TLC Editorial

Literary Culture Survey

We asked 10,000 writers

‘What is Literary Culture?’

Here are the responses

We have not corrected or edited these responses, to honour the format in which they were sent to us. All views and perspectives were welcome.

Art (including literature) that’s more than passive entertainment, and which requires something from the reader.

The canon of literature- high, low and middle brow.

The world of words, carefully crafted storytelling to make us think and become better human beings.

An account of ourselves as creative beings.

The publicly available events and materials around literature.

A vital element in the state of the zeitgeist and a true reflection of contemporary thinking - an essential and permanent element in progressing civilisation.



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Literary culture is writing in any form which gives us the opportunity to explore lives beyond our own. Literary culture develops an open-minded curiosity, which leads to better self-knowledge and empathy with others.

A fair access to all forms of literature - poems, plays, monologues, memoirs, letters, essays, interviews, dialogue, commentary , whether the written word or an audible version, or braille.

An environment in which literature features prominently, allowing readers and writers to explore and expand their worlds.

Creative Writing Workshops, Author Talks, Written And Spoken Word Open Mic Events, Reading Books, Writing Competitions, Writing Submission Opportunities, Sharing Your Own Written Work.

Literature that reflects the rich and diverse culture of these islands.

The society you live in and the communal interest in literature as a part of that. Revealing stories of humanity - out if the ordinary. Not based on race, gender and class which is impacting quality of both writing and story.

Creative writing of all genres, by all people for everyone.

A society where language and its usage is valued and embraced by everyone. A world in which books and writing are easily available and accessible. Where people choose to spend meaningful time reading rather than relying on digital tech.

Being in-touch with the types of books that are popular.

It means what people are reading, watching and listening to.

Book signings, attending author and publisher events, reading around the topic. Literary culture is the shared beliefs and values people hold about books, reading and writing. I think it is very important to a community to have a strong literary culture, to promote the advantages of reading widely and regularly, as well as using writing as a tool of expression and communication.

The widest possible range of writing and thought.

Everything associated with literature, ie writing, reading, books.

A culture of writing, reading, and thinking that is inseparable from a good life.

Literary culture is stories about everyone. It's a way of learning about different people, cultures, societies, eras, movements, families, cities, towns and villages. It also incorporates events which discuss how books were written and why, author talks and panel discussions.

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A sense that the world around me is reflected, lifted up and interrogated in the books being published in my lifetime. That books, writing and readers are centred across all elements of education and wellbeing, as well as appreciated in their own right.

Having access to information about how the words in the world are shaped and put in front of me.

I'd like it to mean the writing community: creating a rich and well-funded culture in which literature and writing and reading (creating and consuming) is open and accessible to all. I am not sure that's what it means yet - but that's what I'd like it to mean.

Where books and reading are seen as meaningful and accessible.

The use and enjoyment of books, stories, writing in the everyday world.

It means acknowledging, exploring and valuing the past, present and future of the written word as a response to the common ground of our human experience and an expression of our shared, varied and ever-evolving identity.

There are so many different subcultures around reading, writing, storytelling - everything from graphic novels to romantasy. I find the term culture can be used to limit and to exclude. 'That's not in our culture' can be used to shut down any behaviour that deviates from a preferred norm, to place bars. Culture can be a home, it can also be a prison.

Exploring, sharing, discussing literature and ideas. The definition of literature can be as broad as we choose it to be, therefore there is no limit to who can join the conversation - the question is only how.

The opening of opportunities to write, reflect on society's values, custom and traditions using challenging and divisive tactics.

A culture which is based on its literature and reading, rather than commercial and media-based.

The availability of multiple routes into reading and writing for EVERYBODY, not just the privileged few.

'Literary culture' means the ability to talk about literature in all of it's forms, whether that be producing literature or talking about a finished piece after it's made. I would want 'literary culture' to be inclusive and welcoming and also AI-free (because generative Ai is stealing people's work).

Literary culture is work which captures voices that are thoughtful, reflective and acute. Pictures in sound and vision fashioned from others are gifts to treasure and celebrate.

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I think it's the hundreds of hours of work put in manuscripts no one will ever see, I think it's the dogged determination to work on your craft for decades before any of it sees the light of day, it's building peer groups so you can all play and improve together, it's furtive experiments with strange structures and cuttings words to the bones. It's the conferences and talks on craft. The reviews and discussions of books. The perfect Sunday afternoon slumped in an armchair and a cup of tea as you sink your teeth into the book that changes how you see the world. It's so many things, a lot of them very joyful.

The enjoyment of reading and how it adds to, and shapes, our national life
Literary culture reflects the cares and concerns of the community that produces it. It speaks to their heritage, their traditions, their challenges and their lives.

It means participating in a community of people with a shared love of reading and books.

How books, stories and literary history is relevant in our current day-to-day and popular culture.

For me literary culture is that bodies of book that are able to reflect and picture the specific moment in time the writer is living in. Literary culture in the 80s, for example, would have been a representation of Yuppies and the first sushi bars, literary culture now would represent social media rise and climate change. Is it widely available? I don't think so. There are so many books that just are on the shelves to sell and make money. There are so many books that don't represent me because I am not part of any majorly accepted minority (I am white, I am a woman, I am in my 40s, I am an immigrant from another European country), and apparently I am not marketable enough to deserve something written for me. About me. That represents me. So often i see literary culture as another way to sell me something instead of listening.

A range of artists/writers who have crafted their work (poetry/prose/drama)- not just the classics and the literary canon but also modern day writers.

A life spent in and out of the written (and spoken) word. It's interweaving writing, reading, sharing into our everyday life, to enrich our experience.

Books and reading.

ideas, values, life and experience captured and communicated through words
The availability and celebration of, and access to, literature in society.

Conversations, discussions, and sharing of experience around the written word, (or audio books)

To me, literary culture is the wider world that surrounds writing and reading: the stories we create, the conversations they start, the people who write them, and the communities that form around them. It includes aspiring and unpublished writers as much as published authors, and the spaces where people can experiment, learn, share ideas and find their voice.

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For me, literary culture is also about whose stories are given space and whose experiences are valued. It is about making literature feel accessible and relevant to ordinary people, rather than something that belongs only to an established literary world.

The joy of reading, of writing, of connecting with other writers and readers, sharing knowledge and opinions. It's writing groups, book clubs, it's everything you see on television or film. Written by actual writers.

It means the works, practices and traditions of a group of people.

A body of thoughtful writings with skill and affection for language and groups and individuals and events celebrating them.

A lot, I can experience other cultures, times and places.

All things surrounding books - fiction and non-fiction.

The total culture around the written or spoken word that has contributed in many societies to raising civilisation from a simple survival level to a sophisticated and responsible level of understanding and respect for the whole of humanity and an inclusive understanding of the world around us.

A community where ideas, help, mentorship can take place.

Culture related to stories, poems and the written word. Creativity of ideas expressed in words.

To me 'Literary Culture' means creative expression that finds its form in writing and the performance of that writing and in a manner which demonstrates a sophisticated use of language.

Reading and educating ourselves!

It means reading, writing and discussing novels of numerous lengths.

IT MEANS HAVING ACCESS TO WELL WRITTEN IDEAS AND THOUGHTS WHICH ENHANCE MY LIFE.

To me, literary culture is how communities come together through books or reading. It's fueled by passionate workers (librarians, bookshop sellers, authors, literary agents, etc.) and can be a benefit to anyone who chooses to be involved.
A culture around books on an infrastructure level. Funding, events, participation, organisations around books and reading.

A cross section of written work spanning the broader society, its conversations, trends and thought. True literary culture engages thematically, not through sales and elitist agendas, however acknowledges and celebrates groundbreaking new work and its authors. Free speech, open debate and exchange of ideas are paramount to this. Curation, at certain levels, is essential.

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Knowledge and wisdom shared creatively in verbal, particularly written, form.
A culture where creative writing is a 'normal' and widely practiced element of social communication without any sense of elitism.

Any form of reading or writing. It doesn't need to be highbrow (but if that what gets you reading, go for it). It covers the full range of genres and sub-genres and anything in between.

media exposure on what new books are coming out, reviews, events, workshops, author signings, general discussion in society about literature and literacy

A community of readers and writers who engage with each other positively through books, media reviews, interviews and in-person events. The community is built on works through history collectively agreed to be important to society.

Truth and creativity through the ages is an essential legacy for us all to enjoy and learn more about ourselves.

Reading, writing and discussing literature in all its forms - fiction, non-fiction, poetry, autobiography, biography, memoir etc.

Activities and ideas related to literature

The whole world of literature, books, storytelling, and thinking and writing and talking about literature.

novels and short stories that elevate life using words

A culture where books with literary quality as opposed to "disposable" light entertainment are valued and their authors recognised and supported by readers, funding bodies, etc. (No disrespect intended to authors of light entertainment, as writing it well is an achievement.) I think literary culture can also be part of a specific national or regional culture, describing that particular part of the world and its general culture and expressing a unique identity.

A culture of enabling, sharing and discussing all forms of literature and supporting and celebrating writers.

It's well away from the bookshops, or stages of festivals, or book reviews. For me: it's the Friday nights, around kitchen tables, in community centres, libraries, where people come together to write, tell their stories, express themselves – for no other reason than they can. They must. It's not the books, it's the communities of potential each of these stories forge.

Currency of ideas… an alive ever-morphing conversation between readers and writers about the meaning of life through prose and poetry… art, music, dance…living.

I think literary culture should highlight all voices and ways of life. I feel like, currently, there is a tendency to publish books with middle class voices.

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Books in all genres are powerful tools. The way that, quietly, with the power of written words thoughts and ideas are spread. A library or book shop is a gift to all. Written or audio, the human perspective needs to be celebrated.

We humans are story-tellers. We can imagine that the first stories were told by cave-dwellers huddled over a comforting fire, stories that would evolve into what Joseph Campbell described as the Hero's Journey.

Active engagement with the story on the page involving one's imagination is more rewarding than passive interaction with a story and its characters on a screen. We feel rewarded, not only because we choose to be an active participant in the story, moment by moment, but because in doing so, we have learned more about life and about our role in our own life-story. We also feel rewarded in that we have taken time to apply our imagination and allow our synapses to fire and wire together as we explore the story with its characters from moment to moment.

For me, literary culture is a part of the artistic enterprise by which we, as a society have developed and can express ourselves. By putting word to paper, we become part of the human endeavor to record the human experience.

A variety of books inform, entertain and nourish me.

It's keeping up with ideas and criticisms and celebrations of what's happening in society - a space for reflection in a hectic world.

I have no idea what it means

Discussion, appreciation, and recommendation of books that are enjoyed for their literary merit, distinct from but not exempting those popular in genre publishing. It also means the many kinds of facets of different cultures that are preserved and expressed through literature. It also encompasses the way that literature shapes human lives, and therefore the country, and therefore the national culture x

When we come together to share our views on writing, publishing and all associate aspects of being an author.

Reading, writing, meeting writers, developing writers craft, learning about past writers, attending book events, oral storytelling, discussing books...

A society that finds joy in the telling of stories. An enthusiasm to read, started from a young age.

The collective beliefs, behaviours and traditions that shape how stories are created, thought about, shared and valued. It is the ongoing conversation between writers, readers and society about the stories we tell and why they matter.

It means a society in which respect is given to reading as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end: one in which if there is any "achievement" in reading, it is simply the altered consciousness of the reader, their deepened awareness of others and

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self. It is not about reading a certain number of books, or about speed, it is about slowness and presence.

People who read books for both entertainment and knowledge and are appalled at bans.

The act of reading

Books

I'm not sure. My knee jerk reaction was to think of middle-class folk sipping wine at book events that feel impenetrable for folk who aren't middle class. I know that's not what it's intended to mean.

Ideas and shared values, championing books and reading.

Both the inclination for the public to engage with books and writers, and the way in which writers work with each other and their readers to engage, involve and produce excellent work that pushes boundaries.

A literary culture values storytelling and stories because they create empathy and so make us gentler more compassionate and tolerant human beings.

Since literature has had its day as a form of mass entertainment, I think its main purpose can be summarised in the phrase 'Beyond the Wings' from 'The Insomniacs' by Adrienne Rich:

My voice commands the formal stage;
A jungle thrives beyond the wings—
All formless and benighted things
That rhetoric cannot assuage.

I think the current purpose of literary culture is to tell the stories that are being ignored by the mainstream.

Literary culture is more than just books and the places you find them - bookshops, libraries, book fairs. It is schools, where children learn the importance of reading and writing, and journalism which encourages people to understand what is going on in the world today. It is the publishers who produce the books, and the media outlets which disseminate news and ideas. It is the community of writers who produce the written words, and the readers who consume them

Books, poems, literary festivals, writing workshops.

All the words and their meanings that have evolved over the centuries. All the phrases that have contributed to our ways of life, and the interweaving of words into stories that have been passed on from one generation to another

books, book reviews, libraries, bookshops

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A movement, or drive, within society and communities to read books and talk about them.

The places where we engage with words which behave differently.

Writing that opens my eyes, ears, mind, heart and soul to new experiences, places, people, ways of living, loving, dying, and everything in between.

People who love reading and writing and care about how it is done

Talking about books and stuff

At it's heart reading fiction and creative non-fiction to help me get through rough patches, enrich my daily life.

Literary culture is the creation or appreciation of writing that can have a positive influence on society.

Reading and writing across genres. Libraries. Literary events. Theatre. Learning. Participation.

Literary culture covers a range of activities including spoken word, poetry, novels and short stories.

the inclusion of all those involved and interested in the literary arts of writing and reading

It means everything to do with literature: writing, reading, publishing, book groups - and all the activities associated

Anything to do with books and reading - museums, exhibitions, talks, mailing lists etc etc

Exclusive, snobby

Storytelling, in the broadest sense. Not just physical books and authors but the ecology that supports that - community, comics, libraries, reading clubs, cosplay, truly hearing each other whether through a microphone or over a coffee!

It’s a space where writers are the preeminent seers and interpreters of the condition of the planet and its inhabitants, and where readers find in them, and the community around them, the ability to participate in a discourse that validates the human condition.

A way of experiencing other lives

Literary culture for me means: writers, readers, discussions, blogs, books, magazines, events, bookshops, and libraries.

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The community which gathers around the tradition of the English language, its appreciation and production irrespectively of where or when it has been produced. Also its connections with the other arts.

knowledge, history, stories, exploring ones own and other cultures. Without it we would lose our rich written and spoken language.

To me, "literary culture" has quite a narrow meaning - it suggests the culture around literary fiction, as opposed to the wider culture of reading, writing and publishing. I understand and support the TLC initiative but I would suggest a different term myself. A crucible of thought that helps us explore what it is to be human. Storytelling (and the non-fictional explorations of ideas) confirms and strengthens our collective humanity.

As well as published books and authors, I think it should (and does) include everyone who writes for whatever reason. The area I live in has a very active literary community with courses, day-long in-person/online writing retreats, workshops, writers groups, open mic events, critique groups and social meetups all happening regularly. Many of the writers I know locally have self-published novels and/or poetry books and are part of an authors collective. The collective, who also hold regular social events and attend markets/shows to sell members' books.

Not all of these people are fantastic writers, but they are dedicated, motivated and gain pleasure from what they do. Their writing is enjoyed by those who read it or hear it read at an event. Too often, what's perceived as 'culture' is subject to industry gate-keeping. When, in reality, literary culture extends so much further than traditional publishing/the publishing industry.

The culture of both fiction and non-fiction written texts.

It means the joy and depth and value of literature and adjacent things like film adaptations and access to writing and publishing.

A country, region or town which had a wide range of literary activities encompassing the whole population: age, sex, creed, ethnicity, income, level of ability. This would span reading, researching, oral tradition, poetry/books/theatre - a strong culture, would mean there was always something to be found. A real literary buzz - whether to experience or create.

An awareness of the power of literature to create empathetic and interrogative citizens better placed to understand the human condition and human relations.
The love of writing and books

It means not just reading and writing but the whole macrocosm of the literary world, writers, readers, publishers, reviewers, marketers, and how they interact with each other and how they synergise to boost the sector within wider society.

Everything! A life long passion. Through literature we learn so much about life.
any level of reading and writing, to discover new and overlooked voices as well as revisit known ones, and social connections around these

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Our heritage of literature and our interaction with it , how it permeates how we read and write, how it shapes our percetion of ourselves others nature and the world.

"the joy of reading"

A society where respecting and enjoying literature is the norm, an expected part of human life and which informs the way society is designed, funded and led.

The culture surrounding books and literature, so anything from reading, to reviews, to discussions and events.

Books, reading, sharing about reading books, expanding one's view of the world. An essential part of human experience

A culture of reading and learning about books and authorship and what goes into making a literate community.

Reading, writing, discussion, writing groups, book groups, festivals, readings, residencies, courses, curricula.

Literary culture for me means everything from Prize-winning novels to popular children's books. I don't think you can have one without the other.

It's a means of helping people understand life and others' viewpoints /perspectives/background /culture. Without a broad exposure to the cultures /experiences /lives of others, individuals' lives are narrowed and their perspectives can be constrained by their own, often limited, lives. For humanity to prosper - perhaps more for their souls to thrive - peoples' lives have to widen to understand others' - and literature can do that.

Books and anything to do with books - reading and writing - skills, workshops, performances, libraries, book shops, authors (established and emerging) supporting literary culture
A community of writers, translators, support organisations, producers, and other artists working together to advance the artform.

The space where reading of all kinds is valued, shared, taught, and supported - financially and in other ways. And where children and young people discover the value of literature through schools. A broad range of literature encourages empathy, and access to all cultures.

Everything around books and reading. Includes live events, tv and film adaptations, BookTok, libraries, literary merchandise, booksellers.

It means 'meaning' to me! Existential meaning! It affords all of us endless opportunities to relax, reflect, consider, change, act.

I don't know what it means

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The practice of reading and writing about real and imaginary things and valuing these activities as vital for a civilised society.

Readers and reading

A culture in which reading, storytelling and poetry are central

Reading and writing. An activity that is usually undertaken alone but can be a shared experience eg book clubs and writing groups or open mics. It's one of the most accessible activities as can be done anywhere with the most basic of tools. It's the most important form of culture to me personally and enriches my life.

Stories and the connections they build between us

The written word is as necessary to me as food and water. It is nutrition for the mind and soul. Literary culture travels beyond books to encompass theatre and screen, and into the content on social media and blog/vlogs.

I'm not sure I know what it means. However, literature reflects and affects our culture while our habits, language, beliefs, for better or worse, inspire us to write and inform what and how we write

real people making and engaging with written work

Literary culture means books, reading and the necessity of using stories to explore the human condition.

A theoretical space (and smaller clusters within that) where people explore, enjoy, share and discuss the ideas aroused by literature, as stories in textual form (fiction, hyrbid non-fiction, etc)

Reading, writing, engaging with new ideas and concepts with people who write, read or want to comment on specific ideas

It's the shared community of readers, writers and booksellers trying to keep alive a culture of reading, and being able to provide a world of books that everyone can find, connect with and enjoy

It means reading, readers, writing, writers, all literary genres on the page, on stage, over the airwaves. I have spent almost 60 years immersed in it as a reader and writer and it is central to my life, relationships and work.

Books, the things around books like signings, festivals, podcasts, reviews, social media. Being a literate society engaged with books. The power to influence what books get on national curriculums and which ones get banned.

Literary culture is providing a space for people who love books - including audiobooks- and love writing

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The production, consumption and enjoyment of books, leading to a richer internal life and improved life choices.

Respect for and acceptance of the importance of literature, with funding and spaces to support this.

The groups and networks that support written expression and the sharing of ideas, creativity and momentum.

A culture in which literature is seen as an engine of prosperity, not an optional. Books and the wider discussion of popular and culturally significant books.

It sounds very elite. It's images of book launches in London. I'm an author in the north east who is disabled, working class and queer. I'm not sure we have a literary culture as I've defined. But we do have loads of literature and happenings! It just doesn't feel establishement. Still a London-centric event.

The vast network of readers and writers and writer-readers and reader-writers, working alone or in groups, observing, remembering, imagining, using language to bear witness, to record, to commemorate.

It means having open, accessible and inclusive spaces to read, meet and share ideas with like-minded people. A community where all types of literature can be talked about and discussed.

Data taken from anonymised SurveyMonkey shared with TLC's newsletter and with literature partners, September 2026. Total eligible respondents: 348.

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