

# Creating a more compassionate world, one page at a time



**Cindy Davis**

Last month, internationally renowned educational psychologist Michele Borba was brought to Montreal by the organization Ometz, to speak about her newest book, *Unselfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*. Borba has spent years researching why there has been a drastic drop in empathy levels in kids and teens over the past few decades and why empathy is essential to the overall success of an individual. She addressed several ways in which we can combat this phenomenon and instill a sense of kindness and generosity in our children, despite the “me, me, me” culture, in which we live today.

It was an insightful talk, but there was one point in particular that Borba made that the Jewish Public Library (JPL) has been emphasizing for years: a key way of

encouraging empathy is through reading fiction. It’s an assertion that’s backed by science.

“There is an empirically established link between empathy and reading fiction. Empathy is at the root of *tikkun olam*. *Tikkun olam* is at the root of philanthropy,” says Michael Crelinsten, executive director of the JPL. “The fact is, therefore, supported by rigorous research, that reading fiction enhances empathy and, thus, is a key component of sustaining our community.”

Study after study has shown that reading character-driven novels helps readers – both children and adults – put themselves in the shoes of the character, by making their brains feel as though they are part of the story.

In one study conducted in 2014, researchers at Carnegie Mellon University determined through MRI scans that the brains of individuals reading a chapter from *Harry Potter* reacted in the same way they would if they were watching the actual events take place. The same study was able to identify “specific parts of the brain which are responsible for such sub-processing as the relationships



between characters, parsing sentences and determining the usage and meaning of individual words.”

Reading good fiction enables a reader to be exposed to characters and situations that he or she would not normally face in the real world, thus broadening that person’s sense of compassion and understanding. In the case of children, books can teach valuable lessons early in life, using both relatable and far-fetched situations, such as living in another part of the world, or a different period in history.

“Look for books that deal with things that children may encounter in everyday social life, like bullying or divorce,” says Talya Pardo, director of the Norman Berman Children’s Library at the JPL. “But reading has such a broad appeal that it can also work in a lot of different situations that put kids in the first person, enabling them to experience different lives.”

Another highly publicized study, conducted by the New School of Social Research in 2013, randomly assigned 1,000 participants with reading material ranging from Danielle Steele novels, to work by Anton Chekhov. The study concluded that those reading literary fiction, as opposed to non-fiction or popular fiction, could better identify emotions in others.

The key, therefore, is to expose yourself and your children to a variety of high-quality literature. Not only is reading good fiction important for building literacy and study acumen – which are important skills in and of themselves – it also plays a large part in creating a community of caring, generous and compassionate people. The key is choosing the right books. Happy reading. ■