

Meeting 6 26 April 2016 Corsham

Empathy in writing fictionalised family memoir: can you learn empathy? Challenges to empathy in multi-perspective fiction. Empathy, the brain's 'default mode' and creativity.

Present were: Kayt Lackie, Bambo Soyinka, Lisa Gee, Paddy Edwards, Bea Hitchman, Alison Lee, Morag Shuaib, Linda Blair, Emma Geen, Tanvir Bush, Grace, Becky Midwinter, Linda Blair, Tracy Brain, Richard Kerridge, Robert Sherman, Deb McCormick, Andrei Branea, Maggie Gee (chairing).

BSU Cr Wr MA writer Deb McCormick introduced herself: challenges and surprises with empathy when writing fiction linked to the writer's birth family.

Deb began by raising a very interesting question: is empathy innate, or learned? She told us she had been raised in a home where her parents lacked empathy, so she had had to become a copier and a carer, looking after herself and others. The passage she read vividly showed the effect her mother's lack of empathy had on her father, who returned from army service abroad with gifts and, laughed at by her, became enraged. The mother, in turn, used her three children 'as a human shield' from him. However Deb had grown up thinking her pretty, uninterested mother was an angel and her angry father a devil – 'I grew up with angels and devils'. She fled into reading, at first, as a child, becoming all the characters. But the lack of parental love and care had painful effects on her and her sister, marking them out as possible targets for the attentions of predators. It was the deep empathy she felt with the birth of her first child that made her look back with astonishment on her own mother's lack of empathy. Relatively late in life Deb slowly gained empathy for herself, and 'more slowly for people I didn't like'. Only as she started writing her book, re-living what had happened in detail, did she start to see that the bullying, unpredictable father she detested had also been suffering from the same lack of love as the children, and that both parents had been affected by their wartime experiences; thus through writing she has at last gained some degree of empathy with parents who had no empathy for her.

BSU Cr Wr PhD novelist Kayt Lackie introduced herself: she had six characters in her 'multimodal speculative novel', which led her to issues about empathy and multiperspective narration in fiction.

The writer might try to empathise with many characters by fictionalising multiple narrative viewpoints – but how many is too many? Would too many disrupt the reader's involvement with the story or the reader's empathy with each character? 'Am I asking too much from a reader in terms of empathy – how many different truths can they entertain?' Might the writer of multiperspective narrative possibly not be showing sufficient empathy for the reader? Kayt's reading would ideally have included 4 narrative viewpoints but time constraints meant we heard only 2. In her narrator Pru's section, the powerful shock of a mother's and a brother's death beside Pru when she was a child in a car crash was made even more complex by the adult Pru's desire to ironise or deflect an emotional response by quoting a road safety slogan, "Car Seats Save Lives". In a comment after the reading Kayt mentioned that she and her brother's first language had been Chinese because that was the language her Chinese carers spoke. Her parents didn't realise the children were speaking actual Chinese and thought it was an invented language they had copied from Jackie Chan on the TV.

Questions & comments (which Deb and Kayt took together) included a discussion of the effects of irony on the emotional tone of writing, and queries re a possibly similar lack of empathy in both writers' parents.

We ended with Linda Blair's comforting remark that even if a child is brought up without empathy, 'it only takes one person' hearing them with empathy for them to survive emotionally.

BSU neuropsychologist Dr Alison Lee, who directs neuroscience at undergraduate and postgraduate level at Bath Spa, updated us on possible correlations between mental health and effective switching between the brain's 'default mode' and the 'task positive state', and on the importance of 'default mode' to creativity. She also writes creatively, and has found expressive writing, ie just sitting down and writing 500 words a day in the morning, is a powerful positive force in liberating creativity and 'a cure' for many ills: which shows 'practice can make you see the world a different way'.

Alison talked about the development from a 'localisation' model of the brain, where every function could in theory be traced to a particular part, to an 'associational model' where different parts of the brain work together. The localisation model didn't work because those who propounded it forgot the white matter in the brain where some bits of the cortex talk to others. Beware of images: for example, photographic images that had seemed to show that language specifically activated Broca's area had looked so clear because scientists had shown what they expected to find. A common MRI scanning technique is called Region of Interest (ROI) scanning, where you scan the areas you expect to see activated. For a while, neuroscientists were chasing their tails, seeing only what was expected.

She showed a photograph of the brain when the person is passive – it was intensely beautiful, an indigo, lime and mauve carnation of nerves. But Alison pointed out that because brains are only studied under a scanner, 'we can only watch the brain in passive mode' – the body is trapped, not moving. So we have very partial knowledge.

'Default mode' is when a person is not task-centred. The brain explodes with colour and activity. 'Mind wandering' is the new term for 'daydreaming'. In life it's important to be able to switch between 'default mode' and 'salience mode' – the state where something must be done because something in the world (eg pain, uncertainty or threat) demands a response from you. (The salience network is what causes the feeling of dread when you are about to have a heart attack.)

'Task positive mode' is what you are in when you are very focused on one duty/action/piece of work. 'Highly intelligent people are often good at sustaining task positive mode for long periods, but they are less good at looking after their bodies, which need a break.' People who can control (to an extent) the balance of activation between the task-positive network and the brain's default mode tend to be either very successful or very unhappy. The key to mental health seems to be finding the balance between these opposing brain states that is right for you.

It is intriguing that the families of schizophrenics seem to stay in default mode more than average. Schizophrenics seem to switch ineffectively between different modes of brain activity. 'Uddin says autism, dementia and psychosis are disorders of the salience network': the white matter between the salience network, the task

positive network and default networks is faulty.

The precuneus and posterior cingulate cortex is a difficult region to scan, but it is believed to be the part of the brain that controls switching between the different modes, and is also one part of the brain currently linked to empathy. 'Empathy is learned.' Alison said that the precuneus is implicated both in people's sense of self and in their theory of mind. Both empathy and 'forgivability judgements' activate the left precuneus. (A side-light I loved: 'forgivability judgements', ie judging one can forgive, 'make us feel good' - and also, I suppose, depend on empathy with the other person.) Alison also told us, for information, that in neuropsychology a coming phrase for 'empathy' was 'self-other resonance'. Most of us were attracted to this clear descriptive phrase, but I was also thinking 'The Self-other Resonance and Writing Group' would not have drawn as many members.'

Note from Maggie: 'I append a quick email sent to me by Alison afterwards in response to a query.'

"Neuro-successful' people will use the salient network most effectively. They use it to listen to their body as opposed to what advertising, Facebook, Twitter, gmail etc are telling them. That is Uddin's theory supported by the interoception work of Bud Craig.

Balance that with the fact that highly intelligent people can ignore their salience network and the lure of DMN [default mode] and stay task positive. However, this isn't healthy (physically or mentally).

People with frontotemporal dementia lose salience entirely and those with severe autism possibly don't switch between networks (the jury is still out here). Add in the fact that some acute psychotics are in DMN a lot, and are overly responding to their salience network at the same time, and you have a three paragraph summary of my talk."