**Ema Sullivan-Bissett, Helen Bradley, and Paul Noordhof, eds., *Art and Belief* (Oxford, UL: Oxford University Press, 2017). (Hardcover, $59.54, ISBN-13: 978-0198805403, 272 pp. Kindle, $68.40, ASIN: B076KP2TS2, 266 pp.)**

When I was growing up, I learned a good deal about the world from novels. Much of my knowledge about adults’ behavior and psychology and most of my knowledge about the past came from fiction. For instance, when I was 12 or so, I read Denis Diderot’s book *The Nun* (La Religieuse). In it, a young woman, Suzanne, is sent to a convent against her will. At one point, the reader learns that Suzanne is an illegitimate child, and that her mother wants to commit Suzanne to monastic life as a way of making up for her own past sins: Suzanne is her mother’s sacrificial offering to God. In the convent, Suzanne suffers at the hands of a Mother Superior who is both mentally and physically abusive (at one point, Suzanne has to walk on broken glass). She succeeds in getting transferred to another convent, where the Mother Superior is much kinder. However, this gentler Mother Superior, attracted to Suzanne’s youth and beauty, attempts to seduce Suzanne.

As a 12-year old, I was impressed by all these events, but more to the point, I learned a lot from Diderot’s book. It had never occurred to me, before reading his novel, that there was a time when parents had the power to compel a young daughter to go to a convent; that some people may believe they can earn God’s forgiveness by sacrificing another person (I found this quite puzzling); that a Mother Superior may be interested in sex; and that it is not only men but women too who may attempt to seduce the object of their attraction. I learned something about myself also: I was not going to join a convent when I grew up, and I wasn’t going to allow anyone to touch me against my will.

It is probably fair to say that as an adult, I no longer learn much about the world from reading fiction. However, I still derive great cognitive benefits from it, just different ones. It is not so much that I acquire knowledge I didn’t have before as that thoughtful fiction authors share ideas that, true or false, are worth thinking about; or else ideas I have not made explicit to myself before. For instance, George Eliot drew my attention to the fact that we may have wishful beliefs not about ourselves, our traits, skills, and so on, but about other people’s duties. We may think others have some duty because it would suit us if they did. In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot describes a case in which a mother attempts to persuade her daughter that it is the daughter’s duty to give up her love interest since the man is of a lower social status. Eliot writes:

“A woman in your position has serious duties. Where duty and inclination clash, she must follow duty.”

“I don’t deny that,” said Catherine, getting colder in proportion to her mother’s heat. “But one may say very true things and apply them falsely. People can easily take the sacred word duty as a name for what they desire anyone else to do.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is not as though I was completely unaware of this phenomenon before reading Eliot’s novel, but I had not, previously, understood it as well as I did then. (I note here that much of philosophy has to do with making things explicit, and good philosophy may feel insightful even when, in some sense, it says only what we already knew.)

But perhaps, I only *think* I learned things or derived cognitive benefits from fiction. For one may wonder – as some have – how exactly we may learn anything about the world or ourselves from accounts of purely fictional events, from authors, moreover, whose primary purpose is not to transmit information but to entertain. And even if the events described in a novel are not purely fictional, we typically do not know that or else don’t know how much the author may have embellished real events. (As I found out many years after reading *The Nun*, Diderot actually based Suzanne’s character on a real person, Marguerite Delamarre, but this chance discovery on my part came too late to make any difference to my initial reaction.) What is worse, it is quite possible that fictions, due to their power of persuasion, instill in us false beliefs, for instance, I may, upon reading Diderot’s book, come to believe that Mothers Superior are much more prone to abuse their power than they actually are. Or I may, upon reading Eliot’s passage just quoted, form the convenient and flattering to me belief that it is *other people* who are trying to present the favored by them courses of action as my duty when in fact, it is I – not others – who does that.

*Art and Belief* contains 12 essays that deal with these and related questions plus an introduction, including a brief chapter overview, by the editors, Sullivan-Bissett, Bradley, and Noordhof. The collection is what one some will call “interdisciplinary” but what, borrowing a term from economist Robert Evans, I am going to call “undisciplined” (in the best possible way): by and large, contributors pursue questions at the intersection of aesthetics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and psychology, using whatever means seem appropriate and without being overly worried about disciplinary boundaries.

*Section I: Art and Testimony*, contains three chapters on authorial testimony and reasons to trust or not trust such testimony. In “Fiction, Testimony, Belief, and History,” Stock takes the question of whether authors of fiction can provide testimony concerning empirical matters, and she argues that they can: testimony-in-fiction, she contends, is not all that different from testimony-in-history: in both cases, we may be asked to believe a proposition about the real world on the author’s say-so. Stock’s argument has a narrower scope than the considerations in favor of learning from fiction I offered above, but the tenor of her argument is similar. Stock tells us, for instance, that in the novel *When I Lived in Modern Times*, Linda Grant says that the winter that began at the end of 1946 was particularly cold in America and Northern Europe (p. 21) Stock’s discussion has implications for what Christopher Bartel calls the “puzzle of historical criticism,” namely, the question of why readers consider certain historical inaccuracies impermissible in a work of fiction.[[2]](#footnote-2) After all, a work of fiction may be said to differ from a history book precisely in that it need not be historically accurate. If fiction authors can provide testimony on a par with historians’ testimony, however, as per Stock’s argument, then perhaps, readers’ outrage at certain historical inaccuracies is not, after all, misplaced.

In “Signposts of Factuality: On Genuine Assertions in Fictional Literature,” Konrad defends compositionalism, the view that fictions can contain both fictional and factual discourse. Konrad discusses an important aspect of the problem, namely, whether and if so how authors may signal that they are making factual claims. Konrad suggests that in an attempt to do so, authors may opt to describe objects and events with precision for which there is no aesthetic reason, as when Alfred Döblin tells us in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* that the slaughterhouse in Berlin covers “an expanse of 47.88 hectares, equal to 118.31 acres.” This level of detail cannot be justified on purely aesthetic grounds – the needs of the narrative would be served just as well had Döblin said that the slaughterhouse covers a very large area. Why mention a precise figure, then? The answer, on Konrad’s view, is that the author intends to provide factual information. The mathematical precision here functions as a “signpost” of factuality.

The next and final chapter in this section, Ichino’s and Currie’s “Truth and Trust in Fiction,” offers a less optimistic take authorial testimony. Ichino and Currie focus on the sorts of cases that earlier, I said are characteristic of my reading as an adult: those that involve deeper insights rather than factual information. It is with respect to these sorts of cases that Ichino and Currie urge caution. On the two authors’ view, readers often acquire false beliefs about factual matters from fiction, for instance that chocolate helps lose weight (p. 63), but more importantly, readers may come to endorse evaluative claims made by the author of a work of fiction without sufficient justification. This is partly due to a general tendency to trust others, but that tendency is here compounded by the fact we like a given author’s work and perceive that author as our “narrative friend.” We may be easily led to trust authors we see as wise and excellent at their craft without sufficient evidence of reliability.

*Section II: Non-Testimonial Epistemic Contributions of Fictions* contains four chapters on cognitive benefits (or disadvantages) of fiction that have to do with features of works other than authorial testimony. In the first essay, “Literary Fiction and True Beliefs,” Young defends aesthetic cognitivism. His focus is on three non-testimonial ways in which fictions may provide cognitive benefits: facilitating perspective-taking, evoking experiential memories, and influencing our emotions. In making his case, Young appeals to a number of interesting and suggestive experiments such as those conducted by David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano. Kidd and Castano report that reading literary fiction appears positively correlated with subjects’ ability to correctly interpret facial expressions.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the next chapter, “Belief, Thought, and Literature,” Peter Lamarque offers characteristically thoughtful discussion of the cognitive value of fiction. Lamarque distinguishes between two ways of reading fiction: what he calls “transparent” reading and what he dubs “opaque” reading. To read fiction transparently is to look for bright lines: to seek to ascribe clear motives to the characters and give unambiguous interpretations of the plot. Lamarque does not say this, but one can think of what he calls “transparent” reading as the Cliff’s Notes version of a novel. In the Cliff’s Notes summary, the psychological and emotional richness of the narrative is lost, and we get a simplified, cleaned-up version. The alternative is to read fiction “opaquely.” That is how, according to Lamarque, we read *from a literary point of view*. When we do that, we do not get any kind of simple interpretation of the characters and the plot. What we get, instead, are highly nuanced thoughts and images. If we hold those in our minds, we allow the fiction to retain its emotional complexity instead of forcing the text into the straitjacket of a narrowly analytic (read: non-literary) perspective.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In “Imagination that Amounts to Knowledge from Fiction,” Allan Hazlett, again in a broadly aesthetic cognitivist vein, offers an argument for a bold and provocative thesis: imagining may do more than enable us to acquire knowledge – it may, under certain conditions, *amount* to knowledge. Hazlett discusses his thesis in light of an example involving E. Annie Proulx’s short story “Brokeback Mountain.” In the story, a character named Ennis asks what has happened to his former lover, Jack Twist. Ennis is told that Jack was pumping a flat tire that blew up, knocking him unconscious, and that he was subsequently found dead. Ennis thinks to himself, “No… They got him with the tire iron.” Hazlett suggests that the rapidity with which Ennis draws his conclusion is an invitation to the reader to imagine that gay men at that time were terrorized by anti-gay violence. And that act of imagination all by itself constitutes knowledge. (I shall return to Hazlett’s chapter later.)

In the final chapter of this section, “The Novel as a Source of Self-Knowledge,” Lucy O’Brien draws attention to the power of novels to stimulate self-reflection. While novels, in O’Brien’s view, are not particularly good sources of knowledge about *the world*, they can help make us aware of our own inner propensities, traits, and value-rankings. O’Brien quotes Quassim Cassam who imagines reading *Anna Karenina* and recognizing himself in the “unfeeling, unromantic, and cold” Karenin despite the fact he would not have previously used those adjectives to describe himself. This would be a stroke of self-insight. There is a caveat: novels may, upon occasion, be a source of self-delusion rather than self-knowledge, as when we come to think we are highly sensitive in virtue of merely sympathizing with a fictional character (at no cost to ourselves) although we would not do anything about the plight of a similarly positioned real person, or when I, in the example given earlier, may, upon reading *Daniel Deronda*, form the belief other people are trying to present their desired courses of action as obligatory for me, when in fact, it is I who does that. Still, this should not lead us to dismiss novels as devices for self-knowledge acquisition, in O’Brien’s view, rather, it should make us cautious. The fact we are apt to misinterpret the evidence about ourselves we acquire in the course of reading a novel does not imply that novels provide no valuable evidence.

*Section III: Belief, Truth, and Attitudes from Fictional Persuasion* includes three chapters. The section opens with Bortolotti’s and Sullivan-Bissett’s (one of the volume’s co-editors) essay, “Fictional Persuasion, Transparency, and the Aim of Belief.” The chapter lies right at the intersection of epistemology and aesthetics. Bortolotti and Sullivan-Bissett begin by marshalling evidence to the effect that people acquire beliefs about the world from fiction and that they may do so even when explicitly told that the texts they’ve engaged with are fictional. This presents a problem, the two authors argue, for the teleological account of belief according to which all beliefs aim at the truth, including versions of the view on which some beliefs are only weakly truth-regulated. Beliefs we get from fiction, Bortolotti and Sullivan-Bissett contend, do not seem truth-regulated at all yet appear to be beliefs proper. The two authors do not propose an alternative (to the truth-aim) account of belief though they express some sympathy with a biological function view on which the mechanisms that produce beliefs – while often producing true beliefs – have a biological function other than truth-seeking.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the next chapter, “Fictional Persuasion and the Nature of Belief,” Steglich-Petersen addresses roughly the same question of whether the phenomenon of fictional persuasion presents a problem for the truth-aim view of belief but, contrary to Bortolotti and Sullivan-Bissett, he argues that it does not. He gives several reasons for this but most importantly, he suggests that levels of *de facto* sensitivity to truth are fairly weak across the board, as people may be biased, self-deceived and so on. Truth-regulation, therefore, must be understood in subjective terms: believers settle doxastic deliberation “by settling *to their own satisfaction* whether the target proposition is true” (p. 190, Steglich-Petersen’s italics). But there is no particular reason to think that people who acquire beliefs from fiction are not settling epistemic matters *to their own satisfaction*. In addition, Steglich-Petersen points out that while initially, beliefs formed on the basis of fiction may appear quite insensitive to truth, such beliefs do not necessarily persist in light of subsequent evidence to the contrary.

In the third and final chapter in this section, “The Genuine Attitude View of Fictional Belief,” Buckwalter and Tullmann take the question of whether our attitudes toward fiction are beliefs or something else. Note that if those attitudes are not beliefs, the issues raised by Bortolotti and Sullivan-Bissett as well as by Steglich-Peterson would have to be rethought since one would not expect non-beliefs to be sensitive to truth. Buckwalter and Tullman argue, however, that while attitudes toward fiction may differ systematically from beliefs about non-fictional matters in a number of ways, the balance of evidence – including behavioral and neuroscientific evidence – supports the view that such attitudes are, indeed, beliefs.

*Section IV: Aesthetic Appreciation and Belief* contains two essays on the role of testimony but this time, the focus is on aesthetic rather than authorial testimony. Jon Robson in “Against Aesthetic Exceptionalism” discusses a position he dubs “belief pessimism concerning aesthetic testimony.” Belief Pessimism as Robson would have it is a conjunction of two claims: (a) the claim that judgments about aesthetic value are beliefs; and (b) the claim that aesthetic judgments are regulated by some norm inapplicable in other cases, a norm that makes it inappropriate to form aesthetic – but not other – judgments on the basis of testimony. Robson argues that if aesthetic judgments *were* regulated by some special norm that makes it inappropriate to form such judgments on the basis of testimony, then aesthetic judgments would not be beliefs. It follows that at least one of the conjuncts that comprise the Belief Pessimism thesis must be rejected.

Should pessimism be rejected? The final chapter of this section and the entire volume, Daniel Whiting’s “Don’t Take My Word for It,” offers arguments *for* pessimism about aesthetic testimony. Whiting offers several arguments against the possibility of second-hand aesthetic knowledge, but I will mention one that stood out for me. It has to do with an alleged connection between beliefs and affect. On Whiting’s reckoning, if it is *pro tanto* rational for you to believe there is a reason to have some affective attitude, then it is at least *pro tanto* rational to *have* that attitude. Now, suppose someone – perhaps someone whose taste you think well of – tells you that *Paris, Texas* is a very good movie. If aesthetic testimony can serve as an adequate ground for aesthetic judgments, it would be at least *pro tanto* rational for you to believe that there is a reason to admire *Paris, Texas*. But given that you have not seen the film, it would not be rational for you, not even *pro tanto*, to admire *Paris, Texas*. Hence, it could not be rational to believe you have a reason to admire the movie either.

There is a good deal in this volume to interest readers, and there are many more ideas worth thinking about than I can discuss here, but I wish, in closing, to draw attention to two of the chapters that I kept thinking about after I finished reading the volume. The first is Allan Hazlett’s. Hazlett’s idea, remember, is that imagining may, all by itself constitute knowledge. This idea had never occurred to me before. If correct, his view would have implications well beyond the realm of aesthetics. Is Hazlett right? In addressing this question, I will consider an illustration of the sort of phenomenon I believe he has in mind but one that does not involve fiction. I do this, because I want for the moment to abstract from some of the thorny issues surrounding the role of author testimony and focus on the key idea of imagining as knowledge. Suppose you are trying to solve a murder mystery. You consider different possibilities for what may have happened: perhaps, the killer is the father, or the 13-year old girl, or someone outside the family. Then it occurs to you that the grandmother is a nurse with access to lethal injections and that idea in conjunction with your background knowledge that the victim died of poising generates in you a feeling of knowing: you now think you know that the grandmother did it. Suppose you are correct. It may seem to you that your “connecting the dots” in this way and imagining that the grandmother did it all by itself amounts to knowledge, because there isn’t any intermediate step between imagining it’s the grandmother and the feeling of knowing that it is her. I wish to suggest, however, that this picture is importantly incomplete. What is missing is the role played by second-order assessment. You assess the possibilities your imagination generates and you rule out some of them as implausible, improbable, or otherwise untrue. If you think of a possibility that seems compelling and you see no reason to rule it out, you conclude it is the correct one. If I am right about this, then it is not the act of imagining by itself but the act of imagining *in conjunction with the implicit second-order assessment* that constitutes knowledge.

Now, “act of imagining by itself” may be somewhat misleading here, since Hazlett suggests that there are constraints on the types of imaginings that may constitute knowledge. What he argues is that there are two important conditions in particular: the act of imagination must be *correct* (an overly sensitive person who keeps imagining others are hostile to him without any ground is imagining things *incorrectly* in the relevant sense); and it must be *safe*, that is, “you would not easily imagine that *p* unless it were the case that *p*” (p. 126).[[6]](#footnote-6)

I don’t think that these conditions would help turn an act of the imagination into an instance of knowledge. Correctness is arguably necessary but insufficient: we need some way of capturing the non-accidental nature of knowledge.[[7]](#footnote-7) Safety – as formulated by Hazlett – cannot give us the missing criterion in the case of imagination, or so I argue. It is generally possible for us to imagine exactly what we are imagining in a world in which what we are imagining is not true. That is just how imagination works. Imagination is not generally “safe,” in the relevant sense and that includes cases in which it appears to amount to knowledge. If any acts of the imagination constitute knowledge, therefore, this is not because they are correct and safe.[[8]](#footnote-8) What I wish to suggest, instead, is that when we exercise our imaginative capacities in the pursuit of knowledge (rather than for some other purpose such as pure entertainment), we assess what we imagine and reject undisciplined imaginings for which there is no good evidence. This may turn an act of the imagination into an instance of knowledge but at the cost of adding something. It is no longer an act of the imagination – with certain characteristics such as correctness and safety – that counts as knowledge.

Going back to the case of fiction now, our imagination may generate possibilities all on its own, as when you try to predict who the fictional killer might be before his or her identity is revealed, or we may be guided in what we imagine by the author, as in the discussed by Hazlett case involving “Brokeback Mountain,” where the author prompts us to imagine a particular possibility. The second-order assessment mechanisms I mentioned must do their work in the case of engagement with fiction much as they do in the real life case, and they play a dual role. First, we try to determine what is *true in the fiction*. For instance, if the murder mystery you are trying to solve is a fictional one, the possibility that the grandmother did it may be too obvious and predictable to be the correct one. In the fiction, it may be more likely that 13-year old girl did it since an underaged killer is a more exciting option. Knowing this, we may, as soon as we think of the hypothesis that the girl did it get the feeling we know what happened in the fiction. And we may be right. By contrast, in real life, we may dismiss the possibility of a teenage murderess whose victim is an adult man.

This brings me to the second role higher-order assessment plays vis-a-vis our imaginings. If we attempt to export a proposition that’s true in the fiction into the real world, then the second-order assessment processes kick in again. If they do not and readers uncritically export propositions from the fiction into the real world, as in some of the studies discussed by other contributors to this volume, then imagination does not amount to knowledge. [[9]](#footnote-9)

I conclude from here that imagination by itself does not amount to knowledge. It remains the case, however, that when the truth is hidden and non-obvious, imagination is crucial in knowledge acquisition: we must think of the truth first before we can possibly know it. The fact is frequently overlooked, and I applaud Hazlett for drawing attention to the role of imagination in knowledge acquisition.

Finally, I wish to briefly comment on Whiting’s “Don’t Take My Word for It.” Whiting, as we said, is pessimistic about aesthetic testimony. I start by laying my cards on the table: I think it is sometimes quite appropriate to form beliefs about aesthetic matters on the basis of testimony as when I form the belief that the work of Nobel Prize winner Herta Müller has literary merit although I have not read her work. What is inappropriate is to put forward a judgment based on another’s testimony *as my own*, which is often what a certain kind of snob does. (Incidentally, pronouncements such as “Müller’s work has literary merit, but I haven’t read it” sound odd only because the first part of the sentence pragmatically implies that I am making my own judgment. If I said, instead, “The Nobel Prize committee considers Müller’s work to be of great literary merit, and I believe them,” there would be nothing odd.) Again, one may form at least *de dicto* aesthetic judgments on the basis of general knowledge of the world without any kind of first-hand knowledge. For instance, I believe that there are great poems written in Danish although I have not read any of them.

But Whiting’s challenge to a view such as mine or Jon Robson’s is a good one and well-worth considering. If I believe that Müller’s work is of great literary merit on the basis of testimony, then it is also rational to believe her work deserves admiration. But it does not seem rational to admire such work given that I am not familiar with it. What gives?

I wish to resist the connection Whiting postulates between belief and affect. I think it does not hold in general, and it does not hold here. Thus, suppose my spouse – who knows me very well – tells me that something’s happened in my absence, and that if I learned what it is, I would be happy, or relieved, or indignant. It would be perfectly rational for me to acquire the testimony-based belief that there is a reason for me to be happy, or relieved, or indignant. However, not knowing what’s happened, I don’t have a good reason to – or perhaps, cannot, as a matter of psychology – feel in any of those ways. As with being told that something good or bad has happened in my absence, so with being told (by someone whose taste I have a reason to trust) that Müller’s work has great literary merit. I have a reason to believe it’s meritorious but not a reason to feel admiration.

I should note, before closing, that Whiting offers several arguments for his thesis, and I addressed only one. I don’t think the others succeed either, but as I cannot go into them here, you should take my word for it.

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1. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 1884/2017), 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Christopher Bartel, “The Puzzle of Historical Criticism,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012): 213—222 and my, “Historical Inaccuracy in Fiction,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 56 (2019): 155—170. See also Sarah Worth’s “The Dangers of Da Vinci or The Power of Popular Fiction,” *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*  14 (2007): 134—143.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gonzalo Munevar, “Fiction in the Brain,” *Questions of Character*, edited by Iskra Fileva (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 415—432 offers insightful discussion of the these experiments. I mention that Munevar is a philosopher of science who also happens to be a (prize-winning) novelist. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lamarque’s chapter reminded me of something that poet and professor of English emeritus William Wilborn told me in personal conversation once: that philosophers always try to read literature as philosophy rather than as literature. If Lamarque is right, we may do worse than that, reading literature not even as philosophy but as discourse that, despite its literary nature, has the simplicity and straightforwardness of factual discourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sullivan-Bissett argues for this view in “Biological Function and Epistemic Normativity,” *Journal Philosophical Explorations: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action* 20 (2017): 94—110. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hazlett models this on the safety condition for belief proposed by Ernst Sosa in “How to Defeat Opposition to Moore,” Noûs 33 (1999): 141–153. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I say that it is “arguably” necessary, because it may be that much of what we today consider scientific knowledge is actually untrue. Our current theories may be overturned. One could maintain that we nonetheless possess scientific knowledge, though this is a topic for another discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I note here that epistemologists talk about another condition for knowledge: sensitivity. While according to safety, [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I note also that there may be a connection between the idea of imagining as knowledge and the view defended by Noël Carroll and Catherine Elgin on which fictions function as thought experiments, but I cannot explore that connection here. See Catherine Elgin, “Fiction as Thought Experiment.” *Perspectives in Science* 22(2014): 221—241; and Noël Carroll, “The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge*.” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002): 3—26. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)