**Memories of Fiction, Mindshaping, and the Porous Self**

**Abstract**

Autobiographical memories are, in some sense, what make us who we are (Rowlands 2017; Schechtman 1994). The experiences we have over the course of a life are retained in memory, and form the building blocks for our sense of self and our continuity through time. The idea that the experiences that constitute the self are maintained in memory is much too simple, however. For one, memory is a constructive capacity, which draws on many sources of information (Bartlett 1932; Roediger & DeSoto 2015; Schacter 2012). It is also a capacity that is tightly connected to, perhaps even continuous with, imagination (Michaelian 2016). Moreover, our memories are not individual and internal records of the personal past, but may be distributed across the physical and social world (Sutton 2002; 2010). In this way, our selves too might spread out into the world and include material and social elements incorporated into our autobiographical topography (Heersmink 2018; Fabry 2023). Material and social elements seep into our porous selves.

One striking example of this is vicarious memory. Whereas personal memory involves the recollection of events in the personal past that were experienced firsthand, vicarious memory involves recollections of events that happened to other people (Pillemer et al. 2024). These vicarious experiences are shared with us through narratives about the past, and these stories allow us to imaginatively enter into the lifeworlds and experiences of others. It is thought that such vicarious memories serve similar functions to personal memories (Pillemer et al. 2024). This is one way in which the self is porous, incorporating aspects of experiences that were originally undergone by another person. One's autobiography is enriched with elements of vicarious experiences. In this way, there is a broadening of our autobiographical repertoire and our sense of self.

Some researchers want to push the boundaries of the self even further, to include not merely vicarious memories of experiences that were had by perhaps close others (friends, family members etc), but memories of events portrayed in the fiction of films, books, and other media (Marsh & Yang 2020). Adopting a functional approach to memory systems, Marsh and Yang (2020) argue that, just like memories of events in the personal past and vicarious memories, memories of fiction should also be considered as occurrences of event memories. On this view, memories of fiction are phenomenologically and functionally similar to memories of personally experienced events and hence can be integrated into our autobiographical records (Marsh & Yang 2020). According to this line of thought, memories of fiction are similar to vicarious memories, contributing to the general functions—identity, directive, and social—of autobiographical remembering (Reese 2025).

It is this fictional turn in connection to memory and the self that we examine in this paper. Drawing on existing research, which adopts a functional approach to autobiographical memory, we first outline the ways in which memories of fiction might be important elements of our autobiographical repertoires. This existing work leaves us with important questions about the role of engaging with fiction and the ways in which memories of fiction might relate to the self. Engaging with fiction is often thought to be a way of improving social cognition (Kidd & Castano 2018; Hutto 2007): it enables us to become better and more accurate mindreaders, allowing us to predict and explain the behaviour of others through the accurate attribution of mental states.

In this paper we adopt a different perspective. We suggest that part of the function of fiction is that it serves a mindshaping role (Zawadzki 2013; cf. McGeer 2007; Mameli 2001). Fiction is one way in which we are provided with virtual models, which describe and sanction examples of culturally appropriate normative and moral behaviours. Our memories of fictional events are in this way a form of vicarious learning, shaping us to enter into the normatively appropriate mental states and behaviours relative to our specific cultural groups. We outline this claim in detail and demonstrate how engagement with fiction encourages enculturation and impacts the self by providing us with virtual role models that we can approximate. In this

mindshaping view, our memories of fiction lead us to become more cognitively homogenous, sharing mental states and emotions with others. Through virtual role models and templates of appropriate behaviour, engagement with fiction and our memories of fiction allow us to become more like one another. In some ways this mindshaping role of fiction can imprison us in certain roles or identities, enforcing stereotypes and encouraging us to adopt behaviour and mental states considered appropriate to members of particular groups (Wolf 2025; cf. Peters 2019). This is especially true in the case of master plots or narratives (Lindemann Nelson 2001; Fabry 2025), which can, for example, provide stock examples of how to live a life and outline what kind of trajectory it should have (McLean & Syed 2015). However, as we demonstrate, engaging with fiction can also provide us with new role models with which to imaginatively engage, encouraging us to shape our own selves and break out of certain ways in which our identities might be constrained (Kind 2024).

Virtual models in fiction can provide us with guidance on *how-to*: how to organise our emotions, how to read those of others, how to judge the appropriateness of certain behaviours. They also provide us with explanatory value. We make sense of our actions and those of others in terms of the roles we and others play, or are expected to play. Virtual role models provide us with information and have a sense-making function in our lives. In this way, memories of fiction are crucial aspects of our autobiographical repertoires and play crucial roles in shaping our identities.

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