**Imagination and Creativity in Fiction**

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Abstract: It is intuitive to think that fiction is more imaginative or creative than nonfiction, and that creating or engaging with fiction involves the imagination in ways creating or engaging with nonfiction doesn't. However, philosophers debate whether imagination has a special connection to fiction. This chapter will argue that fiction is intimately connected to creativity and that creativity's connection to imagination produces the impression that fiction and imagination also share an intimate connection. The key ingredient of fiction that connects fiction to creativity is fabrication. The chapter will also discuss how an author can produce fiction that is creative in content and form, how readers and critics use imagination in a creative manner when engaging with works, and how metaphysical debates about fiction affect the kind of creativity we may attribute to authors.

Keywords: Fiction; nonfiction; aesthetics; artistic process; author; audience

I. Introduction

When I was in third grade, I wrote that I wanted to be an author when I grew up. However, even then I knew I wasn’t going to be a fiction writer. Little me was good at writing book reports, and I aspired to be an author of *that* kind of writing, e.g., nonfiction writing. I’ve thought, and still think, that fiction writers have a superpower that I lack: the ability to conjure up people and worlds and events in a compelling manner. In other words, fiction writers are creative.

But just what kind of creativity is involved with creating fiction? Prominent theories of fiction (e.g., Walton 1990 and Currie 1990) say that fiction involves an invitation to make-eve or imagine things. But not all fictions are creative, and we complain about predictable stories. So, immediately, we see that ‘creative’ shouldn’t be identified with ‘involving-the-imagination.’

Other views on fiction question whether imagination and fiction really enjoy a special relationship (Friend 2012; Matravers 2014). I’m partial to the view that there is no special relationship between imagination and fiction because nonfiction works also routinely invite us to imagine nonactual states of affairs. But given the intuitive association between fiction and imagination, arguing that imagination enjoys no special connection to fiction requires explaining *why* imagination seems so central in understanding and defining fiction.

This is where thinking about creativity will help. Exploring the varieties of imagination and their relationship to creativity will help us explain why we’re tempted to think imagination and fiction are intimately connected. But before we get there, I’ll discuss the kinds of imagination and creativity involved in both creating and appreciating fiction (I’ll be focusing on individual creativity; for collective creativity, see Smith, this volume, 13ff). I’ll then turn to how the perceived relationship between creativity and fiction might have led us to believe that it’s imagination and fiction that enjoy a special relationship.

II. Author’s Creativity in Fiction

A. Creativity in Content

The introduction of this volume spells out the difference between *psychological creativity* (p-creativity) and *historical creativity* (h-creativity) (Boden 2004). P-creativity is exercised when an agent produces something surprising and valuable that is new to them. If they were also the first in human history to do so, then they have also exercised h-creativity. Though works of fiction that tell a never-been-conceived story can certainly be h-creative, we don’t require that a fiction be h-creative in plot for it to count as creative. Fictions in disparate cultures independently developed similar stories—many tradtions’ fables, for example, feature anthropomorphic animals— and the fact that we don’t single out only the earliest instance of them as creative suggests that h-creativity isn’t required for fiction to be creative.

For fiction, p-creativity might matter more than h-creativity. Margaret Boden (1994) argues that an idea is creative only if “the person in whose mind it arises could not (in the relevant sense of ‘could not’) have had it before” (76), and Bence Nanay (2014) builds on his definition to argue for an *experiential account* of creativity where a necessary (but decidedly not sufficient) condition for creativity is that an agent experiences an idea as something she has not taken to be possible before. We might extend this thought to fiction and think that creativity in fiction involves content that is experienced as something that could not have been conceived before. But creative fiction isn’t just unexpected. It’s relatively easy to come up with a surprising plot development, but praiseworthy works like Carlos Ruiz Zafón’s 2001 novel *The Shadow of the Wind*and Christopher Nolan’s 2006 film *The Prestige* manage to be unexpected in a way that is aesthetically meritorious (also see the film chapter). The kind of creativity that we routinely attribute to fiction creators often has to do with the content of their works, and great skill and ingenuity are involved in their cognitive achievement.

It’s commonly thought that being creative is the opposite of being traditional, but it might be more accurate to think that creativity arises *in virtue of* traditions (Gaut 2010)—or at least a comparison class which includes obvious possible ways of doing things. It’s now a cliché to say that one must learn the rules to break them, but creativity confirms why this cliché sticks around. A chord progression of a jazz solo can be creative only in relation to the more routine ways in which chords tend to progress. If creativity requires a tradition or contrast class that is more traditional or typical, and tradition or contrast class is socially determined, then creativity, too, is essentially social (Gaut 2010). Something can be creative—or not creative—only in a context.

Observe, as an example, how the same content can be creative or not depending on the genre. A happy ending would not be creative in the context of a Disney fairytale, but it would be highly unusual, and perhaps even creative, in a tragedy. A work of fiction is creative as a member of a kind, and ways of making some feature of a work unobvious and creative depend on what the preconceived obvious or expected features of the kind are. The disruption of genre expectation is one way to be creative, and what this shows is that creativity often has an implicit contrast class (Gaut and Kieran 2018). Shen-yi Liao, Louise McNally, and Aaron Meskin (2016) provide empirical evidence that standards for aesthetic adjectives like ‘beautiful’ and ‘elegant’ are established in relation to a comparison class. If one considers ‘creative’ to be an aesthetic adjective too, then judgments of creativity might also invoke a class to which the work in question is compared to.

B. Creativity in Form

Form is another dimension along which a work might be creative. Often what makes a work meritorious or creative is not (just) the content of the story but the way it’s told. People tend not to cry over plot summaries, but novels and films more reliably induce affective responses in virtue of the way they present the same material. Fictions can be individualized not only by their content but also by their form, and form is an important axis along which creativity in fiction can be exercised.

Formally creative fictions that I’ve come across feature a book chapter composed of PowerPoint slides (*A Visit from the Goon Squad,* 2010, Jennifer Egan), alternate between chronological and reverse-chronological order (*Memento*, 2000, Christopher Nolan), utilize a nested and genre-switching story structure (*Cloud Atlas*, 2004, David Mitchell)*,* shape the text such that its visual layout complement the content (concrete poetry from George Herbert or e.e. cummings), and use a color and texture palette that approximate an ink painting (*The Shadow*, 2018, Zhang Yimou).

Stacie Friend (2012) argues that fiction and nonfiction don’t have defining essential features, but standard or contra-standard features that pick that what is are typical or atypical for a given category of art (Walton 1970). For example, flatness is a standard feature of painting while protruding three-dimensionally would be a contra-standard feature for a painting. For fiction, involving people who don’t exist is a standard feature (but not a necessary one given historical fiction), and only including known facts is contra-standard. I think Friend is right to draw our attention to standard and contra-standard features instead of essential and accidental ones, and it is in large part thanks to standard expectations that some forms of fiction can be creative. Take, for instance, the genres *Creative Nonfiction* or the *Non-fiction Novel*. The new categories arose when formal techniques traditionally reserved for works of fiction—e.g., evocative scenes, dialogues, and strong narrative voice—were applied to nonfictional content. Examples such as Truman Capote’s 1966 *In Cold Blood* and Edmund Morris’s 1999 *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* were controversial because they flouted expectations of what nonfiction is like. *In Cold Blood* was written while the narrated story was still developing in real life, and *Dutch* included a fictionalized version of the author within the biography. For both fiction and nonfiction, creativity presupposes a tradition, and a work can be formally creative when it goes against more routine ways of telling a story.

Sometimes, recognizing the variety of forms a fiction can take is not only an exercise in aesthetic sensitivity, but also a social, moral, and political necessity. Matthew Salesses, a fiction writer and teacher, disabuses the reader of the idea that literary form is a politically neutral artifact. A story we take to be well-crafted—i.e., satisfying—is considered so because it meets the reader’s expectations, and insofar as our expectations are shaped by society, the kinds of stories we take to be “good” are culturally conditioned (Salesses 2021). Western narrative forms that focus on a central character and their choices reflect our (western) culture’s emphasis on individuality and agency, implicitly assuming that agency is what characterizes our lives—but this doesn’t always apply to members of marginalized or oppressed groups whose lives are characterized just as much by coincidence, fate, and other forces (e.g., racism) that overpower their actions. This is just one example of how story forms can reinforce cultural inequalities: a story’s form can take the privileged class’s life experience as the “expected”, and thus “satisfying” kind. Non-Anglo-European storytelling forms often challenge this individual and agency-based form with their “meandering” plot, *deus ex machina*, or lack of central character, and being aware of their creative contribution is to challenge the assumption that the lives of the culturally dominant are the universal or satisfying human experience.

C. Fictional Ontology and the Nature of Authorly Creativity

How we answer ontological questions about fiction affects how we understand the nature of creativity involved in producing fiction. It is a matter of ongoing debate whether fictional persons, events, objects, settings, and facts that comprise a fiction—fictional entities—exist, and if they do, just what kind of thing they are.[[1]](#footnote-1) There are also disagreements on just what a novel is—is it the abstract string of words, the physical copy of the work, or something else?[[2]](#footnote-2) For our purposes, we’ll focus on fictional entities and see what happens when a new fiction is introduced.

It seems intuitive that authors bring something new into the world when they produce works of fiction. There was no *Americanah* before Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie wrote and published the book in 2013, and there was no fictional character Ifemelu before Adichie wrote the novel. But when an author composes a fictional story, is she bringing something into the world things that are genuinely new (*the creation view*), or is she merely “picking out” and making actual already-existing (possible) objects (*the discovery view*)? The creation view commits us to thinking fictional entities are created entities, usually understood to be abstract cultural artifacts (van Inwagen 1977; Thomasson 1999; Kripke 2013). The discovery view, on the other hand, commits us to thinking that fictional entities are possible or nonexistent objects that are “already there” before any story in which they appear comes to be (Parsons 1980) such that an author may “mentally point” to them through the story (Priest 2010). They might also be thought of as “roles” that preexist any author (Zalta 1983).

If we think fiction creators genuinely bring something new into the world, then the kind of creativity they exercise in the process seems more robust than the kind of creativity involved in merely choosing which possible object will obtain. In fact, the discovery view might suggest that “having good judgment” or “having good taste” is more important than “being creative” since selecting among options doesn’t seem to involve much creativity (just as ordering food off a menu doesn’t involve much creativity).

However, Taliaferro and Varie (2018) argue that the discovery view doesn’t challenge our ability to attribute creativity to an author (also see the music chapter, section II). Even if fictional entities (and therefore, indirectly, fictional works) are states of affairs that pre-existed their obtaining, authors are active in making actual something that was only possible. Taliaferro and Varie contrast creativity with *fancy*, free association which takes no effort and offers little insight. The idea is that use of imagination is valuable when it overcomes obstacles and requires effort and strain. We tend to celebrate something as creative when there has been a use of understanding, lack of pure luck, and a sense of direction. Since creators work hard to bring their works into fruition, the phenomenology accompanying the creative process seems to remain the same whether we embrace the creation view or the discovery view. So, they argue, the discovery view need not threaten our ability to attribute creativity to an author.

Skill is involved in tastefully picking out and arranging already-existing material, so that’s another way “discovering” a work of fiction is different from mere fancy. Arrangement takes skill: scanning for possibilities, privileging promising possibilities, and trying out various options. Though being skillful may not be sufficient for creativity, arranging involves many of the activities we typically associate with creativity. The “picking out” metaphor might be misleading because it makes it seem as if composing fiction were as easy as picking one apple over another at the fruit stand. Instead, the difference in the kind of creativity involved in the creation model vs. the discovery model might be analogous to the difference between the kind of creativity involved in producing a new painting vs. curating an exhibition.

In the discovery model, imagination isn’t involved with the *generation*of fictional truth or fictional entities since they already exist as possibilia or nonexistent objects. We might think combining existing truths into a particular set involves genuine creation, but the discovery model holds that all possible combinations of fictional truths, too, already exist. But, again, this doesn’t mean there is no room left for creativity to play a role. Creating fiction requires thinking through options even with the discovery view. The fact that the options might pre-exist the fiction creator’s thinking doesn’t challenge the fact that a more active effort is required to access those options than to choose an item off a menu. The discovery view might also preserve room for creativity if we go with the thought that it’s not necessarily the conceiving or surveying of possibilities, but the ability to pick out a small subset of promising possibilities, that comprises creativity (Gaut 2003, 278). In this case, selection, and not generation, is at the heart of creativity.

III. Consumers’ and Critics’ Creativity in Fiction

Not all fiction is art. Advertisements and thought experiments typically depict fictional states of affairs, but we tend not to treat them as art. However, paradigmatic examples of fiction, like novels and films, also tend to be art, and most fictions that we deliberately seek out *qua* fiction tend to be art works. So, in this section, I’ll discuss another source of creativity when it comes to fictional arts: the consumer and the critic.

R.G. Collingwood (1958) introduces *the technical theory of art*, a view that denies the audience a creative role when engaging with a work of art. The theory holds that insofar as art is a craft, art works are designed to bring about particular effects (e.g., soothe, frighten, entertain); just as a drug can induce particular states in a patient, art works can manipulate the consumer and induce pre-determined reactions (Kemp 2021). There is ancient precedent for thinking that the audience is passive. Plato assumed the audience to be mere recipients of works’ effects (such that poetry that stirs up emotions is dangerous), and Xunzi treated the audience as a passive body that responds to external stimuli, writing that music can “transform people quickly” by producing certain emotions by way of qi (Virág 2017).

Though ancient authorities espouse a theory of stimulus-and-response and minimize, if not deny, any agency on the consumer’s part, there have been challenges to the assumption that art appreciators are passive recipients of a work’s effects. Eighteenth century philosophers repeatedly involved imagination when explaining how and why we respond to works the way we do (Grant 2013, 55ff). For example, Joseph Addison and David Hume invoke the imagination to explain the pleasure we derive from aesthetic objects, and Immanual Kant and Archibald Alison point to imagination’s ability to produce a variety of thoughts and associations (Grant 2013, 59).

The audience doesn’t passively receive the impact of an artwork as windchimes tinkle in a breeze. The audience’s engagement with fictional art involves diverse ways of being creative, and in fact, most of the time, the audience *must* use imagination in a creative manner to negotiate the stimulus provided by the work (Carroll 2014, 63; also see Smith, this volume, 8ff). When a reader makes up her mind about what the red room symbolizes in *Jane Eyre*, for instance, she is using her imagination to create an idea that is new and valuable, perhaps surprising at first blush but ultimately apt. Critics, too, respond to works of fictional art in an imaginative manner, especially when they approach works in ways that are not obvious. The fact that many works invite and admit multiple interpretations suggests that creativity plays an important role in aesthetic experience and appreciation, and criticism, too, often relies on the use vivid and novel (Grant 2013, 53, 63; note that he uses ‘imaginativeness’ in place of ‘creativity’).

Using one’s imagination is a way to be creative. There is an association between the two, and the following might justify the connection. Pretending and thinking creatively both require supposing (Gaut 2010). Many philosophers connect supposition with propositional imagining (Arcangeli 2018; though some, such as Kind 2013 and Tooming 2018, maintain that supposing isn’t imagining), a phenomenologically lean mode of imagination, and creativity also brings to mind objectual imagining, a form of imagination that requires sensory presentation, such as mental imagery.[[3]](#footnote-3) Rosa Aurora Chavez (2016) found that highly creative individuals routinely report having vivid, multimodal mental imagery while working. Even if we don’t think imagination is a crucial source of creativity, it can be central to creativity as a vehicle, which is to say that imagination can be a way to display, but not necessarily explain, creativity (Gaut 2003). It might be an author’s or a critic’s vast knowledge and experience that makes them creative, but imagination can be a way to showcase their creative thinking.

Audience use of imagination can produce creative interpretations when it results in experiences or ideas that are novel, valuable, or surprising. Works of fiction tend to be representationally rich, and their invitation for open-ended engagement fosters the exercise of creativity through imagination. Carroll (2014) outlines five different imaginative activities that accompany the consumption of fictional art. They’re not meant to be exhaustive, but they begin to outline the breadth of audience creativity. Many of them, if not all, are also used by the critic. The argument isn’t that the following imaginings are unique to fiction. We use exploratory, elaborate, constructive, and thematic imagination when we engage with nonfiction, too. But the point is that engaging with fiction makes the following kinds of imagination routine, and that sometimes, the use of imagination makes the consumers’ and critics’ activities—and the results of those activities—creative when they involve making unobvious connections or building a mental model of fictional states of affairs.

The first is *exploratory imagination*, which involves playfully engaging with a stimulus under different concepts. When we see objects in clouds, we use exploratory imagination to subsume cloud shapes under categories like “bunny” or “face.” When an author has constructed a narrative, consumers are invited to use exploratory imagination to search for, test, and select the most fitting association between the stimulus and the content we’re meant to mentally behold. Grant writes that having an aesthetic experience at all might involve perceiving in an imaginative way (2013, 53). When we listen to and describe music, for example, we naturally borrow from spatial language, and this interplay between the musical and the spatial is one manifestation of exploratory imagination. When we understand or compose a metaphor, we use exploratory imagination to work with various associations of a word—and this kind of creativity is also involved in engaging with fiction. Elisabeth Camp (2009, 2017) highlights the role of “seeing-as” imagination in metaphor as well as fiction; successfully interpreting metaphor or fiction requires that we think of one thing through our conception of the other. Exploratory imagination, seeing-as, and perspectives are closely related.

The second is *fictive imagination*, which is rooted in our capacity to think about the non-actual. Fictive imagination involves holding a propositional content in mind as unasserted, so it can be contrasted with belief. As soon as we recognize fiction *as*fiction, we’re using fictive imagination. Kathleen Stock’s *F-imagining*, which involves taking particular propositions to be a part of a fiction, is a kind of fictive imagination (2017, 21ff), and so is Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft’s notion of a *recreative imagination*, which involves shifting our perspectives by imaginatively placing ourselves in situations other than our current situation (2002, 10).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Fiction is always incomplete, i.e., we can always come up with a statement that is neither true nor false in fiction. All fictions also include *implicit truths*, truths that we infer from other explicitly stated truths or import from the actual world (Kim 2022). Every work of fiction requires that we imagine more than what we’re directly told or shown, so *elaborative imagination*, which involves filling in the fiction, is required if a story is to remain coherent and intelligible (Carroll 2014). After all, we can understand the meaning of a character’s tears only if we assume the same human anatomy and social conventions to be in place in the fictional world. Elaborative imagination’s production—i.e., the building up of a total stock of fictional truths—might be uncreative when it merely fills in unsurprising implicit details, but it can be a source of creativity when an audience thinks of an unobvious implicit fictional truth.

Genre can affect how elaborative imagination is employed as many inferences or implicit truths are activated in response to genre expectations. Agatha Christie’s 1934 *Murder on the Orient Express* is creative in part because (spoiler alert!) it challenges the consumer’s fictive and elaborative imagination by thwarting the expectation—born out of sensitivity to genre conventions—that there is one culprit. *Retroactive continuity*, a narrative device where a subsequent work recasts or contextualizes a previous work in a surprising way, often takes advantage of the implicit nature of elaborative imagination. *Wicked*, for example, challenges the implicit assumption that (spoiler alert!) the Wicked Witch of the West and the Wizard of Oz have no blood relations, and the consumers navigate new revelations by employing exploratory, fictive, and elaborative imagination.

Elaborative imagination has been discussed in relation to genre conventions and implicit, explicit, and background truths so far. We should also acknowledge how formal features of a work invite the use of elaborative imagination. Kim (2022) shows how visual and sonic variation in prose fiction can add new fictional truths. In Zadie Smith’s *NW*, for example, indentations serve as a kind of nametag in a conversation:

**Specially when he looks like yours. And he’s so lovely.**

 **He’s so lovely your Meeshell. Lovely way about him.**

 **Bev, d’you remember when we was round Leah’s that time and my car window weren’t working and Meeshell got on his knees with a wire coat hanger? After I’d been telling Leon about it for a MONTH.**

 **He’s proper sensitive. Proper family oriented.**

**Whenever I’m thinking: where did all the good brothers get to? I think, breathe: at least there’s Meeshell.**

 **Yeah but they’re all already taken!**

**HAHAHAHAHAHAHA By the white girls!**

**Nah, don’t be like that. Leah she’s only messing with you.**

 **Don’t mess with Leah! Not her fault Leon’s a useless bastard. (2012, 39).**

Unusual spacing makes it fictionally true that there are at least four participants in this conversation, and we can keep track of who said what (the woman who addresses Bev, for instance, also exclaims “Yeah but they’re all already taken!”). If features such as indentations, font size, and color scheme can generate new fictional truths, then elaborative imagination works in tandem with exploratory imagination to explore the associations offered by the formal (e.g., visual and sonic) features of a text.

*Constructive imagination*, the fourth kind, aids fictive imagination and elaborative imagination because it builds the geographical, physical, temporal, biological, cultural, and moral framework that renders the fictional world a coherent place.[[5]](#footnote-5) Van Leeuwen (2013) writes that constructive imagining involves generating representations. The kinds of implicit truths that we derive from elaborate imagination are also derived from constructive imagination. If elaborative imagination is local, constructive imagination is more global: the former tells me that the protagonist breathes air; the latter tells me the same laws of physics obtain in the fictional world. Sometimes the contents of a fiction aren’t presented in chronological order, and assembling all the truths into an intelligible cause-and-effect sequence requires constructive imagination. So does keeping track of what happened and what might (or will) happen.

The fifth and last creative role for imagination to play involves themes. *Thematic imagination*, which is invoked when we try to understand what a work is “about” or what the “message,” “purpose,” “point,” or the “idea” of the work is. It goes beyond fictional truths to see what connects them in a holistic fashion. The unifying idea can be more or less fine-grained, and more or less obvious—and the audience and the critic must use their imagination to speculate about a conceptualization that unifies disparate aspects of the work. Whereas exploratory imagination is open-ended, thematic imagination is aimed towards closure.

Attention to form and its relation to the presented content often accompany thematic imagination. When we ask why an author put something like *that*,ask why a portion of a film is in black-and-white, or wonder about the connection between Hemingway’s lean prose and his conception of masculinity, we engage in thematic imagination. A critic is especially skilled at thematic imagination, and she uses relevant background knowledge and nuanced judgment to communicate new ways of appreciating the work better (Grant 2013). The critic forms beliefs about what would be appropriate responses to a work that might not be obvious—in part by forming beliefs about what the work is trying to do—and she finds effective ways of communicating the unobvious ways of appreciating the work (Grant 2013). Both tasks require thematic imagination and creativity.

Of all the types of imagination, I’m least confident that thematic imagination is really a kind of imagination. Thematic imagination is participatory and creative in the sense that one needs to go beyond what’s given to construct something new, but I’m not sure imagination is the mental action that best characterizes this activity. Is inferring a kind of imagining? Of course, we need to use exploratory, elaborative, fictive, and constructive imagination to understand what’s going on in a fiction to begin with, but when we’re searching for a unifying conceptualization that presents the work as a coherent vision, it’s not imagination in its propositional, objectual, transcendent (going beyond the world), or instructive (aiming to learn about the world) form that is being used (Kind 2022, 37).

It might seem as if there’s a tension in saying that elaborative imagination, which also requires inferring, is a kind of imagining while thematic imagination isn’t one on account of its involvement of inference. But recall that elaborative imagination wasn’t creative simply because it generated implicit truths by way of inference. Rather, it has the potential to be creative when unobvious implicit truths are thought of. The presence of inference doesn’t prove that imagining occurs, let alone the creative kind. In addition, elaborative imagination uses inference to work out what is fictionally true while thematic imagination uses inference to work out the larger goal of the work. The former deals with the “internal” facts of the fictional world; the latter deals with the “external” facts of the actual world. Inference in search of fictional truth is more likely to utilize imagination (at the very least fictive imagination) since it concerns the fictional world, while inference in search a unifying vision of a work need not utilize imagination since it concerns the actual world. And as we saw, imagination is closely associated with creativity.

This isn’t to say, of course, that thematic imagination isn’t creative. I might have preferred something like “thematic investigation,” but Carroll and Grant’s overall point about the audience and the critic’s participation in work interpretation stands. Properly engaging with a work of fiction requires that the audience deploy a variety of imagination, and critics, too, rely on a variety of imagination to convey what’s involved in appreciating a work.

IV. Using Creativity to Understand Imagination and Fiction

Philosophers disagree whether fictional truth (or fictional content) can be defined by appealing to imagination, and whether imagination enjoys a special or necessary relationship to fiction. The “consensus” view (coined by Matravers 2014) is that a proposition is fictional if there is an invitation or prescription to imagine it. There have been many formulations of the view, but take Walton (1990, 39) as an example: “a fictional truth consists in there being a prescription or mandate in some context to imagine something. Fictional propositions are propositions that are to be imagined—whether or not they are in fact imagined.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The consensus view establishes a definitional relationship between something being fictional and something involving imagination.

Friend (2008, 2012) and Matravers (2014) have pushed back against the consensus view. They argue that the function of *any* representation is to bring our attention to states of affairs that aren’t actual via imagination, and that a wide range of nonfiction also invites imagination. Captivating historical works, especially those with small units of research (e.g., microhistory concerning a particular community), naturally invite the reader to imagine what it was like to live in a different time and place, and we might even judge a historical work by its ability to do so. Heck, even reading an Ikea manual invites imagining how all the pieces are to fit together!

Some views, like Currie (1990), distinguish fiction from nonfiction by claiming that nonfiction is aimed at belief production while fiction isn’t. I don’t think this is right since one can both imagine and believe the same content. An ingenious study involving children and an imaginary tea party presents a plausible case in which one might both imagine *and* believe that a teacup is empty (because a guest has finished drinking it *and* because there was never any tea in the first place) (Leslie 1994, discussed in Nichols 2004). If imagining and believing aren’t neatly separable, then we couldn’t, or shouldn’t, attempt to separate fiction and nonfiction neatly along their lines.

I’m with Friend and Matravers in finding the consensus view lacking. A wide variety of imagination—propositional, objectual, transcendent, and instructive varieties, not to mention further kinds identified by Carroll—are used while engaging with fiction *and* nonfiction. The use of imagination is not unique to fiction, so imagination can’t be the primary or essential feature that defines fiction as a category.

But why is the consensus view so widespread and intuitive? My hunch is that it has something to do with the relationship between *creativity* and fiction. It is commonly intuited that fiction is more creative than nonfiction and that fiction involves the imagination more than nonfiction does. It’s likely not a coincidence that we closely associate fiction with both imagination and creativity, and the explanation for the fiction-creativity connection might be linked to the explanation for the fiction-imagination connection. To explore the connection among fiction, imagination, and creativity, let’s turn to another intuitive association, one between fiction and fabrication.

The pre-theoretic understanding of fiction is that it is made up.[[7]](#footnote-7) Harry Deutsch (2000, 2013) has argued that fabrication is a necessary and sufficient condition for fiction, where to fabricate is to invent “from scratch” or to make something up “out of whole cloth” (2013, 365). This suggestion hasn’t been taken very seriously by fiction theorists, but I’d like to explore the option. I’m open to fabrication being a necessary condition, but it can’t be a sufficient condition for fiction since fabricated content is sometimes grounds to consider something a *bad nonfiction* and not fiction (a journalist who fabricates her news story produces bad nonfiction, not fiction). Categories we don’t typically consider fiction—like a scientific model—also include made up elements. But it seems uncontroversial to say that fabrication or expectation of fabrication is a *standard* feature of fiction; when we pick up a novel, we expect its content to have been made up. Works of fiction often include disclaimers attesting that the represented persons and events are made up. So, let’s say ‘inviting reader expectation that fabrication was involved’ is a standard feature of fiction.

Catherine Abell (2020) argues that a work where nothing is fabricated can still be a work of fiction. She gives Helen Garner’s *The Spare Room* as an example, a novel that (apparently) relays a true account of the author nursing a dying friend but is presented as fiction for legal protection. Abell argues that what’s more important than the truth status of *The Spare Room*’s content is the intention of the author for the work to conform to a practice of fiction (39). I endorse this shift away from the nature of the work’s content to the nature of the creator’s intention (or activity), but if examples like this are the best attempt to undermine the fabrication requirement, I think there is plenty of room to resist. Fictions are routinely based on an author’s experience, and some argue that *The Spare Room* is not a novel.[[8]](#footnote-8) The lesson to draw from the example might be that what’s more important is the *expectation* that fabrication was involved in a fiction’s creation, and not whether the content was actually fabricated.

If our standard engagement with fiction involves the expectation that its content was fabricated, then fabricated content is something we expect from the work unless given clues to expect otherwise (e.g., historical fiction). Note that this is an expectation that concerns not only the content but also the author’s creation process—and this is where creativity and fabrication become linked. Creativity is an important evidence of fabrication quality. Fabrication alone doesn’t always produce something worth engaging with. Creativity is part of what makes a fabricated story good of its kind, and fabricating in a manner that is intricate, unobvious, and delightful makes the fabricated thing good in virtue of its ability to afford a more rewarding engagement. Creative fictions are valuable because they invite sensory imagining and transcendent imagining.

If fiction typically involves fabrication, creativity is central to it being good of its kind. Insofar as nonfiction doesn’t involve fabrication (or is expected not to have involved fabrication), being creative isn’t a central criterion for excellence in the same way. Nonfiction works might be creative in their presentation (e.g., perspective, ordering, tone), but in a certain sense we don’t want our nonfictions being “creative.” We link creativity to fiction because fictions’ fabrication condition (or expectation) makes creativity an important desideratum in judging fiction. Creativity is a criterion of success in fiction generation in part because of the expectation that fiction includes fabricated content.

Creativity also makes it manifest *that* something is a fabrication. If creating fiction is expected to involve fabricating, then one way to produce fiction well is to make it obvious that one did in fact fabricate. A reliable way to make it clear that something is fabricated is to create the kind of thing that isn’t already out there to allay any suspicion that the work was intentionally copied or derived from another source. Being creative involves producing something that is new or novel, so being creative is one way to produce something that doesn’t seem (intentionally) derivative. So, again, creativity is a criterion of success in fiction generation.

If I’m right about fiction’s connection to creativity via the standard expectation of fabrication, then it is no surprise that we also connect fiction to imagination given creativity’s close association with imagination. Philosophers might have gotten in the habit of thinking that imagination itself is crucial to fiction because it’s common to loosely think of creativity as “praiseworthy and novel uses of the imagination”. There are tight associations among imagination, creativity, and fiction, and the explanation for them ought to be connected. Invoking the role fabrication plays in fiction is one promising way to tell a unified story of why imagination and creativity are so centrally linked to fiction.

Given its explanatory benefits, we should consider seriously the idea that (the expectation of) fabrication is an important, if not defining, feature that separates fiction from nonfiction. Again, the idea isn’t that fabricated content is sufficient to make something a work of fiction, but that for something to count as fiction, it must include at least *some* element that is fabricated (or is expected to have been fabricated). Diverse fiction practices, such as early novelists feeling the need to hide or minimize the fact that their work was fabricated (often by pretending to give first- or second-hand accounts of historical events, e.g., *Robinson Crusoe, Scarlett Letter, Moby Dick*) to modern day disclaimers that any resemblances to actual persons or events are coincidental, center on the expectation that fiction include fabricated content. A fuller exploration of fabrication’s status as a standard (and perhaps even necessary) condition, and the sufficient conditions of fiction, will be taken up on another occasion.[[9]](#footnote-9)

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1. See Kroon and Voltolini (2018) for a survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for instance, Thomasson (1999) which argues that works of fiction are syntactical-semantic entities, and Markosian (draft) which argues that works of fiction are concrete artifacts. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For propositional vs. objectual imagining, see Yablo (1993) and Goldman (2006); for connections between supposition and propositional imagining, see Kung (2010), Kind (2013), and Williamson (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Peter Langland-Hassan (2020) for an argument that understanding fiction doesn’t require imagination. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Friend (2017) argues that we assume real-world facts to obtain in fiction unless specified otherwise. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Also see Currie (1990, 30), Lamarque and Olsen (1994, 43), and Davies (2007, 50). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I’ll limit my discussion to a *work* being fiction as opposed to nonfiction. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In his review for *The Monthly*, Robert Dessaix, a critic, argued that *The Spare Room* isn’t a novel but a piece of journalism. For discussion, see Abell 38-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Thanks to James Grant, Matteo Ravasio, and the editors for feedback on previous drafts and to Kyle Kirby for help in preparing the manuscript. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)