



Reading and Wellbeing



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of EDINBURGH

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Literacy Lab

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Overview

- Research insights across the lifespan
 - Exploring the evidence base
 - Deepening and expanding understanding
- Practice
 - Supporting wellbeing through reading among young people
- Reading and resources

Exploring the evidence base

Children and Young People

- UK (n = 49,046, aged 8-18): Reading enjoyment and reading frequency positively associated with self-reported wellbeing.
- Australia (n= 61,759, aged 9-15): Frequency of reading for enjoyment associated with higher self-reported wellbeing, among those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Kennewell et al., 2022).
- US (n = 10,243, aged 9-14): Frequency of reading for pleasure at 9-11 years old negatively associated with mental health difficulties at 11-13 years old (Sun et al., 2023).

Clark & Teravainen-Goff (2018) [https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/Mental_wellbeing_reading_and_writing_2017-18 - FINAL2_qTxyxvg.pdf](https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/Mental_wellbeing_reading_and_writing_2017-18_-_FINAL2_qTxyxvg.pdf)

Kennewell et al. (2022): <https://bmcpediatr.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12887-022-03322-1>

Sun et al. (2023): <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37376848/>

Adults

Figure 4. Levels of life satisfaction by reading habit

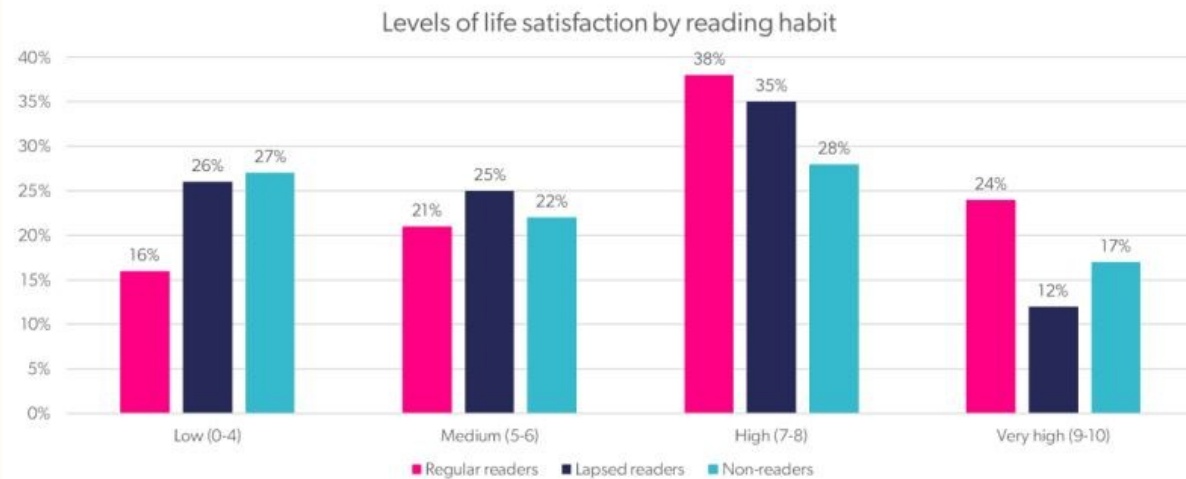
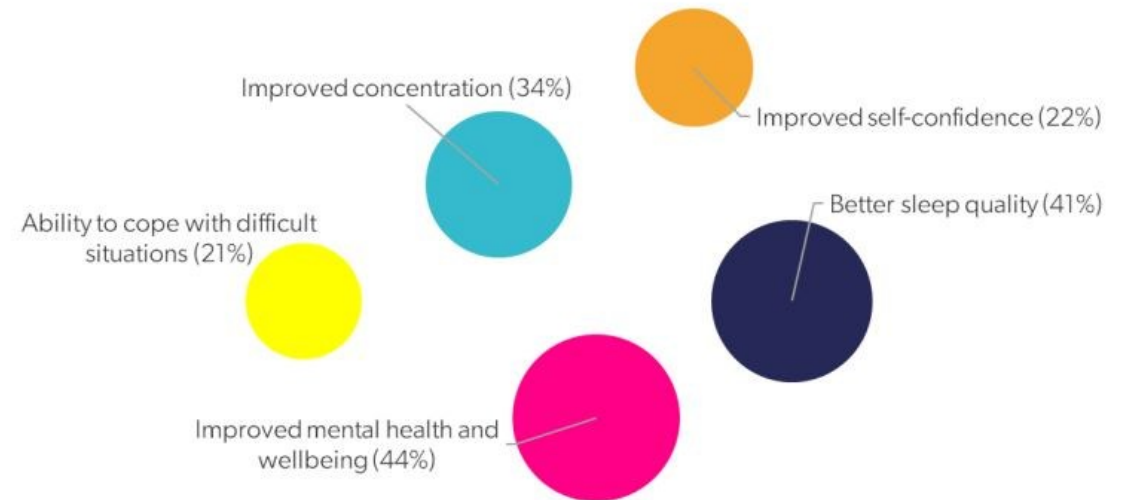


Figure 3. Regular readers' health and wellbeing-related responses to 'What, if anything, has reading helped you with?'



Reading Agency

Based on n = 2,003, aged 16+

https://readingagency.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/State-of-the-Nations-Adult-Reading_2024-Focus-on-Health-and-Wellbeing.pdf

Deepening and expanding understanding

Reading and Wellbeing: Qualitative project

- Large scale (n = 78) qualitative research project, interviews with children (aged 9-11), young people (aged 15-17), adults (aged 30-50) and older adults (aged 63-83) who enjoy reading fiction.
- Focused on wellbeing from hedonistic (positive affect) and eudaimonic (connection, personal growth) perspectives.

Currie, N. et al., (2025). Reading Fiction and Psychological Well-being During Older Adulthood: Positive Affect, Connection and Personal Growth. *Reading Research Quarterly*, <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.605>

Currie, N., et al., (2025). How does reading fiction support adolescents' wellbeing? A qualitative study examining positive affect, connection and personal growth. *Reading Psychology*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02702711.2025.2504974>

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Findings: Positive affect

- Fiction book reading can elicit a wide range of emotions (e.g., happiness, sadness, excitement, tension, nostalgia, hope)
- Some readers report that 'negative' emotions can be enjoyable
- Emotions before and after reading
- Emotions elicited via book content and/or cueing of personal memories
- Readers differ in their predisposition to seek out/engage in emotionally meaningful content
- Book content/writing quality influences emotional experiences



Positive affect

'it is genuinely one of the funniest things I've ever read. And then there's other moments where it's like hair-raisingly awful and it's-, yeah, it's just it's so good'

'I just love the thrill of it, I just love the magic...It just feels like I'm in another world'

'I've read a few books as well that that have like left me crying in tears, like, I'm not even kidding. But it's amazing'

'the way that that sentence was written terrified me...'

'It lived with me and I still think about it every once in a while'

'it gave me an experience that I haven't had in real life, but it was for me, it was quite a deep experience'

'remembering the days when you really could chase down the deck and grab the ropes that were thrown [laughing] reminds you of happy times.'

Findings: Connection

Fictional world

- Characters
- Settings
- Story events

Real world

- Known others
- Unknown others



Connection

‘When they tell you about their personal feelings and you can tell how much it actually relates to you. How, I know it's just a book, but it feels like sometimes just yourself’

‘the people become real. Like, I don't care what anybody says to me, I genuinely believe that these people are real and that I know them intimately’

‘I felt as if I'd lived the whole life with her when she died. So I've really, I sort of lived and breathed the series’

‘It's always like an internal monologue. So it makes me think if other people I know, they're not saying anything, but they're having troubles, they're constantly thinking about stuff that is never talked about, you know?’

‘cause like when I read a book that's like about friendship and stuff I just, I just see how good that friendship is and I want that to happen with my friends and stuff’

Findings: Personal growth

- Intellectual and educational development
- Supporting self
- Understanding others
- Expanding life experiences



Personal growth

'I would say I went to India, I went to Africa, I went to, you know, there was all these countries I went to with all of these books'

'it makes me understand that people are fighting battles that you have no idea about'

'just reading about different concepts and topics, it really helps to define what I enjoy and what I want to do in the future'

'but I think the quieter arena of reading is more likely to bring about change, or slow change. At least some self-questioning'

'it gives you an understanding and an insight and maybe hopefully an empathy into those experiences that you, were not gonna have yourself but help to be maybe, hopefully, a better human being'

'[through character] I can see that it is OK to not be perfect because it will always be OK, like, it will all be alright'

Research summary

- Fiction book reading can provide a vast range of rich and diverse positive experiences.
- However, for the wellbeing benefits of reading to be realised, we need to find books we enjoy reading, and **engage deeply** with the books that we read....

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David Robinson
George Heriots School, Edinburgh



Lochaber High School
Fort William



Japan



China

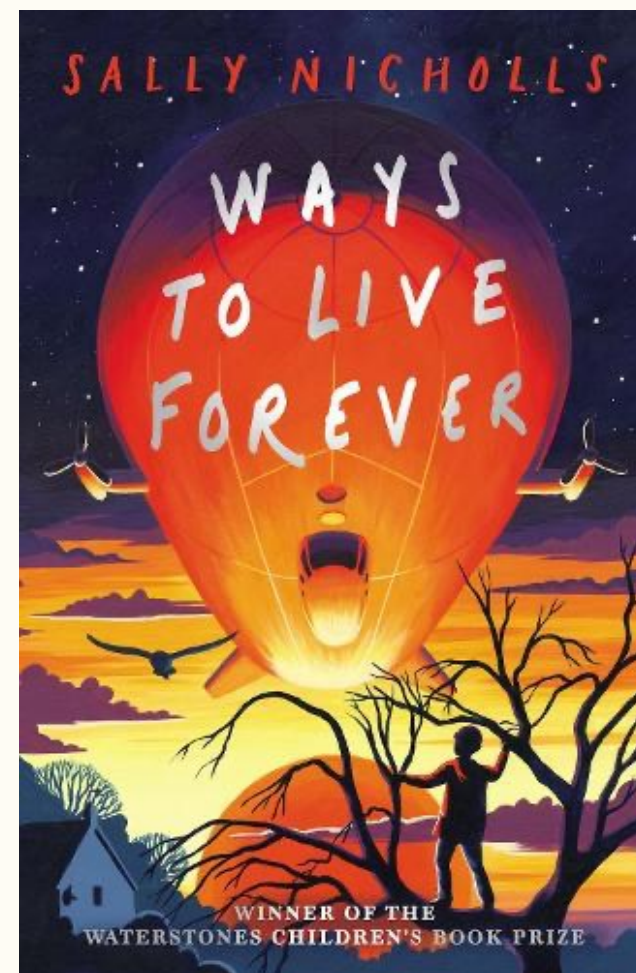
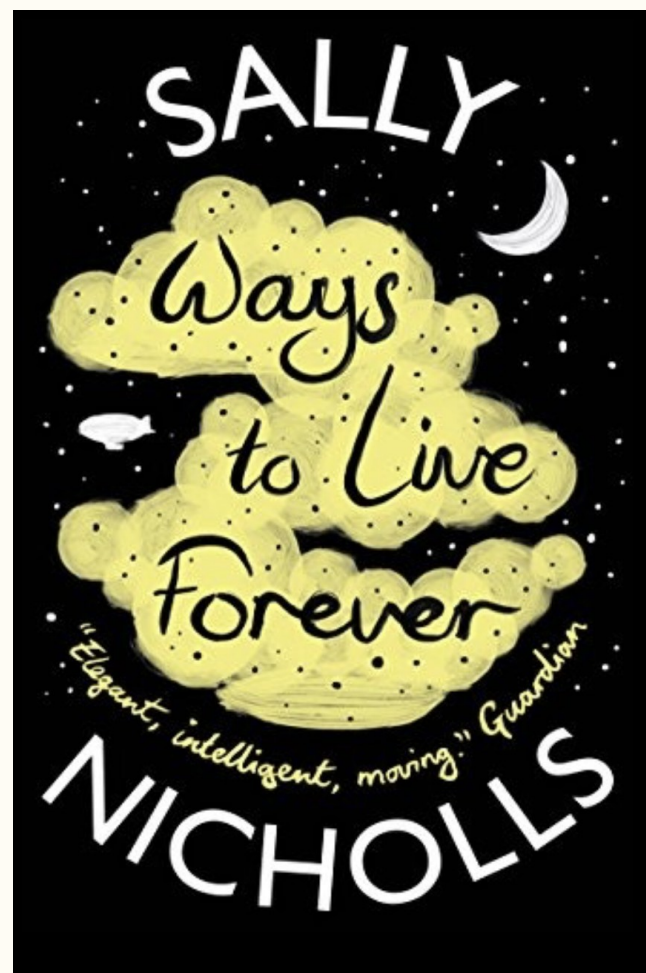
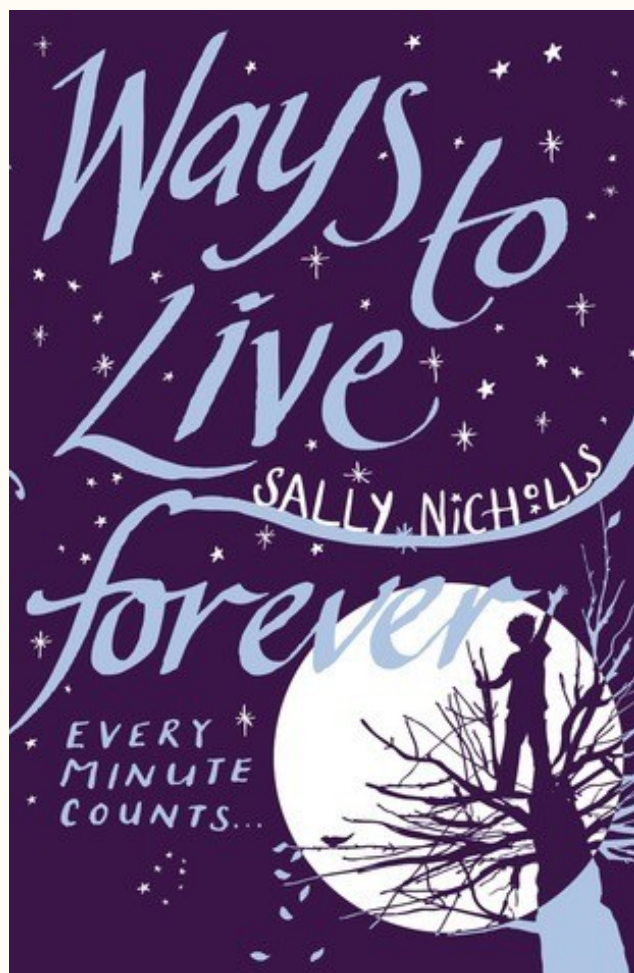


Melbourne



Hong Kong

The worst day of my teaching career



This is my book, started 7th January,
finished 12th April. It is a collection
of lists, stories, pictures, questions
and facts.

It is also my story.

WHY I LIKE FACTS

I like facts. I like *knowing* things. Grown-ups never understand this. You ask them something like, “Can I have a new bike for Christmas?” and they give you a waffly answer, like, “Why don’t you see how you feel nearer Christmas?” Or you might ask your doctor, “How long do I have to stay in hospital?” and he’ll say something like, “Let’s wait and see how you get on”, which is doctor-speak for “I don’t know”.

I don’t have to go into hospital ever again. Dr Bill promised. I have to go to clinic – that’s it. If I get really sick, I can stay at home.

That’s because I’m going to die.

Probably.

Going to die is the biggest waffly thing of all. No one will tell you anything. You ask them questions and they cough and change the subject.

If I grow up, I’m going to be a scientist. Not the sort that mixes chemicals together, but the sort that investigates UFOs and ghosts and things like that. I’m going to go to haunted houses and do tests and prove whether or not poltergeists and aliens and Loch Ness monsters really exist. I’m very good at finding things out. I’m going to find out the answers to all the questions that nobody answers.

All of them.

LIST NO. 1 FIVE FACTS ABOUT ME

1. My name is Sam.
2. I am eleven years old.
3. I collect stories and fantastic facts.
4. I have leukaemia.
5. By the time you read this,
I will probably be dead.

QUESTIONS NOBODY ANSWERS NO. 2

Why does God make kids get ill?

QUESTIONS NOBODY ANSWERS NO. 6

Why do people have to die anyway?

LIST NO. 3 THINGS THAT I WANT TO DO

1. Be a famous scientist. Find things out and write books about them.
2. Break a world record. Not an athletic one, obviously. A silly one.
3. Watch all the horror films I'm not allowed to watch. 15-certificates. Or 18s.
4. Go up down-escalators and down up-escalators.
5. See a ghost
6. Be a teenager. Do teenage things like drink and smoke and have girlfriends.
7. Ride in an airship
8. Go up in a spaceship and see the Earth from space.

What ideas and experiences and can
books explore that no other medium
can do?

Crisis in English Studies

ANNALS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

THE END OF THE ENGLISH MAJOR

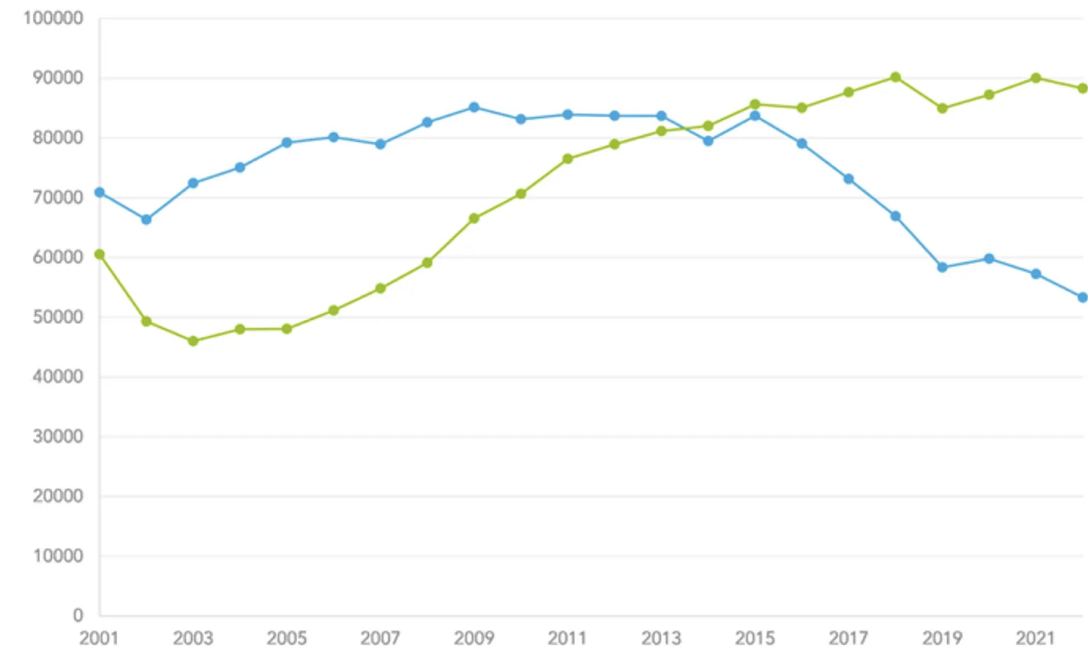
Enrollment in the humanities is in free fall at colleges around the country. What happened?

By Nathan Heller

February 27, 2023

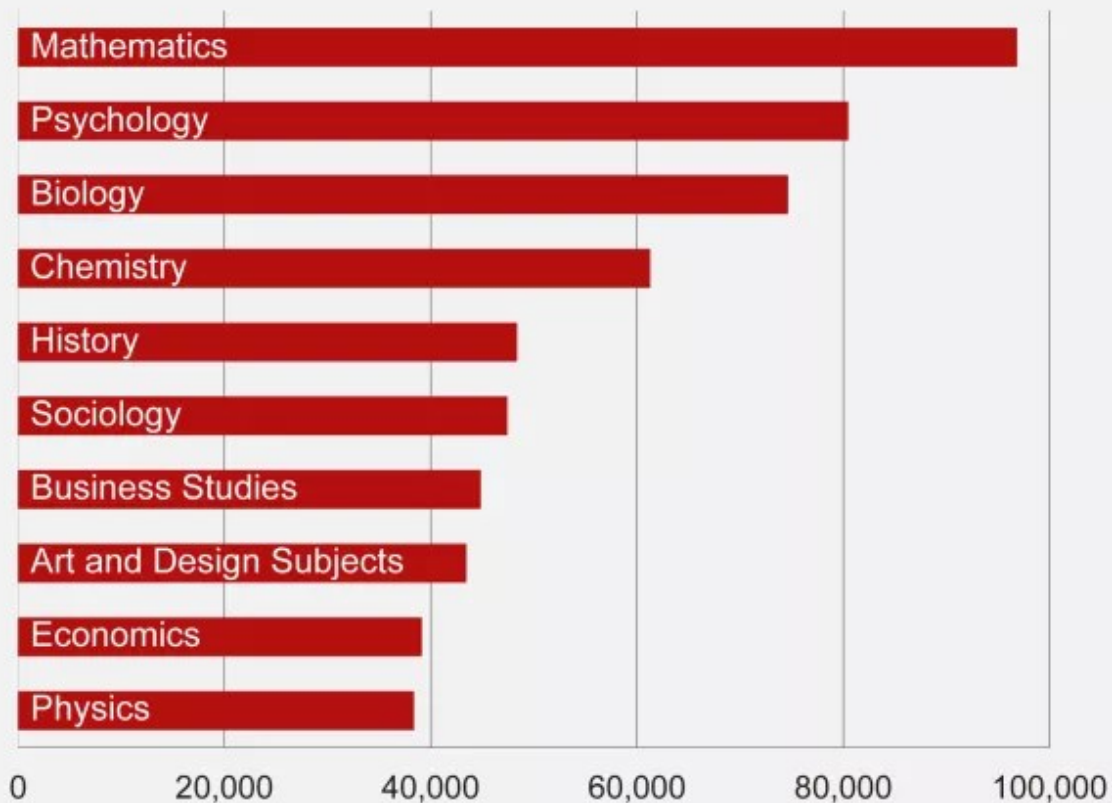
Heller, Nathan. "The End of the English Major." *The New Yorker*, 27 Feb. 2023, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/06/the-end-of-the-english-major.

A-Level entry numbers, 2001-22
English and maths students in England



Plaister, Natasha. "Which A-Level subjects are the most popular?" *FFT Education Datalab*, 17 Aug. 2022
<https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2022/08/which-a-level-subjects-are-the-most-popular/>

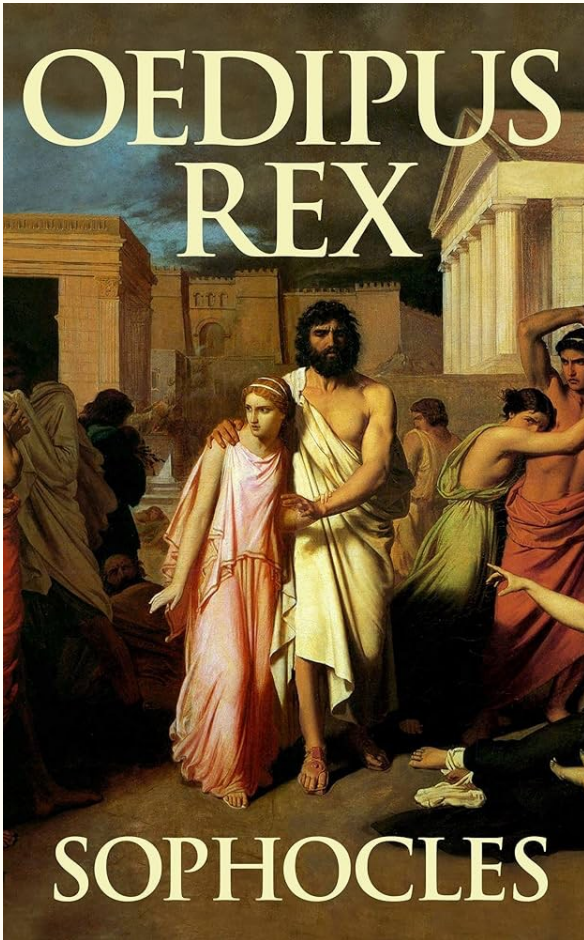
Top 10 most popular A-level subjects by entry in the UK in 2023



Source: Joint Council for Qualifications

tes
magazine

Psychological Insights From Literature



*There are in our existence spots of time,
That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
By false opinion and contentious thought,
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,
In trivial occupations, and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, **our minds**
Are nourished and invisibly repaired;
A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
That penetrates, enables us to mount,
When high, more high, and lifts us up
when fallen*

William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*. Book 12. 208-218
(1850 edition)



Lady Macbeth Effect

“Every brilliant experiment, like every great work of art, starts with an act of imagination. **Unfortunately, our current culture subscribes to a very narrow definition of truth. If something can’t be quantified and calculated, then it can’t be true.** Because this strict scientific approach has explained so much, we assume that it can explain everything. But every method, even the experimental method, has limits. Take the human mind. Scientists describe our brain in terms of its physical details; they say we are nothing but a loom of electrical cells and synaptic spaces.

What science forgets is that this isn’t how we experience the world. (We feel like the ghost, not like the machine.) It is ironic but true: the one reality science cannot reduce is the only reality we will ever know. This is why we need art. By expressing our actual experience, the artist reminds us that our science is incomplete, that no map of matter will ever explain the immateriality of our consciousness.”

Lehrer, J. (2012) Proust Was a Neuroscientist. Edinburgh: Canongate Books. ISBN 978-0857862310.

“Marks the arrival of an important new thinker, who finds in the science and the arts wonder and beauty, and with equal confidence says wise and fresh things about both.

— *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

PROUST

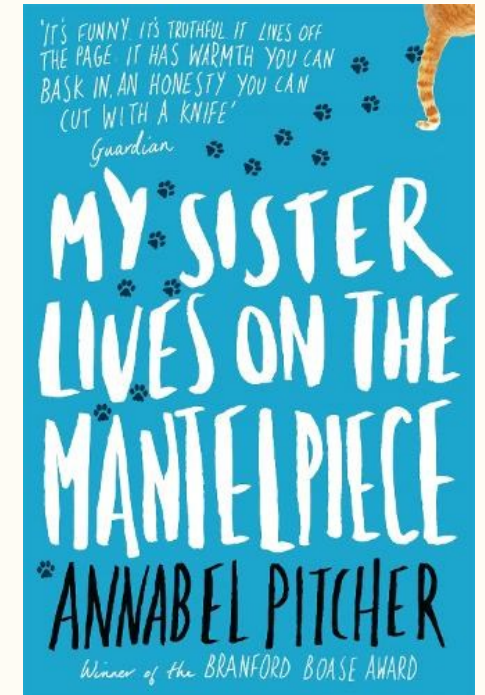
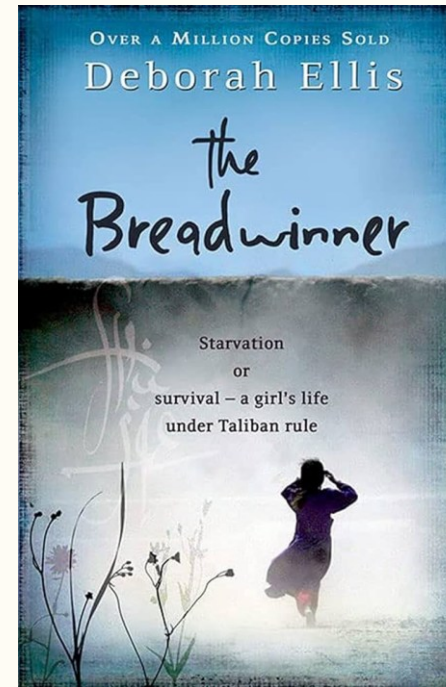
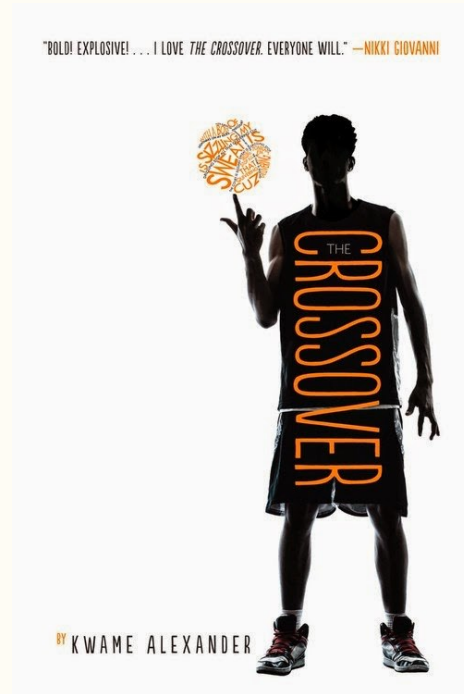
Was a

NEUROSCIENTIST

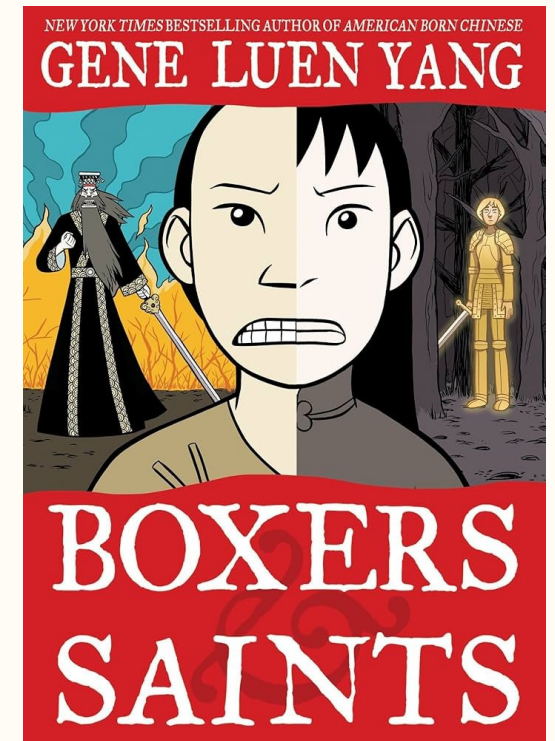
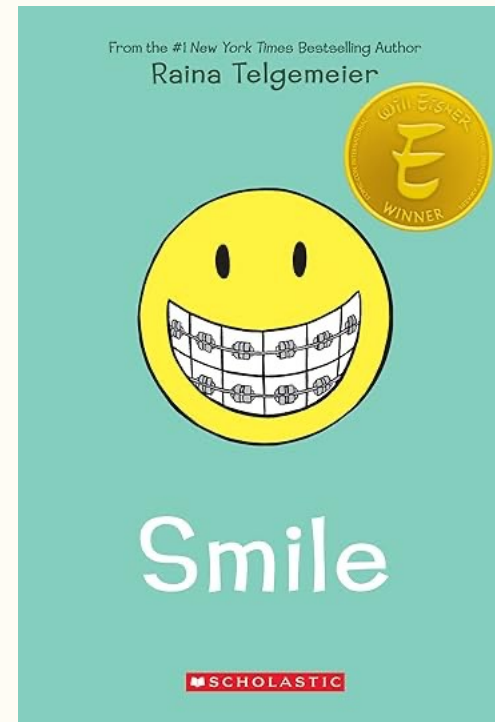
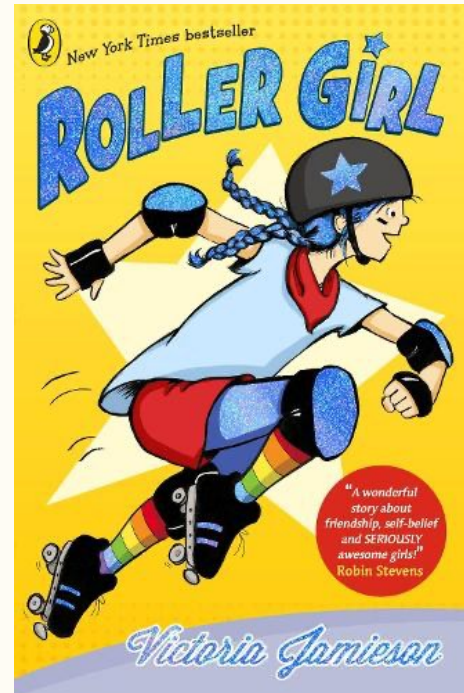
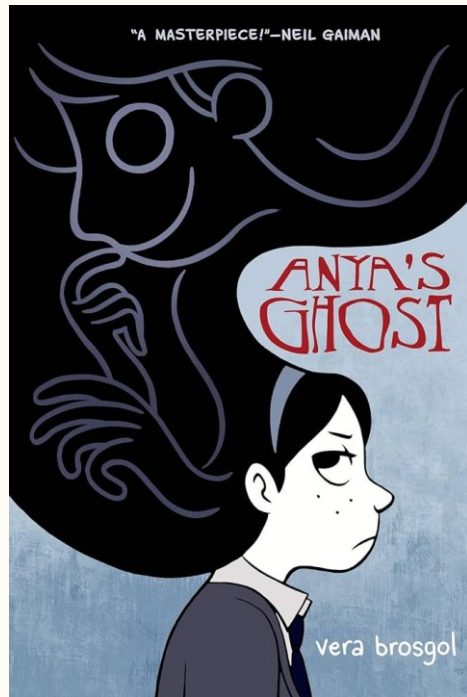


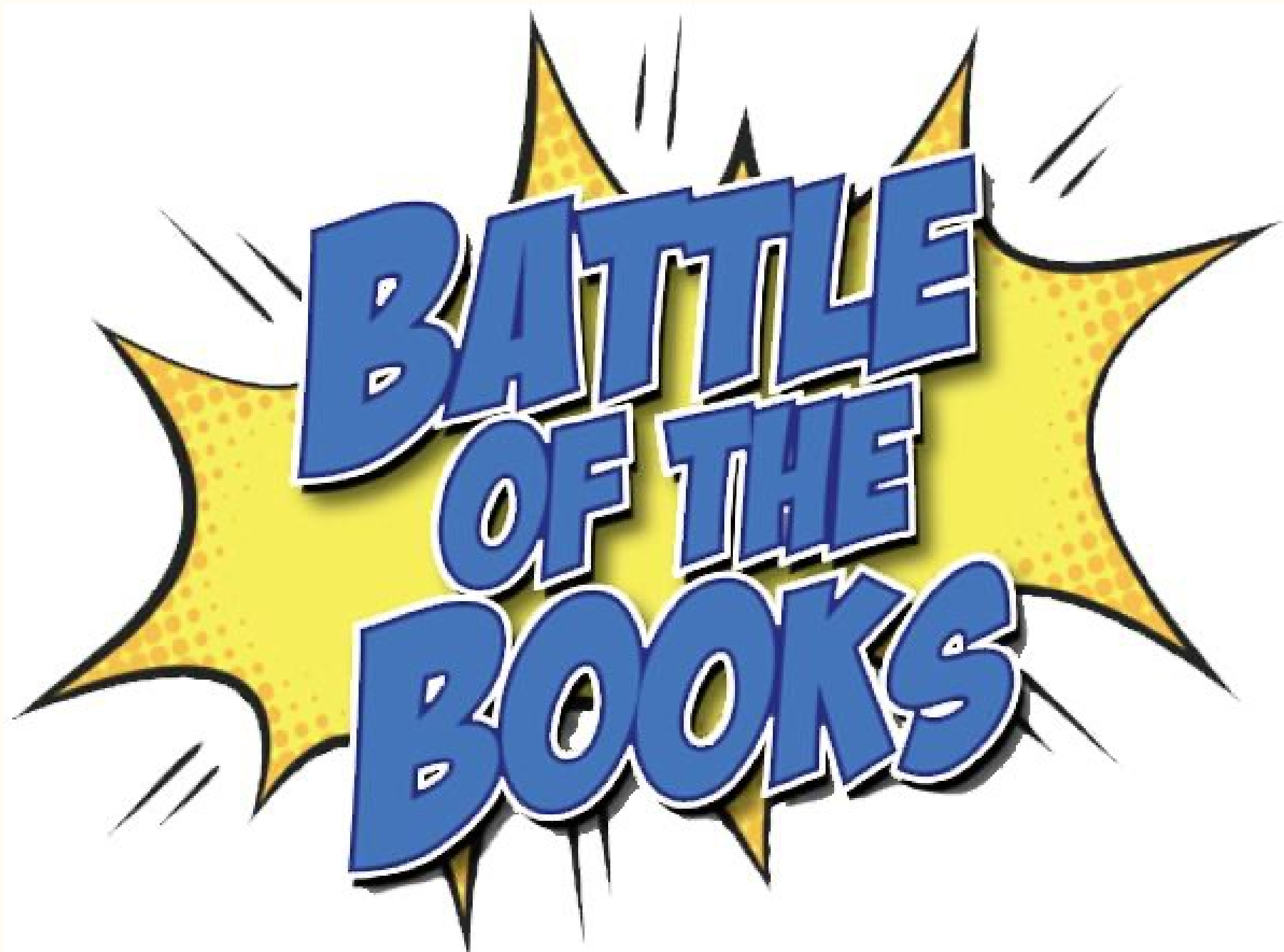
JONAH LEHRER

Stories that Live in Letters



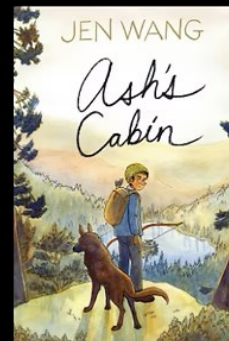
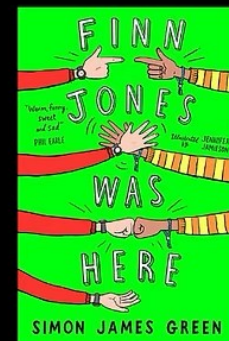
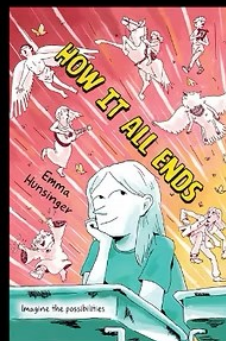
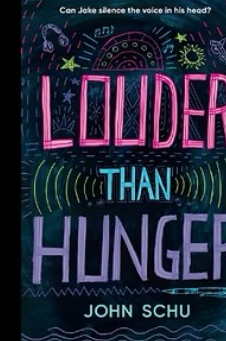
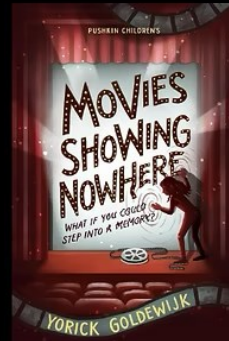
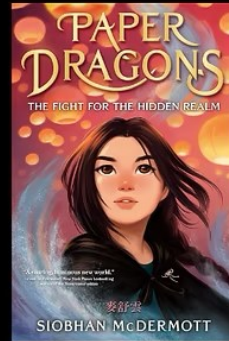
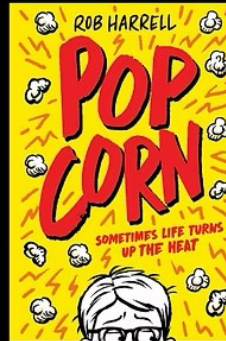
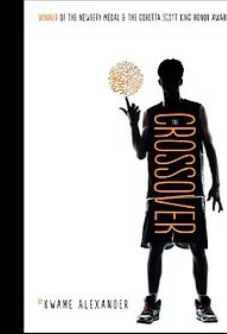
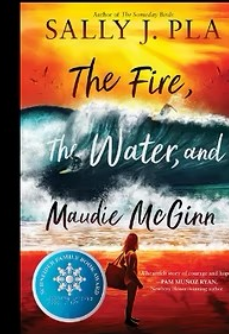
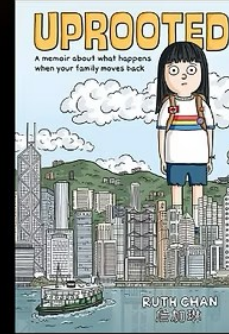
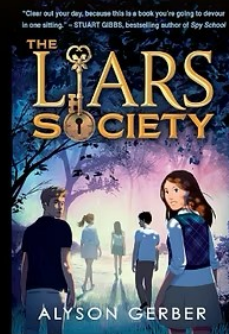
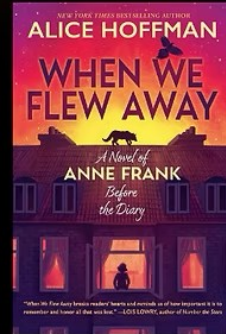
Stories Born in Boxes





BOB BOOKS

Secondary
2025 - 2026





Battle of the Books Competitions

Awards and Recognition for Reading

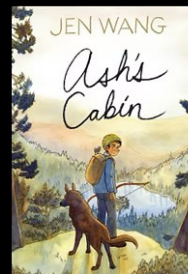
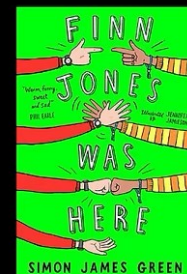
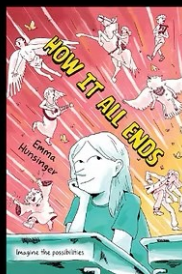
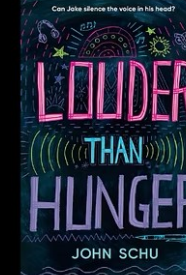
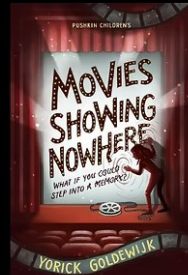
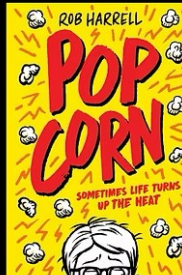
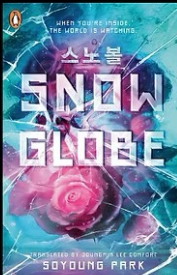
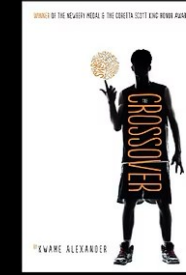
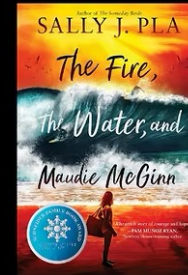
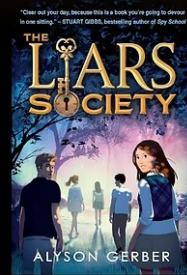
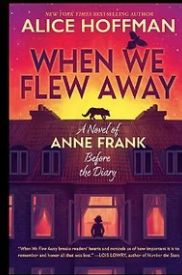


How can we use social connection,
competition and recognition to support
reading?

Choosing Books

BOB BOOKS

Secondary
2025 - 2026



Why do readers get stuck on certain series or writers?



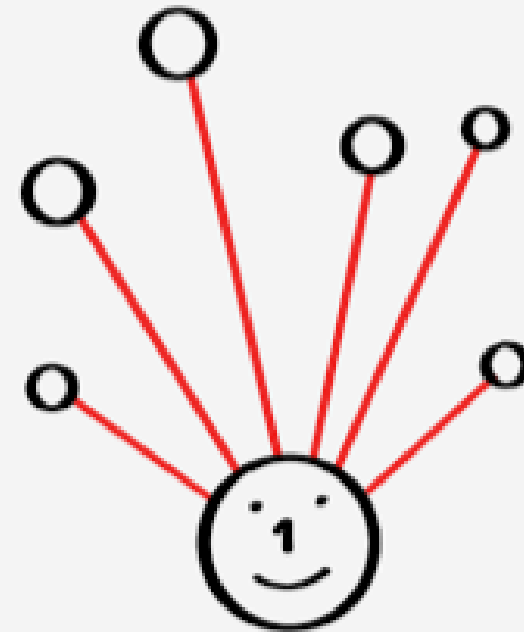
The Paradox of Choice.

The more choices we have, the higher our expectations — and the more we worry about making the “wrong” decision.

24 CHOICES

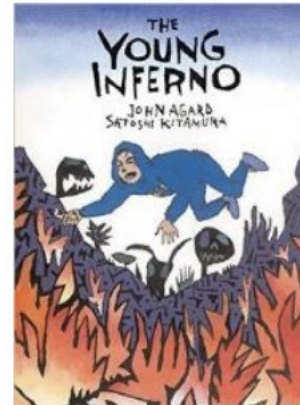
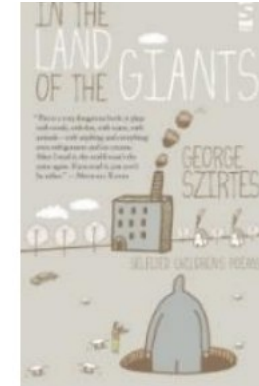
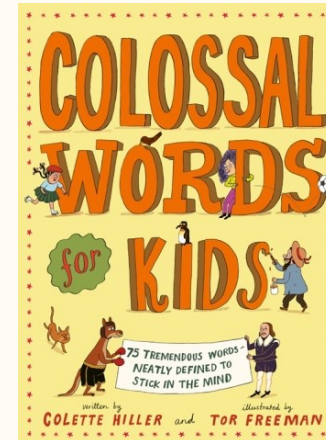
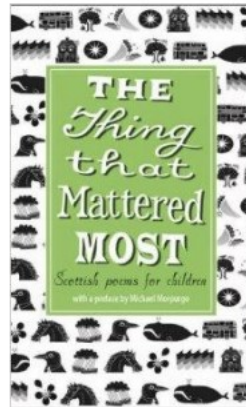


6 CHOICES



World Poetry Day

Everybody chooses a poetry book to read

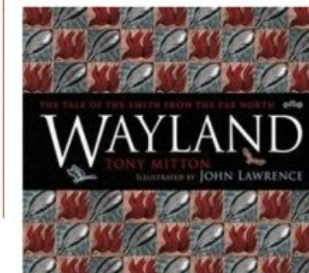
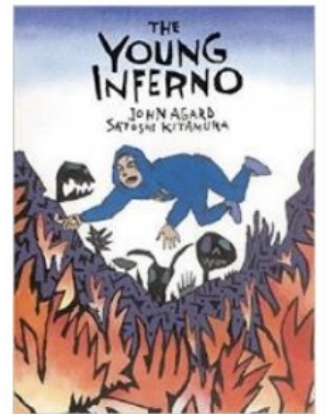
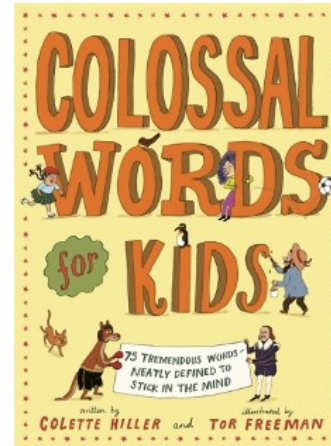
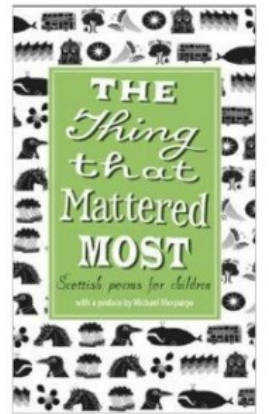
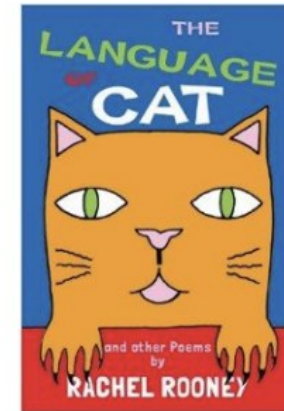


Winners of the



THE CLPE POETRY AWARD

2007 - 2025





ROYAL SOCIETY YOUNG PEOPLE'S BOOK PRIZE 2025



The
Carnegies

Medal for
Writing
Shortlist 2025

#Carnegies2025 | Carnegies.co.uk



How can we encourage young people
(and ourselves) to be more ambitious and
varied with our reading?

Reading and resources

Research

Website: <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/literacylab/>

- Research articles
- Online articles/blogposts
- Reflective reading guide
- Recorded author events

Reading and Wellbeing

Reading and Wellbeing: A Reflective Reading Guide

Reading fiction can support our wellbeing, but particularly when we engage deeply with the books that we read, and reflect on our reading experiences. This guide is designed for readers, and book groups, to reflect upon and discuss the different ways in which reading can support their wellbeing.

Positive emotions
Our own life experiences shape our reading of fiction, and fiction books can elicit emotions either directly through the characters and events depicted in the story, or indirectly, as it leads us to recall personal memories and their associated emotions. In addition, even sad narratives can elicit emotions which readers report to be positive.

Questions for reflection:
1. Can you think of a recent book you read, or an all-time favourite book, and how you felt when reading it, or after reading it? What was it about the book that elicited these emotions?
2. Reflect upon your favourite genres, why you are drawn to these and the emotions you experience when reading them.
3. Reflect upon or discuss whether extending your reading experiences to different genres could widen the emotions experienced by reading.

Connection
Fiction books often portray the social world we live in. Readers often report feeling connected to fictional characters (for example, those with shared experiences), but also more connected to those around them, as they develop an enriched understanding of others and/or talk with others about books they have read.

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Questions for reflection:
1. Can you think of a book where you felt a sense of connection with a character, story, setting or author? Why was that and how did it make you feel?
2. Have fiction books helped you to understand others better, or feel more connected to other people in your life?
3. If you are part of a book group, in what way do you feel you benefit from talking about books with others? Are there ways to extend these benefits?

Personal growth
Reading fiction offers many opportunities for personal growth, for example, it improves language and literacy skills, and our knowledge and understanding of the world, ourselves, and others. Reading fiction can help us to see things from others' perspectives and has been associated with empathy and wellbeing. It can also help readers during difficult times.

Questions for reflection:
1. Can you reflect upon the different ways in which reading fiction currently supports your own personal growth?
2. Can you reflect upon the role that fiction books have played in supporting personal growth across your lifetime?
3. Consider and discuss how being part of a book group, and hearing others' perspectives of the same book, can support personal growth.

Find out more about the Reading and Wellbeing project here: 







Article | [Open Access](#) | 

Reading Fiction and Psychological Well-being During Older Adulthood: Positive Affect, Connection and Personal Growth

Nicola K. Currie✉, Katherine Wilkinson✉, Sarah McGeown✉

Research Articles

How Does Reading Fiction Support Adolescents' Wellbeing? A Qualitative Study Examining Positive Affect, Connection and Personal Growth

Nicola Currie , Charlotte Webber , Katherine Wilkinson, Christina Clark, Gemma Moss  & Sarah McGeown  

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Reading and wellbeing: Exploring perspectives across the lifespan

Nicola Currie and Sarah McGeown of the University of Edinburgh's Literacy Lab explore the perceived impact of reading on people's wellbeing.

Topics: Research and evaluation
Last updated: 17 September 2024

Upcoming events

Book Week Scotland

The Power and Pleasures of Reading with Graeme Macrae Burnet

20th November, 7-8.30pm

In person and online tickets available



<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/the-pleasures-and-power-of-reading-with-graeme-macrae-burnet-tickets-1544433455039?aff=Web>

Research

Positive narrative to frame future thinking, discussion and action in relation to books and reading.

Shares research insights, and diverse perspectives within the context of five themes:

- Enjoy
- Engage
- Empower
- Enrich
- Expand

<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/literacylab/>



Practice

References

- **Heller, N.** (2023) *The End of the English Major*. The New Yorker, 27 Feb. Available at: www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/06/the-end-of-the-english-major
- **Christodoulou, D.** (2024) *The Fall of Eng Lit*. Substack. Available at: <https://substack.com/@daisychristodoulou/p-151515473>
- **Lehrer, J.** (2012) *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books. ISBN 978-0857862310
- **Battle of the Books (USA)**. Available at: <https://www.battleofthebooks.org/>
- **Battle of the Books (Hong Kong)**. Available at: <https://www.hkbattleofthebooks.org/>
- **CLiPPA Poetry Award Winners**. Available at: https://clpe.org.uk/system/files/2024-08/Previous%20CLiPPA%20Winners%202024_0.pdf
- **Excelsior Prize for Graphic Novels**. Available at: <https://www.excelsioraward.co.uk/>
- **Jhalak Prize for Writers of Colour in the UK and Ireland (Children & YA)**. Available at: <https://www.jhalakprize.com/>
- **Carnegie Awards**. Available at: <https://carnegies.co.uk/archive>

Recommended Books for Young People

Ways to Live Forever by Sally Nicholls.

(2008). *Marion Lloyd Books*. ISBN: 978-1-4071-0499-7.

Wonder by R. J. Palacio. (2025).

Puffin Classics. ISBN: 978-0-241-77751-0.

The Crossover by Kwame Alexander.

(2015). *Andersen Press*. ISBN: 978-1-78344-367-3.

The Breadwinner by Deborah Ellis.

(2023). *Oxford University Press*. ISBN: 978-0-192-78738-5.

My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece by Annabel Pitcher.

(2013). *Orion Children's Books*. ISBN: 978-1-78062-186-9.

Anya's Ghost by Vera Brosgol.

(2014). *Square Fish*. ISBN: 978-1-250-04001-5.

Roller Girl by Victoria Jamieson

(2024). *Puffin*. ISBN: 978-0-241-71296-2.

Smile by Raina Telgemeier.

(2023). *Scholastic US*. ISBN: 978-1-338-74026-4.

Boxers & Saints by Gene Luen Yang.

(2013). *First Second*. ISBN: 978-1-59643-552-0.

Thank you for listening

Opportunity for questions and discussion



University of Edinburgh Literacy Lab:

<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/literacylab/>

LinkedIn: [Sarah McGeown](#)

A copy of these slides is available on the 'talks' page



George Heriot's School
Founded 1628

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