

*Flow:*

A strong sense of being creatively engaged – as happens in a close conversation and when reading or watching a fiction – is of becoming one with what we are doing, or reading, or watching. An important researcher on this sense of engagement, which he identifies with creativity, is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who has written: “ Creativity is a central source of meaning in our lives [because] when we are involved in it, we feel that we are living more fully than during the rest of life ”. With a colleague, Csikszentmihalyi used a method in which he gave adolescents signals at random moments during the day, and asked them to say what they were doing and what their emotions were at that moment. Among the findings was that although adolescents spend a good deal of time watching television, they do it more or less to pass the time, and it ’ s generally experienced as not particularly enjoyable. Enjoyment is based on experiences that Csikszentmihalyi calls “ flow. ”

*The Experience of Emotion in Fiction:*

When we read fiction or watch drama we want to be moved. When we read a piece of non-fiction, perhaps about genetics or history, we want to be informed. At least that’s a first thought. It ’ s not a complete thought because we also often feel involved and moved when we read non-fiction. So let me see if I can put this intuition better. In fiction, as well as in genres like biography, emotions are critical; **we engage with issues because they are emotionally important to us**, having to do with people, with intentions, and with outcomes. The emotions we experience are not primarily those of the characters, they are our own, in the contexts we imagine. In non-fiction, the issues with which we engage may include people, intentions, and outcomes but they can be more various, and need not have our own emotions at the center.

How do we understand emotion? There is fair agreement in psychology that it is typically a process in which some event or person (in the outer world) is related to a concern or a purpose (which is inward). **Emotion is that process in life by which events become meaningful to us. Often it brings the events to consciousness.**

Perhaps the principal reason why emotion is so important to fiction is that it is the touchstone of consciousness. By externalizing certain elements of mind into a book or other

kind of object in the outside world – which is what art does – a growth of feeling and consciousness is enabled, both in the author and in the person who engages with the created artwork. As Susanne Langer has put it:

The emergence of . . . “feeling” in the broadest sense, or consciousness . . . [was] a crisis in natural history as great as the emergence of life from physicochemical processes; the . . . crisis may not have been a “crisis” in the ordinary sense of a single, more or less cataclysmic, event, but a vastly distributed, protracted process taking eons to develop. As it did so, however, “life” in another than physical sense originated with it – “life” as the realm of value. For value exists only where there is consciousness. Where nothing ever is felt, nothing matters.

Fiction has been often thought of as a creation of the writer. Really it’s a joint creation of writer and reader (or viewer), the joint creation of an imaginary, but conscious, world that has emotion (or feeling in Langer’s sense) at its center. Emotion in human beings is that process in which events are related to purposes and hence to meanings. What a writer does is to offer cues, or suggestions, so that the reader or viewer can start up and sustain scenes in imagination, and experience for him - or her - self meaningful emotional effects of their juxtapositions.

### *Memory and Retention*

**Memories of those who read the narrative, as compared with the expository version, were significantly more vivid**, and more often involved the reader as actor or observer in a detailed scene, rather than being reports of events or semantic memories. Narrative, the native mode of prose fiction, can prompt vivid images.

A term that has come into use in relation to getting lost in a book is “transportation.” According to Melanie Green and Tim Brock, transportation is a state of immersion in a story. It can involve the experience that Csikszentmihalyi calls “**flow**” of being totally engaged in what one is doing. It **involves attention, imagery, and emotion**. Green and Brock found that the extent of our transportation into a narrative world predicted the extent to which readers’ beliefs became consistent with beliefs and evaluations in the story.

Green has also found that labeling a story as fact or fiction had no effect on the extent of transportation that occurs.

In researching other effects of narratives, Terre Satterfield and her colleagues offered people the same information about effects of a planned hydroelectric system on a river's salmon population in either a narrative or a didactic format. They found that **people who received the information in a narrative format were better able to evaluate the issues, and better able to apply what they had learned in a complex policy judgment.**