

Maria Nikolajeva (University of Cambridge)

Reading fiction is good for young people's cognitive, emotional and social development  
(abstract)

On October 3, 2013, *Science* published an article with the provocative title "Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind". While the results of the study may have come as a surprise for brain researchers and cognitive psychologists, literary scholars received experiment-based confirmation of something they have known for centuries: reading fiction is good for our social and emotional development. Since then, numerous empirical studies have confirmed the findings. However, what has so far been largely neglected is the implications of cognitive criticism for the study of literature targeting a young audience, whose theory of mind, empathic skills and ethical values are not yet fully developed. The imbalance of the cognitive, affective and social competences of the sender and the receiver makes children's literature a unique study object. In addition, the representation of a young protagonist's consciousness and emerging empathy poses specific demands on the writer as well as the reader. In this talk I will consider how cognitive literary criticism can explain how reading fiction is particularly beneficial for young readers' understanding of the material and social world, of themselves and of other people. I will explore how fiction, through its specific construction of time, space and narrative, stimulates young readers' perception, attention, imagination, memory, empathy and other aspects of cognitive activity. Drawing on the work by Lisa Zunshine (2006) and Blackey Vermeule (2010), the predominantly theoretical argument will be illustrated by a number of classic and contemporary children's novels.

Maria Nikolajeva is Chair of Education at the University of Cambridge, UK. She is the author of numerous books on various theoretical aspects of literature for young audiences, the most recent *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature* (2014); and the co-editor of *The Edinburgh Companion to Children's Literature* (2017). In 2005 she received the International Brothers Grimm Award for lifetime achievement in children's literature research.