

Why read fiction in the first place?

The Surprising Power of Reading Fiction: 9 Ways it Makes Us Happier and More Creative

1. Empathy: Imagining creates understanding

To put yourself in the shoes of others and grow your capacity for empathy, you can hardly do better than reading fiction. Multiple studies have shown that imagining stories helps activate the regions of your brain responsible for better understanding others and seeing the world from a new perspective.

When the psychologist Raymond Mar analyzed 86 fMRI studies, he saw substantial overlap in the brain networks used to understand stories and the networks used to navigate interactions with other individuals.

“...In particular, interactions in which we’re trying to figure out the thoughts and feelings of others. Scientists call this capacity of the brain to construct a map of other people’s intentions ‘theory of mind.’ Narratives offer a unique opportunity to engage this capacity, as we identify with characters’ longings and frustrations, guess at their hidden motives and track their encounters with friends and enemies, neighbors and lovers.”

That’s because when we read about a situation or feeling, it’s very nearly as if we’re feeling it ourselves. ...

*Two researchers from Washington University in St. Louis scanned the brains of fiction readers and discovered that their test subjects created intense, graphic mental simulations of the sights, sounds, movements, and tastes they encountered in the narrative. **In essence, their brains reacted as if they were actually living the events they were reading about.***

2. Disengagement: Reading is most effective for stress

Your brain can’t operate at maximum capacity 24/7—far from it. We all need periods of disengagement to rest our cognitive capabilities and get back to peak functionality.

Tony Schwartz talks about this as one of the most overlooked elements of our lives: Even the fastest racing car can’t win the race with at least one or two great pit stops. The same holds true for ourselves. If we don’t have “pit-stops” built into our days, there is now chance we can race at a high performance.

And **reading fiction is among the very best ways to get that disengaged rest.** The New Yorker reports that:

Reading has been shown to put our brains into a pleasurable trance-like state, similar to meditation, and it brings the same health benefits of deep relaxation and inner calm. Regular readers sleep better, have lower stress levels, higher self-esteem, and lower rates of depression than non-readers.

Research at the University of Sussex shows that reading is the most effective way to overcome stress, beating out other methods like listening to music or taking a walk.

Within 6 minutes of silent reading, participants’ heart rates slowed and tension in their muscles eased up to 68%. Psychologists believe reading works so well because the mind’s concentration creates a distraction that eases the body’s stress.

3. Sleep: Regular readers sleep better

In fact, the kind of relaxed disengagement that reading creates can become the perfect environment for helping you sleep.

Creating a sleep ritual is a great way to build up a consistent sleep pattern. One of the key things is to have **the last activity completely disengage you from the tasks of the rest of your day.**

...the power of reading before bed—fiction only:

“Do not read non-fiction prior to bed, which encourages projection into the future and preoccupation/planning. Read fiction that engages the imagination and demands present-state attention.”...

4. Improved relationships: Books are a ‘reality simulator’

Life is complicated. Oftentimes, interpersonal relationships and challenges don’t have the simple resolutions we might like. How can we become more accepting of this reality? By using fiction to explore ideas of change, complex emotions and the unknown.

Keith Oatley, an emeritus professor of cognitive psychology at the University of Toronto, proposed to the New York Times that reading produces a kind of reality simulation that “runs on minds of readers just as computer simulations run on computers.”

Fiction, Dr. Oatley notes, “is a particularly useful simulation because negotiating the social world effectively is extremely tricky, requiring us to weigh up myriad interacting instances of cause and effect. Just as computer simulations can help us get to grips with complex problems such as flying a plane or forecasting the weather, so novels, stories and dramas can help us understand the complexities of social life.”

Writer Eileen Gunn suggests that reading science fiction, in particular, helps us accept change more readily:

“What science fiction does, especially in those works that deal with the future, is help people understand that things change and that you can live through it. Change is all around us. Probably things change faster now than they did four or five hundred years ago, particularly in some parts of the world.”

5. Memory: Readers have less mental decline in later life

We know that hearing a story is a great way to remember information for the long-term.

Now there’s also evidence that readers experience slower memory declined later in life compared to non-readers. In particular, later-in-life readers have a 32 percent lower rate of mental decline compared to their peers.

In addition to slower memory decline, those who read more have been found to show less characteristics of Alzheimer’s disease, according to a 2001 study published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

6. Inclusivity: Stories open your mind

Can reading *Harry Potter* make us more inclusive, tolerant and open-minded? One study says yes. ...

The study, published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, tested whether the novels of *Harry Potter* could be used as a tool for improving attitudes toward stigmatized groups.

After 3 experiments in which students read passages of the books about discrimination, the students showed changed attitudes about everything from immigrants to gay students.

Mic reports that “the researchers credited the books with improving readers’ ability to assume the perspective of marginalized groups. They also claimed that young children, with the help of a teacher,

were able to understand that Harry's frequent support of "mudbloods" was an allegory towards bigotry in real-life society."

There's no doubt that books can open your mind. This great, short [TED talk by Lisa Bu](#) shows just how much.

7. Vocabulary: Fiction readers build more language

We all want the kind of vocabulary that can help us express ourselves and connect with others.

Fiction can help you get there. A 2013 Emory University compared the brains of people after they read fiction (specifically, Robert Harris' *Pompeii* over nine nights) to the brains of people who didn't read.

The brains of the readers showed more activity in certain areas than those who didn't read—especially the left temporal cortex, the part of the brain typically associated with understanding language.

The website [testyourvocab.com](#) analyzed millions of its test-takers to discover the somewhat expected conclusion that reading more builds a bigger vocabulary. What was less expected was how much of a difference the *type* of reading made: Fiction readers were significantly more likely to have a larger vocabulary:

The study noted: "That fiction reading would increase vocabulary size more than just non-fiction was one of our hypotheses — it makes sense, after all, considering that fiction tends to use a greater variety of words than nonfiction does. However, we hadn't expected its effect to be this prominent."

8. Creativity: Fictions allows for uncertainty (where creativity thrives!)

In the movies, we often long for a happy ending. Have you noticed that fiction can be much more ambiguous?

That's exactly what makes it the perfect environment for creativity. A study published in *Creativity Research Journal* asked students to read either a short fictional story or a non-fiction essay and then measured their emotional need for certainty and stability.

Researchers discovered that the fiction readers had less need for "cognitive closure" than those who read nonfiction, and added:

"These findings suggest that reading fictional literature could lead to better procedures of processing information generally, including those of creativity."

9. Pleasure: Reading makes you happier

All the above factors are great. But the very biggest reason I try to read every single day? I love it. It makes me happy, and I'm not alone—a survey of 1,500 adult readers in the UK found that 76% of them said reading improves their life and helps to make them feel good.

Other findings of the survey are that those who read books regularly are on average more satisfied with life, happier, and more likely to feel that the things they do in life are worthwhile.

The Surprising Power of Reading Fiction: 9 Ways It Make Us Happier and More Creative." *Buffer Open*. 2015. Web. 24 Feb. 2016. <https://open.buffer.com/reading-fiction/>

The value of rereading

The novelist Vladimir Nabokov (1980) writes the following about the necessity for rereading:
When we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation. When we look at a painting we do not have to move our eyes in a special way even if, as in a book, the picture contains elements of depth and development. The element of time does not readily enter in a first contact with a painting. In reading a book, we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it. We have no physical organ (as we have one in regard to the eye in a painting) that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy the details. But at a second, or third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave toward a book as we do toward a painting. (p. 62)

Another argument for rereading is provided by Broyard (1985) when he writes how during a first reading of a book we are often distracted by pleasure, excitement or curiosity. The book may actually so seize us that we rush through it in what he refers to as a "kind of delirium." If we only read a book once, we may only remember the main outline of the work. The beautiful sentences and heartbreaking scenes may be either missed or forgotten, not necessarily because we are careless readers but because a book, especially a good or great book, can often be a very subtle, intricate and demanding experience.

New insights through rereading

Perhaps the strongest case for rereading made by educators comes from Tierney and Pearson (1983). They believe that readers are more likely to gain new insights into a variety of perspectives, or in their words: "try out different alignments or stances" as they read. Eleanor Gibson's description of how she approaches the work of Jane Austen provides an example of the different stances a reader may take toward a text:

Her novels are not for airport reading They are for reading over and over, savoring every phrase, memorizing the best of them, and setting an even deeper understanding of Jane's "sense of human comedy" ... As I read the book for perhaps the twenty-fifth time, I consider what point she is trying to make in the similarities and differences between the characters ... I want to discover for myself what this sensitive and perceptive individual is trying to tell me. Sometimes I only want to sink back and enjoy it and laugh myself. (Gibson & Levin, 1975,458-460)

In order to read in this way, students must take the time to rethink, reexamine, and review what they read. And this will not happen during a single reading; rather it occurs only after engaging in rereading the text several times. Tierney and Pearson also suggest that we think of a reader as someone who revises in the same way that a writer is a reviser. They consider revising as important to reading as it is to writing. Students are only able to construct models of meaning for a text if they approach the text with the same degree of deliberation and reflection that writers engage in when they revise a text. Readers should examine their developing interpretations and view the models of meaning they build as draft-like in nature, subject to revision that emerges through subsequent rereading.

Encouraging rereading

David Wyatt (1986), in describing the draft-like quality of our interpretations of a text, notes that we take what we need from what we read, and what we need changes. The meaning of a text should be located less in a particular interpretation than in the history of our return to it. Wyatt is making a point about what he refers to as the "unfixedness" of the reader and the reader's interpretation which, in Shakespeare's words, "alters when it alteration finds." The alteration found is alteration of the reader, and it has the effect of conditioning any interpretation a book has for a reader. As readers, we are only finished reading a book when we stop second-guessing it, and that means that we are probably never finished with it.

Once teachers accept the value of rereading, and students are convinced that they should engage in rereading, how can teachers encourage rereading? Tierney and Pearson (1983) remind us that we should not assume that merely allowing time for rethinking, reexamining, reviewing or rereading will guarantee that students will revise their readings. Students should receive instructional guidance when they are asked to go through a text a second, third, or fourth time. They need to be given reasons for another reading of a text, such as to get a general feel for the topic, to find specific information, to appreciate the author's use of language or imagery, or to read from another point of view or perspective. And students need the support and feedback that can only come from having an opportunity to share and discuss their different interpretations of the text with thoughtful teachers and interested peers

Perez, Samuel A. "Rereading to Enhance Text Understanding in the Secondary Classroom." Rereading to Enhance Text Understanding in the Secondary Classroom. Reading Horizons. Web. 20 Mar. 2016.
<http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1654&context=reading_horizons>.

Ways to "maybe" get students to re-read.

This is an example of a general re-reading protocol on fiction that might be handled either in a reading journal or, more collaboratively, in an on-line discussion.

How did the story's general purport and orientation change after second reading?

What aspects of the story have you "misremembered," adapted to conform to your first reading?

What possibilities of the text have you ignored (not account for) during earlier reading?

What "mysteries" or "gaps" in the narrative have you tried to settle and how successfully?

What aspects in the story are still unresolved, what questions unanswered?

Who did you identify with during first reading, and how did this identification change in subsequent rereadings?

Have your generic or thematic expectations about the story changed?

Is the story more/or less satisfying after second reading, and why?

As you begin to sort out the textual "evidence" in support of an interpretation of the story, which details do you find useful, and which seem difficult to resolve with your interpretation?

Has this approach to reading given you more confidence in your judgments and helped you understand the intricate details of the text better?

Another rereading protocol, focused in this case on a poetic text, can be built from questions such as these:

Exploring the text

Read the poem slowly and "out loud" several times. Look up any words you are unsure about, noting different meanings, synonyms, antonyms, linguistic roots as relevant, including allusions you don't know (such as references to classical mythology or the Bible). Note any images in the poem and experience them in sensory as well as intellectual terms.

Exploring patterns

What is/are the metrical pattern(s) of the poem? Where are there breaks in the pattern? Are there any repeated words, phrases, or images? Does the poem rhyme? Is it a regular rhyme scheme? Are there any approximate or off-rhymes?

Questioning the text

Where are the gaps or ambiguities of syntax or meaning in the poem? Are there any hints of a subtext which conflicts or questions the surface text?

Exploring the author's and work's general repertoire (adapted after McCormick, Waller, Flower, 16-27)

What do you know about the author and the personal conditions under which he/she wrote? What can you deduce from the poem? How do you think age, gender, race, social or financial status of the author might be relevant to the poem? What else do you know about the time, the place, and social, cultural, and/or political conditions of the work? Which of these might be relevant to this particular text?

Exploring the author's and work's literary repertoire (adapted after McCormick, Waller, Flower, 16-27)

What are the literary conventions and expectations of the time which affect this work in terms of genre and form, rhetorical strategies, imagery, meter (or lack of it), etc. Do you know any other works by this author? If so, what patterns and ideas seem to recur in those works that you think may be in this one?

Matching up your own personal, literary, and general repertoires

What expectations do you have for the genre and the subject represented by this poem? How does it meet or disappoint those expectations? How do your relevant personal experiences (as recorded in your free association) match or clash with those suggested in the poem? Are they so strong that they might block your ability to respond to the poem? What differences (from the author) in age, race, gender, social or political status, etc. might color and shape your reading of this poem?

"The Rereading/Rewriting Process: Theory and Collaborative, On-line Pedagogy." *The Rereading/Rewriting Process: Theory and Collaborative, On-line Pedagogy*. Web. 20 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/ReReadingTheorychapter.htm>>.

1 Corinthians 13:11 *When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.*

Pages 1 – 5

Little Jack Horner
Sat in the corner
Eating his Christmas pie,
He stuck in this thumb,
Pulled out a plum
And said “What a good boy am I!”

Pages 7 – 8

Jack be nimble, Jack be quick,
Jack jumped over a candlestick.

Pages 27 – 29

Humpty-Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty-Dumpty had a great fall.
All the King’s horses and all the King’s men,
Couldn’t put Humpty together again.

Pages 30 – 32

Sing a song of sixpence,
A pocket full of rye,
Four and twenty blackbirds,
Baked in a pie.
When the pie was opened,
The birds began to sing,
Now, wasn’t that a dainty dish
To set before the King?
The King was in his counting house,
Counting out his money.
The Queen was in the parlour,
Eating bread and honey.
The maid was in the garden
Hanging out the clothes.
When along came a blackbird,
And snipped off her nose!

Pages 41-43

Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any wool?
Yes, sir, yes, sir, three bags full.
One for the master, one for the dame,
And one for the little boy who lives down the lane.

Dr. Seuss? in the high school classroom. Sure!

Read a Dr. Seuss book to the class. Allow students to look at the pictures, and ask them to think about the messages and main points of the story.

Discuss the main ideas and themes in the book. Also discuss the techniques Dr. Seuss uses to convey these messages and themes. Some examples of techniques include using simple words and word structure, specific words or phrases that rhyme or repeat, drawings, and characters' actions. How do his techniques help get his points across?

- Have students read a Dr. Seuss book of their choice and determine the themes they discover. Ask them to list these themes and write explaining the book's message with regard to the themes.

Horton Hears A Who

Themes: democratization in post-war Japan, treating Japanese people with respect and really listening to them

Explain that the United States occupied Japan after World War II, and this is the period with which Horton is dealing.

Yertle the Turtle

Themes: Hitler, thirst for power

The Sneetches

Themes: anti-Semitism, racism, tolerance

Explain to students that the Nazis often required Jews to wear yellow stars on their clothing to identify themselves as Jewish.

The Cat in the Hat

Themes: general subversion and rebellion against authority, new optimism and energy of the 1960s

The Lorax

Themes: conservation, corporate greed, against the consumer culture

The Butter Battle Book

Themes: Cold War, against silly conflict that escalates into a dangerous situation.

FISH? - Shel Silverstein

The little fish eats the tiny fish,
The big fish eats the little fish—
So only the biggest fish gets fat.
Do you know any folks like that?

Listen to the Mustn'ts - Shel Silverstein

*Listen to the MUSTN'TS, child,
Listen to the DON'TS
Listen to the SHOULDN'TS
The IMPOSSIBLES, the WONT'S
Listen to the NEVER HAVES
Then listen close to me—
Anything can happen, child,
ANYTHING can be.*

SARAH CYNTHIA SYLVIA STOUT WOULD NOT TAKE THE GARBAGE OUT



Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout
Would not take the garbage out!
She'd scour the pots and scrape the pans,
Candy the yams and spice the hams,
And though her daddy would scream and shout,
She simply would not take the garbage out.
And so it piled up to the ceilings:
Coffee grounds, potato peelings,
Brown bananas, rotten peas,
Chunks of sour cottage cheese.
It filled the can, it covered the floor,
It cracked the window and blocked the door
With bacon rinds and chicken bones,
Drippy ends of ice cream cones,
Prune pits, peach pits, orange peel,
Gloppy glumps of cold oatmeal,
Pizza crusts and withered greens,
Soggy beans and tangerines,
Crusts of black burned buttered toast,
Gristly bits of beefy roasts. . .
The garbage rolled on down the hall,
It raised the roof, it broke the wall. . .
Greasy napkins, cookie crumbs,
Globs of gooey bubble gum,
Cellophane from green baloney,
Rubbery blubbery macaroni,
Peanut butter, caked and dry,
Curdled milk and crusts of pie,
Moldy melons, dried-up mustard,
Eggshells mixed with lemon custard,
Cold french fried and rancid meat,
Yellow lumps of Cream of Wheat.
At last the garbage reached so high
That it finally touched the sky.
And all the neighbors moved away,
And none of her friends would come to play.
And finally Sarah Cynthia Stout said,
"OK, I'll take the garbage out!"
But then, of course, it was too late. . .
The garbage reached across the state,
From New York to the Golden Gate.
And there, in the garbage she did hate,
Poor Sarah met an awful fate,
That I cannot now relate
Because the hour is much too late.
But children, remember Sarah Stout
And always take the garbage out!

Shel Silverstein, 1974

Read the following quotations from books you may (hopefully) have read when you were younger. Try to remember what you thought the meaning was when you first read the book. How has your understanding of the quotation changed now that you are older? If you have not read the book, go ahead and decide what you might have thought in the past and then what do you think it means now.

In the last chart, try to remember quotations (you may paraphrase) from books/stories/poems that you read when you were younger that impressed you. What did you think they meant then and how has the meaning changed as you have matured?

Quotations from The Phantom Tollbooth .	What I thought or might have thought when I was younger.	What I think now. Why? Why did the meaning change?
<p><i>There was once a boy named Milo who didn't know what to do with himself – not just sometimes, but always.</i></p> <p><i>When he was in school he longed to be out, and when he was out he longed to be in. On the way he thought about coming home, and coming home he thought about going. Wherever he was he wished he were somewhere else, and when he got there he wondered why he'd bothered.</i></p> <p>Nothing really interested him – least of all the things that should have.</p>		
<p><i>“Have you ever heard the wonderful silence just before the dawn? Or the quiet and calm just as a storm ends? Or perhaps you know the silence when you haven't the answer to a question you've been asked, or the hush of a country road at night, or the expectant pause of a room full of people when someone is just about to speak, or, most beautiful of all, the moment after the door closes and you're alone in the whole house? Each one is different, you know, and all very beautiful if you listen carefully.”</i></p>		
<p><i>“You must never feel badly about making mistakes ... as long as you take the trouble to learn from them. For you often learn more by being wrong for the right reasons than you do by being right for the wrong reasons.”</i></p>		
<p><i>“Everybody is so terribly sensitive about the things they know best.”</i></p>		
<p><i>“You can swim all day in the Sea of Knowledge and not get wet.”</i></p>		
<p><i>“The most important reason for going from one place to another is to see what's in between.”</i></p>		
<p><i>“But just because you can never reach it, doesn't</i></p>		

<i>mean that it's not worth looking for."</i>		
<i>"... what you learn today, for no reason at all, will help you discover all the wonderful secrets of tomorrow."</i>		
Quotations from <i>A Wrinkle In Time</i>		
<i>"But Charles Wallace doesn't look different from anybody else." "No, Meg, but people are more than just the way they look. Charles Wallace's difference isn't physical. It's in essence."</i>		
<i>"I don't understand it any more than you do, but one thing I've learned is that you don't have to understand things for them to be."</i>		
<i>"But you see, Meg, just because we don't understand doesn't mean that the explanation doesn't exist."</i>		
<i>"Nothing is hopeless; we must hope for everything"</i>		
<i>"Like and equal are not the same thing at all!"</i>		
<i>"You mean you're comparing your lives to a sonnet? A strict form but with freedom within it?" 'Yes,' said Mrs. Whatsit. 'You're given the form, but you have to write the sonnet yourself. What you say is completely up to you'"</i>		
Quotations from <i>Alice Through the Looking Glass</i>		
<i>Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things." "I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."</i>		
<i>'Are we nearly there?' Alice managed to pant out at last. 'Nearly there!' the Queen repeated. 'Why, we passed it ten minutes ago! Faster!' 'Well, in OUR country,' said Alice, still panting a little, 'you'd generally get to somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time, as we've been doing.' 'A slow sort of country!' said the Queen. 'Now, HERE, you see, it takes all the running YOU can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!'</i>		
<i>That's the effect of living backwards,' the Queen</i>		

<p>said kindly: 'it always makes one a little giddy at first—'</p> <p>'Living backwards!' Alice repeated in great astonishment. 'I never heard of such a thing!'</p> <p>'—but there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways.'</p> <p>'I'm sure MINE only works one way,' Alice remarked. 'I can't remember things before they happen.'</p> <p>'It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,' the Queen remarked.</p> <p>'What sort of things do YOU remember best?'</p> <p>Alice ventured to ask.</p> <p>'Oh, things that happened the week after next,' the Queen replied in a careless tone. 'For instance, now,' she went on, sticking a large piece of plaster [band-aid] on her finger as she spoke, 'there's the King's Messenger. He's in prison now, being punished: and the trial doesn't even begin till next Wednesday: and of course the crime comes last of all.'</p> <p>'Suppose he never commits the crime?' said Alice.</p> <p>'That would be all the better, wouldn't it?' the Queen said, as she bound the plaster round her finger with a bit of ribbon.</p>		
<p>'I should like to buy an egg, please,' she said timidly. 'How do you sell them?'</p> <p>'Fivepence farthing for one—Twopence for two,' the Sheep replied.</p> <p>'Then two are cheaper than one?' Alice said in a surprised tone, taking out her purse.</p> <p>'Only you MUST eat them both, if you buy two,' said the Sheep.</p> <p>'Then I'll have ONE, please,' said Alice, as she put the money down on the counter. For she thought to herself, 'They mightn't be at all nice, you know.'</p>		
<p>'My NAME is Alice, but—'</p> <p>'It's a stupid enough name!' Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. 'What does it mean?'</p> <p>'MUST a name mean something?' Alice asked doubtfully.</p> <p>'Of course it must,' Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh: 'MY name means the shape I am—and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost.'</p>		

Quotation or paraphrase from a book/story/poem you read when you were younger.	What it meant to you when you were younger and why (if you remember).	What it means to you today. Why did the meaning change? Why do you like the quotation?

Jack Horner meaning

Little “Jack” Horner was actually Thomas Horner, steward to the Abbot of Glastonbury during the reign of King Henry VIII. Shortly after the dissolution of the monasteries, Mr. Horner settled into a very comfortable house. The rhyme tells the story of his acquisition of the property.

Always keen to raise fresh funds, Henry had shown an interest in Glastonbury (and other abbeys). Hoping to appease the royal appetite, the nervous Abbot, Richard Whiting, allegedly sent Thomas Horner to the King with a special gift. This was a pie containing the title deeds to twelve manor houses in the hope that these would deflect the King from acquiring Glastonbury Abbey. On his way to London, the not so loyal courier Horner apparently stuck his thumb into the pie and extracted the deeds for Mells Manor, a plum piece of real estate. The attempted bribe failed and the dissolution of the monasteries (including Glastonbury) went ahead from 1536 to 1540. Richard Whiting was subsequently executed, but the Horner family kept the house, so the moral of this one is: treachery and greed pay off, but bribery is a bad idea.

Jack be Nimble meaning

Various pagan associations here, with fortune-telling, fertility, and it being considered good luck to be able to jump over a candlestick without the flame going out. The ability to do this meant a prosperous year ahead. For no apparent reason, Buckinghamshire was once a real hot spot for candle leaping and even elevated it to a sport, which considering some current Olympic “events,” is probably a reasonable thing to do. ...

Perhaps if you were nimble enough to clear the flame, it meant you were a lean and healthy person up of the challenges of the year ahead, whereas the lardier among the crowd might cause a draught and put the fire out. ...

There are happier links for this rhyme in pre-Christian fertility rituals involving jumping over fire and some, perhaps more sensible, young couples today still “jump the broomstick.”

Humpty Dumpty meaning

...Other, deeper analysts see the egg as a motif for mankind, representing the essential fragility of the human condition, while in some cultures the egg symbolizes the soul. This is all well and happy as a means of explaining the roots of the rhyme, but there is an eggstra-ordinary twist to this tale, at least according to another theory

Apart from being the name of a drink and a means of referring to an ungainly person, “Humpty-Dumpty” was also the name given to a huge and powerful cannon that stood on the walls of Colchester. At least, that’s the tale from the East Anglia tourist board—the local museum in Colchester is more sceptical.

The story goes that, during the English Civil War (1642—49), Humpty was mounted on top of the wall of St. Mary’s Church in Colchester. In common with other cannons of the time, it was made of cast iron. Now, while cast iron is not as light as an egg, it is nevertheless quite brittle and shatters if mishandled.

The city of Colchester—a Parliamentary* (Roundhead) stronghold—had been captured by Royalists (Cavaliers) in 1648. It might be fair to deduce from this that, as a defensive fixture, Humpty can’t have been all that great. The King’s men held on to the city for eleven weeks and during the Parliamentary counter-siege, decided to use Humpty against the Parliamentarians. Unfortunately, they lacked the skill to fire Humpty-Dumpty properly and managed to blow the cannon to pieces. (In an alternative version the enemy hit the church tower.) Either way, Humpty-Dumpty was left in pieces all over the ground and “all the King’s horses and all the King’s men couldn’t put Humpty together again.” So here is a case of an ancient folk rhyme being given new life as an anti-Royalist chant.

Sing a Song of Sixpence meaning

Alternative theories abound for this one, but first a little culinary history. Once upon a time apparently, people baked little clay whistles into the pastry on the top of pies. These whistles were shaped like the heads of birds with their beaks wide open. The idea was that when the pie was cut and the crust broken, the cold air outside met the hot contents inside, creating lots of steam. Also, the eating of songbirds was considered normal in English, and still is in parts of Italy, so if blackbirds were considered to be a culinary delicacy, then they were fit for royal consumption. Therefore, they whole thing could just be about a meal, simple as that. All sorts of creatures were put in pies in the past,

although the notion of people jumping out of food dishes did not come along until the reign of Queen Anne.

According to the leading theory, this rhyme is about Henry VIII and two of his six wives; the maid handing out the washing in the garden is Anne Boleyn, blissfully unaware of her future loss of head and status, and the Queen is Catherine of Aragon, mother of Mary Tudor.

As with “Little Jack Horner,” the business about the pie is related to the dissolution of the monasteries. Nowadays many “crusties” take jobs as cycle couriers, but in the past there was a real crusty courier service whereby valuable documents were hidden in pies (and other everyday objects) in order to conceal their worth from brigands. The story goes that King Henry VIII had the deeds to yet more monasteries concealed in a pie that was sent to him. The King’s men went to the monasteries to open them up and persuade the “blackbirds” there (clergymen were often jokingly associated with blackbirds, as nuns are associated with penguins today) to sing—that is, to “sing” in the more modern (Mafia, if you like) sense, meaning to plead and betray. Some monks tried to advance themselves by grassing up (informing on) the abbot, who may have hidden a few items from the King’s men—little things like gold crosses and ruby-encrusted mitres, valuable things that would cause even a monarch to reassess his cash value.

So the King is in the counting house. Queen Catherine is out of the way in the parlour, divorced from the action. Ms. Boleyn waits in the garden and finds all her new-found riches come to an abrupt end with her beheading. Elements of the clergy (those blackbirds again) are also getting their own back with accusations of witchcraft against her. In real life Anne got to choose her own executioner, a Frenchman, and is quoted as having said, “I head he’s quite good and I have a very small neck!” She referred to herself in the tower as “Queen Lackhead,” which has to be the epitome of gallows humour. The whole break with the Church of Rome, and the dissolution of the monasteries, came about as a result of the divorce of Catherine for Anne. It is perhaps a shame that the rhyme doesn’t go on to chronicle what happened to the other wives. For that we have, “Divorced, beheaded, died; divorced, beheaded, survived” as a handy mnemonic to remind us of their fates.

Baa, Baa, Black Sheep meaning

“Baa, Baa, Black Sheep” is an early complaint about taxes. Some version even end, “And none for the little boy who lives down the lane,” which seems very unfair, as the “little boy” represented either the farmers or the people of England.

The wealth of England was largely a result of the trade in wool, hence the “woolsack” on which the Lord Chancellor still sits today in the House of Lords. The woolsack was introduced by King Edward III in the fourteenth century and though originally filled with English wool, it is currently packed with wool from each of the countries of the Commonwealth, in order to express unity among member states. Quite how a British lord plonking himself down on the produce of more than fifty countries symbolizes concord is hard to say, though it does provide a good metaphor for the British Empire.

During feudal times, taxes did not go to the Chancellor or even the European Union. In the Middle Ages, farmers were required to give one-third of their income (which could be in the form of goods such as wool) to their “master”—the local lord—who would in turn pass one-third of it to the King, and another third to the “dame” (representing the Church). The final third they kept for themselves or sold, and this was the part that went to the “little boy.” Of course, if you really want to bleat about it, the sheep started off with all the wool but ended up with none at all.

Roberts, Chris. *Heavy Words Lightly Thrown: The Reason behind the Rhyme*. New York: Gotham, 2005. Print.

READING FOR SIGNPOSTS

Signpost and Definitions	Clues to the Signpost	What Literary Element it Helps Us Understand	Anchor Questions
<p>Contrasts and Contradictions A sharp contrast between what we would expect and what we observe the character doing; behavior contradicts previous behavior or well-established patterns. Also contrasts between characters or situations.</p>	<p>A character behaves or thinks in a way we don't expect, or an element of a setting is something we would not expect</p>	<p>Character development Internal conflict Theme Relationship between setting and plot</p>	<p>Why would the character act or feel this way? How do the contrasts between characters help us understand them? How might contrasts between situations help us predict plot or conflict?</p>
<p>Again and Again Events, images, or particular words that recur over a portion of the novel</p>	<p>A word is repeated, sometimes used in an odd way, over and over in the story An image reappears several times during the course of the book</p>	<p>Plot Setting Symbolism Theme Character development Conflict</p>	<p>Why might the author bring this up again and again?</p>
<p>Memory Moment A recollection by a character that interrupts the forward progress of the story</p>	<p>The ongoing flow of the narrative is interrupted by a memory that comes to the character, often taking several paragraphs to recount before we are returned to events of the present moment.</p>	<p>Character development Plot Theme Relationship between character and plot</p>	<p>Why might this memory be important?</p>
<p>Aha Moment A character's realization of something that shifts his actions or understanding of himself, others, or the world around him.</p>	<p>Phrases usually expressing suddenness, like: "Suddenly I understood..." "It came to me in a flash that..." "The realization hit me like a lightning bolt..." "In an instant I knew..."</p>	<p>Character development Internal conflict Plot</p>	<p>How might this change things?</p>

READING FOR SIGNPOSTS

Signpost and Definitions	Clues to the Signpost	What Literary Element it Helps Us Understand	Anchor Questions
Tough Questions Questions a character raises that reveal his/her inner struggles	Phrases expressing serious doubt or confusion: “What could I possibly do to...?” “I couldn’t imagine how I could cope with...” “How could I ever understand why she...?” Never had I been so confused about...”	Internal conflict Theme Character development	What does this question make me wonder about?
Words of the Wiser The advice or insight a wiser character--usually older--offers about life to the main character	The main character and another are usually off by themselves in a quiet serious moment, and the wiser figure shares his wisdom or advice in an effort to help the main character with a problem or a decision	Theme Internal conflict Relationship between character and plot	What the life lesson, and how might it affect the character?

Beers, G. Kylene, and Robert E. Probst. Notice & Note: Strategies for Close Reading. Print.