

Preface

The Secret Life of Literature brings together cognitive science and literary history to trace a series of patterns that made their early, modest, appearance in literature at least four thousand years ago and have, since then, grown to become the cornerstone of literary imagination, while remaining largely invisible to readers and critics. It shows how social institutions and political regimes can strengthen or weaken the hold of those patterns and how they present in North American, British, Chinese, Russian, German, and Melanesian, as well as ancient Greek, Roman, and Mesopotamian cultures.

“Cognitive” literary criticism is a relatively new field, yet one already well populated by studies ranging across a variety of genres and cultures.¹ Readers familiar with such studies will notice that this book is organized differently from others. Instead of starting out by reviewing cognitive foundations of my argument, as is often done in such cases, I postpone this review until chapter 3. I do this because I want my readers to be excited about discovering something new about literature, before learning how cognitive psychology and social neuroscience support these discoveries and sharpen their meaning.

A brief road map: The volume is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces what I call the “secret life of literature,” showing how specific patterns of “mindreading” (that is, of the capacity to explain people’s behavior as caused by their unobservable mental states, such as thoughts, desires, and intentions) have come to shape our interaction with novels, plays, and narrative poems, as well as with memoirs focusing on imagination and consciousness. The conversation here is more practical than theoretical: I use numerous examples to train the reader to recognize those

mindreading patterns in a variety of literary contexts. This chapter also explores the fraught issue of the difference between popular and literary fiction (e.g., Can a computer program distinguish between the two?) and recounts my experience of taking a graduate seminar in creative writing, at my home university, which I did in order to learn if writers themselves are aware of their role in supporting the secret life of literature. (Spoiler alert!) They mostly aren't, and that's a good thing.

Chapter 2 shifts the focus from what the secret life of literature *is* to what it *does*, and the argument becomes more theoretical and historical. I show that writers can intuitively experiment with the real-life relationship between social status and mindreading. Briefly, in real life, the lower one's relative social standing, the more active and perceptive a mind-reader they are; in fiction, not necessarily. Here are some highlights of this chapter. If you want to see how characters' mindreading disparity is used in works of literature foregrounding race, go to section 2.6. If you are interested in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and want to see how this disparity can become a form of heteroglossia in a novel obsessed with social class, turn to section 2.8. To learn what happens to fictional characters' mindreading profiles under totalitarian regimes, take a look at sections 2.10 and 2.11.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 deal with the history of the secret life of literature, focusing, respectively, on its evolutionary and neurocognitive foundations, its relationship with community-specific mindreading values, and its migration across different genres and national literary traditions. Chapter 3 presents perspectives from social, developmental, clinical, and evolutionary psychology, as well as cognitive neuroscience. Chapter 4 aims to provide a comparative context for some of our unspoken but pervasive beliefs about mindreading. Specifically, it builds on the insight of linguistic anthropologists studying language socialization in Papua New Guinea, that "the similarities and differences between these two practices—thinking about others' internal states and/or talking about them—are often at the heart of culture."² We do not often think of literature as expressing a particular mindreading ideology—that is, who gets to talk about people's mental states and who does not and which cultural institutions promote this kind of talk and which suppress it. Once we start thinking about it this way, however, a broad range of practices that we take for granted—for example,

readers talking unembarrassedly about characters' intentions; writers using deception, eavesdropping, and shame as recurrent plot devices—appear in new light. Chapter 5 explores the role of those plot devices, particularly lying, in shaping the secret life of literature in ancient China and early-modern Russia.

Chapter 6 turns to children's literature. It follows treatment of mind-reading in stories targeting one- to two-year-olds, three- to seven-year-olds, and nine- to twelve-year-olds, as well as, provisionally, young adult audiences. It inquires, in particular, into the role of tricksters in stories geared toward three- to seven-year-old children, and it looks at the interplay of cognitive and historical factors involved in designating some texts as serious novels and others as "kiddie lit."

A short conclusion speculates about the future of the secret life of literature, imagining travails of an author who decides to write a novel that would break with this pattern. It revisits cultural institutions that would make it hard for the author to do so—hard but not impossible, for, as the preceding chapters will have demonstrated, mindreading ideologies that underwrite the secret life of literature are not cut in stone.

Although this book is a work of literary criticism, it is not intended only for literary critics. I tried to keep it as reader-friendly as possible, by banishing discursive scholarly references to endnotes and not assuming any specialized knowledge on the part of my audience. While working on this project, I shared my research-in-progress not just with literary scholars but also with cognitive and social psychologists, as well as with anthropologists, ethnographers, philosophers, and students of media and communication. My hope is that my argument will continue to be of interest to scholars from those disciplines, as well as to any habitual, or occasional, readers of fiction.

Meanwhile, I gratefully acknowledge the valuable feedback provided by my colleagues from the International Society for the Study of Narrative; the Forum for Cognitive and Affect Studies at the Modern Language Association; the annual conference "Cognitive Futures in the Arts and the Humanities"; the Chinese Association of Cognitive Poetics and Cognitive Literary Studies at China University of Petroleum (Beijing), Hainan Normal University (Haikou), and Guandong University of Foreign Studies (Guangzhou); the Program in Literary Linguistics and Cognitive Literature Studies

at the Smolny Institute in Saint Petersburg State University; the Religion, Cognition and Culture Research Unit of the Aarhus Institute for Advanced Studies; the Cambridge Symposium on Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature; the European Association of Social Psychology; the Center for the Study of the Novel at Stanford University; and the Center for Science and Society at Columbia University.

I am also grateful to friends and colleagues who have, for the past several decades, provided me with invaluable support and whose brilliance and kindness have kept me going: Porter Abbott, Denis Akhapkin, Frederick Luis Aldama, Elaine Auyoung, Michael Austin, Alexandra Berlina, Guillemette Bolens, Fritz Breithaupt, Rhonda Blair, George Butte, Emanuele Castano, Terence Cave, Rita Charon, Mary Crane, Amy Cook, David Richter, Nancy Easterlin, Felipe de Oliveira Fiuza, William Flesch, Monika Fludernik, Thalia R. Goldstein, Paul L. Harris, David Herman, Patrick Colm Hogan, Tony Jackson, Isabel Jaén-Portillo, Suzanne Parker Keen, David Comer Kidd, Karin Kukkonen, Joshua Landy, Haiyan Lee, Howard Mancing, Bruce McConachie, Muqing Xiong, Pascal Nicklas, Keith Oatley, Aaron Ngozi Oforlea, Laura Otis, Alan Palmer, Jim Phelan, Natalie Phillips, Carl Plantinga, Merja Polvinen, Peter Rabinowitz, Alan Richardson, Naomi Rokotnitz, Marie-Laure Ryan, Ralph James Savarese, Bambi Schieffelin, Casey Schoenberger, Nicola Shaughnessy, Julien Jacques Simon, Ellen Spolsky, Gabrielle Starr, Francis Steen, Simon Stern, Peter Stockwell, John Sutton, Mark Turner, Blakey Vermeule, J. Keith Vincent, and Wen Yongchao.

My special thanks are to Michael Holquist (who, sadly, passed away in 2016) and Douglas H. Whalen, my coauthors in a series of experiments carried out at the Haskins Laboratories in New Haven and CUNY Graduate Center and seeking to find out if the "secret life of literature" can be tested empirically. I could not have wished for more creative and encouraging friends and collaborators.

At the MIT Press, I am grateful to Philip Laughlin and his team of anonymous reviewers, whose detailed suggestions for revision have been truly invaluable. In a couple of instances when I could not follow them, the fault is all mine. I am also thankful to Andrew Katz for his thoughtful copyediting of the manuscript.

Some of this book's arguments have first been published elsewhere. I am grateful to the editors of *PMLA*, *Narrative*, and *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* for letting me include material from my essays "The Secret Life of Fiction"

(*PMLA* 130, no. 3 [2015]); “Bakhtin, Theory of Mind, and Pedagogy: Cognitive Construction of Social Class” (*Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 30, no. 1 [2017]); and “What Mary Poppins Knew: Theory of Mind, Children’s Literature, History” (*Narrative* 27, no. 1 [2019]).

Last but not least, I thank Joel Kniaz, Etel Sverdlov, and Harry Zunshine.

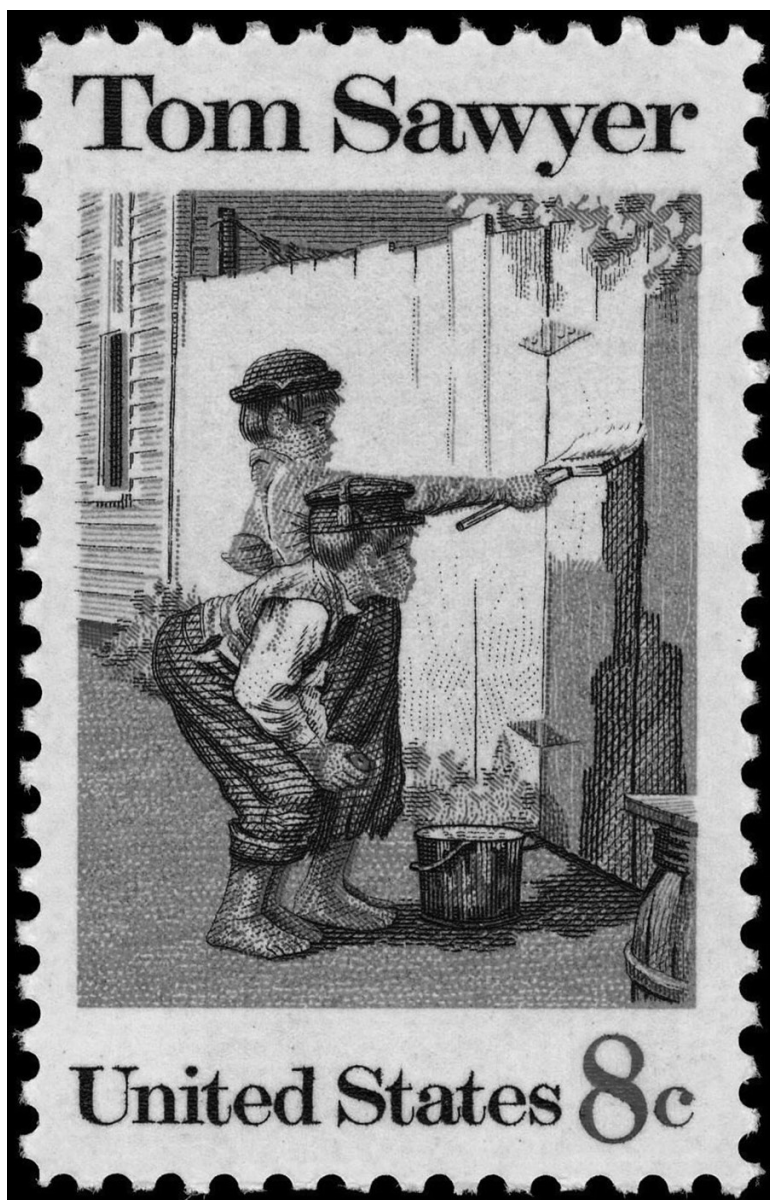


Figure 1.1
Bradbury Thompson, Tom Sawyer stamp, 1972.

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/13964.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/13964.001.0001)

The Secret Life of Literature

By: Lisa Zunshine

Citation:

The Secret Life of Literature

By: Lisa Zunshine

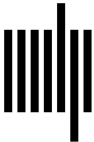
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/13964.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262367653

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2022

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from The MIT Press Frank Urbanowski Memorial Fund



The MIT Press

© 2022 The Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is licensed to the public under a CC-BY_NC_SA license.
Subject to such license, all rights are reserved.



The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Zunshine, Lisa, author.

Title: The secret life of literature / Lisa Zunshine.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021031221 | ISBN 9780262046336 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Literature—Psychological aspects. | Cognition in literature. | Psychology and literature. | Narration (Rhetoric)—Psychological aspects. | Discourse analysis, Literary—Psychological aspects.

Classification: LCC PN56.P93 Z86 2022 | DDC 801/.9—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021031221>