



Review

The youngest readers' dilemma: A review of children's learning from fictional sources



Emily J. Hopkins*, Deena Skolnick Weisberg

University of Pennsylvania, Department of Psychology, United States

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ABSTRACT

Young children are surrounded by fictional media, including books, videos, and games. Often they are expected to learn new information from these explicitly fictional sources, while simultaneously avoiding confusion about what is true in the real world versus what is true only in fictional worlds. How do children navigate this “reader's dilemma”? The current review addresses this question by first examining whether fiction can change children's real-world knowledge or behaviors, both generally and through learning of specific pieces of information from fictional contexts. The bulk of this research suggests that children can learn new information from fiction. We then ask whether fiction teaches children more effectively than other types of activities or than nonfiction media, as well as whether there are differences in children's learning from realistic as opposed to fantastical fiction. Many open questions about these topics remain, including how selective children are when learning from fiction, which properties of the media affect their selectivity, how long children retain information learned from fictional contexts, and how child-level factors like age may affect this learning. We close the review by addressing these issues and offering some suggestions for future research in this area.

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Introduction

Despite their fictional nature, stories present a wealth of true information about reality, like what life was like on a whaling ship (*Moby Dick*) or the virtues of friendship (*Harry Potter*). Readers or viewers can and should incorporate this kind of information into their background knowledge. Indeed, part of the pleasure we experience from consuming stories may come from vicariously experiencing new situations and emotions (Bloom, 2010; Gerrig, 1993; Green, 2010; Green & Brock, 2002; Harris, 2000; Lillard, 2001; Mar & Oatley, 2008). Although it is obviously important to distinguish fiction from reality, some aspects of the boundary between reality and fiction should be porous, so that we can learn new information from stories and so that our real attitudes can be enriched by our experiences in fictional worlds. But how do we know which aspects of stories can apply to real life, and which cannot?

This is known as the “reader's dilemma” (Gerrig & Prentice, 1991; Potts, St. John, & Kirson, 1989), to capture the difficulties we face in deciding whether a piece of information in a story could potentially be true in reality. This dilemma is present for readers of all ages, but it is especially acute for children: Many of the stories that young children hear are designed to teach them something and hence require them to solve this dilemma correctly. Stories like Aesop's fables, or modern-day equivalents of these tales such as *The Berenstain Bears*, are often used to illustrate morals or values that are important to

* Corresponding author at: 580 Meetinghouse Road, Ambler, PA 19002, United States.

E-mail addresses: emily.hopkins@temple.edu (E.J. Hopkins), deena.weisberg@psych.upenn.edu (D.S. Weisberg).

a culture. Children are expected to learn these values and apply them to real life, but not to believe that other aspects of the story are real. When children hear a book like *The Berenstain Bears Visit the Dentist*, for example, they are expected to learn what dentists do and what typically happens during a visit to the dentist, but not that bears wear clothes, live in houses, and speak like people.

This dilemma is not limited to behaviors or values. Many television shows, like *Dora the Explorer* and *The Magic School Bus*, present children with new languages, cultural practices, and information about the physical world. Indeed, it is difficult to find a children's book, movie, or television show that does not aim to teach some sort of new fact or lesson. But to what extent are children successful at solving the reader's dilemma? What kinds of information do children export from fictional worlds into reality, and under what circumstances? How do children learn from fiction—that is, import some information from stories into reality—without coming to believe false things about reality (“representational abuse;” Leslie, 1987)? And can fictional sources be more effective ways of conveying educational material than non-fictional sources? This paper aims to answer these questions by presenting a comprehensive review of the literature on children's learning from fictional media.

We will begin with an overview of the skills that are required for solving this dilemma, which will place restrictions on the age groups and types of learning that we will consider. We will also introduce our working definition of “fiction” to further clarify our inclusion criteria for studies, and describe our search process for locating the articles we have chosen to include.

Experiencing the reader's dilemma

The reader's dilemma occurs whenever readers encounter a novel piece of information in a context that they know to be fictional. Readers are then faced with the challenge of determining whether the information is true only of the fictional world or is also true of reality. This dilemma does not occur in the same way with non-fiction, because in non-fiction the content is intended to be true of reality. Thus, in order to experience the reader's dilemma, children must first be able to understand fiction as adults do: as a description of fictional events separate from reality. Without this understanding, children would always risk blurring what is true in a fictional world with what is true in the real world and could not be credited with successfully navigating the reader's dilemma.

Recent research has shown that children are able to make an explicit distinction between reality and fiction by about the age of three, though this ability continues to grow throughout the preschool years (Morison & Gardner, 1978; Skolnick & Bloom, 2006; Wellman & Estes, 1986; Woolley & Cox, 2007; see Lillard, Pinkham, & Smith, 2010; Weisberg, 2013 for reviews). Children around this age also understand that what happens in a fictional context does not really affect how things work in the real world (“quarantining;” see Leslie, 1987). Based on these results, it is not clear whether toddlers conceptualize information presented in print or screen media in the same way as older children. We thus use 3 years as a lower age limit for the purposes of this review, excluding studies that only focus on toddlers or younger infants.

This is not to say that fictional media does not affect children younger than 3. Indeed, even infants and toddlers can replicate actions that they have seen in videos (e.g., Barr & Hayne, 1999; Hayne, Herbert, & Simcock, 2003; Meltzoff, 1988; Simcock, Garrity, & Barr, 2011). And a large body of work shows that infants and toddlers can learn words from non-narrative videos (Krcmar, 2014; Krcmar, Grela, & Lin, 2007; Roseberry, Hirsh-Pasek, Parish-Morris, & Golinkoff, 2009; Vandewater, Barr, Park, & Lee, 2010, but see DeLoache et al., 2010; Robb, Richert, & Wartella, 2009) or simple picture books (Chiong & DeLoache, 2012; Ganea, Pickard, & DeLoache, 2008; Khu, Graham, & Ganea, 2014; Tare, Chiong, Ganea, & DeLoache, 2010; see Linebarger & Vaala, 2010 for a review). However, it's not clear that they are confronted with the reader's dilemma in the same way as older children who know that these media are fictional. Examining the behavior of children who have a more adult-like understanding of the reality/fiction distinction ensures that we are indeed studying the reader's dilemma: the ability to discriminate between information that should remain quarantined in a fictional world and information that can apply to the real world.

Solving the reader's dilemma

Once the reader's dilemma has been experienced, what does it take to solve it? When novel information is encountered in fiction, readers or viewers must first decide if the information could plausibly be true of reality and then appropriately integrate it into their real world knowledge.

The first step involves an understanding of the structure of the real world in order to discriminate what types of information can potentially apply to reality and what types of information cannot. Some information in fiction directly violates real-world laws and thus cannot be true outside the fictional world. For example, Superman can fly and see through walls, which no real person could possibly do. Readers therefore should not incorporate information about Superman's powers into their knowledge of reality. By early preschool, children have rich knowledge of the workings of the physical, social, and biological world (Carey, 1985, 2009; Flavell, 1999; Keil, 1992; Wellman, 2011), though much of this knowledge is still developing over the course of the preschool and elementary school years. Thus, children starting around 3 years of age should be able to avoid incorrectly learning information in fiction that obviously violates real-world laws.

However, other information in fictional worlds is more ambiguous. Batman is a fictional character, but he is also a human being who does not violate any of the rules that govern the workings of reality, and so could potentially be real (Sharon &

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