Study: Reading novels makes people better thinkers

By Tom Jacobs, Salon

Are you uncomfortable with ambiguity? It's a common condition, but a highly problematic one. The compulsion to quell that unease can inspire snap judgments, rigid thinking, and bad decision-making.

Fortunately, new research suggests a simple anecdote for this affliction: Read more literary fiction.

A trio of University of Toronto scholars, led by psychologist Maja Djikic, report that people who have just read a short story have less need for what psychologists call "cognitive closure." Compared with peers who have just read an essay, they expressed more comfort with disorder and uncertainty—attitudes that allow for both sophisticated thinking and greater creativity.

"Exposure to literature," the researchers write in the Creativity Research Journal, "may offer a (way for people) to become more likely to open their minds."

Djikic and her colleagues describe an experiment featuring 100 University of Toronto students. After arriving at the lab and providing some personal information, the students read either one of eight short stories or one of eight essays. The fictional stories were by authors including Wallace Stegner, Jean Stafford, and Paul Bowles; the non-fiction essays were by equally illustrious writers such as George Bernard Shaw and Stephen Jay Gould.

Afterward, each participant filled out a survey measuring their emotional need for certainty and stability. They expressed their agreement or disagreement with such statements

as “I don’t like situations that are uncertain” and “I dislike questions that can be answered in many different ways.”

Those who read a short story had significantly lower scores on that test than those who read an essay. Specifically, they expressed less need for order and more comfort with ambiguity. This effect was particularly pronounced among those who reported being frequent readers of either fiction or non-fiction.

So how does literature induce this ease with the unknown? Djikic and her colleagues, Keith Oatley and Mihnea Moldoveanu, have some ideas.

“The thinking a person engages in while reading fiction does not necessarily lead him or her to a decision,” they note. This, they observe, decreases the reader’s need to come to a definitive conclusion.

“Furthermore,” they add, “while reading, the reader can stimulate the thinking styles even of people he or she might personally dislike. One can think along and even feel along with Humbert Humbert in Lolita, no matter how offensive one finds this character. This double release—of thinking through events without concerns for urgency and permanence, and thinking in ways that are different than one’s own—may produce effects of opening the mind.”

The researchers have no idea how long this effect might last. But their discovery that it is stronger in frequent readers suggests such people may gradually become programmed to respond in this way. “It is likely that only when experiences of this kind accumulate to reach some critical mass would they lead to long-term changes of meta-cognitive habits,” they write.

Their results should give people “pause to think about the effect of current cutbacks of education in the arts and humanities,” Djikic and her colleagues add. After all, they

note, while success in most fields demands the sort of knowledge gained by reading non-fiction, it also “requires people to become insightful about others and their perspectives.”

If their conclusions are correct, that all-important knowledge can be gained by immersing yourself in a work of literature. There’s no antidote to black-or-white thinking like reading “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”