

Shelf Healing Interview with Professor Raymond Mar. Transcription by Lukas Montgomery.

00:00:03

Rebecca Markwick:

Before we start. If you could say your first and last name to make sure I pronounce it right and give your pronouns as well, that would be brilliant.

00:00:12

Professor Raymond Mar:

Sure. Yeah. My name is Raymond Mar and my pronouns are he/him.

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Rebecca:

Hello and welcome to Shelf Healing, UCL's bibliotherapy podcast. I'm your host, Rebecca Markwick. Our guest today is Professor Raymond Mar. Professor Mar received his PhD from the University of Toronto and has been at York University in Canada ever since. He is a Professor of psychology and researches personal, social and cognitive psychology and neuroscience in relation to imaginative experiences, engaging with fictional narratives across media. Professor Mar runs the Mar lab, which focuses its research around the cognitive and emotional outcomes of exposure to narrative fiction and surrounding topics.

First question to get us started is maybe not as simple as it sounds. What is the effect of fiction on the brain and social cognition?

00:01:07

Raymond:

That's an excellent question. And I think that the truth is that we don't really know at the moment. You know, this is really a rather new research topic, and we're busy gathering evidence and trying to figure out what might be possible, what might be going on, but you know, my theory is that when we're engaging with fiction, we're imagining this fictional social world, right? So the books that we read are just populated with different characters that are, you know, have a sort of different personalities, have different goals and have different interactions and relationships with one another. And I think that when we're engaging with stories, we're really imagining what it's like to be a part of that world and to be among these characters. And I think that a lot of things that we do, while imagining these fictional worlds, parallel what happens in the real world, you know. And so, for trying to develop a model of what a character might be like. We can use those same mental processes to develop models of what our friends and family are like, you know, to see what kind of people they are like to make predictions about them. And so I think that there's a great deal of parallel between the mental processes that we use to understand stories and the mental processes that we use to understand the social world, and so our behaviors our thoughts, our engagement with fiction might actually translate over into the real world and help us to better understand our friends and peers and coworkers.

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Rebecca:

That's really interesting. Have you found that there's like a particular kind of book or genre that has more effect than others in your research?

00:02:46

Raymond:

That is an excellent question yeah, so there are a lot of different genres of fiction, and I think that what's most important is that the reader happens to be interested in that genre, right? And so I think that what makes stories real for us is a deep interest in those topics and those kinds of characters and those kinds of plots. And so the number one thing I think is a fit between the type of book and the reader's interest. On top of that, I also believe that a portrayal of human psychology and human relationships that takes a sort of centre stage in the story is probably going to be the most likely kind of story that's going to sort of help us practice empathy, help us to practice understanding other people and sort of help us learn about human relationships.

00:03:34

Rebecca:

This is getting really exciting. Now what do you do to this research area off the psychology of literature and its relationship to the development of social cognition?

00:03:44

Raymond:

So I was a really ardent reader when I was a child. I was just a huge bookworm, read everything and anything, you know. I spent so much time in the library. And then when I was in university, I began to study psychology and I got all the way up until my fourth year when I finally had time for an elective because I had just so many required courses. And as an elective, I took a humanities course that was about rhetorical perspectives towards literature, which was this idea that that books could be making persuasive arguments through their themes and topics and that sort of thing. And I never thought about analysing literature that way. I just enjoyed reading, and I enjoyed psychology. And then here was this course that was all about seeming like a psychological approach to literature. I thought it was just fantastic, and so I had this idea of using psychology in order to study literary topics, and so that's what I am going to graduate school for and that's sort of what I've been doing ever since.

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Rebecca:

Is that something that's really surprised you since you started researching this area? That's sort of been either a good surprise or a bad surprise or just anything that's just generally unexpected.

00:04:54

Raymond:

So many things, so many things. I think this is like the wonder of research is that, you know, we're asking questions, and we don't know what the answer to those questions are, and sometimes our hunches or instincts are correct, and sometimes they're wildly off base. But it's always interesting. It's great when you're right and it's great when you're wrong. So I'll just give a couple of examples. When I was earlier on in my career, I used to get asked this question about genre all the time. But are there are particular genres that are, you know, especially good at maybe, you know, improving our social cognition, and I used to say that it was really important that the portrayals of human psychology be accurate. And so if there is one genre where we wouldn't see this possibility, an engagement with fiction, you know, helps to improve our social cognition. It was going to be the romance genre. You know, at the time I knew nothing about romance literature at all, and that comment really just came out of ignorance and out of stereotypes. But we actually ran the study. What we found was that people who had a higher exposure to romance fiction, it was actually one of the most robust predictors of better mentalising abilities and of course, in hindsight, it kind of makes sense because romance fiction is all about human relationships. It's the genre that's really about emotions, you know, human psychology and interpersonal interactions, intimate relationships. So, you know, it just kind of makes sense. That was one example of where I was dead wrong about something and sort of happy and interested to be wrong.

00:06:27

Rebecca:

Yeah, I looked at some of your research articles, but some of them had really interesting titles. Have you noticed a big difference between the whole non-fiction fiction question?

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Raymond:

Yes, so in general, I think that the biggest distinction is between narrative and non-narrative, and so, as long as the text that you're looking at has a portrayal of, you know, the real world, that's relatively accurate, it doesn't really matter whether it's rooted in fiction or rooted in non-fiction. And this is something that Aristotle actually argued early on in his *Poetics*. You know, he said, that we can learn from drama. It doesn't matter whether the dramatized events actually occurred in history, or whether they're completely made up, you know, there can still be psychological truths, basically, that underlie it. So it's not so much fiction or non-fiction, I would say the difference between narrative and non-narrative. And so a lot of expository nonfiction happens to be non-narrative, which is not about portraying, you know, human psychology in the human world.

00:07:24

Rebecca:

That's interesting. So if it's narrative versus non narrative, where would poetry fit in? Because that's not necessarily narrative, but it does often show emotions.

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Raymond:

This is a great question, and one that I'm not very well suited to answer. I'm afraid that I don't know much about poetry. I'm not much of a poetry reader myself and have never really studied it. But my intuition is that you're absolutely correct, this would be the exception, because I feel that so much of poetry is about capturing human experience and human emotions and human psychology. And so I think that poetry would be likely to function similarly to literary fiction,

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Rebecca:

Brilliant . Because in doing these interviews, a lot of people have been saying how poetry makes them understand the world better, makes them feel better, focus in if they're having problems with their mental wellbeing or just general stress that poetry and the comedic fiction has been sort of that drive, which I think is quite interesting. With that idea of comedy, has that come up it all in your research because I imagine that's technically, it's a societal function, isn't it? Comedy and psychology?

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Raymond:

Absolutely. Yeah. So our lab has begun to study humor a little bit, although not within the comedic genre of narrative fiction. We did a little bit of work on absurd humor, and we also did some work on phonemes and whether certain sounds were funnier than other sounds in language and that kind of thing. So it's been a little bit of a side area of the lab, but I would say that we're not necessarily specialists in humor and certainly not in the comedic genre. So hearing you mention that people are drawn to comedy in order to sort of gain greater insight or to center themselves is very, very interesting. I think that's something that's really worth studying.

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Rebecca:

I can't let you get away with not telling me what you found the most comedic phonemes were.

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Raymond:

So for a long time, people used to say that it was hard continent sounds that, you know, basically 'Ka' sounds. You know, we're like the funniest phonemes around and, you know, quite famous comedy writers like people who wrote for *The Simpsons* and so forth they, you know, wrote articles about this. But when we tested empirically actually couldn't find evidence that it was the case, people have found some evidence when you look at nonsense words that some if you look at nonsense words, some nonsense words are funnier sounding than other ones. But when we looked at actual jokes with, like, setups and punchlines, we couldn't find the effects. So in our research we didn't find evidence that it was the case, um, in application, but that that was just a small set of three studies that we haven't yet published. So I would say that the you know, the book is still out on that.

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Rebecca:

That's interesting. And I hadn't thought of that. But I think people do have that a lot, don't they? In there in the comedy routines that that hard sound?

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Raymond:

Absolutely. I think it makes sense in a lot of ways. It helps to, you know, sort of attract people's attention, you know? And so maybe when it comes and combined with really good timing as well as some funny content, you know it could improve a joke, possibly.

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Rebecca:

When you're doing your research, obviously, you've got to pick a piece of narrative fiction. How do you go about choosing your narrative fiction?

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Raymond:

So the way that we often study this in the lab is that we look at people's lifetime exposure, to all kinds of different texts because, you know, this sort of theory that I have usually entails long term, frequent and prolonged exposure to stories and have some kind of effects. So we tend not to look at short term effects of just reading one piece of fiction or a short excerpt fiction. We do really look at, you know, a whole lifetime of reading. That said, on the rare occasions where we've sort of examined particular text. They're usually selected, I hate to say, for practical reasons, you know, ones that are a little bit shorter, like really engaging short stories from *The New Yorker* and that kind of thing because people really don't want to read for, say, 45 minutes in the lab or else we take a text that suit our needs in other ways. So we have done research, for example, looking at graphic novels. And when we did that, we wanted tightly controlled text. So we got graphic novels and written text that had almost identical language throughout. So that's partly how we went about choosing our materials again, not the greatest answer but there's some practical concerns that the drive our research designs.

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Rebecca:

That's the problem, I think, with literature being humanities subject. It's so much about ideas and concepts, and then the psychology is such a scientific subject that combining them, I imagine you get an awful lot of problems in that setting up studies because you obviously need the empirical data that's hopefully repeatable. But obviously literature is so dependent on the person who's reading it.

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Raymond:

Yes, precisely, you know, and so the scientific approach to studying literature. I wouldn't say it's the best or the only way to understand the literary arts. It's just a way, and it's a way that often has a lot of limitations. You know, it's sort of what I do and what our lab does. I think it's because that's just the way our mind works. You know that we sort of have this scientific mindset and then we apply it to a humanities topic. But certainly, I think that it's limited a lot of ways, unfortunately, but still fun and interesting for us.

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Rebecca:

Definitely. Have you found that in addition to its abilities to improve sort of social, linguistic and emotional function, that this fictional narrative is capable of improving mental health and wellbeing, or have you not really massively looked into that?

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Raymond:

So us personally, our lab we haven't really looked into this question, and I would say that it's sort of an understudied question as well. I mean, the idea of bibliotherapy has been around for a very long while. But empirical question- empirical research into bibliotherapy is relatively scant. That said, there have been some really interesting findings related to physical health, in which people have found that individuals that read fiction tend to have longer lives. Yeah, there's been a couple of very interesting large samples of older adults looking at mortality, and they found that reading fiction many of those who read more fiction tended to live longer. And so, you know, at this point, it's about sort of seeing whether the phenomenon is real, whether it's stable, what its limits are. I'm not sure if we yet fully understand why that might be the case, but it could easily have to do with the reduction of stress. I think you know, other researchers have found that while reading we do enter sort of meditative mental states, and I think that that could be calming and relaxing. And, you know, we all know that less stress in our lives or coping with stress better is better for our mental and physical health.

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Rebecca:

Yeah, this kind of leads me on to the next question with the whole physical health. I was doing some reading around your area and your topic, and I got very excited by the neuroscience and you mentioned earlier getting people to read in a lab are you doing brain scans on people or, like, MRIs to see which bits or if I just got really over excited about the whole concept of neuroscience and reading?

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Raymond:

I think it is a very exciting topic. The neuroscience work that I did was early on in my career. And to be honest, I no longer really do any neuroscience. But the type of neuroscience that I was doing was exam was directed toward answering this particular question whether it was possible that our engagement with stories had something to do with improving our social cognition. And so part of what

I did was these large scale meta analyses to examine whether the areas of the brain that are associated with story comprehension overlap with the same area of the brain that are involved with social cognition or social comprehension. And I did indeed find some evidence of this overlap as well as you know, evidence of non-overlap. And in general then, that neuroscience work is consistent with the idea that, while engaging with stories were also engaging the same parts of our mind that we use to understand other people.

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Rebecca:

That's really interesting. I don't know if you've looked into it but is there sort of like a new age relevance to the effect that it has? Is there sort of more effect on younger people or older people or middle-aged people on that social linguistic effect of reading?

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Raymond:

That's an excellent question. I'm sorry to say that there hasn't been enough research on a lot of different diverse age groups. There has been a small number of studies on children that has shown the same effect. And so children that have more exposure to children's story books tend to progress further, along with respect to their social development than those who have less exposure to storybooks. So there's maybe three studies along these lines, and what I find particularly encouraging is that they all come from different countries. So one was done in Israel, one was done in Latin America, and there's one story that we did in Canada and Toronto, and they all find this kind of effect. So I think that's a very promising area, looking at children. And then with respect to older adults. I'm afraid I don't know any research along those lines yet, but you know, an exciting area for future study.

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Rebecca:

I was going to say it's it's a young science so far, isn't it? It's not very old.

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Raymond:

Absolutely, yeah, absolutely.

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Rebecca:

Is there a certain type of narrative other than just that dealing with the psychology of people that you found most effective in creating changes over time in the idea of self-hood and cognition? Is it the same sort of narrative that you would expect to have seen?

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Raymond:

So I don't think that there is going to be one kind of story that's going to be the ultimate story for everybody. You know, I really do feel that stories are very individual and the stories that attract myself might not attract someone else, you know. And so it really is about a fit between, I think, the story and the individual. But I think that stories that deal a lot with socioemotional content to do with human psychology they're probably the most likely to expand our minds into other people and other people's experiences. Personally, I think that, you know, maybe the best kind of story will be one that we have some sort of familiarity or entry into that seems, you know, to share someone personal experiences and then expands those experiences, you know. And so there's an entryway to see things that are familiar and similar to our own minds, but then also expand things beyond our own personal experience.

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Rebecca:

That's that idea of sort of social modeling, isn't it? Where if you're modeling on yourself and then you can expand your social model via a narrative medium?

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Raymond:

Absolutely, absolutely. You know I think that's something that we all struggle with is that we feel so bound by our own experiences, you know, and that we often struggle to, I guess, believe that other people could have such different experiences of this world. And so I think that's partly what stories help us do is that they give us entryway into the experiences of other people that might have very different experiences of this world or live in different worlds than we do. And because stories allow us to imagine those experiences in such a rich and maybe even physically embodied way, I think that they're, you know, particularly powerful and opening up our worlds to the worlds of other people.

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Rebecca:

That's just so fascinating, I'm loving it. I noticed on your website that you're open for postgraduates and I'm like damn me for not taking a STEM course. Pure humanities. In regards to the effect on social cognition, that idea of sort of empathetic understanding of those around you and within societies. Do you think that obviously literature is global on societies are global but different, do you think that it's very specific to each individual society and culture, or do you think it's, it works across societies and culture? If you're looking at the idea of fiction narratives, obviously they change.

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Raymond:

I think that both things are true. You know, I think that all of us share some shared humanity, and I think there are absolutely culturally unique influences on our lives and different cultural norms across countries. But of course, what's interesting is that stories have emerged in pretty much every culture that we know about. I think that the reason that's the case is because stories really are about the human experience, and so that's what we're most interested in as a social sort of species. In order for

us to survive, it's really important for us to be able to collaborate and get along with other people, in order to collaborate and get along with other people we have to understand them. And so stories are a way of transmitting knowledge about other people because other people are important for our survival. And so I think that's why we see stories emerging cross-culturally all over the globe, and that there's also some similarities in the stories that emerged all across the globe. That said, there are, of course, cultural differences, different cultural norms, and those also get expressed within stories.

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Rebecca:

What's the biggest difference that you've seen? You say you're studying people over long periods of time at the exposure to the fiction narratives. What's the biggest difference that you found with people who have been exposed to a lot of narratives and those who have not been so exposed to the narratives?

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Raymond:

So we look at variability in exposure to narrative and non-narrative texts across their entire lifespan and the non-narrative text really act as our control because there's a lot of similarities between reading, narrative and reading non-narrative writes the same word decoding, you know, presumably it's the same sort of communication of complex ideas, and so for me, this is really what has been fascinating is that it's exposure to narrative fiction that predicts better social abilities. But the exposure to expository nonfiction doesn't have that same, you know, predictive potential. The most striking example that I've seen of this has been when we looked at children. And so when we looked at children, we asked their parents to try and recognise the names of children's book authors and children's book titles. And we use that as a proxy of how much exposure that their child had to children's story books. And indeed, we found that parental recognition of children's story books is what predicted their child's ability to pass these social development tasks. And as a control we ask parents to recognise the name of adult fiction authors, and this did not predict their child's socioemotional development. And so for me, this was just fascinating, right, because it's such a tight control. It controls for things like socioeconomic status, even a literary cultural environment, parental intelligence, potentially. But it really was about that child being exposed to story books that predicts their socioemotional development.

00:22:39

Rebecca:

Very quickly and I didn't see any evidence of this when I was doing all my research, but have you looked at the narrative that you find, you mentioned graphic novels, in the illustrations showing narratives, versus the words and narratives? Or is that kind of very out there?

00:22:57

Raymond:

This is a great question. I think it's something that so many people have had this idea. Many people that are interested in fiction are skewing towards text. I would say right, I think that a lot of us that are ardent readers have this belief that there's something very special about books, and there probably is something special about books. But the truth be told, when people have looked for differences

between, say, television, movies, and books, they don't frequently find differences. And the same was actually true when we tried to look at the difference between graphic novels and text. When we controlled for the actual text that was being presented, we didn't find many differences. And so I think that it's really about narrative. It's really about being immersed into the story worlds with compelling characters with sort of rich psychologies, and this could be achieved in multimedia like in Netflix shows and movies, and it could also be achieved within texts.

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Rebecca:

Have you looked at anything just audio?

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Raymond:

That is a great question. I did this only once, and that was because the psychology undergraduates that we were using as participants were complaining about having to read the short stories. And that is a bit sad to me because I thought, wow, if I had to do a psychology study for credit and they just asked me to read a short story, I would have been thrilled, as opposed to say, you know, looking at black and white text pattern, you know, or shapes or something along those lines. So we did run a study where we had people listen to stories, thinking that it would be easier, but we didn't compare it to reading, unfortunately, but I think that audio books e-books are probably as an effective, just as an effective way of exposing people to narratives as reading.

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Rebecca:

That's fascinating. I was going to say, obviously you have your Mar lab, which is so cool. What's it like having the power to kind of delegate around these topics? Do you get to pick which one sort of most interesting this week and sort of move around? And if it gets boring, give off to someone.

00:24:58

Raymond:

So I've chosen to run my lab in a way that I guess is somewhat unusual and that I do not dictate the topics of my students at all. And so my students determine their own topics. The lab, I view, is really an opportunity to train junior scientists, and I think the best way to train a junior scientist is to have them investigate topics that they're really personally invested in. In my mind, science is just so punishing and so cruel and so fickle and so frustrating that you couldn't get through it unless you were yourself personally extremely passionate about the topic. So the truth be told, 90% of the research that comes out of the lab, that topic is chosen by the student on that's why most of the publications that come out of the lab it's the student that is the first author. But we do everything collectively so although their idea might be of their own making, all the research is done as a group and that everyone provides input on the design, everyone assists with sort of piloting the study. And then, of course, I'm assisting every step of the way with the data analysis and writing papers and so forth. So it really is a big collaboration. And frankly, my students have fascinating ideas. They have such unique, interesting topics of study that I'm never bored.

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Rebecca:

What has been your all time favorite research piece that you've done?

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Raymond:

That's really hard to choose really, really hard to choose. Some of my students have done work on video games, and I think that work is super, super cool. One of the neatest things that the lab has ever done is a former student of my Dr. Elizabeth van Monsjou wanted to study shipping and I'm not sure if you know what shipping is? Okay, so when she asked me, I did not know what shipping was. I thought that she was talking about container ships moving across the Atlantic, right? As you probably know, it's about a deep emotional investment and romantic couples, and it's a huge phenomenon. It's been almost completely ignored by empirical researchers, and so she did what we believe to be the very first empirical study of shipping, and it was a great, great project, and this was another project that sort of surprised us, I think, because we came into it, thinking that people that are deeply, emotionally invested in fictional couples well, they're probably dissatisfied with their own relationships or their own relationship status. I mean, why else would you be so obsessed about two characters getting together. Unless you know you didn't have someone of your own or you did have some of you weren't happy with and we were completely wrong, absolutely wrong. There, there is no evidence of that at all. In fact, what seemed to be going on is that people's interests and fictional couples stemmed out of their interest in romantic relationships in general. And so it was really people who cared about romance that were- cared about relationships that were just interested in it that also tended to ship fictional couples. So, you know, they weren't more likely to be unhappy. They weren't more likely to be single or any of these things. But they were more likely to sort of endorse stronger beliefs in different romantic attitudes but a wide diversity of romantic attitudes, so not necessarily like stereotypical swept away by passion attitudes. They also were more likely to endorse practical attitudes towards romance, which really made us think that they're just more interested in romance and relationships in general, writ large. So that was a really, really cool project, and you know, some fascinating results.

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Rebecca:

That's really interesting again. I'm slightly surprised by that. In a good way. I love science.

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Raymond:

Yeah, we were surprised as well. Absolutely. And but I think that this does seem to be a theme that we're seeing pop across our different research topics that people tend not to use their leisure behaviors as compensation, but rather they're using them as a reflection of their deep interests.

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Rebecca:

Which would then kind of explain if you're reading to improve your wellbeing, why you be reading things that make you feel better and you're interested in, psychology rocks.

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Raymond:

Absolutely.

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Rebecca:

Fantastic. Well, I am going to try and put some of those I'll find some of those studies and put links to them in the show notes. I'll put a link to your research lab because people who are listening you have to go and check out the research lab. There's all these really cool papers on such crazy and exciting things to look at, and it's such a cool area of study. I'm so jealous that you get to sit and study this. I wish I'd done psychology.

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Raymond:

I feel very lucky every day to work on a topic like this, that's just so much fun and so interesting and being able to work with such energetic and intelligent young researchers as well.

00:30:00

Thank you so much for coming on Raymond. I really appreciate it. This has been fantastic.

00:30:05

Raymond:

Yeah, thank you so much Rebecca and thank you as well for the lovely introduction I think you did a perfect job.

00:30:12

Rebecca:

Sadly that is the end of a fascinating conversation with Professor Raymond Mar. I hope you all enjoyed it. I thoroughly enjoyed it, and I will see you next week with another episode of Shelf Healing.

Thanks as always to Nicholas Patrick for the music and to Lukas Montgomery for our transcripts.