Introduction:

Several studies have shown that reading fiction may help to improve an individual's level of empathy and their ability to understand others. When we dive into a piece of fiction, we often become emotionally attached or have strong feelings about the characters in that story. This activity asks you to consider the importance of empathy within fiction, the relationship between empathy and culture, and how your empathy for fictional characters might translate to empathy for real people or situations.

Participant Instructions:

1. Listen to the episode of Alan Alda's podcast Clear + Vivid titled "Ann Patchett on Novelists and the Sources of Empathy in Story" up until the 9:50 mark. Take notes on points that you find important.

2. Engage in a short discussion about empathy and fiction using the following questions:

   - What is empathy? How do we define it?
   - Alan Alda differentiates between empathy and compassion? Do you agree with his distinction? Why or why not?
   - Why is empathy important in a work of fiction?
   - What makes us feel empathetic toward fictional characters?
   - In the podcast episode, Ann Patchett says that she has difficulty writing villains because she always ends up empathizing with them. She and Alan Alda then go on to discuss how sometimes villains or antagonists become the most popular characters in a fictional story. Why do you think this happens?
   - What makes a character villainous or antagonistic? Do you think the qualities of a villain are universal, or are they more culture-dependent?

3. Write about a villainous or antagonistic character for whom you felt empathy. This character could be in any form of fictional media: novel, television show, movie, short story, comic book, etc. After you have identified their character, answer the following questions:

   - Why do you consider this person villainous or antagonistic?
   - Why do you feel empathy for this character, despite the bad things they may have done?

4. Pair and share and note the similarities and differences between your responses. Then, engage in a group discussion with the entire group.

5. End the activity by debriefing with the following questions:

   - What were the similarities and differences that you noticed between your and your partner's responses?
   - How might culture affect how we characterize villains/antagonists? How might it affect our empathic responses?
   - How might the empathy you feel for your chosen character translate to real people and situations in your life?