

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

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Match each title with the correct descriptions a-d. Write the letter of the description next to each title.

1. The Odyssey _____

2. Hamlet _____

3. Epic of Gilgamesh _____

4. Moby Dick _____

- a. A tale of a royal heir consumed by grief and revenge after the mysterious death of a close family member, leading to deep philosophical reflections and tragic consequences.
- b. One of the earliest known stories in human history, chronicling a powerful figure's journey to understand mortality and find eternal life, meeting mythical beings along the way.
- c. A seafaring saga about a captain's obsessive pursuit of whales, with classic themes of man versus nature.
- d. A clever hero longs to return home after a huge war and goes on a long journey filled with trials and supernatural challenges.

b. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- Have you read any of these works of literature?
- Why do you think they're considered classics?
- Can such old literary works still offer meaningful insights or entertainment for modern readers?
- In this time, where access to texts is easy, do we still need long works of literary fiction? Why?

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Level 3: Advanced

2 Key words

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

attain	insight	prolong	shrink
certainty	jingoism	prophecy	vulnerability
flood	numb	ration	emotional intelligence
grief	perish	resilience	
in-depth	predate	restless	

- _____ is feeling sure about something.
- _____ is the ability to recover from difficulties.
- If you feel _____, it means you can feel nothing, usually because of shock or pain.
- _____ is deep sadness felt after losing someone or something important.
- If you have _____, you are good at understanding your own emotions and those of others.
- _____ is to limit how much of something you use or give.
- When you have _____ into something, you understand it deeply and clearly.
- When you _____ something, you make it last longer than expected or needed.
- _____ means to become smaller in size, amount or importance.
- _____ means to predict what will happen in the future.
- _____ is the sensitivity or being open to harm or criticism.
- _____ is strong support for one's country, often with dislike of others.

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Level 3: Advanced

13. When we say people _____, it means they died, especially suddenly in tragic circumstances.
14. _____ is the inability to stay still or calm.
15. _____ means something happened before something else.
16. _____ is a large amount of something that comes quickly, like water or emotions.
17. To _____ something is to succeed in getting or reaching something.
18. If something is _____ it is detailed and complete.

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

1. The author gave a(n) _____ interview explaining the symbolism in her novel.
2. Great literary characters often show both strength and _____, which makes them feel real.
3. Classic myths and legends often _____ modern novels by centuries.
4. In dystopian fiction, characters sometimes must _____ food to survive.
5. Her novel showed great _____ into the theme of loss.
6. The evil king in the book tries to _____ the hero's journey by creating delays.
7. Readers will feel a(n) _____ of emotions while reading the final chapters.
8. The main character's dog _____ in a house fire in the first chapters of the book.
9. His _____ kept him going even when critics doubted his writing.
10. A wise mentor figure may _____ what will happen later in the story.

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Level 3: Advanced

11. After reading the sad ending, I felt _____ and stared at the page for a while.
12. The poet's strong views bordered on _____, with many patriotic images.
13. As readers' attention becomes shorter and shorter, the market for long novels _____.
14. To _____ success as a writer, you must read a wide range of styles.
15. The teacher praised the student's _____ in understanding how characters manage emotions.
16. The hero acted with _____, even when he had no proof things would work out.
17. Many stories deal with _____, especially when a character loses someone close.
18. Sailors had to _____ water during long journeys across the sea.

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Level 3: Advanced

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 A recent YouGov poll found that 40 per cent of Britons have not read a book in the last year. "The literary era has come to an end," Philip Roth prophesied in 2000. "The evidence is the culture, the evidence is the society, the evidence is the screen." Roth believed that the habit of mind that literature required was bound to disappear. People would no longer have the concentration or the isolation needed to read novels.
- 2 Several studies seem to 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 witnessed this when I gave two Ted talks almost 10 years apart. In 2010, we were asked to keep our talks to 20 minutes; in 2017, that was reduced to around 13 minutes. When I asked why, the organisers informed me that the average attention span had shrunk. Still, I kept my talk to 20 minutes. And I would similarly like to push back on the idea that people no longer need novels.
- 3 The same YouGov polling shows that among those who read, more than 55 per cent prefer fiction. Talk to any publisher or bookseller and they will confirm it: the appetite for reading novels is still widespread. That the long form endures is no small miracle in a world shaped by hyper information, fast consumption and the cult of instant gratification.
- 4 *That the long form endures is no small miracle in a world shaped by hyper information*
- 5 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. We must change this ratio and focus more on knowledge and wisdom. For knowledge we need books, slow journalism, podcasts, in-depth analyses and cultural events. And for wisdom, among other things, we need the art of storytelling. We need the long form.
- 6 I am not claiming that novelists are wise. If anything, quite the opposite: we are 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". Ultimately, though, it is the art of storytelling that's older and wiser than we are. Writers know this in their guts – and so do readers.
- 7 In recent years, I have noticed a change in the demographics of book events and literary festivals across the UK: I am seeing more and more young people. Some are coming with their parents, but many more come alone or with friends. There are noticeably more young men attending fiction events. It seems to me that the more chaotic our times, the deeper is our need to slow down and read fiction. In an age of anger and anxiety, clashing certainties, rising jingoism and populism, the division between "us" and "them" also deepens. The novel, however, dismantles dualities.
- 8 The long narrative, ever since the Epic of Gilgamesh, has quietly cast its spell. One of the oldest surviving works of literature, at least 4,000 years old, Gilgamesh predates Ovid's Metamorphoses, Homer's Odyssey and the Iliad. It is also an unusual story with an unlikely hero at its centre. In the poem, King Gilgamesh emerges as a restless spirit, burdened by the storm of his heart. He is a brute, a selfish creature motivated by greed, power and possession until he got a companion: Enkidu. Together they embark on journeys far and wide, discovering other lands, but also rediscovering themselves.
- 9 It is a story about friendship, but also about many things besides, such as the power of water and floods to destroy or renew our environment, our desire to prolong youth, and our fear of death. In many classical myths, the hero returns home triumphant – but not in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Here we have a protagonist who has lost his dear friend, failed in almost everything, and has achieved no clear victory. But having experienced failure, defeat, grief and fear, Gilgamesh evolves into a kinder, wiser being. The ancient poem is about the potential for change and our need to attain wisdom.

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Level 3: Advanced

- 10 Since the Epic of Gilgamesh was narrated and written down, so many empires have come and gone, so many mighty kings – “strong men” – have perished, and some of the tallest monuments have crumbled to dust. 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 vulnerability and resilience. He learns to become human. Just as we do when we read novels about other people.

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Level 3: Advanced

3 Comprehension check

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

1. In the first paragraphs, what reasons does Shafak give for the reduction of popularity of novels?
 - a. People prefer to stay informed than to read fiction.
 - b. Our ability to focus has decreased.
 - c. Readers prefer to analyse complex texts.
2. What does the YouGov poll tell us about the modern readers?
 - a. They still like novels.
 - b. They prefer non-fiction.
 - c. People are overwhelmed with information and so they don't read novels.
3. What was Milan Kundera's view of the novel?
 - a. He believed novels should prioritise entertainment above all.
 - b. He saw the novel as a form of protest and a space for doubt.
 - c. He argued that novels must always reflect national identity.
4. According to the article, what trend has Elif Shafak observed at literary events in recent years?
 - a. A decline in attendance due to digital distractions.
 - b. An increase in young people, especially young men, engaging with fiction.
 - c. A growing preference for non-fiction over novels among older audiences.
5. According to the article, how is the Epic of Gilgamesh different to other classical myths and stories?
 - a. It focuses on gods and heroic battles rather than personal emotion.
 - b. It centres on grief and emotional vulnerability instead of triumph or conquest.
 - c. It was written purely as historical record with no fictional elements.

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Level 3: Advanced

6. According to the article, why is The Epic of Gilgamesh still relevant to the modern reader?
 - a. Because it offers detailed insight into ancient Mesopotamian rituals.
 - b. Because it explains the origins of storytelling in chronological detail.
 - c. Because its themes of grief, emotional struggle and overcoming emotional pain remain universally human
7. What is the author's conclusion about the importance of novels?
 - a. They are entertaining.
 - b. They are important for our personal improvement through understanding of ourselves and others.
 - 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, read the surrounding sentences and try to understand their meaning. Then write a similar expression or idiom from your own language in Column 3. Finally, match each phrase to its correct definition from the a–j list below and write the corresponding letter in Column 4.

Phrase	Your definition	In your language	Definition (a–j)
cast a spell			
attention span			
instant gratification			
no small miracle			
be a walking mess			
know something in your gut			
come and go			
crumble to dust			
tides of history			

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Level 3: Advanced

- a. to feel certain about something without needing logical proof
- b. to want something immediately and feel frustrated by delay
- c. to change or disappear frequently, not remain stable
- d. a very impressive or unlikely success or achievement
- e. an emotional or mental state of being very disorganised or overwhelmed
- f. to completely fall apart or be destroyed
- g. a period of time you are able to focus on something
- h. to put someone under a strong emotional or imaginative influence
- i. events and forces that shape history and societies over time

- b. Match each verb or a verb phrase with the correct preposition. Find the words in the article to check your answers.

Verb / Collocation	Preposition
1. be bound	a. by
2. push back	b. on
3. appetite	c. to
4. be burdened	d. for
5. embark	e. on
6. write	f. down

- c. Complete the sentences below using the correct collocation or phrasal verb from the list in task b. Use the correct form of the words as applicable.

- In *Matilda*, the title character is treated unfairly by the headmistress Miss Trunchbull, but she finds clever ways to _____ it.
- Frodo _____ the responsibility of the One Ring. He must _____ a dangerous journey across the Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings*.

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Level 3: Advanced

3. In *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein has an obsessive _____ scientific knowledge and power, which ultimately leads to tragedy.
4. Elizabeth Bennet is not afraid to _____ on the limiting societal expectations in *Pride and Prejudice*, especially when it comes to marriage.
5. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield feels he is _____ a future he doesn't understand or want.
6. In *Little Women*, Jo March would often _____ her thoughts and stories in her notebook, dreaming of becoming a published author.

5 Discussion

- a. Discuss these quotes from the article in pairs or groups. What do you think they mean? Do you agree with them?
- 'We live in an era in which there is too much information but not enough knowledge, and even less wisdom.'
 - 'The novel's wisdom is very different from that of philosophy.'
 - 'King Gilgamesh, after journeys and failures, reconnects with his own vulnerability and resilience. He learns to become human. Just as we do when we read novels about other people.'

6 In your own words

- a. Plan and deliver a short presentation about a novel that had a significant impact on you. You should explain why the book mattered to you, how it changed your thinking, feelings, or perspective, and why others should read it. Use the plan and prompts below to outline your presentation.

Introduction

- What is the title and who is the author of the novel?
- What genre is it? (e.g. historical fiction, fantasy, realist novel)

Summary

- What is the novel about in 3-5 sentences?
- Who are the main characters and what is the core conflict or theme?

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Level 3: Advanced

Impact on you

- What made you read this book? (e.g. for school, book club, personal interest)
- How did this novel affect you emotionally or intellectually?
- Did it challenge something you believed before?
- Did it change how you think about the world, people or yourself?
- Did a specific character or scene that you remember well? Why?

Recommendations

- Why do you think others should read this book? Who would benefit from it?

Useful language

The novel I chose to talk about is ...

It was written by ...

I read this book when I was ...

What drew me to this book was ...

This book belongs to the genre of ...

The plot centres around ...

This book made me think differently about ...

It challenged my beliefs about ...

It opened my eyes to ...

One moment in the book that really stayed with me was when ...

I would recommend this book to people who ...

b. Share your presentation with your class.