Toward an Understanding of Fiction and Information Behavior

Ramona Broussard  
School of Information  
University of Texas at Austin  
1616 Guadalupe Street, Austin TX  
ramonab@utexas.edu

Philip Doty  
School of Information  
University of Texas at Austin  
1616 Guadalupe Street, Austin TX  
pdoty@ischool.utexas.edu

ABSTRACT
The study of information science and technology has expanded over the years to include more kinds of people, more kinds of behavior, more methods, and a broader inclusion of fields. There is at least one area, however, where very few information studies scholars have tread: entertainment, particularly fiction. Yet many fields indicate that information studies should consider fiction. In this paper, we discuss how fiction is an informative genre and reasons why information studies scholars have mostly ignored fiction. We also identify potential research directions for studying fiction. We provide a summary of works about fiction and information, discuss motivations for expanding (and not expanding) information studies beyond what it is and has been, and we use an exploratory study of one example of a fiction-interaction - reading Young Adult novels - to illustrate how fiction is important to information behavior.

Keywords
Information behavior, fiction, history of information science.

INTRODUCTION
In the study of what we now call human information behavior, we can identify four fundamental changes in the past century and a half. Each of these changes expanded the phenomenon of information behavior. As is common (see, e.g., Nunberg, 1996), all four of these moments in information behavior research continue to co-exist, with each change complementing rather than replacing what has gone before. While no one integrated, canonical work exists recounting this story, useful overviews of some of these trends are in the well-known works of Buckland (1996 and 1997), Machlup & Mansfield (1983), and Case (2012). Valuable insights are also available through a historical review of the Annual Review of Information Science & Technology (1966-2011); of important journals such as Journal of Documentation, Journal of the Association for Information Science & Technology, Information Processing and Management, Library and Information Science Research, Journal of Information Science, and Library Quarterly; and proceedings of meetings of professional associations such as the special interest groups of the ACM, the Society for the Social Studies of Science, and the Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIST) itself.

The first shift to note was an expansion in the kinds of persons studied. First it was scientists, beginning in the mid- to late-19th century (e.g., Briet, 1951; Crane, 1972; Otlet 1934; Price, 1961 and 1986; Sonnenwald, 2007), with engineers added in the early parts of the 20th century (e.g., Allen, 1977; Bush, 1945; Garvey, 1979; Herner & Herner, 1967; Latour, 1987; Nelson & Pollack, 1970), expanding to include “professionals” of many kinds, e.g., lawyers, academicians (especially humanists), accountants, managers and other decision makers, and the like (e.g., Cole & Kuhlthau, 2000; Ellis, 1993; Machlup, 1962; Palmer & Neumann, 2002). Then two more recent elements in this shift appeared as the study of "ordinary people," however operationalized (e.g., Chatman, 1999; Dervin & Nilan, 1986; Winograd & Flores, 1986), including often marginalized populations, e.g., the poor, ethnic and linguistic minorities, children, and youth (e.g., Agosto, 2002; Chatman, 1996; Kuhlthau, 1991).

The second major shift was a concomitant change in the kinds of information behavior studied, expanding from scientific and professional work as noted above, to everyday information behavior (e.g., Aspray & Hayes, 2011; Huotari & Chatman, 2001; Savolainen, 1995 and 2008; Spink & Cole, 2001), leisure and hobbies (e.g., Hartel, 2003; Kari & Hartel, 2007), health information use (e.g., Eysenbach et al., 2002; Gollop, 1997), and so on.

A related third change has occurred in the research methods used to study information behavior, expanding from survey protocols and increasingly complex counts to using more sophisticated statistical and analytic methods (e.g., Borgen & Furner, 2002; Cronin & Sugimoto, 2014; White & McCain, 1989 and 1997), to complementing these methods with more constructivist, narrative, and ethnographic methods (e.g., Latour, 1987; Orr, 1996; Star...
A fourth shift has been the expansion of fields interested in and providing expertise to the study information behavior. Whether we regard the field of information studies as emerging only in the mid- to late-nineteenth century or assert that its history began with the establishment of civic archives in Mesopotamia around 3000 BCE, information studies has never held a monopoly on information behavior research. In recent decades, however, many more fields have made substantial contributions to our understanding of people and their information behavior than ever before, e.g., design, computer science, psychology, literary studies, sociology, history, science and technology studies, linguistics, anthropology, rhetoric, communication, cultural studies, cognitive science, industrial engineering, and the various flavors of informatics.

Despite these and other expansions in the research area of information behavior, however, serious research attention to the potential role of fiction as an informative genre is rare in information studies. At the same time, many other fields have investigated how it is that fiction is informative. The next section of the paper identifies some of that work and its implications for information studies’ engagement with fiction.

**THE IMPRESSION FICTION LEAVES**

The definitions of information are too numerous and complex to do justice to in this paper (Case, 2012, has an excellent overview of some). It will be useful, however, to think here of how Bates defines information behavior specifically as, “all instances where people interact with their environment in any such way that leaves some impression on them—that is, adds or changes their knowledge store” (2010, p. 2382). Although the field of information behavior itself has not often looked at fiction as an instance that “leaves some impression,” other fields have done so, and those fields often explicate how fiction leaves impressions just as Bates describes for information behavior: by adding or changing people’s knowledge stores. Scholars in a variety of fields including philosophy, literary studies, psychology, as well as entertainment and education have argued that fiction makes some difference to people who read it. The following five sub-sections discuss some of the findings from these other disciplines as well as a few studies from the field of information, and the implications of all of those findings for information scholars.

**Philosophy: Fiction changes values**

Many of the philosophical inquiries into fiction and its purposes highlight fiction’s ability to influence and communicate a “right way of being” to its readers. Philosophers, at least since the days of Aristotle if not earlier (Belfiore, 2014), have claimed that fiction provides a place for both author and reader to explore morals, ethics, and values. Plato’s description of fiction posits that fictional stories will “mould [young people’s] minds and characters,” and beliefs that fiction will at least influence, if not “mould,” our minds and characters persist (discussed in Deleuze, 1983).

Modern philosophers continue to discuss fiction as an avenue for value exploration. Currie, for example, argues that by projecting ourselves into fictional characters and scenarios, we learn about real consequences (1994). Other philosophers explore variations on this theme, such as Paskins’ (1977) discussion of emotion and fiction, and Galgut’s exposition of our absorption in stories (2002). A clear theme is that fiction readers and authors are doing the work of making values. The theme of fiction as value-maker is especially apparent in cautionary discussions about controlling fiction, for example when we discuss which fiction is appropriate for our children. Scholarly conversations, political discussions, popular media, and library guidelines all include vehement arguments about censorship of, influence by, and appropriate use of fiction.

**Does philosophical inquiry into fiction have implications for information studies?**

The research in philosophy summarized above suggests that fiction adds to and changes people’s values. If these philosophers are right, and fiction plays a role in influencing, building, and changing values, then is reading fiction an information behavior? Returning to Bates’ definition, perhaps reading fiction is an information behavior only if values are a kind of knowledge. Values may have little or no relation to our Western understanding of facts, but surely our values change our practical attitudes and understanding. Does that mean that fiction-based interactions with values are interactions with information?

**Literary studies: Fiction changes social norms and boundaries**

Literary scholars have investigated the meanings and influences of literature from studies of folklore to studies of modern romance fiction. When reading these works, a common theme emerges that describes fiction as “boundary-forming” (Bettelheim, 1975). The formation of boundaries through reading fiction occurs through an interaction by which readers sometimes accept social norms (i.e., “boundaries”). Acceptance of norms, however, is but one way boundary-formation occurs. Sometimes reading fiction is an interaction through which readers contest those boundaries or norms. Radway (1991), for example, studies women who read romance, and finds that they use reading in complex and even conflicting ways: not just to “escape” and accept boundaries, but also to challenge accepted social boundaries, and their roles within those boundaries. In part, Radway identifies a romance novel’s mythic ending as a story archetype that both conforms to (often unrealistic) ideals while also allowing some readers to combat societal norms. Literary scholars, Carroll (1996) and Cohen (2000) explore the idea of both conforming and combating when he discusses the paradox of violent horror and stresses that...
readers enjoy reading about violence not out of perversion, but because it is a (relatively) safe place to test (and contest) normal scenarios and problems.

Both Finders (1997) and Buckingham (1993) confirm that fiction is related to the formation of social norms. It would not be accurate to say, however, that modern literary scholars claim that fiction causes particular effects. Both Finders and Buckingham stress the active role of the reader rather than supporting a simple, deterministic view of effects. Rather, we should say that fiction serves as a place where people perform complex and even opposing interactions: both confirming and contesting. Finders’ work reveals especially how girls form social identities through reading, while the essays in Buckingham demonstrate that even young readers are not passive consumers of fiction, but rather actively use fictional works to socialize, question, and accept.

In line with the findings of the philosophers summarized in the first sub-section then, there is a strong indication from literary research that fiction changes people’s minds and attitudes, although in literary studies the focus shifts to social norms rather than internal values. After all, according to George Orwell, “All art is propaganda,” (2009, p. 39). He meant that all art (and he writes particularly about fiction) attempts to persuade its reader of some point of view. A close look at the research shows that fiction does not always succeed as authors intend, but that fiction does have some influence nonetheless. According to these literary scholars, fiction particularly gives readers a way to make sense of social norms, and, through that understanding, fiction also provides a means of resistance to those social norms (Radway, 1991, p. 101).

Does literary inquiry into fiction have implications for information studies?

If literary scholars are right, and fiction plays a role in influencing, building, or changing social norms, then is reading fiction an information behavior? Again returning to Bates, perhaps reading fiction is an information behavior only if social norms can be seen as a kind of knowledge. Surely social norms influence attitudes and behavior. Does that make interactions involving social norms interactions with information?

Psychology and fiction: Fiction changes our empathy

In psychology and cognitive psychology, researchers see reading fiction as part of our evolutionary behavior that necessitates art and socialization (e.g., Gotschall, 2012). They argue specifically that fiction is an evolutionary element that helps humans develop a “theory of mind.” This theory of mind is useful because we have evolved socially, and thus have a desire to understand others (Boyd, 2009; Zunshine, 2006). Authors in psychology claim that reading fiction develops a stronger theory of mind, that is, readers’ ability to better understand the minds of others.

Oatley (2009) also explores this theory and finds that reading fiction of any type increases the empathy and altruism of readers, and identifies this increase as a socially valuable evolutionary behavior. According to Oatley, fiction influences readers to care about others (even made-up others) and sometimes adds to the readers’ understanding of human emotions and thoughts. This psychological research continues to support the general theories of philosophy and literary studies to confirm that readers sometimes change their attitudes and ideas. Researchers in psychology, unsurprisingly, focus on empathy and the mind where philosophers focus on values and literary theorists on social norms.

Does psychological inquiry into fiction have implications for information studies?

If these psychologists are right, and fiction plays a role in influencing, building, or changing our “theory of mind,” then is reading fiction an information behavior? We must say again that if empathy can be seen as a kind of knowledge, then perhaps the answer would be yes. Surely “theory of mind” helps constitute attitudes and behavior, but is it knowledge? Are interactions related to empathy interactions with information?

Entertainment studies and education: Fiction changes learning and development

In perhaps the most obviously identifiable relationship for information and fiction, the fields of entertainment and education often overlap in discussing how fiction teaches readers about the world. According to these scholars, fiction can be a useful venue to educate people. Krashen (2004) presents arguments in his book that assert that reading fiction teaches language, cognitive skills, and writing. Others claim that fiction is a good way to teach readers practical topics such as health and hygiene, geography, and history (see Singhal, 2004). Still other media scholars have argued that entertainment is an essential aspect of learning through play (e.g. Zillman & Bryant, 1994), though these scholars often disagree about the effects of media such as whether violent fiction will make readers more violent (e.g. Barker & Petley, 2001).

Does research on the relationship between entertainment and education have implications for information studies?

Scholars in the field of entertainment-education certainly argue that fiction is an avenue for conveying information. Yet we might ask why use fiction for this job instead of some entertaining version of “non-fiction” such as biographies? Why confuse readers with a mix of “true” and “untrue,” or to construct that a different way, with “information” and “misinformation?” And when does fiction fail or succeed at conveying information? The research from other fields show the usefulness of interacting with fiction as an opportunity for changing minds and attitudes, possibly about facts, but about other types of things as well. So are interactions with fiction, this
made-up stuff that is a confusing mix of reality and imagination, interactions with information?

**Information and fiction**

Before we can answer the four questions concluding each subsection that we posed above, it is important to note that recently, perhaps as part of the general trends noted above to expand what we regard as information behavior, more information studies scholars have begun to investigate fiction. Sheldrick-Ross (1999) asked participants about their information encounters when reading fiction for pleasure and found that people say that they read because it helps them with new perspectives, identity, comfort, self-worth, and strength. Rothbauer, on the other hand, specifically explored how people form identities through reading fiction (2004).

Usually, however, scholars of information and recently those of information behavior have focused on areas other than fiction, and some maintain that fiction is outside the purview of information study entirely. Is adding to or changing a person’s knowing “the right thing to do” an information interaction then? Is it like the more widely recognized information interactions such as adding to or changing people’s knowing about which car is the most cost-efficient, or what cancer treatment the most likely to succeed? Our answers to these questions will likely depend on our definitions of knowledge itself. Whether the interactions are the same or not, it will be useful for us to investigate fiction and its range of influences simply because people read it, and are influenced in a variety of ways by it. Above, we have asked four times if interactions with fiction are interactions with information, and left the question unanswered each time.

For this paper, let us do as Case (2006) does and consider information behavior in terms of why it matters to value formation, attitudinal change, and decision making. In this light, it is clear that fiction has some role to play in peoples’ attitudes and behaviors such as an influence on their decisions, problem solving, sense making, and identity formation, much as other sources of information do.

**WHY HAS INFORMATION STUDIES GENERALLY IGNORED FICTION?**

Despite these expansions in the research area of information behavior in a broad array of fields, however, serious research attention to the role of fiction as an informative genre is rare in information studies. Exceptions can be found, for example, in the notable works of Rothbauer (2004) and Sheldrick-Ross (1999) as described above, as well as in the research streams exploring information behavior and affect (e.g., the chapters in Nahl & Bilal, 2006), materials challenged in libraries (e.g., Pattee, 2008), and “the pleasurable” and fiction (Kari & Hartel, 2007). There is also a literature on fiction as the particular object of search (e.g., Ooi & Liew, 2011) or the difficulty of exercising intellectual control over fiction (see below for more on this theme).

One might ask: why has information behavior scholarship NOT investigated fiction more fully? One simple response could be the assertion noted previously that fiction cannot be informative. The literature cited above, both in other disciplines and in information studies, indicates, however, that such an assumption is untenable even though it is subtly linked to a belief in a radical disjunction between fiction and non-fiction; see below. Some of the more convincing contributing reasons to the dearth of research in information studies on fiction as informative are discussed below.

Research grant and fellowship support, especially governmental funds to investigate information behavior, have focused on scientists and engineers. A related encouragement to the study of scientific and technical fields’ information characteristics, rather than ordinary people’s use of fiction, is the rise of information as a commodity in the past few centuries.

Scientific disciplines, especially the physical sciences such as chemistry and physics, are more mature along many characteristics (are paradigmatic in Kuhn’s, 1970, terms), e.g., these disciplines’ concepts and terminologies seem stable and predictable. A brief word about chemistry might be useful here. The world-famous *Beilstein Handbook of Organic Chemistry* (commonly called Beilstein in the discipline) illustrates how the universally accepted concepts and terms serve as foundations of chemistry, especially the atomic theory, the periodic table of elements, and crystallography. While there is still on-going discussion about what chemistry is and what it aspires to be (e.g., Scerri & McIntire, 2015), chemical handbooks were among the first modern reference works, after encyclopedias and national bibliographies. Thus scholarly investigation into such paradigmatic disciplines’ research processes seems likely to be successful, especially if the goal is to make these research processes more fruitful through information interventions.

The relationship between scientific and engineering research and financial benefit, however complex, can be articulated and understood by policy makers, ordinary citizens, and media commentators (e.g., Walshok, 1995). It is not so clear how investigating people’s reading of novels and other works of fiction might benefit the nation, especially financially. Such research does not have the face validity that focus on “scientific and engineering research,” technology transfer, and related information behavior have, most particularly in developed nations.

Researchers and research programs often follow where the money is, and governments for the reasons above have invested for centuries in the creation, use, and investigation
of information resources. Among these reasons are national economic competitiveness, national security, economic development, and national prestige. For example, the 2017 R&D budget for the United States is $152.3 Billion according to the Executive Office of Science & Technology Policy (Holdren, 2016), including $8.0 Billion for the National Science Foundation (NSF). NSF, of course, long has been and remains the source of many of the funds for studying the information behavior of scientists, e.g., funding for investigations for supercomputing, national networking initiatives, and digital libraries. Thus, the early and on-going commitment of information scholars to the study of scientists’ and engineers’ information behavior springs, in part, from the availability of research support and cultural commitment to such research. Studying this rich and complex information behavior is, of course, a rewarding and creative endeavor in itself, but important external governmental, corporate, and other actors also encourage it.

In the 1970’s through the 1990’s, “information science” grew in currency as a term of art and as programs in library science became increasingly schools of library and information science, as professional associations and journals either changed their names and/or sprang up with this increasingly popular label. During those decades there was a witticism that held that “information science is just librarianship for men.” Such a trope, whether accurate or not, reveals the often undisussed gendered character of the field of information studies, as well as all disciplines in the academy, especially in professional fields. We naturalize that the overwhelming majority of scientists and engineers are male but generally do not consider how that characteristic may influence our decisions to study their work.

In parallel fashion, fiction is often gendered as “female,” a female mode from its birth, dominated by works often stereotyped as “chick lit” (recall bias against romantic fiction as studied by Radway, 1991). Also see Nancy Armstrong (1982) and Virginia Woolf’s famous addresses and essay “A Room of One’s Own” (1929) on the parallel rise of feminine authority, the “feminine voice,” and concern about “domestic” concerns in the early English novel as well as Ian Watts’ well-known Rise of the Novel (1965). A related reason for the relative neglect of fiction in information studies that cannot be explored here is the presumption in most of the English-speaking world of a sharp distinction between fiction and non-fiction. In the Western tradition, there is a long-term prejudice against the misleading “un-truth” that fiction is presumed to represent, as well as against rhetoric (see, e.g., Lanham, 1995 and 2007).

Related to this presumed fiction/non-fiction disjunction are two characteristics of the field of information studies. The first is the decades’ long conflict between the high culture and connoisseurship view of libraries on the one hand and the view that libraries should “give the people what they want even if it is fiction” on the other (e.g., Carrier, 1965; Snape, 1995; Williams, 1988). The view that fiction is too “frivoulous,” “trivial,” or not worthy of serious scholarly attention from information studies would encourage us not to study fiction and information behavior closely, especially if fiction is a “female” genre.

The second characteristic of our field worth noting here as significant for not exploring fiction and information behavior more fully involves the difficulties of cataloging and intellectual control of more creative works especially novels and other works of fiction (e.g., Cawkell, 1997; Maker, 2008). We might recall, for example, the long, contentious development of the Art & Architecture Thesaurus at the Getty Research Institute and its controlled vocabulary now in five print volumes (2016), as opposed to the relative ease with which analogous tools developed in scientific and technical fields, e.g. MeSH in medicine and in chemistry (e.g., National Library of Medicine, 2016). This last characteristic recalls the argument made above about how research funding tends to be attracted to the study of those disciplines that have stable concepts and vocabularies – the study of fiction and fiction itself do not exhibit such characteristics.

So, despite these reasons and others, what might we learn about information behavior by focusing on the reading of fiction? The last two sections of the paper briefly discuss preliminary findings from a small initial study that the first author of this paper performed and develop a preliminary research agenda for investigating fiction as informative from the perspective of information behavior research.

**PROVOCATIVE RESULTS FROM A PRELIMINARY STUDY**

Julien (1999) asked teenagers how they choose a potential career. She conducted a survey of 399 female and male teenagers and found that their behavior did not conform to the logical model that the career literature assumes. Specifically, Julien found that many teenagers did not know where to begin looking for information. She also noted that the teenagers in her study more commonly made decisions based on incidental information (information they encounter by chance) than on information they sought out. Considering what scholars outside our field have argued about fiction’s role in learning about others (e.g. Boyd, 2009; Zunshine, 2006), influencing ideas of norms (e.g. Bettelheim, 1975; Radway, 1991), and identity formation (e.g. Finders, 1997; Rothbauer, 2013), it is apparent that fiction may be one of these “incidental” sources, and decisions about careers serve as exemplars of how “sources” that inform decisions might include fiction.
The following sections further clarify some of the benefits of studying fiction as an informative source through the results of this preliminary study.

**Motivations for the study**

The hopes and fears surrounding the influences fiction has on readers are especially notable when discussing fiction for young people. Will “bad” fiction teach our children to act badly? Will “good” fiction teach our children to act better? Reasons for attempts to control the distribution of fiction cover a wide range. In the USSR, government officials banned or censored many works that they considered dangerous to their ability to maintain order (Sova, 2006, p. 8), while, more recently, parents in the United States have complained about books for reasons like including “immoral passages” (p. 154), “celebrating euthanasia” (p. 161), and depicting “unsavory activities” (p. 192).

Young adult literature, in particular, has gained greater cultural attention recently for a variety of reasons, and has relatedly received a great deal of attention from the media (see for a review Cart, 2001). To further investigate readers’ behaviors, the first author conducted in-depth interviews with two adults about the young adult books they remembered as influential. The first author chose books as a fruitful place to begin the study of fiction, because the body of research about books provides ample foundation for study. While, “fiction,” certainly includes more forms than just the novel, the novel persists as a much-studied form with which to begin our exploration of fiction and information behavior.

Informed by the literature on reading practices, especially those in literary studies, some obvious areas of “information” in fiction regard fiction as a template for a “way of being” or a “roadmap,” and some people regard fiction particularly as a roadmap for right actions and values. As such, the interview protocol began from the following research question:

**RQ:** How do readers use YA fiction as a “roadmap” for lived situations?

**Methods**

The first author received IRB approval in 2015 and recruited two participants for a pilot study, one man and one woman. Both participants were known to the first author, who also conducted the interviews. The interview protocol was semi-structured and allowed for probes and follow-up questions. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Questions were largely based on Weiss’ method (1995), and sought to elicit meaningful memories about books for the participants and develop elucidation therefrom. The analysis was done by thematic sorting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher created categories and codes from the interviews. The results presented here are exploratory only.

**Results**

Both participants talked primarily about two overarching topics when asked about memorable books from their late teens: “human nature,” and “model behavior.” The themes within these larger topics that they discussed were both positive and negative. That is, they discussed how books showed them “ideal” ways to behave or “good” parts of human nature, as well as “problematic” parts of human nature and “wrong” ways to behave.

For example, the first pilot participant exemplified how fiction can be a source for thinking about what he called “human nature.” The interviewer asked him to describe a book from high school that stood out in his mind, and he brought up *Animal Farm* as a book that was particularly important to him and he explained that:

> It [*Animal Farm*] taught me that human nature is universal.  
> [I: What do you mean?]  
> As soon as the underdog is no longer the underdog, they become everything that they hate. It teaches me that the way people treat each other is dependent on their situation and it’s not real – it’s rare that someone who has empathy for someone outside their current situation. So if you just get behind someone who is an underdog – that’s not good enough. So everyone’s perspective is slanted. It’s a mind.****! You could become a new person and just make all of the same old mistakes.

This exchange illustrates how some people use fiction as a way to explain complicated social values – this participant is saying something he feels about “the way people treat each other.” Whether “human nature is universal” or not, the participants’ explanations, with some probing, indicate that this participant is thinking, at least in part, about what philosophers have called “values.” He describes his conclusion about the complexities of empathy and trying to do something right (“just get behind the underdog”).

The second participant talked about characters from books she remembered as “role models.” When asked about books she remembered from her teen years, she mentioned that her two favorite books as a teenager were *The Moonstone*, and *Mara, Daughter of the Nile*. When I questioned her about why she liked these two, she explained that they both had strong female characters. She especially made a point that as a teen, she did not feel “strong” herself and she liked to know that there were other strong women – that it was possible to be a strong woman.

The interviewer also asked about books the participants remembered in a negative light (“bad” books, as the interviewer phrased it). The two participants interpreted this term in a variety of ways. The first participant mentioned an author (Robert Heinlein) he had enjoyed reading, but in
recent years had come to think of as problematic because of sexist remarks or tropes within the stories. The second participant listed several books she had found uninteresting or “torturous” assignments from her teachers (Atlas Shrugged, Catcher in the Rye, and some other “classics” she could not recall the names of.)

Both participants also talked about books others (such as teachers and parents) wanted them to read or not read, and both discussed books they were not allowed to read as well as those they were assigned (see above for an example of assigned books). The first participant mentioned that he was not allowed to read anything with “witchcraft,” specifically he was not allowed to read Harry Potter, while the second participant discussed several books with sex in them that she and her friends shared with each other secretly to hide them from their parents.

Discussion
These two cases together show that readers will openly discuss potential influences of fiction and that they do so “actively,” as many literary scholars have argued, e.g. Buckingham (1993). In other words, these two participants exemplify clearly that, while people do not necessarily take fiction as literal instruction of “how to act,” fiction may be informative to readers nonetheless. For example, the first participant explicitly stated that he had enjoyed Heinlein as a teenager, but that he could identify issues of sexism.

That both participants talked of their own volition about “good” and “poor” parts of human nature is largely in keeping with the philosophical arguments summarized in the early pages of this paper (e.g. Currie, 1995). That both participants talked about model behavior is also consistent with findings of researchers who have argued that fiction is an important factor in identity formation (e.g. Rothbauer, 2013).

Our purpose here is not to confirm all of the previous findings from existing studies in other fields, which serve handily without our help. It is likely that interviews with more participants would continue to support theories from existing literatures. Our purpose, rather, is to show how results that are consistent with past research also show how readers use fiction as a kind of alternate “possibility” that informs their thinking about the world. Whether they are right or wrong, whether these made-up situations and explorations might or might not come to pass in their “real” experiences, the fact remains that these “fictions” serve as informative for real people.

To conclude, how does fiction serve as a “roadmap,” then? Perhaps “wayfinding” is a more apt metaphor for the work people do with fiction, because full understanding of how people use fiction to inform their attitudes and behavior should account for the interpretive work they do individually. Fiction may serve as an indicator, and even a simulacrum or distorted version of reality (Deleuze, 1997), even as it does not (usually) provide an explicit map of “what to do.” When it does so people often resist it, as participant two did with Atlas Shrugged. Adding to research such as Julien (1999) requires that we, as information scholars, understand that fiction may have an effect on such specific information decisions such as career choices as some have argued (King & Multon, 1996), and that we also understand that readers actively interpret these sources of information.

If we ignore fiction as informative and dismiss such information as mere entertainment, we ignore behavioral realities, that is, what people do, rather than what a systems-based, idealized model would predict. Further, we avoid important questions about what is missing in “logical” patterns assumed by simplistic behavior models or implied by studies that limit informative works to works containing facts.

CONCLUSION: AN EMERGING RESEARCH AGENDA
Studying fiction as an informative genre will contribute to research in at least two ways. First, an information studies and information behavior perspective will provide further insight into how fiction can make a difference to readers without assuming particular outcomes, an argument scholars who study fiction have increasingly advanced (e.g. Radway, 1991; Buckingham, 1996; Finders, 1997; Rothbauer, 2013; Oatley, 2013). Theories from information studies such as those related to satisficing (e.g. Agosto, 2002), selective exposure to information (e.g. Sears & Freedman, 1967), and information poverty (e.g. Chatman, 1996), among many others, can all add to an understanding of readers’ responses to fiction.

Second, insights from studying fiction will provide further insights into information behavior, for example, giving more insight into how people satisfy their information “needs” and how emotion influences their decisions and everyday behaviors. Fiction is historically a difficult problem for information studies (see e.g., Sturges & Barr, 1992), but we should confront the problem with more research rather than less. Studying reading for entertainment is generally considered academically “less important” compared to studying reading for information by scientists and academics (Wiegand, 1999). Other fields have plainly shown, however, the rich findings that may await information behavior researchers who investigate fiction as an informative genre.

Studies both inside and outside information studies will benefit from more attention to fiction as informative. Studies inside our field about peoples’ information decisions (e.g. Julien, 1999) and the information profession such as how to select and organize information in cultural institutions (e.g. Carrier, 1965; Sturges & Barr, 1992) need such understandings. Studies outside our field about people’s reading practices (e.g. Sweeney, 2010) can benefit from our insights. In short, there is a need for more
scholarship that seeks to understand and explain how peoples’ interactions with fiction and information overlap, intersect, and diverge.

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