

A role for fiction in science

John D Porter* Comment on: **DR Smith** (February 2021)

The opinion piece by David R. Smith “Do scientists read enough fiction?” (Smith, 2021) had me right at the title. The premise of his article is that scientists who take the time to read fiction benefit in multiple ways. Improved brain function from working through complex characters and plots, as well as enhanced empathy as one comes to better appreciate the diverse populace in literature, can only make us, as scientists, better. I can relate.

As an asthmatic child, with a secondary school librarian mom, I read a lot. In college, I was the prototypic science major, but I also took a lot of literature courses. In part, it was the course distribution requirements at William and Mary, but I also came

to enjoy what fiction could bring. My wife bought me the first-gen Kindle out of self-defense, to “stop the un-controlled breeding of books on our shelves”. Once ensconced in an academic, and later NIH and patient advocacy career, I could not fly without a loaded Kindle. Even in her 80s, my mom was still suggesting carefully selected books, not for the plot or other interest factors, but for the quality of writing.

Did taking this approach do what Smith hypothesizes? Unequivocally yes. Don’t laugh—one needs creative writing skills in science. This can make all the difference between manuscripts accepted or rejected or grant applications funded or not. How well ideas are accepted in a paper or application requires the skill to grab the attention of the reader/reviewer quickly and hold it. Fiction writers do not survive

without creativity skills, scientists shouldn’t either.

When writing a review article on my own research, extraocular muscle, the “grabber” in the piece was the product of a creative process (Porter & Baker, 1996). This was not an isolated incident. As Smith says, appreciation for the variety of ideas and people in science is enhanced by reading a diverse range of authors, characters, and plot lines. I think we’ve all had that experience, if only from required reading in school. Smith’s opinion piece should be a clarion call to scientists. Take his advice: “put down the to-do list, and pick up a good book. Trust me, it is time well spent”.

References

- Porter JD, Baker RS (1996) *Neurology* 46: 30–37
Smith DR (2021) *EMBO reports* 22: e52206