

Sad story OK for guys, as long as it's fiction



Field of Dreams is the kind of story that allows guys to tear up.

When it comes to sappy movies, it's men who are all about faking it.

Melodramatic tear-jerkers, usually called 'chick flicks,' result in a chorus of groans should someone with a Y chromosome be forced to partake. But a University of Alberta researcher has discovered that men who are told that a sob story is purely fictional are more likely to enjoy the tale.

"Now, we're not saying that guys are going to go and scour the video store for a sad movie, just because it's not based in reality," said Jennifer Argo, a marketing professor with the U of A School of Business. "This really only applies if someone is already being made to watch the story, or read a book. But when guys are told a story is fictitious, they really rate it much higher."

Women, on the other hand, are more likely to have a positive response if they're told ahead of time that the story is based in fact, according to the study *Fact or Fiction: An Investigation of Empathy Differences in Response to Emotional Melodramatic Entertainment* Argo authored with Rui Zhu and Darren W. Dahl of the University of British Columbia. The results will be published in *The Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Our hypothesis is that men are stereotyped and socialized to not show emotion, and if a story's fictional, it allows them to just relax," said Argo. "It gives them a chance to escape reality."

The researchers found that a person's level of empathy is actually the determining factor. To test empathy levels and the subjects' reactions to various melodramas, the researchers turned to several classic short stories, like *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry, that include struggles against adversity and melancholy plot twists. Study participants were told that the stories were scripts of pilots for a coming television series - some subjects were told the fake scripts were based on a true story while others were told that the story was fiction.

Most men who believed the stories to be fantasies liked them much better than those who were told the stories were factual. The reverse held true for most of the women.

So, while it might be OK for a dude to tear up for the classic baseball, father-son tale *Field of Dreams*, getting emotionally involved in the reality-based, post-9/11 Angela Jolie vehicle *A Mighty Heart* is a definite no-no.

Where this research comes to play, says Argo, is in the way movie studios choose to market their products. If you're selecting a forum for your advertising, frame your message to your target audience. In other words, if you're buying advertising space during sports programming, don't mention that a movie's based on a true story.

"The movie industry is a huge, huge, huge industry and there's just not a lot of solid research that's been done in this area," said Argo. "When you think about it, that's quite shocking, but it was a big part of the

appeal when we were looking at this project."

The current study only applies to "definite melodramatic entertainment - sad movies," said Argo, which explains why a dark comedy like Fargo managed to include the 'based on a true story' tag and still draw in the guys.

Source: University of Alberta

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