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**Filling in the gaps**  
**Or, why we love **  
**fictional characters**




A screenshot of a web browser window displaying the Future Learn website. The browser's address bar shows 'https://www.futurelea...'. The page features the Future Learn logo, a search icon, a menu icon, a notification bell, and a user profile icon labeled 'SJ'. The main content area is titled 'ONLINE COURSE' and features the course title 'How to Read a Mind: an Introduction to Understanding Literary Characters' in large, bold black text. Below the title is a brief description: 'How do we read and model fictional minds? Introducing cognitive poetics: the application of cognitive science to literary reading.' To the right of the text is the University of Nottingham logo, which includes the text 'University of Nottingham' and 'UK CHINA MALAYSIA'. A prominent pink button with white text reads 'Go to course – started 3 Oct'. At the bottom of the page, there is a decorative image of a hand holding a pen over a circular diagram with numbers, and a 'Support' link in the bottom right corner.

**Peter Stockwell**  
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at the  
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## Cognitive Poetics

- **Uses insights derived from cognitive science interpret what happens when we read a text.\***
- **Assumes that the way we experience fiction is no different from the way we experience reality (in the sense that we use the same mental equipment).** 

**\*Or watch a film or TV series, read a comic, look at a picture with a narrative...**



**Do you  
recognise  
this?**

Picture by  
shining.darkness



**The Ianto Jones memorial**  
Pictures by shining.darkness & spudgun67



**Read this sentence:**

**He sat on the bench. The train pulled away.**



**He** sat on the bench. **The** train pulled away.

- **In your mind's eye, can you see 'him'? Can you describe him?**
- **Was he already sitting on the bench or did you see him sit down?**
- **Can you see the bench and its setting?**
- **Do you know where the train's going?**
- **Is it a steam train?**



**He** sat on the bench. **The** train pulled away.

This is called **Free indirect perception**—spontaneously interpreting the text from the POV of the character.





**Does *this* make a difference to how you 'read' the scene:**

**He sat on the bench. **A** train pulled away.**



**Does *this*:**

**She** sat on the bench. The train pulled away.



## **How do we do it?**

**How is it possible to see things from somebody else's POV? How can we know what others need, want, feel?**

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## The *Theory of Mind* Theory

We use a Theory\* of Mind—we assume that the other person† has a mind like ours.

\*It's called a *theory* of mind because we can only *theorise* that the other person has a mind like ours and is thinking like us.

†A *person* is anything to which you attribute personhood: dog, cat, teddy bear, computer, car, ice hockey puck...

Or a fictional character.





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## The *Theory of Mind* Theory

When we interact with another person, we '**run** our Theory of Mind'. (The process is sometimes called **mind reading** or **mind modelling**).

In theory, running our Theory of Mind allows us to decide what the other person needs, wants or feels, to see things from their POV, and to act accordingly...



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## **Test your *Theory of Mind***

***Mary is playing with a ball. Her mother tells her it's tea-time and to go and wash her hands. Mary dumps the ball on a chair and goes to the bathroom. Whilst she's away, her mother tidies up and puts the ball in the toy box.***

**When Mary comes back from tea, where will she look for the ball?**



## Test your *Theory of Mind*

You are doing two things:

- assuming that Mary is like you (not psychic or possessed of X-ray vision) = **having a Theory of Mind**
- assuming that Mary's not like you (in the sense that she knows where she *left* the ball whereas you know where it is *now*) and keeping track of what *she* knows = **running your Theory of Mind for Mary**



# The best example of a person

To run your Theory of Mind you need **data**.

- For me, the best data I can use—the best, most fully realised, example of a person I have—is *me*.
- For you, the best example of a person you have is *you*.

Other people you know—partner, children, friends—may be *quite* good examples, but not as good as you. People you don't know are less good examples—they're hazy; they may seem not quite real.



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## Filling in the gaps

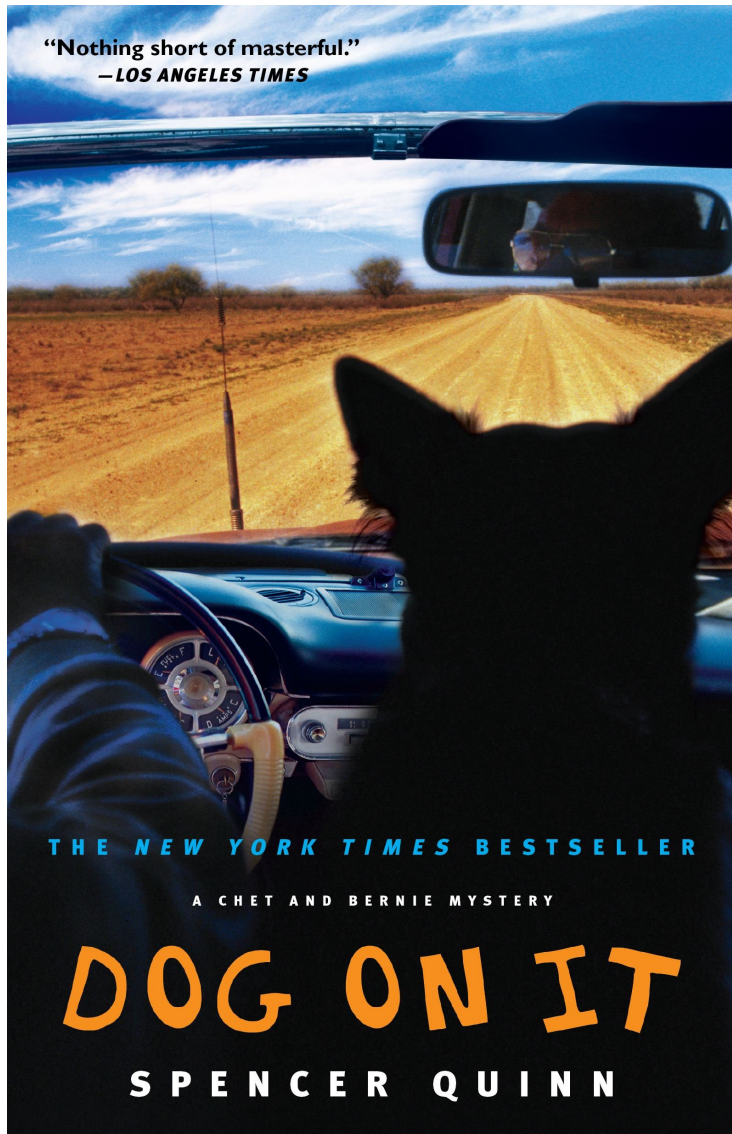
Because you use yourself as data, when you run your Theory of Mind, you assume that the other person is like *you* except in the ways they're *explicitly* not like you, so



- **a fictional character can feel complete** even though the written or visual data he or she is built from is brief and scattered
- **it's relatively easy to write convincing non-human characters**, like aliens, sheep and dogs.



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## Some non-Human Persons

### Chet & Bernie Mysteries

Told entirely from the POV of the dog, Chet, which allows the writer to tinker with certain mystery conventions. Chet

- can't communicate what he knows
- has a very short memory; he discovers things and forgets them
- makes decisions based on things like smell, and on how well someone treats him.

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## Chet

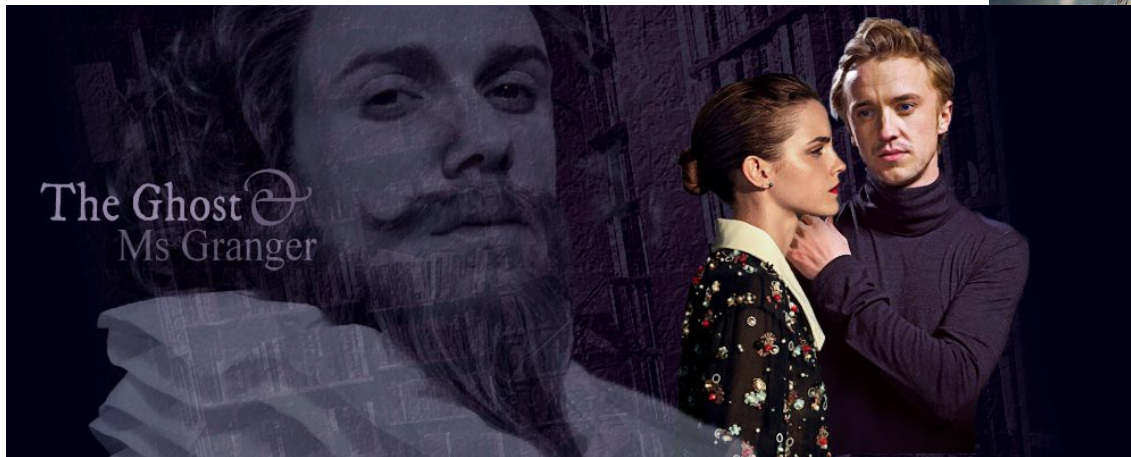
Chet understands English to the extent that he can narrate what's being said, but he doesn't always understand what it means, and he has a short attention span. Narration is a patchwork of

- stuff he's understood
- stuff he's misunderstood (which may be funny, or may show how vulnerable he is)
- stuff he hasn't bothered to listen to.

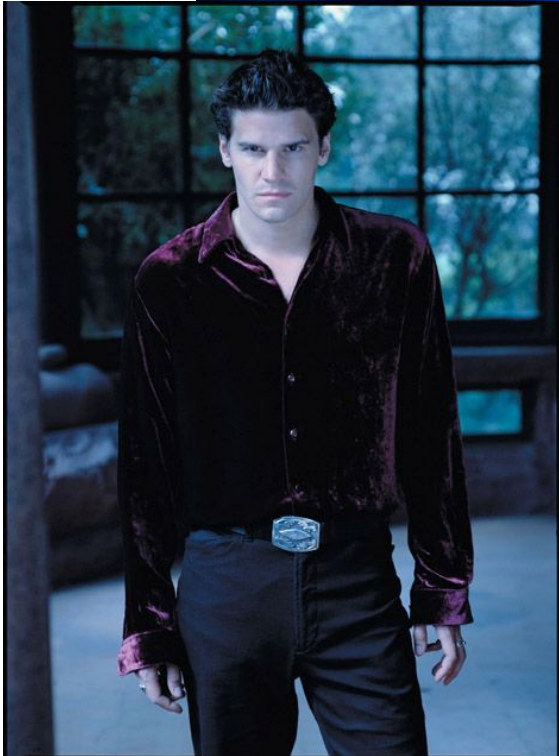


Running a ToM for Chet fills the gaps in the character but also makes you very (& very entertainingly) aware of the differences between him and you.

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The banner features the text "WriterConUK" in red and "COVENTRY 2017" in teal. The background is a photograph of a woman with long blonde hair and a man in a forest setting with autumn leaves.

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## Read this:

"The day the stock market falls out of bed and breaks its back is the worst day of your life. Or so you think. It isn't the worst day of your life, but you think it is. And when you give voice to that thought, it is with conviction and a minimum of rhetorical embellishment.

'This is the worst day of my life,' you say, as you drop a salted peanut into your double martini - on better days, you drink white wine - and watch it sink. It spirals down more slowly, more gracefully, than your own plunging fortunes, the pretty little gin bubbles that gather around the peanut a marked contrast to the lumps and burrs and stinging things that are attaching themselves to your heart.

It has been approximately four hours since the market slid off the roof, and the shocked and, at times, hysteric roar that filled the Bull and Bear earlier in the afternoon is starting to give way to a slightly dimmer din of elaborate survival strategies and cynical jokes. You share in neither the desperate ploys nor the false mirth. You hold your prematurely graying head in your hands and repeat, 'This is the worst day of my life.'

'Come on, kid,' says Phil Craddock. 'The market'll be back.'

'Maybe the market will be back. But I won't. I've left my clients so far underwater, they're going to need gills to breathe.'

You gulp a fireball of martini. 'Posner knows it, too. He passed me in the hall right after the bell and asked me if I didn't think nursing was a noble occupation.'

'Maybe he meant for him.'

You laugh in spite of yourself. 'Posner emptying bedpans? Before that happens, the Pope will star in an X-rated movie shot on a mink ranch. No, Phil, the old man sent me a signal that said, 'Sell your Porsche, baby, and line up for food stamps.' If there isn't a major bounce-back on Monday, I am puppy chow.'

'Monday's four days off.'

'Thanks for reminding me. A whole extra day to go crazy in. Well, Good Friday's famous for its executions.'

'Settle down, little lady,' says Phil. 'Now's the time to slip into your bulletproof bra.'"

From Tom Robbins *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* (1994)



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## A big exception

At what point did you realise that 'you' (the narrator) were a woman?

- **Stereotypically female clues:** martini, white wine, nursing, 'kid', 'baby', the character using descriptive phrases such as 'pretty little gin bubbles', or 'more slowly, more gracefully'...
- **Stereotypically male clues:** stock market, pub called 'The Bull and Bear'... 'noirish' tone of the narration.



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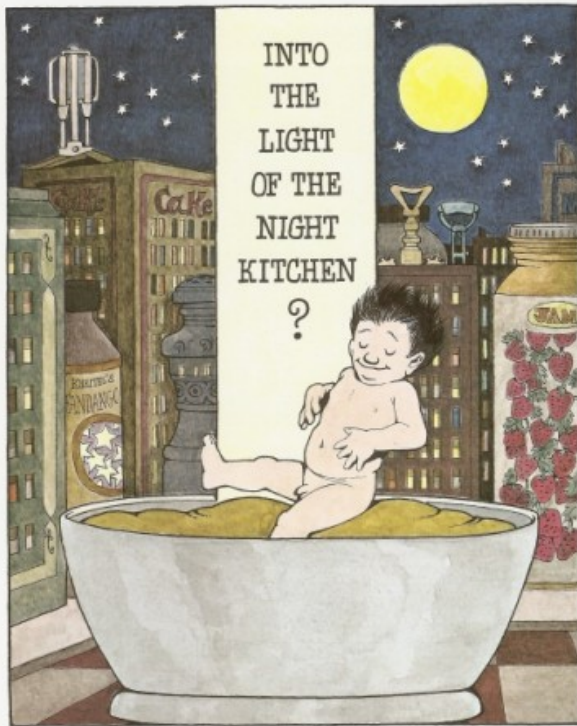
## **A big exception**

**Many readers assume that a narrator or character is male until they're told otherwise (and probably assume more besides – ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc).**

**Implies that the 'you' who reads is not a 'natural you' but a special 'readerly you', who is culturally influenced. And in our culture that reader seems to be 'male'.**



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In *In the Night Kitchen* by Maurice Sendak, Mickey is naked. Does this make it harder for a girl to identify with him?



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## *Theory of Mind & fanworks*

Reading or watching, we run our Theory of Mind to interact with the characters, and we naturally fill in the gaps. We

- **all** flesh out the characters (called '**writingandreading**')
  - but **fans** write and share extra scenes; **fans correct** things the writers have got 'wrong'.
- **all** pick up cues—words, glances, touches, behaviours—and interpret them according to our *own* understanding of those behaviours
  - but **fans** also interpret them according to an *agreed* fandomly understanding, and then discuss the interpretation with other fans, and/or create fanworks.



# Writingandreading

A reader's response to the writer's cues is creative—they simultaneously create as well as infer characters; they **writeandread** the narrative.



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## 'Flat' or 'Round'?

**In 1927, EM Forster gave a series of lectures, later published as *Aspects of the Novel*, in which he talked about 'flat' characters and 'round' characters.**

*IMPORTANT Flat or round is not a value judgment; it refers to the characters' function in the narrative.*



## Flat Characters

**'Flat characters can be expressed in one sentence.'**

(They have one purpose in the narrative, and that purpose can be summed up in one sentence).

- **"'I will never desert Mr Micawber.'" There is Mrs Micawber — she says she won't desert Mr Micawber; she doesn't, and there she is. ... Probably the immense vitality of Dickens causes his [flat] characters to vibrate a little, so that they borrow his life and appear to lead one of their own. It is a conjuring trick.'**
- **'They are best when they are comic. A serious or tragic flat character is apt to be a bore.'**

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## An Example of a Flat Character



*Eva Hansteen*  
(Lena Endre)  
in  
***Acquitted***  
wants nothing  
but revenge.

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## Round Characters

**Round characters have multiple dimensions to their personality, which are revealed as events demand, and which may surprise us.**

**'All the Jane Austen characters are ready for an extended life, for a life which the scheme of her books seldom requires them to lead, and that is why they lead their actual lives so satisfactorily.'**



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**Actors  
help make  
characters  
round**







## A character may have multiple 'Enactors': three Pips

Young Pip: [Miss Havisham] was dressed in rich materials,—satins, and lace, and silks,—all of white...

Grown-up Pip: It was not in the first few moments that I saw all these things, though I saw more of them in the first moments than might be supposed...

Flashback/Toddler Pip: Once, I had been taken to see some ghastly waxwork at the Fair... Once, I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress...

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*



## Two Enactors



**A woman  
depicted at two  
stages of her  
life**

Picture by  
Jacob Haas



# Switching between enactors

A narrative may switch from one enactor to another by means of

- **Flashbacks/flashforwards**
- **Direct speech or thought** (*...much of [the furniture] was of forms and uses then quite unknown to me*)
- **Modalisation** (using words or phrases like *might, must, could, should, is possible that, alternatively, was able to...*)
- **Metaphor** (*Juliet is the sun*)
- **Negation** (*Don't think of an elephant!*)



# Tracking & Compression

**Every enactor conjures up his or her own world**

*'Once, I had been taken to see some ghastly waxwork at the Fair...'*

**But we have ~~no difficulty~~ can**

- **run our Theory of Mind for each enactor and keep track** of where he or she is in the story (and of what he or she knows relative to the other enactors)
- **compress** multiple enactors into a single character.

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## 'Impersonation'

Some fictional characters achieve *impersonation*—become a better example of a person than some of the real people we encounter.

For me, these include:

- Dr Who, especially #2, #4, #10
- Mr Spock
- Toby Wren (*Doomwatch*)
- Alan Ward (*New Scotland Yard*)
- Avon (*Blake's 7*)
- Legolas, Eowyn
- Draco Malfoy, Hermione Granger
- Mr Haxby (*Harlots*)



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## 'Portability'

Some fictional characters achieve *portability*,  
'they take on a virtual life outside their source  
text, in the lives of readers'

(The fan says: "And?")

### Some examples:

- Sherlock Holmes
- Scrooge
- Mr Darcy
- Mr Spock
- Christian Grey (!)

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## 'Portability'



**John Munch appeared in:**  
*Homicide: Life on the Street*  
*Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*  
*Law & Order, Arrested Development*  
*The X-Files, The Beat,*  
*Law & Order: Trial by Jury, The Wire,*  
*30 Rock, Sesame Street, Luther*

- **Munch became portable because Richard Belzer's agent contacted the makers of *Law & Order* and suggested it**
- **his portability became self-perpetuating, an in-joke that made him a more interesting character.**



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## Simulation

There are two different views of how Theory of Mind works:

- **Theory-theory** – you assume another person has a mind & theorise what that mind might be like on the basis of external evidence.
- **Simulation-theory** – you imagine yourself as the other person in order to feel their perceptions and beliefs. (Support from research into Autism & the discovery of 'mirror neurons': same neurons in the brain are active when we experience emotion or observe it in others.)



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## Simulation

### Various experiments have shown:

- warm drink = warm feelings for a character
- iced drink = cold feelings
- hard seat = harsh judgments
- make a fist with your hand = helps you read and understand metaphors such as *grasp the truth*, or *hit the nail on the head*
- (just thinking about grasping has similar effect)
- reading about doing exercise is better for you physically than doing nothing!
- Reading about Uriah Heap – '*He had a way of writhing when he wanted to express enthusiasm, which was very ugly; and which diverted my attention from the compliment he had paid my relation, to the snaky twistings of his throat and body*' – makes people squirm!



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## Simulation

**And if you think about it:**

- reading/watching sad scenes can make you cry
- reading/watching funny scenes can make you laugh
- reading/watching sex scenes can have physiological effects



**We are intimately connected to what we are reading/watching.**



**No wonder we can fall in love with the characters we are writeandwatching, writeandreading, and writing about in our own fics.**



**The End!**