

Blakey Vermeule wonders how readers become involved in the lives of fictional characters, people they know do not exist. Vermeule examines the ways in which readers' experiences of literature are affected by the emotional attachments they form to fictional characters and how those experiences then influence their social relationships in real life. She focuses on a range of topics, from intimate articulations of sexual desire, gender identity, ambition, and rivalry to larger issues brought on by rapid historical and economic change. Vermeule discusses the phenomenon of emotional attachment to literary characters primarily in terms of 18th-century British fiction but also considers the postmodern work of Thomas Mann, J. M. Coetzee, Ian McEwan, and Chinua Achebe. From the perspective of cognitive science, Vermeule finds that caring about literary characters is not all that different from caring about other people, especially strangers. The tools used by literary authors to sharpen and focus reader interest tap into evolved neural mechanisms that trigger a caring response. This book contributes to the emerging field of evolutionary literary criticism. Vermeule draws upon recent research in cognitive science to understand the mental processes underlying human social interactions without sacrificing solid literary criticism. People interested in literary theory, in cognitive analyses of the arts, and in Darwinian approaches to human culture will find much to ponder in *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?*

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