Can fiction generate social change?

Certainly it can. Look at *Black Beauty*.

Written as an autobiography, Anna Sewell’s 1877 novel describes the life of the eponymous horse, Black Beauty, from his early days in fields with his mother, through life with owners good and bad, to his comfortable final home in the countryside.

This book was described in the *Encyclopedia of Animal Rights and Animal Welfare* as “the most influential anticruelty novel of all time”. In the USA alone a million copies were sold within two years and it was widely distributed by animal rights activists to people who worked with horses.

One example of the anticruelty legislation that was passed after its release was the abolition of the bearing rein. This held a horse’s head up high to look stylish, but prevented the horse leaning forward to pull. Wearing the rein was described by Black Beauty’s friend Ginger as “dreadful . . . your neck aching until you don’t know how to bear it . . . the blood from my tongue covered the froth that kept flying from my lips”.

So why was it that *Black Beauty* was so influential, instead of being dismissed, like many horsey books, as sentimental anthropomorphism for teenage girls? Partly because, besides being a rippling good read and accurate in detail, it was written at the right time: a time of social change,
when Charles Dickens’ novels were raising awareness of the ill effects of poverty and Harriet Beecher Stowe was assisting the abolition of slavery with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

In order to generate social change, a novel must be different. And Anna Sewell did write differently from many novelists, because she wrote from the standpoint of the animals whose lives she was describing. Although Black Beauty was beautiful and good-natured, he was not a hero aestheticised or objectified. The horses’ suffering was seen from the standpoint of the animals concerned, not - as so often - from the narcissistic viewpoint of the humans who saw the animals suffer. The horses were seen as ends in themselves, with their own hopes and desires, wishing for their own good.

Compared with nonfiction accounts of animal ethics, *Black Beauty* appeals to the emotions, and this is often a more effective motivator of change than appealing to the intellect. But the animals appealed to the readers’ emotions as creatures in their own right. They were not literary metaphors for human emotion.

Also *Black Beauty* does not demand too much of human horse owners. While condemning the abuse of horses, it does not criticise using them to provide means of transport, provided they are treated kindly. The novel gives practical advice on how to make their lives content - how to treat horses so that they could be willing to consent to being used.
Black Beauty shows that, by appealing to hearts and minds, describing human behaviour from the animals standpoint, and by letting people know of the effects of their actions on those animals, fiction can, indeed, generate social change.

(500 words)