

Extract: The Better Angels of Our Nature by Steven Pinker

As part of a new series debating books with big ideas, read an excerpt from Pinker's new study of the decline of violence, considering the role of literacy

The human capacity for compassion is not a reflex that is triggered automatically by the presence of another living thing. As we shall see in chapter 9, though people in all cultures can react sympathetically to kin, friends, and babies, they tend to hold back when it comes to larger circles of neighbours, strangers, foreigners, and other sentient beings. In his book *The Expanding Circle*, the philosopher Peter Singer has argued that over the course of history, people have enlarged the range of beings whose interests they value as they value their own. An interesting question is what inflated the empathy circle.

And a good candidate is the expansion of literacy.

Reading is a technology for perspective-taking. When someone else's thoughts are in your head, you are observing the world from that person's vantage point. Not only are you taking in sights and sounds that you could not experience firsthand, but you have stepped inside that person's mind and are temporarily sharing his or her attitudes and reactions. As we shall see, "empathy" in the sense of adopting someone's viewpoint is not the same as "empathy" in the sense of feeling compassion toward the person, but the first can lead to the second by a natural route. Stepping into someone else's vantage point reminds you that the other fellow has a first-person, present-tense, ongoing stream of consciousness that is very much like your own but not the same as your own. It's not a big leap to suppose that the habit of reading other people's words could put one in the habit of entering other people's minds, including their pleasures and pains. Slipping even for a moment into the perspective of someone who is turning black in a pillory or desperately pushing burning faggots away from her body or convulsing under the two hundredth stroke of the lash may give a person second thoughts as to whether these cruelties should ever be visited upon anyone.

Adopting other people's vantage points can alter one's convictions in other ways. Exposure to worlds that can be seen only through the eyes of a foreigner, an explorer, or a historian can turn an unquestioned norm ("That's the way it's done") into an explicit observation ("That's what our tribe happens to do now"). This self-consciousness is the first step toward asking whether the practice could be done in some other way. Also, learning that over the course of history the first can become last and the last can become first may instill the habit of mind that reminds us, "There but for fortune go I."

The power of literacy to lift readers out of their parochial stations is not confined to factual writing. We have already seen how satirical fiction, which transports readers into a hypothetical world from which they can observe the follies of their own, may be an effective way to change people's sensibilities without haranguing or sermonizing.

Realistic fiction, for its part, may expand readers' circle of empathy by seducing them into thinking and feeling like people very different from themselves. Literature students are taught that the 18th century was a turning point in the history of the novel. It became a form of mass entertainment, and by the end of the century almost a hundred new novels were published in England and France every year. And unlike earlier epics which recounted the exploits of heroes, aristocrats, or saints, the novels brought to life the aspirations and losses of ordinary people.

Lynn Hunt points out that the heyday of the Humanitarian Revolution, the late 18th century, was also the heyday of the epistolary novel. In this genre the story unfolds in a character's own words, exposing the character's thoughts and feelings in real time rather than describing them from the distancing perspective of a disembodied narrator. In the middle of the century three melodramatic novels named after female protagonists became unlikely bestsellers: Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), and Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Héloïse* (1761). Grown men burst into tears while experiencing the forbidden loves, intolerable

arranged marriages, and cruel twists of fate in the lives of undistinguished women (including servants) with whom they had nothing in common. A retired military officer, writing to Rousseau, gushed: You have driven me crazy about her. Imagine then the tears that her death must have wrung from me ... Never have I wept such delicious tears. That reading created such a powerful effect on me that I believe I would have gladly died during that supreme moment.

The philosophers of the Enlightenment extolled the way novels engaged a reader's identification with and sympathetic concern for others. In his eulogy for Richardson, Diderot wrote: One takes, despite all precautions, a role in his works, you are thrown into conversation, you approve, you blame, you admire, you become irritated, you feel indignant. How many times did I not surprise myself, as it happens to children who have been taken to the theater for the first time, crying: "Don't believe it, he is deceiving you." ... His characters are taken from ordinary society ... the passions he depicts are those I feel in myself.

The clergy, of course, denounced these novels and placed several on the Index of Forbidden Books. One Catholic cleric wrote, "Open these works and you will see in almost all of them the rights of divine and human justice violated, parents' authority over their children scorned, the sacred bonds of marriage and friendship broken."

Hunt suggests a causal chain: reading epistolary novels about characters unlike oneself exercises the ability to put oneself in other people's shoes, which turns one against cruel punishments and other abuses of human rights.

As usual, it is hard to rule out alternative explanations for the correlation.

Perhaps people became more empathic for other reasons, which simultaneously made them receptive to epistolary novels and concerned with others' mistreatment.

But the full-strength causal hypothesis may be more than a fantasy of English teachers. The ordering of events is in the right direction: technological advances in publishing, the mass production of books, the expansion of literacy, and the popularity of the novel all preceded the major humanitarian reforms of the 18th century. And in some cases a bestselling novel or memoir demonstrably exposed a wide range of readers to the suffering of a forgotten class of victims and led to a change in policy. Around the same time that Uncle Tom's Cabin mobilized abolitionist sentiment in the United States, Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) and Nicholas Nickleby (1839) opened people's eyes to the mistreatment of children in British workhouses and orphanages, and Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast: A Personal Narrative of Life at Sea* (1840) and Herman Melville's *White Jacket* helped end the flogging of sailors. In the past century Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, George Orwell's *1984*, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Alex Haley's *Roots*, Anchee Min's *Red Azalea*, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (a novel that features female genital mutilation) all raised public awareness of the suffering of people who might otherwise have been ignored.

Cinema and television reached even larger audiences and offered experiences that were even more immediate. There are experiments that confirm that fictional narratives can evoke people's empathy and prick them to action. Whether or not novels in general, or epistolary novels in particular, were the critical genre in expanding empathy, the explosion of reading may have contributed to the Humanitarian Revolution by getting people into the habit of straying from their parochial vantage points. And it may have contributed in a second way: by creating a hothouse for new ideas about moral values and the social order.

Steven Pinker, 1 November 2011

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/nov/01/extract-better-angels-nature-steven-pinker>