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The Trade between Fiction and Reality
Smuggling across Imagination and the World

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The current debate on literary cognitivism in the philosophy of fiction typically assumes that we can rigorously distinguish between fiction and reality, and focuses on the question of whether and how works of fiction can impart propositional knowledge to the reader. In this paper we suggest that this way of framing the debate may be problematic. We argue that works of fiction almost inevitably include a reference to the real world and that – contrary to what is usually assumed – the exchange between fiction and reality is vivid as well as potentially fruitful. We shed a new light on these complex dynamics by building on the metaphors of trade exchange and smuggling between the two worlds. While the current debate exclusively focuses on cognitively relevant goods that “officially” cross the border through “customs”, as it were, we show that exchanges between fiction and reality run deeper. Indeed, as we show, a substantial part of the cognitive impact that we derive from fiction goes “under the table” and is “smuggled” from fiction to reality. As such, it bypasses the audience’s conscious control, which in turn explains the manipulative force that fiction can exert. Smuggling takes place when cognitively relevant contents are passed on to the reader in subliminal ways, as it happens when they imprint implicit biases or prejudices, shift perspectives or subtly modify habits or patterns of behavior. By elaborating on the metaphors of trade exchange and smuggling, we aim at presenting a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the relations between fiction and reality and of the impact that imagination has on our real-world beliefs.