



## FINDING MEANING THROUGH LITERATURE

Struggling to find a path through the chaos? Books may help,  
says editor **Elizabeth Sulis Kim**

Aged eleven, I read a book that changed my life. It was Eva Ibbotson's *Journey to the River Sea*, an adventure novel about an orphan, Maia, who leaves behind England and journeys to Manaus, Brazil, to stay with her long-lost relatives. Manaus is in the centre of the Amazon rainforest, but it was a bustling port during the Rubber Boom of the early 20th century. The city conjured up by Ibbotson sounded magical: a Belle Epoque opera house standing tall beside a market full of exotic fruits, frequented by colourful birds – all in close proximity to the river sea, surrounded by vast, unexplored forest. I wanted so desperately to go there.

Maia eventually leaves the city and explores the river sea and its many tributaries. Her beloved governess, Miss Minton, recalls Maia's Amazonian ►



adventure: “When she was traveling and exploring... and finding her songs, Maia wasn’t just happy, she was... herself. I think something broke in Maia when her parents died, and out there it healed... I think children must lead big lives... if it is in them to do so.”

These words resonated. Seven years later, aged eighteen, I too went to the Amazon to heal. As my plane broke through the clouds, I saw the city on the banks of the wide river, surrounded by rainforest. I forever imprinted that scene in my memory – emerging from the dark cloud and seeing below me the place that until then only existed in my imagination. This was the start of the next chapter in my book. We might not see these little moments of joy and transformation in the chaotic mess that is life, but reading helps us identify them; stories provide narrative structure.

Life often seems like a soap opera. It can be hard to identify where one scene ends and another begins; we’re constantly thrown into new situations, some more tragic, some more comic. But seven basic plot types have been identified by scholars, and these might become clearer when we read a traditional novel; over the course of the novel’s time frame, be it a day or year, a character or community will somehow change, for better or for worse.

They might defeat monsters – terrifying beasts or situations, people or problems that seem monstrous. They might go out on a journey or against the odds, becoming kinder, braver or wiser as a result. The reader’s advantage is that every difficult situation or feeling has probably already been articulated by a writer. Reading about another person’s experience, we might feel less alone. We can also learn from their mistakes and

victories and find solutions for obstacles we have yet to encounter ourselves.

Stories give us structure as individuals, but they also give structure to society as a whole. Yuval Noah Harari, in his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, writes about the importance of finding common myths. Such myths only exist in people’s collective imagination, but they help us connect with other people. Much of what we encounter in our daily life exists because someone once told a story, from the nations to which we belong to our sense of identity.

There are many things we probably don’t like about the reality we live in. There may also be things we don’t like about ourselves. We sometimes worry when we recognise ourselves in a flawed character. Awareness enables us to tell new stories about ourselves that better reflect who we want to be, as Ebenezer Scrooge did in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, confronted with himself as a miser. We also model ourselves on the characters we read about and love, or characters whose positive transformation seems attainable. I doubt I’m alone in looking up to characters such as Hermione from the *Harry Potter* series, known for her love of books and curiosity.

Who do we want to be? Our sense of self is surprisingly malleable. And what do we care about? In hard times, we can wonder whether there’s any meaning to all this. Joseph Campbell, in *The Power of Myth*, emphasises how we often think we’re seeking meaning, when really “we’re seeking an experience of being alive”. We can get this from reading books as well as first-hand experience. I think back to the day I walked out of my last exam at university. I anticipated feeling a sense of relief, of freedom. Instead, on handing in my paper and leaving the quiet examination hall, I experienced an unbearable sense of lightness on feeling the warm sun on my face. This was the end of four years of structured learning. Of living in a town I knew well. Of feeling settled. I was between stories, and I didn’t quite feel at home among the living. Deciding what to do next, I picked up a new book and moved to a new city. It was time to tell – and live – a new story.

## A JOURNEY IN BOOKS

The books I’ve read have given me the courage to speak up, be myself or made me realise it’s time to change. Here are my nine life-affirming reads:

- 1 **MADAME BOVARY BY GUSTAVE FLAUBERT**  
Like the heroine in this book, I realised much of my world view came from romantic novels. Fortunately, relating to a tragic character doesn’t mean our destiny is set in stone. Learning from *Emma Bovary*, I realised life isn’t just in the material world, it’s also in the way we process life internally.
- 2 **YOUR SILENCE WILL NOT PROTECT YOU BY AUDRE LORDE**  
In the main essay of this collection, Lorde writes about the importance of speaking up even if you’re scared of what will come of it. We have all kept quiet about things and this essay puts forth a persuasive argument for allowing yourself be heard.
- 3 **NEVER LET ME GO BY KAZUO ISHIGURO**  
This book is influenced by the Japanese concept of *mono no aware* – an awareness of impermanence. Reading it, we’re reminded that we often lead lives as if caught in a turbulent current, and not fully conscious of what we’re living through.
- 4 **THE DEATH OF IVAN ILYCH BY LEO TOLSTOY**  
Tolstoy explores how a dying man confronts his own mortality, and the isolation and truth that comes with it. The book reminds us that life is brief, and we need to stop deferring joy and self-reflection, and embrace the present moment instead.
- 5 **CONVENIENCE STORE WOMAN BY SAYAKA MURATA**  
Keiko is an unconventional person, but finds contentment in her role as a convenience store woman. However, her parents and friends have other expectations for her. This book emphasises the importance of living according to your own script, even if that doesn’t look like other people’s.
- 6 **THE ROAD BY CORMAC MCCARTHY**  
A man and his son walk along the road in a post-apocalyptic landscape, heading south looking for a warmer climate. Life is often confusing, we don’t know where we’re going or why, but we keep going because we value our relationships, and are curious about what lies ahead.
- 7 **THE UNABRIDGED JOURNALS BY SYLVIA PLATH**  
In Plath’s journals we find a woman struggling to come to terms with self-doubt. For anyone who has struggled with similar feelings, there is much contained within Plath’s writing to reassure us we aren’t alone.
- 8 **THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE BY SHIRLEY JACKSON**  
Shirley Jackson suffered from anxiety, and she explores this in much of her work. In this psychological horror, *Ellen*, the protagonist, finds socialising daunting and it’s unclear whether things are really happening, or if she is a victim of her own anxious mind.
- 9 **NORMAL PEOPLE BY SALLY ROONEY**  
In this novel, Rooney explores how we can feel insecure about who we are and don’t really participate in life – consequently, we don’t feel normal. This book related to many, redefining what it actually means to be ‘normal’.