas Cromwell.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Evidence of belief change is not always evidence of learning; we sometimes go from a better belief-state to a worse one. But epistemic growth has often been the focus of attention for critics: Johnson claimed that Shakespeare “has not only shown human nature as it acts in real exigencies, but as it would be found in trials, to which it cannot be exposed”; David Bevington said recently that *Hamlet* is “able to speak to persons and societies of all nations and all ages who have turned to it for a better understanding of themselves”.[[7]](#footnote-7) Cora Diamond, Iris Murdoch, Martha Nussbaum and other philosophers celebrate literature’s capacity to enrich moral understanding, and moral philosophy itself.[[8]](#footnote-8)

How should we assess such claims? One way is to examine the pathways from fiction to belief, for some are more apt to support learning than others. Here we give particular attention to pathways which depend on readers’ assumptions, often tacit, of the author’s reliability. Such pathways are, in favourable circumstances, epistemically benign—apt to provide beliefs which are true, justified to varying degrees, and sometimes deserving the title “knowledge”. They are pathways to belief particularly appealing to the philosophers and critics who have made a case for literature’s cognitive value. Before that however, we briefly discuss pathways that are more prominent in the psychological literature, and seem less supportive of the humanistic belief in learning from literature. And before that, some preliminaries.

## Belief change

While we focus on pathways capable of producing knowledge, our interest is not exclusively in beliefs which achieve that status. Our topic is learning, and learning may fall short of the conditions for knowledge; it may even fall short of truth. A better understanding of yourself is not necessarily a true one, and people who come to believe the earth is spherical rather than flat are learning something.[[9]](#footnote-9) *Better* belief is what interests us. Some, we know, will insist that learning is factive and that appearances to the contrary are just loose usage. We need not quarrel with them. If they are right then at worst we need a term other than “learning” to label what interests us: improvement in belief.

While we focus on learning from fiction that involves belief change, we recognise other kinds of learning and fiction’s role in promoting them. In saying this we have two groups of critics in mind. There is first the no belief-*change* party, emphasising fiction’s capacity to reconceptualise what we already know/believe, or to make us see its significance.[[10]](#footnote-10) In fact all these things do involve belief-change. Assuming beliefs are propositionally individuated and that propositions have conceptual structure, reconceptualisation gives us new beliefs; notably so if it sharpens previously vaguer understanding. Since belief is not closed under deduction, drawing out the consequences of what we believe is similarly belief-generating, while seeing the significance of what we believe involves linking it with known propositions to derive new conclusions. While we grant fiction may have effects on belief which don’t amount to belief change, it is hardly deniable that some do.

Then there is the no *belief*-change party, emphasising fiction’s capacity to enlarge our skill or know-how; they deny that this enhancement of practical knowledge need involve change in belief.[[11]](#footnote-11) We agree that change in, say, empathic abilities is possible without change in belief, though it is likely often to result in changed beliefs about the mental states of others. But we take it that changes in belief are sometimes among the direct effects that fiction has on human cognition and may themselves be partly the cause of changes to abilities: if watching ER improves people’s capacity to deal with medical problems that is partly because it changes their beliefs about appropriate medical interventions; if reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* made people in the nineteenth century more able to empathise with the suffering of slaves, that was partly because it changed (in some cases refined or reconceptualised) their beliefs about the conditions of slavery.

That said, the mechanisms by which fiction affects know-how, either independently of belief-change or in tandem with it, deserve serious treatment; our exclusive focus on belief is simply a first step in examining learning from fiction, and one complex enough to warrant an extended treatment which this paper merely begins. We will, however, be sensitive to the possibility that some effects of fiction which seem to be effects on belief may not be—see Section 3.

For all our emphasis on belief change, there are effects of fiction on belief which we ignore: effects that don’t take us far from the fiction itself, or that belong to other explanatory projects. We come to believe that it is true in the story that Holmes lives in Baker Street, because that is what the text says or implies. How beliefs about what is true-in-a-fiction are gained on the basis of reading the fiction itself is a rich topic, since many fictions make these judgements difficult by introducing plot twists and unreliable narrators. But our concern is with acquisition of beliefs about the real world beyond the story itself. And if reading a fiction causes us to imagine P, we may well form the belief that we imagine P; how we monitor, with some reliability, our own imaginings is a problem we leave to inquirers into metacognition.

Finally, a word about what counts as belief change and how it can be identified. To measure the effects that a stimulus X has upon a belief P, psychologists sometimes probe for an estimate of agreement with P, seeking differences in confidence before and after the exposure to S.[[12]](#footnote-12) If a subject moves from a very low confidence-point to one slightly higher, we say she has a raised degree of belief in P, or now believes that P is more likely, and not that she has come to believe P. Our talk of belief change covers all these cases: change from not believing to believing and vice versa; change of belief concerning probability; change of degree of credence (where the greater degree might still be very small).

## Murder in the Mall

 Psychological studies of ‘transportation’, the experience of becoming deeply absorbed by a story, have been taken to indicate fiction induced belief-change. Psychologists Melanie Green and Stuart Brock had subjects read a short story – *Murder in the Mall –* about the murder of a girl by an unrestrained psychiatric patient. They found a shift towards agreement (or increased agreement) with propositions suggested by the story: “The likelihood of a death by stabbing in a shopping mall is quite high”; “Psychiatric patients who live in an institution should not be allowed out in the community during the day”, and “The world is violent and unjust”.[[13]](#footnote-13) This tendency correlated with self-reported transportation, but – surprisingly – was independent of whether subjects thought they were reading fiction or nonfiction.[[14]](#footnote-14)

A number of explanations for this and similar results are available, not all involving the assumption of belief-change of any kind.[[15]](#footnote-15) Since a follow-up test was not carried out, one may ask how long-lasting these effects were; other experiments of this kind have found reversion to pre-test attitudes within days or hours, and readers’ responses may have been indicative of temporary changes in mood rather than of belief changes.[[16]](#footnote-16) On the other hand, beliefs are sometimes of brief duration.[[17]](#footnote-17) Suppose, then, there was change in belief. One explanation appeals to the *availability heuristic*:a process by which we form beliefs concerning the likelihood of a given event on the basis of the ease with which vivid examples of that kind come to our mind.[[18]](#footnote-18) This is a hard-to-suppress mechanism with distorting effects on belief since it causes us to weigh examples within our own recent experience heavily, when what is needed is broadly representative data. It is also, as Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky noted, blind to the distinction between real and imagined cases: people rate nuclear war more likely after having seen a movie depicting it. Readers of *Murder at the Mall* may similarly have raised their estimates of the incidents of knife crime on the basis of the vivid though fictional example the story presented.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Green and Brock do not consider the availability hypothesis, developing instead a theory of Dan Gilbert: we believe everything we hear/read, while disbelieving means ridding ourselves of a belief already acquired, something requiring effort which, for various reasons, is not always forthcoming. Engagement with a story is one such reason: the story absorbs the readers’ attention, and the absence of an assertoric voice makes us less prone to critical assessment; epistemic vigilance is lowered and appropriate processes of belief rejection are not activated.[[20]](#footnote-20) On this model belief-acquisition is relatively automatic, and belief-acquisition from fiction is notable for the absence of the second, reflective, process of assessment. So the argument goes.[[21]](#footnote-21)

But even if it were true that, as Gilbert puts it, “we cannot *not* believe everything we read”, this wouldn’t explain why subjects came to believe that psychiatric patients should be confined, since no such statement occurs in the text of the story. In many cases the relevant propositions are not even directly implicated, but only loosely suggested by the story. How could they be believed automatically, given the inferential effort required to work them out? Perhaps Gilbert’s model works better to explain cases of fictions’ influence where readers come to believe general factual statements explicitly presented as true in the story as background information on geographic, historical or scientific facts. Following Dan Sperber and colleagues, we take Gilbert’s model to be implausible even here, given the pragmatic processing generally required to decide what proposition to believe when we read something.[[22]](#footnote-22) “Everyone cheered the Emperor”, said in a novel set at the Battle of Austerlitz, will not provide anyone with the belief that every person in the whole world cheered, or even that everyone there did so: most likely the idea conveyed is that an overwhelming majority cheered. One cannot get from “Everyone cheered the Emperor” to the belief that most people within a restricted group did so by a process that bypasses all inference to speaker’s intentions. This suggests, pace Gilbert, a system of pragmatic processing involving theory of mind prior to the insertion of any proposition into the belief box: before such pragmatic processing takes place, we don’t know what proposition to insert.[[23]](#footnote-23)

We are not suggesting that we do or should carefully scrutinize every proposition before coming to believe it. Distinguish between two claims:

* 1. We are naturally prone to believe what we hear and will tend to do so unless we exercise vigilance;
	2. We automatically believe everything we hear, and vigilance is available only at the stage of removing propositions from the belief system.

Those seeking to explain the effects of fiction on belief may want to appeal to (1), but they should not appeal to (2). And care should be exercised even in appealing to (1): we should not invoke a failure of vigilance whenever someone forms a belief through exposure to fiction –as we will argue further on.

Pathways to belief such as availability and failure of vigilance are not likely to appeal to the literary and philosophical advocates of learning from fiction. Those advocates do not seek to show that cognitively valued works of literature depend on reason-defying heuristics or on the suppression of opportunities for rational reflection. The humanistic tradition holds literature to be cognitively valuable on account of its (supposed) capacity to promote a reasoned and reflective exploration of our moral, social and psychological worlds, where part of the material for that reflection is our affective engagement with fictional characters and situations.[[24]](#footnote-24) We focus on pathways that allow rich opportunities for reflective thought, the elaboration of reasons, conscious engagement with the details of plot, narrative or style, and with the personality which lies, or seems to lie, behind it.

Our particular concern is with cases where the reader’s acquisition of a belief depends on their assumptions about the author’s reliability.[[25]](#footnote-25) We often form our beliefs by taking people’s behaviour as indicators of their opinions, which we then embrace. Beliefs thus formed do not always depend on assumptions of reliability: your assertion that life is meaningless may simply bring this idea to my attention, with me finding my own reasons for believing it. But often, when we come to believe a proposition that someone else believes, it is partly because we have confidence in her opinion. Plausibly, this is true also in some cases of fiction: readers take the way the work is written to indicate something about the author’s serious beliefs, they have some confidence in the reliability of those beliefs and hence some confidence that the propositions believed are true

However, this class of pathways from fiction to belief is itself heterogeneous and we treat two sub-cases separately, distinguished by their subject matters. In the next two sections we examine the acquisition of beliefs concerning purely factual and relatively uncontentious aspects of the real world such as the location of London landmarks and the outcome of the War of the Spanish Succession. After that we examine beliefs concerning at least partly evaluative and often controversial matters such as the nature and value of loyalty and obligation, love and friendship.

## Truth, and truth in fiction

Fictions are sometimes regarded as especially useful ways of conveying factual information; The *Katie Morag* stories by [Mairi Hedderwick](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mairi_Hedderwick%22%20%5Co%20%22Mairi%20Hedderwick) are used in some junior schools to teach island geography, and for some of us the little we know about nineteenth century Russian aristocrats we learned from *War and Peace*. While learning of this kind is common it is not obvious how it happens. It is not generally the case that authors convey such information by moving out of the pretence-mode of utterance they occupy when they tell us about the thoughts and doings of the characters; if an author writes of her fictional character:

Walking to Buckingham Palace through Green Park, Smith realised that arithmetical truth is not arithmetical

she is not asserting anything about arithmetic or London geography any more than she is asserting that the character was walking, thinking or existed; the proposition in question is offered as something to be imagined.[[26]](#footnote-26) Yet readers with no inclination to believe in Smith may well come to believe (truly) that a way to Buckingham Palace is through Green Park and (if they find the proposition intelligible and interesting) that arithmetical truth is not arithmetical. And for works in some genres, readers would be justified in believing both of them, and would regard the author as at fault to some degree if either turned out to be false. Readers might even be justified in believing them if the statement was put in the mouth of a character. Readers of Iris Murdoch’s *Under the Net* may come to believe (not unreasonably) that there is such a place as the Wallace Collection in London and that it possesses a portrait by Hals on the basis of what is said by the character-narrator Jake Donoghue, though Jake shows signs of unreliability on other matters (“money means nothing to me”).

We start from the assumption that ideas about London geography, Scottish islands and meta-mathematics are established by the author in the first instance merely as *true-in-the-fiction*, and that there are processes of inference available to suitably prepared readers which enable them to infer from “P is true-in-the-fiction” to “P is true”, for some propositions P and some works. A complete taxonomy of such inferences would be hard to provide. We describe here one inferential pattern we take to be common and important and where the ascription of beliefs to the author plays a key role.

It is uncontroversial that what is true-in-a-story and what is true-tout-court typically overlap strongly, though different genres have different rules about where overlap with real-world truth is to be expected; fantasy stories allow magical forces but discourage psychological unrealism and extreme coincidence.[[27]](#footnote-27) A full investigation of this strong tendency towards overlap is beyond us; but here, briefly, are some (increasingly speculative) suggestions about the reasons behind such a tendency. The first and most obvious is *communicative economy*: authors could not make explicit everything that is true-in-their-stories and do not need to as long as they can count on readers assuming that, where there is no good reason to think otherwise, what is true is also true-in-the-story. That way authors do not bore us by saying that their characters have arms and legs, breathe air and depend on sustenance and rest for survival. The second is *creative economy*. If Elster is right that creativityis a matter of maximising value subject to constraints, insisting on a large measure of conformity to real-world truth is a natural and effective way of constraining literary creativity[[28]](#footnote-28). A third is that by so conforming writers increase the likelihood that readers will be imaginatively and emotionally engaged (“transported”) by their work. The imagination, it is fair to assume, is an evolved capacity which throve because it enabled us to survive and reproduce. It is then unsurprising that the imagination is highly tuned to scenarios which are in significant ways plausible; we find it easier and (perhaps in consequence) more satisfying to imagine the unfolding of physical and psychological processes of kinds we do or might encounter than we do processes which are ecologically deviant. There are spectacular exceptions to this with tales of magic and the supernatural and our attraction to these ideas is itself the subject of much theorising. But studies of folk-conceptions of religion and related phenomena indicate that these ideas are highly constrained by features of the natural world; deities officially conceived of as all-powerful are represented in normal thinking as limited to managing one task at a time; trolls, goblins and witches have very limited supernatural powers and their motivations are explicable in folk-psychological terms. Finally, a preference for a high degree of conformity to truth would be explicable if fictional stories emerged and flourished partly because they were a way of conveying factual information. The way last week’s hunt, with all its confusions and mistakes, was conducted might not be the best guide you could provide for trainee hunters, and anyway no one is now certain about exactly what happened. An invented episode may do a better job, as long as it respects the likely behaviour of prey and the efficacy of weapons. A general preference for verisimilar fiction would then help to make verisimilitude an adaptive feature of fictional stories, and a cause of our having fiction.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Note that once it is in place, and for whatever reason, the expectation of conformity to truth will be strongly reinforced because violations of it will have communicative costs. If I expect truth-in-fiction and truth to overlap in a certain region and find that they don’t this will create expectations about the work: the author moved the date of that battle or the location of that railway station, so something in the narrative is going to hang on that choice and I expend attentional resources on finding out what that is. If it was just a slip, my attention has been misdirected and the author is guilty not merely of failing to minimize deviation from truth but of miscommunicating, as an incompetent speaker would be miscommunicating if they said “I have two children” without intending the implicature that they have exactly two children.[[30]](#footnote-30)

## the author’s beliefs

The overlap between truth and truth-in-the-fiction may be large but it is less than maximal. How it is that, having recognised that some particular proposition P is true-in-the-story, the reader is sometimes able to conclude that P is also true?[[31]](#footnote-31) One simple way is to consider P and judge it to be true on the grounds that it coheres well with what else one believes; given what I know about the standing of French culture in 19th century Europe the idea that Russian aristocrats spoke French has a certain plausibility, though not enough to make me confident of the proposition without further support. Another is for the details of the story to reveal a way for the proposition to be true. The credence you give to a proposition may rationally depend partly on seeing how it could be true; we raised our credence in the proposition that the Polynesian Islands were populated by people from South America after Heyerdahl’s expedition showed that the journey could have been undertaken with then available technology. How far this method works in fiction is uncertain. It does not seem to help with the case of French-speaking Russians in *War and Peace*. Assume that Tolstoy’s novel shows how Napoleon could have won at Austerlitz; this does not give much support to the proposition that he did win.

Better support comes when we ask whether Tolstoy *believed* that Russian aristocrats spoke French and that Napoleon won at Austerlitz. Someone who wrote a vast and admired novel of the Napoleonic wars would be likely to have true beliefs about at least the more general, salient and verifiable aspects of relevant events. And given the already noted pressure to conform to truth, the author would probably not have deviated from what he understood to be truth in this matter, especially since the work gives all the appearance of being in the genre of the realist novel. Minor deviations from the known details of the battle’s course are more likely, given that such deviations might serve useful dramatic or narrative purposes, but intentionally changing the outcome of a major battle to suite such purposes would be a hard-to-justify violation of aesthetic economy.

One might come to know that Tolstoy believed that Russians of the relevant period spoke French because he said so in a letter. But we are interested in learning *from* fiction, and so focus on cases where the fiction itself provides us with evidence that the author believes the proposition in question. [[32]](#footnote-32) More particularly, we are interested in cases where the work is *expressive* of a belief. Tolstoy’s way of writing the novel—his lexical, grammatical and narrative choices—is expressive of that belief, and *War and Peace*, being the result of that activity, is expressive of Tolstoy’s belief in that proposition. The test of this claim is that an appropriately prepared reader, though one with no specialist knowledge of Tolstoy’s opinions, could reasonably infer from their reading of the novel that he believed this. The relevant inference would follow contours already explained: the putative fact is large in scale, probably widely known about and certainly within the province of reliable specialist knowledge, and there is no obvious reason why altering the facts as Tolstoy understood them to be would in this case give any advantage to the narrative; so probably Tolstoy was conforming here to what he took the facts to be and in this matter he was probably reliable.

There is an important distinction between a narrative *being (merely) expressive of* the author’s belief and the author *expressing* that belief through the work, just as there is a distinction between a person’s unintended slow walk being expressive of their sadness, and their expressing their sadness by deliberately walking slowly.[[33]](#footnote-33) Tolstoy’s writing that “Anna looked out of the window and saw Alexey ringing the front door bell” is, presumably, merely expressive of his belief that door bells were used in nineteen century Russia; we may infer from his putting it that way that he believed that door bells were so used, since he is unlikely to have invented a novel way for Alexey to make his presence known, but it is also unlikely that he would be expressing this uninteresting belief. By contrast, readers of Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* probably have the impression that he wished to communicate news of conditions in Soviet camps to an ignorant audience, and was not merely placing his characters against a realistic background in conformity with genre expectations. Where the proposition in question is less morally significant, less controversial or more widely understood, its presentation is more easily seen as merely expressive of belief rather than the author expressing their belief.

In sum, a work of fiction may be expressive of the author’s beliefs in two ways: it may be expressive of them because the author uses the work as a means to indicate or suggest that she has the belief, in which case the author expresses her belief through the work; it may provide unintended evidence that the author has the belief, in which case the work is *merely* expressive of the belief. And the class of cases where the author expresses a belief is itself highly differentiated. Some of these cases will involve outright assertion, as when Walter Scott breaks off the narrative of a story to tell us something about relevant local history.[[34]](#footnote-34) In such a case the author’s expression of their views amounts to the provision of testimony, which is often understood to require an explicit statement or assertion from the testifier.[[35]](#footnote-35) Most cases of authors expressing their beliefs in fiction are not of this clearly testimonial kind, just as a good deal of ordinary communication is not testimony; the tutor who writes that Smith’s handwriting is excellent and his attendance at class punctual is not testifying that Smith lacks philosophical talent even though this is clearly part of what is meant.[[36]](#footnote-36) Fictions’ more evaluative messages (something we discuss in the next section) are often not stated by anyone, author, narrator or character, but are rather suggested very indirectly by the content of the story or tone of its narration. It is best to see testimony as the high point of the expression-spectrum, points on which vary in the extent to which the utterer is manifestly committed to that which they express. The fact that the expression of belief in fiction is usually below this high point has consequences for the reliability of beliefs derived from fiction, as we will see immediately.

Should it matter to readers whether authors are testifying to their beliefs, or expressing them in some less explicit way, or not expressing them at all while their work is merely expressive of them? It may matter, and there are competing reasons to prefer one practice to the other: favouring subtlety and indirection, readers will prefer a muted voice which does not actively broadcast opinions; favouring reliability they will prefer the committed stance of the testifier, because more open commitment to a proposition means a higher cost of being wrong, and greater likelihood of being right. We feel able to blame those who testify falsely, especially if their failure is negligent, but less entitled to complain if their commitment to the proposition in question was less than explicit, and even less able to complain if we merely noticed their behaviour and drew a conclusion about what they believed, though we suffered by adopting the belief ourselves. Blaming people, we are likely to trust them less, to spread distrust, and to punish them by withdrawing co-operation; knowing you will be blamed for a mistake makes you more careful and hence more reliable.[[37]](#footnote-37) Suspecting that you can get away with it by avoiding explicit commitment will make you less careful, and some authors may even practice the following deception: deliberately writing in such a way that their story is merely expressive of a belief while hoping at the same time to convert readers to a belief they could plausibly disown if pressed. And making one’s narrative merely expressive can be a particularly effective method of propaganda because work which is merely expressive of opinions the author is not (apparently) intending to communicate can easily seem to contain opinions so well established that communicating them would be pointless. That way, one may persuade people to believe what you believe by convincing them that what you believe is very widely believed and hence likely to be true.

Still, moderately rational people can be misled by fictions the authors of which are neither deceptive nor especially irresponsible. One of us, reading *Our Mutual Friend*, acquired the false belief that there was in Victorian London a recognised form of employment collecting bodies from the Thames. This seemed likely to be true on the grounds that Dickens, by and large, would not easily deviate from the known general circumstances of his setting. On the other hand a careful reader would have noted that the episode presents a dramatically effective opening for the novel and is to that extent tempting to invent.[[38]](#footnote-38) The sensible course, as in many other cases, would have been to withhold judgement while making further inquiries.[[39]](#footnote-39)

## Wise authors

While we may get historical and other kinds of purely factual knowledge from fiction, this is not what the humanistic tradition emphasises. Talk of learning from Tolstoy or Proust brings more naturally to mind insights into human character, motivation and moral values. In such domains we often treat the author not as a transmitter of established information, but as a source of wisdom: someone with valuable insight and a perhaps unique perspective on the human condition. The kinds of propositions involved in such cases have features which make for greater difficulty in accounting for their role in learning than we found in the case of factual beliefs acquired from fiction. The difficulties are of at least three kinds:

*Epistemic*: Unlike the historical, geographic and other kinds of purely factual information one might learn from fiction, these propositions are typically controversial or at least not widely agreed to, even by experts (assuming there is expertise in the relevant area);[[40]](#footnote-40)

*Interpretive*: they are not usually made explicit in the text nor obviously implied by it, and their content may be vague and the subject of extensive and perhaps unresolvable interpretive dispute;

*Conceptual*: concerning, as they often do, such things as the complexities of duty, the nature of a caring relationship, the dangers of rigid morality, these propositions deploy thick concepts combining evaluative and descriptive elements not easily separated.[[41]](#footnote-41)

This last feature raises difficult questions about the connection of such propositions with expressive acts, with desires and with values, questions which are likely to have us conclude that learning in this area is not simply a matter of belief change. In this preliminary investigation we put aside these difficulties and consider only their relation to belief. Belief may be the most tractable attitude to consider in this context, and it is sensible to start with that. We will, however, try to take some account of the epistemic and interpretive problems.

Here the distinction between authors expressing their beliefs and their works being merely expressive of them becomes especially relevant. As we noted in Section 5, while fictional works are often merely expressive of historical and geographic beliefs, evaluative propositions are more naturally seen as expressed (sometimes ambiguously and very indirectly) by their authors.[[42]](#footnote-42) One reason for this is that evaluative beliefs are, in the context of story-telling, more salient than descriptive ones because they are more likely to be controverted. A story teller may conform the events of the story to the facts of London’s geography without much reflection on or even awareness of what they are doing. An author who conforms the plot to a personal vision of the value of love and friendship is likely to be aware of this, to be aware of the controversial nature of their opinion and the interest that will be taken in it, and likely therefore to craft a narrative which shows their perspective in the best light. A narrative designed to communicate that perspective is likely to *seem* designed to communicate it, and correspondingly unlikely to seem designed to communicate propositions about the layout of London streets. In this section we focus mainly on fictions in which the author expresses their belief in the relevant propositions.

How might readers of a novel understand that the author wished to communicate propositions about love, fidelity, and happiness when such propositions are not explicit in or directly implied by the story text? How – to go back to a notably unliterary example– might readers of *Murder in the Mall* conclude that the author wished to communicate to them that unrestrained psychiatric patients are dangerous?[[43]](#footnote-43)

However readers arrive at these conclusions, they must be based on a sensitivity to details of the work itself. Readers start, as John Hospers noted, “by observing carefully which passages contain the greatest passion and intensity, which themes are most often reiterated, how the plot is made to evolve, which characters are treated with the greatest sympathy.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Neither Hospers nor later commentators have been able to say much about the inferences involved, and some have concluded that nothing much can be said.[[45]](#footnote-45)

There is, indeed, no single form which such reasoning takes, any more than there is a single way for the detective to infer the identity of the murderer from the accumulated clues. But it is tempting to think that reasoning from the assumption of conversational cooperativeness will often be involved, since such reasoning is often thought to play a significant role in coming to understand what people mean in their acts of communication.[[46]](#footnote-46)

In cases where a fiction is presented as a contribution to a conversation, we might apply the conversational maxims in straightforward ways. According to Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan in response to the question from “a certain lawyer”, Who is my neighbour? Jesus’ response, taken as literally meant assertion, violates various conversational rules, notably “be relevant”, since the story, taken as a literal and assertive utterance, manifestly fails to answer the question. Casting around for a way of preserving the assumption that Jesus is maintaining conversational co-operativeness, we conclude that he is offering a set of merely pretended assertions, the content of which can be easily understood to exemplify the proposition that people to whom one owes the obligations of a neighbour include those who are culturally distant and even antagonistic, this now being understood as his answer to the question.[[47]](#footnote-47)

But the parable is an atypical case, and always will be where fiction is an institutionalized category. Fictions are rarely offered as contributions to an ongoing conversation, and may even give the impression of answering questions we would otherwise never have thought of asking. In this they are like many non-fictional texts isolated from any conversational context: texts which create a standard of relevance of their own, with relevance in later parts constrained only by the contents of earlier parts. Nor do we normally apply conversational rules to work out that what we are reading is fiction rather than asserted utterance; we know that because we chose a book from the fiction shelves. Fictions generally contain a good deal that is false, but we do not derive conversational implicatures from their telling by exploiting this fact, for a work’s being fictional acts to suspend rules like “do not say what you believe to be false” rather than to violate them.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Sensitivity to conversational cooperativeness will not, we claim, get us far in understanding what beliefs are expressed in fiction. Fortunately humans are highly attuned to each other’s mental states even outside of conversational contexts, capable of grasping them on the basis of exposure to a vast range of behaviours, from facial and bodily expression to such affiliative choices as dress, food, and mode of transport. Traces of behaviour can be equally informative: the content of your diary, wardrobe and e-bay purchasing record. All these sources vary on a number of relevant dimensions: the strength of conviction they convey in the idea communicated or manifested by the agent; the specificity of what is communicated or manifested; the degree to which an audience can be confident that something is communicated or manifested. I may end up suspecting that you strongly believe that P; strongly believing that you suspect that P; suspecting that you suspect that P (or at any rate something with similar content to P). Assuming our contact with the author is exclusively through the work, the range of available behaviours is limited; we as readers are confined to what there is in the work which seems to be expressive of this or that opinion, given relevant background knowledge. But fictional works are in another sense especially rich sources of clues as to the mental states of their makers; the narrative of a fictional story is guided less by requirements of fidelity than are history and journalism; more in the text represents a choice, and that choice may be a clue to opinion.[[49]](#footnote-49) And just as plot is chosen, so is the mode of representation for plot. At this point Hospers’ remarks about passages of passion and intensity, the reiteration of themes, the evolution of plots and the portrayal of characters are especially relevant. Such details in a fictional text indicate very precisely the author’s choices, helping to make certain hypotheses about the author’s communicative intentions more probable than others: details about what Albertine and Marcel say and do make a difference to any conclusions we draw about Proust’s perspective on love.

##  Trust

When readers learn from fictions by taking on the beliefs of authors expressed in their works, they often do so because they treat the author as a reliable believer.[[50]](#footnote-50) We treat thermometers as reliable without trusting them, and we may do the same with people; my threats to murder your family give me grounds for treating your assertions about where the money is as reliable though my resort to threats indicates a complete lack of trust. We may treat an author of fiction as reliable on, say, geographic matters simply on the grounds that we believe she has the requisite expertise, has no particular reason to deviate from truth in presenting the story, and dislikes readers complaining that she got background wrong. Trust need not be a factor.

Still, trust often is a factor in settling our judgements of people’s reliability. What is required for trust, over and above the assumption of reliability?[[51]](#footnote-51) Without seeking to adjudicate between fine-grained competing accounts of these notions, we assume that a crucial difference is affective. For Karen Jones trust is characterized by an emotional attitude of optimism towards the goodwill of the other, while Annette Baier and Richard Holton emphasize, in different ways, the feelings of betrayal that disappointed trust provokes.[[52]](#footnote-52) Are we more likely to be wrong in trusting someone than in simply relying on them? You might say that reliance is clear headed while trust, being affectively tinged, is apt to miss signs of unreliability. But trust in testimony (rather than mere reliance on it) is not always the more risky policy. A tendency to trust may be supported by iterated verification of the other’s reliability. Trust is likely, if broadcast, to call forth feelings of obligation on the part of the one trusted, thereby improving their reliability.[[53]](#footnote-53) And trust enables the one who trusts to dispense with high levels of vigilance which are cognitively expensive. But is an attitude of trust likely to be warranted in a fictional context?

There are reasons to think not. The lowered vigilance induced by a trusting attitude raises the likelihood of forming unreliable beliefs, and this increase is not, in fictive contexts, much constrained or compensated for by the factors just mentioned. First, our relations with authors generally lack the reciprocity required to form a mutually trusting relationship. Perhaps this can be overcome in the case of an author with a long and public literary career (Dickens comes to mind) who may be aware that his readers trust him and who feels an obligation to live up to that trust. But such cases are unusual. And trust, being in part an emotional attitude, can be induced by factors that do not correlate well with reliability. Appearance and demeanour can affect our tendency to trust people, while failing to track expertise in difficult areas of inquiry such as moral psychology. Authors whose work we enjoy, who we admire for their uses of language, their inventiveness with plot, their vivid character portrayal, who become (we imagine) our best narrative friends, are likely to generate feelings of trust in their views on moral psychology when, in this complex and specialised area, one ought to seek unusually strong evidence of reliability.[[54]](#footnote-54) Nor could we be confident that the rewards of past trust in a given author justify future and perhaps more extensive trusting. The authors we read rarely address the details of our own present concerns and it would be difficult to show that whatever lessons we took from their works contributed materially to such good fortune as we enjoyed. Nor is it clear how we could find independent sources to check on the reliability of favoured literary perspectives on moral psychology. We might appeal to psychological research or the deliverances of moral philosophy, but this sounds like a recommendation to replace the familiar stance of absorption in literature with a quite different and antithetical practice. It is not part of the humanistic belief in the cognitive value of literature that readers need to treat their favoured texts as pieces of evidence to be weighed against the deliverances of scientific and analytical thought. Whether trust in authors is widespread is unclear, but we can say at least that a desire to trust them should not easily prevail.

Some of these concerns extend beyond trusting and bring into question the weaker stance of assuming reliability, notably the lack of confirmation for the propositions in question other than the subjective conviction of readers. To the extent that literary artists are rarely committed to the propositions conveyed by their works in ways which amount to openly asserting those propositions, there is a corresponding danger that what they communicate will not be the product of responsible inquiry. Indeed, it is common for the message of a literary work to be arrived at only by subtle methods of interpretation applied by academic critics, and to be itself the subject of complex and sometimes unresolved dispute. While authors may worry that factual errors will be brought to their doors, they rarely have reason to fear that their views on love will be identified with enough precision to be refuted, or, even if they are identified, that hard evidence against those views will be found.

## Conclusions

We examined two of the ways fictions are likely to affect beliefs: by invading the reader’s cognitive system via heuristics and other sub-rational devices, and by expressing authorial beliefs we take to be reliable. Within this second way we distinguished fiction as a mechanism for the transmission of relatively uncontroversial factual information from fiction as a means of expressing distinctive, perhaps idiosyncratic perspectives on evaluatively inflected propositions. For both kinds of cases the inferences involved are often precarious, and especially so with evaluative cases where there is little hope of independent verification. Trust, which in other contexts has a tendency to increase the reliability of beliefs transmitted from person to person, cannot be much depended on in belief transmission from author to reader.

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1. Versions of this paper have been read by both authors, singly and jointly, at a number of workshops and colloquia, most recently at the Art and the Nature of Belief conference, University of York, 2013. We thank the audiences on all these occasions for their comments and suggestions and express our debt to work done by Stacie Friend and Tamar Gendler, referred to below. The paper is fully collaborative and the ordering of the names of the authors is arbitrary. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, p.196, Trs Scott-Moncrieff and Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright, Chatto & Windus, 1992. Thanks to Naomi Segal for this example; neither of us knew anything of Mme de Sevigne. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Brodie, M., et al. ‘Communicating health information through the entertainment media: A study of the television drama ER lends support to the notion that Americans pick up information while being entertained’, *Health Affairs*, (2001) 20: 192–199; Gerrig, R. & D. Prentice The Representation of Fictional Information, *Psychological Science* (1991) 2; Marsh, E. J., Meade, M. L., & Roediger, H. L. ‘Learning facts from fiction’, *Journal of Memory & Language*, (2003) 49: 519-536. By contrast misrepresentations in Silent Witness have been said by one pathologist to be “quite damaging” (http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/jan/09/stuart-hamilton-silent-witness). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For other discussions of the Transportation literature in this volume, see chapters by Buckwalter and Tullman, Steglich-Petersen, and Sullivan-Bissett and Bortolotti. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dal Cin, S., M. P. Zanna & G. T. Fong, ‘Narrative Persuasion and Overcoming Resistance’, in Knowles & Lin (eds.), *Resistance and Persuasion*, Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004; Butler, L. D., Cheryl Koopman and Philip G. Zimbardo, ‘The Psychological Impact of Viewing the Film "JFK": Emotions, Beliefs, and Political Behavioral Intentions’, Political Psychology, (1995) 16: 237-257. While our examples are taken from a variety of fictional media, we avoid disjunctions like “literary, filmic, televisual or theatrical fictions” and refer simply to “literature”. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See http://moreintelligentlife.co.uk/blog/maggie-fergusson/wolf-hall-effect#. According to friends of Mantel’s project, *Wolf Hall* goes some way to undo the damage done by an earlier fiction: Robert Bolt’s *A Man for all Seasons*, with its unrealistically positive representation of Sir Thomas More. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Johnson, S. *Preface to Shakespeare*, 1765; Bevington, D., *Murder Most Foul: Hamlet through the Ages.* Oxford University Press, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Through literature we can re-discover a sense of the density of our lives” (Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, Chatto & Windus, 1997, p. 291, from a paper first published in 1961, see also her *The Sovereignty of the Good.* Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970); Nussbaum, M., *Love’s Knowledge,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994; Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit* (MIT Press, 1991), Ch. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For general arguments for not give special attention to knowledge when assessing a creature’s cognitive competence see Godfrey-Smith, P., Signal, decision, action, *Journal of Philosophy*, (1991) 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See e.g. Carroll, N., ‘Art, Narrative and Moral Understanding’, in Levinson, J. (ed.) *Aesthetics and Ethics. Essays at the Intersection,* Cambridge University Press, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*. See her endnote to Ch. 5 where she grants that the moral lesson of a literary work may have a propositional expression, though it would be “very long and probably open-ended”. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See e.g. Green, M. & T. C. Brock, ‘The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2000) 79, p.705. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For the last of these the trend towards agreement was below significance. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Green & Brock ‘The Role of Transportation. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Non-doxastic explanations of such results are discussed and rejected by Steglich-Petersen (this volume) and by Sullivan-Bissett and Bortolotti (this volume). We are less sceptical than these authors about the plausibility of such non-doxastic explanations. However, we grant that even if such explanations turned out to be correct for the experimental data in question (Green and Brock’s studies on narrative persuasion), there would still remain independent evidence (some of which we mentioned above) that fictions can influence readers’ *beliefs*. Our discussion in what follows refers to cases where fiction’s influence is plausibly interpreted in a doxastic way. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Hakemulder, F. J. *The Moral Laboratory: Experiments Examining The effects of Reading Literature on Social Perception and Moral Self-knowledge*, Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Sullivan-Bissett and Bortolotti (this volume) observe that taking stability over time as “a requirement for belief seems to clash oddly with the requirement of [belief’s] revisability”. We don’t require stability for beliefs in general and hold that most perceptual beliefs are likely to be highly unstable, as they track continuous change in the believer’s surroundings. By contrast beliefs about general matters such as those at stake in transportation experiments are more likely to display some stability. Still, we grant that, even for such beliefs, stability is not a requirement. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Tversky, A. & Kahneman, D. ‘Availability: A heuristic for judging frequency and probability’, *Cognitive Psychology* (1973) **5**: 207–233. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Heuristics are also appealed to as explanations of the effects of television viewing on people’s overestimations of the occurrences of crimes, marital discord, etc, (Shrum, L.J., Wyer, R.S., & O’Guinn, T.C., ‘The effects of television consumption on social perceptions’, *Journal of Consumer Research*  (1998) 24: 447-458). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Green & Brock ‘The Role of Transportation, p.703, citing Gilbert, D, Tafarodi, R., Malone, P. (1993), ‘You Can’t Not Believe Everything You Read’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 65: 221-233. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For other endorsements of the Gilbert model as an explanation of belief from fiction see Prentice, D.A., & Gerrig, R.J., ‘Exploring the boundary between fiction and reality’, in S. Chaiken & Y. Trope (eds.), *Dual-process theories in social psychology*, New York: Guilford, 1999; Marsh, E. J., Meade, M. L., & Roediger, H. L., ‘Learning facts from fiction’, *Journal of Memory & Language*, (2003) 49: 519-536, Marsh, E. & Fazio, L., ‘Learning errors from fiction: Difficulties in reducing reliance on fictional stories’, *Memory & Cognition,* (2006) 34: 1140-1149. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Sperber, D. et al., ‘Epistemic Vigilance’, *Mind & Language,* (2010) 25: 359–393. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. On some of the complexities involved in making inferences from what is true-in-the-fiction to what is factually true of the real world, see below section 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. We made a similar point above (Section 1) in discussing the effects of fiction on empathy. We do not claim that processes of belief formation that bypass rational reflection are generally to be deplored or that they never result in knowledge (for a particularly strong defence of the respectability of such processes see e.g. Gigerenzer, G. & Gaissmaier, W., ‘Heuristic Decision Making’, *Annual Review of Psychology*, (2011) 62: 451–82). An interesting line of thought available to advocates of literature as a device of cognitive enhancement is to show that certain kinds of fictions, in certain situations are apt to produce true (or better) beliefs by such means. Identifying the relevant kinds and situations will be complicated; it has not been attempted and it is fair to say that at the moment we have no idea about how to do it. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This is not the only ‘reflective pathway’ from fiction to belief. Another depends, not on readers’ assumptions about the reliability of the author, but on their taking the story itself as a plausible *model* of real-world processes. Yet another is the ‘experience-taking pathway’ discussed by Young (this volume), where readers’ beliefs change as a result of their taking the perspective of a fictional character: “experience-taking is one of the ways in which artworks [i.e. works of literary fiction] provide audience members with new perspectives or ways of looking at the world” (Young, this volume: XX). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. It may be fictional that the author is asserting these things. Lewis says that “Storytelling is pretence” (Truth in Fiction, *Philosophical Papers*, volume 1, Oxford University Press, 1983: 266). Perhaps we should think of authors as creators not merely of the fictions they tell, but as creators of fictions about their telling of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Arguably many fantasy stories are psychologically unrealistic. Perhaps we should say, more guardedly, that they are not generally less realistic by the standards of ordinary opinion about what constitutes psychological realism than other genres. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Elster, *Ulysses Unbound: Studies in Rationality, Precommitment, and Constraints*, Cambridge University press, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Note that these reasons for fiction’s conformity to truth need not be reflected in the thinking of readers or writers. Perhaps neither group understands all or any of these principles; perhaps some are understood to a degree but are hard to articulate. We offer them as explanations for why people expect fiction to conform to truth, and why they prefer that it does so, not as reasons people would or could give to justify their preferences and expectations. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. On the appropriateness of criticizing authors who include inaccurate factual information in their stories, see Konrad (this volume) and Stock (this volume). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. One important clue here is the genre of the work. The likely boundaries of overlap between truth and truth-in-fiction are set in one way for the realist novel, another for magical realism and another for science fiction [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. There are many cases where the fiction is only part of the source of learning. Readers of Ngaio Marsh’s *When in Rome* may wonder whether the story’s church built over a temple to Mithras is real, and might by inquiry discover that it is, under a different name (Basilica di San Clemente al Laterano). Some of what they have to that point been imagining about the church then gets converted to belief, along with detail added from other sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. The distinction between expressing and being expressive of is nicely captured in Bruce Vermazen’s ‘Expression as Expression’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 67 (1986): 196-224, though Vermazen is there concerned with the expression of emotions rather than beliefs. Our epistemic version of this distinction is close to one made by Stacie Friend, ‘Believing in Stories’, in *Aesthetics and the Sciences of Mind*, Gregory Currie, Matthew Kieran, Aaron Meskin & Jon Robson (eds), Oxford University Press, 2014: “authorial testimony” vs. “comprehension-based beliefs”. Friend argues convincingly for the possibility of testimonial transmission via fiction. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. These are the sort of cases discussed by Stock (this volume). Stock argues that in cases like these a number of conventional marks – both at the stylistic level and at the level of the content – indicate to (competent) readers that the author is offering some serious testimony, rather than *just* telling a fictional story. Konrad (this volume) makes a similar suggestion, identifying a number of ‘signposts of factuality’ that authors typically use to indicate their serious testimonial intentions. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. “To accept testimony is to take someone else’s word for it” Owens, D., ‘Testimony and assertion’, *Philosophical Studies,* (2006) 130: 105-129. Jennifer Lackey says that testifying that P requires stating that P (*Learning from Words*, p.20 (Oxford University Press, 2008)); see also C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony*, p.42, Clarendon Press 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See Grice for this well-known example of (particularized) conversational implicature [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Friend, “Believing in stories” for an important discussion of the reliability of (putatively) factual inform transmitted by fiction. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Sensible viewers of Schiller’s *Maria Stuart* are probably wary of concluding that Elizabeth I and Mary of Scotland actually met (as the play represents them), given the obvious dramatic advantage of having them together on stage. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. As with Frank Kermode, reviewing McEwan’s *Atonement* ( *LRB* October 1st 2001). Noting the orderly march of the Guards against the chaotic flow of retreating soldiers towards Dunkirk he asked “Did it, in fact, happen?” [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. #  For skepticism about expertise in the relevant domains see Currie, Methods in the Philosophy of Literature and Film, to appear in Herman Cappelen, John Hawthorne and Tamar Szabo Gendler (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology*.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. For a defence of the inseparability of descriptive and evaluative components of thick concepts see Dancy, J., “In Defense of Thick Concepts’, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, (1996) 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. But see Stock (this volume) for various examples of deliberately expressed – and arguably testified – beliefs about geographic and historical matters. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Perhaps the effects on belief (if any) of *Murder in the Mall* were mostly due to processes such as the availability heuristic. But note that participants were told that the story was written by a “prize-winning author”, which might have had some effect on estimations of the author’s reliability. How might we discriminate between the effects of such processes as the availability heuristic and apparently more rationally-based mechanisms such as testimony? One way would be to assume that the latter kinds of processes are more extensively cognitively penetrated than the former. We would then see whether subject’s (apparent) change in belief was affected by the presentation of information emphasizing the fictional nature of the story, suggestions of unreliability, etc. The less these interventions affected the change of belief, the more confidence one would have that something like heuristic-based belief acquisition was involved.

The hypothesis that participants’ beliefs in Green and Brock’s experiment might have been the result of a rationally-based and truth-conducive process of testimonial transmission is critically discussed by Sullivan-Bissett and Bortolotti (this volume: Section 4.2). Sullivan-Bissett and Bortolotti argue that even if a participant had taken *Murder in the Mall* as a piece of testimony, they wouldn’t have been rationally justified in so doing, given the conditions of the experiment. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Hospers, J., ‘Implied Truths in Literature’, [*Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*](http://philpapers.org/asearch.pl?pubn=Journal%20of%20Aesthetics%20and%20Art%20Criticism) (1960) 19:37-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See e.g. Lamarque P. & Olsen, S. H., *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994. For a review of philosophical opinion on this over the last half century see Mikkonen, J., ‘Implicit assertions in literary fiction’, *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, (2010) 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. See Grice, P., *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, 1991, Part I and essay 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Perhaps it is a substantive historical question whether a contemporary audience would have taken the story-content of Jesus’ parables to be true and known by Jesus. Even if they would have, it does not seem to be essential to the testimonial effect of the parables that they be so taken. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Assumptions of conversational co-operativeness play an *internal* role in fiction, helping to guide us to the right imaginings: if the text of a realist novel says that “Smith was invisible” we understand that what is true-in-the-story is that Smith made little impression on others; that way we avoid supposing it part of the fiction that the narrator is violating the requirement that one does not say what is obviously false. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Much we have said earlier should make it clear that these choices are still highly constrained. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Recall that exceptions to this occur when the reader notices the proposition in question and finds their own reason for believing it [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Perhaps one can trust a manifestly unreliable loved-one. Here we consider only the difference between trusting reliance and untrusting reliance. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Baier, A., ‘Trust and Antitrust’, Ethics, (1986) 96: 231-260; Holton, R., ‘Deciding to trust, coming to believe’, [*Australasian Journal of Philosophy*](http://philpapers.org/asearch.pl?pubn=Australasian%20Journal%20of%20Philosophy) (1994) 72: 63 – 76; Jones. K. ‘Trust as an affective attitude’, *Ethics*, (1996) 107: 4-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. For this reason there are circumstances in which it is wrong to trust another because one is thereby imposing an obligation on them to which you are not entitled. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. On authors as best narrative friends, see Booth, W.C., *The Company we Keep: an Ethics of Fiction,* University of California Press, London, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, 1988. It’s striking how personal a relationship readers can feel they have with authors they know nothing about, apart from their fiction. On the author Elena Ferrante, whose character and even identity is apparently unknown to any of her readers, one enthusiast commented: ‘But … Elena is my friend! My private relationship with her, so intense and so true, is one that nobody else can fully know!’ (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/31/elena-ferrante-literary-sensation-nobody-knows>). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)