

Given up on reading? Elif Shafak on why we still need novels

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

1. Do you read novels? Why?
2. What are some benefits of reading novels?
3. Do you think people read enough books?

2 Key words

a. Find the words from the wordpool in the article. Then use the words to complete the definitions.

literary
greedy
in-depth
insight
instant

miraculously
numb
predate
publisher
rediscover

resilience
shrink
storytelling
wisdom
the long form

emotional
intelligence
instant gratification

1. instant gratification means getting something pleasurable that you want immediately, without waiting.
2. A(n) publisher is a company that prints and sells books.
3. To shrink means to become smaller in size or amount.
4. emotional intelligence means understanding your own and other people's feelings well.
5. A(n) in-depth analysis looks at something in great detail.
6. Storytelling is the act of telling or writing stories.
7. When you are numb, you don't feel emotions often because you're in too much pain or stress.
8. Something that happens miraculously is surprising, very lucky and hard to explain.
9. A(n) literary work relates to books, especially fiction or poetry.

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10. Rediscover means to find something again that was lost or forgotten.
11. Resilience is the ability to recover from problems or difficulties.
12. Wisdom is knowledge gained from experience or deep thinking.
13. If one thing predates another, it means it happened earlier in time.
14. Greedy means wanting more than you need, especially food, money or power.
15. Insight is the ability to understand things clearly and quickly.
16. Instantly means something happens immediately, with no delay.
17. the long form refers to longer, detailed pieces of writing like novels or poems.

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. Reading fiction can develop our emotional intelligence, helping us understand characters' feelings and motives.
2. Some people stop reading novels because they prefer instant gratification – watching short videos or scrolling through social media videos.
3. Classic novels are an important part of our literary culture.
4. Novels offer insight into the lives of people from different places and cultures.
5. The publisher printed more of the popular, sold-out novel.
6. Many myths and legends predate written history, but they still influence modern literature.
7. A good novel should give us wisdom that stays with us.
8. Even when the book market seemed to be failing, some titles became bestsellers miraculously.

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9. Many readers are returning to long form, choosing long novels over short, fast content.
10. When reading a deep, emotional story, we might feel numb from the intensity.
11. The main character's resilience helped her survive many challenges.
12. This novel was well-written and detailed, so I started a(n) in-depth discussion in our book club.
13. When the trend in reading began to shrink, authors worried about losing their audience.
14. Her early success made her greedy for awards, money and more attention.
15. Tolkien's great storytelling in The Lord of The Rings makes his books very popular to this day.
16. It was wonderful to rediscover my love for reading after years of not picking up a book.
17. A(n) instant reaction to a good story can be laughter, tears or shock.

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Recent studies suggest we've fallen out of love with reading – but the more chaotic our times, the deeper is our need to slow down and read fiction

Elif Shafak

11 May, 2025

- 1 YouGov found recently that 40 per cent of Britons have not read a book in the last year. "The literary era has come to an end," said Philip Roth in 2000. Roth believed that the societal changes and technological progress gradually reduce people's ability to concentrate and read long literary works.
- 2 Several studies support Roth's conclusion. The average time that a person can focus on one thing has dropped in recent decades from approximately 2.5 minutes to about 45 seconds. I saw this too when the TED talk organisers asked me to reduce my presentation time to 13 minutes in 2017. In 2010, I had 20 minutes for my talk. They explained that attention times have shrunk. I still used 20 minutes.
- 3 The same YouGov information also shows that more than 55 per cent of readers prefer fiction. Publishers confirm this. People are used to fast consumption and instant gratification but miraculously the novel is still popular.
- 4 We live in an era in which there is too much information but not enough knowledge, and even less wisdom. This excess of information makes us arrogant and then it makes us numb. For knowledge, we need books, slow journalism, podcasts, in-depth analyses and cultural events. And for wisdom, we need the art of storytelling. We need novels.
- 5 I am not claiming that novelists are wise. We can be a walking mess. But the long form contains insight, empathy, emotional intelligence and compassion. This is what Milan Kundera meant when he said, "the novel's wisdom is very different from that of philosophy". Writers and readers know this in their guts.
- 6 In recent years, I have been seeing more and more young people, especially young men, at book events and literary festivals in the UK. Some are coming with their parents, but many more come alone or with friends. I think our chaotic times create a deep need to slow down and read fiction. The novel helps to push back on 'us' vs 'them' mentality.
- 7 For centuries, the long narrative has had its impact. The Epic of Gilgamesh predates Homer's Odyssey and Iliad. In the poem, King Gilgamesh is an unusual hero. He is angry, selfish and greedy. But then he embarks on journeys with his new friend Enkidu, discovering other lands, but also rediscovering themselves.
- 8 In many classical myths, the main character returns home as a hero – but not in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Here Gilgamesh has experienced loss and failure, without a clear victory. But Gilgamesh becomes kinder and wiser. The ancient poem is about the potential for change and wisdom.
- 9 Since the Epic of Gilgamesh was narrated and written down, so many empires have come and gone. Yet this poem has survived the tides of history – and here we are, thousands of years later, still learning from it. King Gilgamesh, after journeys and failures, reconnects with his own humanity and resilience. Just as we do when we read novels about other people.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Choose the correct answer (a, b or c).

1. According to the YouGov how many Britons read a book last year?
 - a. 40 per cent
 - b. 60 per cent
 - c. 14 per cent
2. Why did the TED talk organisers give the author less time for her second talk?
 - a. Because people can focus for shorter periods of time now.
 - b. Because her talk wasn't as interesting.
 - c. Because they had more participants to give talks.
3. Why is it surprising that over half of readers still like fiction?
 - a. Because fiction writing is longer, and people are used to instant gratification.
 - b. Because people read few books.
 - c. Because publishers publish lots of fiction.
4. Why are novels valuable according to Milan Kundera?
 - a. They give us a lot of information and in-depth analysis.
 - b. They improve our emotional intelligence.
 - c. They offer a unique kind of wisdom.
5. What trend has the author observed during book festivals and events?
 - a. An increase in the 'us' vs 'them' mentality.
 - b. Many young people come to these events.
 - c. Young men spending time with their parents.

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6. Why is Epic of Gilgamesh unusual?
 - a. The main character goes on adventures.
 - b. The main character has a friend.
 - c. The hero doesn't win a great victory.
7. What is the author's conclusion about the importance of novels?
 - a. They are important for our personal improvement through understanding of ourselves and others.
 - b. They are entertaining.
 - c. They are better for our brains than technology because they make us concentrate more.

4 Key language

a. Find the phrases in the article. Match them to their definitions.

1. know something in your gut _____
 2. be a walking mess _____
 3. push back on something _____
 4. embark on a journey _____
 5. come and go _____
 6. the tides of history _____
- a. to begin a long and often meaningful process or experience
 - b. to instinctively feel or believe something without needing proof
 - c. to appear and disappear repeatedly or not stay long
 - d. to strongly resist or disagree with something
 - e. to be emotionally or mentally overwhelmed and disorganised
 - f. the powerful forces of change that shape societies over time

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b. Choose the correct form of the phrases from the previous activity to complete the sentences.

1. In many ancient stories, the hero must _____ to find knowledge, freedom or peace.
2. Civilisations _____, but great myths often remain.
3. Some characters in Greek tragedies seem to _____, full of emotion and confusion.
4. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the main character tries to _____ against the idea of death.
5. Some ancient people didn't have science, but the people would often _____ when they were in danger or ill.
6. Historical fiction novels often show how _____ shape the lives and futures of people and nations.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- What was the best book you have ever read? Why?
- Do you think people read less nowadays due to the shirking attention?
- Do you agree with the final reflection of the author on why novels are still important?

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6 In your own words

- a. Choose one ancient literary classic (e.g. The Mahabharata, The Iliad, The Odyssey, Antigone, or another story from any ancient culture). Write a short discursive essay (about 200-250 words) explaining why this work is still relevant today and why people should read it. Use the essay outline and useful language to help.

Essay outline:

Introduction

- Name the work and briefly describe what it is about.
- Mention that it is still important today.

Main Body (2-3 paragraphs)

- Give 1-2 reasons why it is still relevant (themes, lessons, emotions, cultural value).
- Support your ideas with examples from the story or modern life.

Conclusion

- Summarise your main points.
- Clearly state why people should still read it today.

Useful Language

One reason this story is still important today is ...

This classic teaches us about ...

Even though it is ancient, it still speaks to modern readers because ...

The main theme of the story is ...

We can learn a lot from ...

It shows how people have always struggled with ...

This story continues to inspire people today because ...

It helps us understand ...

For these reasons, I believe this classic should still be read.

- b. Share your essay with a partner. Read each other's work. Do you agree with the arguments?