

*The Contracts of Fiction: Cognition, Culture, Community.* Ellen Spolsky.  
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This is an engaging, perceptive, and innovative book. My review is being extracted from thirty-seven pages of laboriously constructed notes of a kind you will no doubt compile for yourself in absorbing this study. Professor Spolsky has devoted much of her career to the intersection between the brain and literary studies. The thesis: we read not only with language, experience, and culture, but with a mental architecture generic to the species, one that forms the basis of our intrapersonal communication, our data-processing contracts with fictional worlds, our interpretation of other minds, and our compulsive use of analogical thinking. All these things matter to the way we read, recollect, feel, and interpret literature. This is a particularly exciting moment: the links between the adaptive brain and the contracts of literature have not yet settled into packaged theory. They remain liquid, emergent, and contested.

Brains are information processors that crave data with something like an appetite. Spolsky uses the term “cognitive hunger,” which hovers between the literal and the metaphorical. What matters is the notion of surfeit and lack when it comes to the kinds of information from which we build our well-being, mental balance (intellectual homeostasis), and survival. As a literary critic, her special concern is with narrative and fictional representation. For social creatures, signing and communication are vital. As cognitive faculties emerged, we became storytellers building upon our growing skills. It

stands to reason that we should crave what we create in the image of our cognitive potential.

There are so many excellent parts to the book. On the literary side, there are investigations into the late medieval culture of relics and icons, as well as religious and secular portraits. There is an update of her study of the Anglo-Saxon poem “The Wanderer,” an encounter with *The Merchant of Venice* as I’ve not encountered it before, and a long final section on the revenge tragedies of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Behind each of these chapters there are hooks to perspectives pertaining to cognition, philosophies of mind, tilted emotions, and computational capacities. One of the most critical is the problem of other minds and how we intuit them. Spolsky relies upon recent studies to illustrate just how we read the signifiers of alien intentionality. Stories, like portraits, have much to do with our compulsion to interpret those states by the minutest of clues. What is more, we build communities of interpretation through gossip, erecting collective stances through which we interpret stories as social practice, cautionary tales, and adaptive learning.

In “The Wanderer” Spolsky sees a lyric study of the mental resources of the pagan mind for dealing with isolation, a dying world order, the loss of kin, and the imminence of death itself. Likewise, she offers a compelling study of *rescrittura* concerning the suicide of Lucrezia from Livy to Shakespeare, a story retold because it defies moral stasis. Behind these studies are questions about the mental construction of right and wrong, moral obligation, resistance, compromise, and failure. How these sensibilities arose in the generic human spirit is, once more, a kind of grammar in the genes from which our cultures emanate.

Spolsky’s impressive range of reading testifies to her desire to ground her arguments in scientific substance. That will remain the greatest of challenges, however, for the bridges are complex that link mental production to literary experience. That some theories are more cogent and grounded than others is a judgment call. Spolsky is given to characterizing periods of cultural history in terms of their collective cognitive implications. There are risks. She traces the genesis of the Tudor-Stuart revenge plays to the inadequacies of the contemporary law courts, and especially to the contest between the common law and equity courts. Her overview of the age of Saint German, William Lambard, Thomas Egerton, John Selden, and Edward Coke is well done. But how do we align this history with a metacognitive discontentment that made revenge tragedies a fictional expression of choice? Harder yet, how did we come by the neural platforms that compute unfairness? Equity pertains to conscience and conscience is . . . ? Saint German, in the 1520s, produced the term “sinderesis”: a universal and reliable property instilled by the divine in every man. But can we use it today? We need the evolutionary backstory that aligns the fascination for revenge with the inefficiencies of the common law — if there is one. There is toggling. In no sense are these plays “reflecting the troubled situation in the courts” (176), yet “the paths of the litigant in the London courts and of the protagonist in a revenge play are similar” (178). Spolsky finds the origins of justice in body symmetry, in the balance of the inner ear, in modified notions of the law

of talion, in bodies unbalanced by violence, and in the aesthetics of the grotesque — analyses generated from her broad reading, which happened to miss the origins of binaries and reciprocal altruism as adaptive neural systems. Petty carping, though, for behind the entire study is a noble critical vision: to redeem the literary arts as expressions of our grounded evolutionary natures, and for this reason I fully endorse the pioneering spirit of this study. It is worth every minute of the time and attention it requires.

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