

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

Level 1: Elementary

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

1. How do you read long books like novels?
2. What is the longest book you have ever read? Why did you read it?

2 Key words

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

drop
come and go
consumption

journey
main
numb

publisher
reconnect
storytelling

wisdom
wise
emotional intelligence

1. a long trip or experience, especially one that changes you _____
2. a person or company that makes books or magazines _____
3. the ability to understand your own and other people's feelings _____
4. to feel nothing, often because of shock or sadness _____
5. the most important part of something _____
6. when you take in or use food, media or other things _____
7. describes a person who has a lot of experience and makes good decisions

8. when people or things appear and disappear over time _____
9. to stop holding something so it falls _____
10. to become close again with a person, idea or feeling _____
11. using stories to share ideas or emotions _____
12. the knowledge or good sense you get through life and learning _____

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b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. Springer Nature is a famous _____ that makes science books.
2. Sometimes people feel _____ after hearing sad news because they don't know how to react.
3. The _____ reason for reading a story is to understand its message.
4. Good _____ means understanding your own feelings and the feelings of others.
5. When you _____ with an old friend, you start to be close again.
6. Many stories show a character's _____ to find something important in life.
7. In the digital age, the _____ of information can be too much for some people.
8. Fashion trends _____, so I don't spend a lot of money on fashionable clothes.
9. Please do not touch this glass vase. You might _____ it.
10. My granddad was very _____ because of his experiences.
11. In the past, _____ was the way that people shared information about history.
12. Life teaches us _____ – we cannot learn from books alone.

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Elif Shafak

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- 1 YouGov has found recently that 40% of Britons have not read a book in the last year. Philip Roth said in 2000 that the times of literature are over. Roth believed that technological progress makes us bad at concentrating for a long time.
- 2 Science shows Roth's conclusion may be correct. The average time that a person can focus on one thing has dropped in recent years from about 2.5 minutes to about 45 seconds. But it doesn't mean novels are not needed.
- 3 The YouGov information also shows that more than 55% of readers prefer fiction. Publishers confirm this. People are used to fast consumption, but the novel is still popular.
- 4 Today there is too much information but not enough knowledge, and even less wisdom. This excess of information makes us arrogant and numb. For knowledge, we need books, slow journalism, podcasts and cultural events. And for wisdom, we need storytelling. We need novels.
- 5 It does not mean that novelists are wise. We can be a mess. But novels teach 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.
- 6 In recent years, I have been seeing more and more young people 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, stressful times create a need to slow down and read fiction.
- 7 For centuries, traditional long stories have had impact. The Epic of Gilgamesh is older than Homer's Odyssey and the Iliad. In the poem, King Gilgamesh is an unusual hero. He is angry, selfish and greedy. But then he goes on journeys with his new friend Enkidu, discovering other places, but also themselves.
- 8 In many classical myths, the main hero wins – but not in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Here Gilgamesh has experienced many difficulties, without a clear victory. But Gilgamesh becomes kinder. The ancient poem teaches us that we can change and become wiser.
- 9 So many empires have come and gone, but we still read the Epic of Gilgamesh. We can still learn from it. King Gilgamesh, after difficult experiences, reconnects with his own humanity. 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. How many Britons people read a book last year?
 - a. 60 per cent
 - b. 20 per cent
 - c. 40 per cent
2. What did Philip Roth say about literature?
 - a. People will no longer read literature because of technology.
 - b. Technology will make it easier to read books.
 - c. Technology is more important than novels.
3. What does science say about our focus?
 - a. We can focus for shorter periods of time than in the past.
 - b. We can concentrate for longer now.
 - c. We can focus better on reading now.
4. Why is storytelling important?
 - a. Because stories are fun.
 - b. Because we get wisdom from stories.
 - c. Because we can use stories to exchange information.
5. Why is Gilgamesh different from a usual hero?
 - a. He is angry.
 - b. he has a friend.
 - c. He does not win.

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4 Key language

a. Find and underline forms of these words in the article.

wise

angry

selfish

kind

greedy

slow

b. Complete the sentences using the correct form of the adjectives.

1. My grandmother is the _____ (wise) person I know.
2. I feel _____ (angry) today than yesterday because of the bad news.
3. Tom is _____ (selfish) than his brother; he never shares his toys.
4. Sarah is the _____ (kind) student in our class because she helps everyone.
5. The cat is _____ (greedy) than the dog; it eats all the food quickly.
6. This turtle is the _____ (slow) animal in the garden.
7. You should try to be _____ (wise) when making important decisions.
8. He gets _____ (angry) when things don't go his way.
9. My little sister is _____ (selfish) than me, but she's learning to share.
10. That was the _____ (kind) thing anyone has done for me this year.
11. The _____ (greedy) people only think about themselves.
12. The bus is usually _____ (slow) than the train.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Do you agree we can't focus for as long as we could as in the past?
- What are some pluses of reading novels?
- Do you like reading very old stories like the Epic of Gilgamesh? Why / why not?

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6 In your own words

- a. Work in pairs. Choose two old or classical stories (like The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, Beowulf, The Ramayana, etc.) that you think everyone should read. For each story, write 2-3 reasons explaining why it is important or interesting. Think about things like:
- What makes the story special?
 - What can readers learn from it?
 - Why is its message still important today?
- b. Prepare to present your list and reasons to the class. Try to convince others!