



# How Literature Plays with the Brain: The Neuroscience of Reading and Art

*Paul B. Armstrong*

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"Literature matters," says Paul B. Armstrong, "for what it reveals about human experience, and the very different perspective of neuroscience on how the brain works is part of that story." In *How Literature Plays with the Brain*, Armstrong examines the parallels between certain features of literary experience and functions of the brain. His central argument is that literature plays with the brain through experiences of harmony and dissonance which set in motion oppositions that are fundamental to the neurobiology of mental functioning. These oppositions negotiate basic tensions in the operation of the brain between the drive for pattern, synthesis, and constancy and the need for flexibility, adaptability, and openness to change.

The challenge, Armstrong argues, is to account for the ability of readers to find incommensurable meanings in the same text, for example, or to take pleasure in art that is harmonious or dissonant, symmetrical or distorted, unified or discontinuous and disruptive.

*How Literature Plays with the Brain* is the first book to use the resources of neuroscience and phenomenology to analyze aesthetic experience. For the neuroscientific community, the study suggests that different areas of research—the neurobiology of vision and reading, the brain-body interactions underlying emotions—may be connected to a variety of aesthetic and literary phenomena. For critics and students of literature, the study engages fundamental questions within the humanities: What is aesthetic experience? What happens when we read a literary work? How does the interpretation of literature relate to other ways of knowing?

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