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.

It matters because unless, as readers (and listeners, and viewers), we use our intellectual muscles, they will atrophy. (I use “intellectual” in a broader sense than merely rational.) If that happens, we are defenceless against interests, corporate and otherwise, that manipulate us to their own ends.

Reading is critical to intellectual thinking, empathy, self awareness, growth and connection.

Because without it we would be poorer at understanding people different from ourselves.

To inspire and to prolong creative communication.

It brings literature into everyday life.



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Against a tide of disinformation, societal delinquency and violence literary culture holds firm as a true reflection of the times we live in.

Facts and history teach us the what, where, when, but only literary culture enables us to feel as if we are there, and understand the human costs and impacts of events.

The development of the mind, to form opinions, register information, inspire conversation and debate, promote understanding , critique, social realism and insight, pleasure.

It encourages empathy, understanding, emotional literacy, can "teach" about times, places, cultures and points of view different from one's own.

A chance to give yourself and your community a voice.

People feel seen if their own, everyday language is used in literature.

Books are able to take you everywhere, to meet people, explore places, challenge your ideas, come up with solutions.

Literary culture is an important way of illuminating every area of society in different verbal formats so that everyone can be included in the beauty and intricacy woven by words, re telling our own story, imagining new stories, warnings of past stories, inspiring hope, painting a political wall or scaring people by what reality could hold in the future...words spoken, written or illustrated rhyming or not all influence this world for good and ill. Whilst we have freedom we should use it.

Today society is facing lower literacy levels and falling standards of educational achievement due to short form digital titbits and hours of scrolling. Attention and focus has now become shorter. The command of language and words opens imagination and creativity thus intelligence

I think as a writer it's good to know what's going on for publishers and other authors What we absorb through literary culture informs our morals, our principles, our tastes, as well as enriching our imaginations and stimulating our own creativity. It shapes us as civilised beings and makes our society what it is. It helps decide what we will tolerate and how we treat other human beings.

Because it matters to think about things. It matters to express opinions and converse around topics, especially voices that are lesser heard. The internet has helped open up literary culture, I think, but I would say it's still dominated by middle class people. Often talks or events are in person and almost always in London, which is terrible for diversity or representing what the rest of the country (UK) or what global voices think. Sometimes webinars are expensive, having to pay £20+ for a remote session is not feasible for many people. Subscriptions and education cost even more, and often price out voices in the culture.

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It matters because it shapes the way people interact and understand the world around them. I believe people who read are more open-minded, slower to judge, more empathetic and more respectful of other perspectives- not just tolerant, but actively welcoming and curious about others.

Because the imaginative use of words is one of the things that makes us human, and support for imagination is what stops society from atrophying.

Because the written word contains our history, describes our culture, tells us about social mores, and in other languages allows us to enter the culture and stories of other countries.

Without it we have mere utility, a mechanistic life.

It matters because readers want to know about different stories and diverse narratives encourage future writers. Learning the story of someone we may never have contact with increases understanding and empathy. Books have the power to change lives.

It is how we construct history, how we shape memory. Literary culture is a key part of how our footprint on the world will be measured. And seeing clear lines in terms of who is included and who is left out is a stark indication of the inequalities that persist in society. When we talk about who has a voice in the world, literary culture plays an important role in shaping that voice - a book is a pathway to education and to escape our present circumstances, when escape is needed.

It matters because we are all storytellers and writers and stories are how we know the world. And imagination and empathy offer possibilities for a fairer, better world. It improves life.

Because the transient nature of our lives, particularly on a digital level, make for an immediacy in our desires. Books especially pin you down to the here and now, provide the opportunity to collectively enjoy and share not just at the time but through the years.

It matters because it is the most accessibly of all the arts. Even the back of the proverbial cereal packet has something to say!

I'm not sure. I think reading matters, stories matter, books matter, writing matters, creative process matters. If you take these things to comprise literary culture, then it matters because it brings people together to think about things that are bigger than themselves and their lives.

Without it, books are a commodity and reading is consumption. Which may be an acceptable state of affairs, given that any reading is better than no reading. But literature - as opposed to just "books" - can open up so many things - minds, conversations, doors. And the difference is literary culture - that's next level.

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This allows education, exploration and preservation of history. It allows the learning of the old and the new, the opportunity to question and to evolve ideas, which ensure that literature does not solely become 'his story' but concedes valid history.

It's our heritage in this country! Our literary legacy is world famous and is what drove thinking and education for centuries.

Because learning how to write well also teaches you how to think; and because being able to read easily allows you to expand your experience to that of other people

We live in a time when culture and arts are needed more than ever. We as artists are under threat and we need to go back to basics and start to talk about what it means to be an artist, to be a writer, to be a reader and literary culture is part of that. More and more people want to connect on a human level and you can see people gathering to write together, people gathering to read together.

Because we have a shot at better understanding our world and that of others
It's how we learn to tell and listen to stories and that's a fundamental skills for understanding ourselves and each other, persuasion, mental wellbeing and a host of other important parts of being human.

Because it defines us as a nation, opens our mind and gives us great enjoyment.
In the digital age, algorithms have turbocharged the 'idol in the cave'; the belief that our own limited, personal way of life applies universally to everyone else. This in turn has bred extreme division. Literary culture is a vital and unique way to reflect the myriad life experience of the entire community, not just your bubble, helping to breed empathy and understanding about other ways of living.

Yes it matters a lot! Because books are the oxygen of ideas and how we understand the world and each other.

New ideas, inspiration, literacy and expanding perspectives

It matters to bring something to light, to make people think, reflect, be uncomfortable. Yes it matters because it can be a voice for others; it can provide a safe place for people to escape to; it can enrich people’s lives and also make them aware of struggles/issues that others face.

By positioning ourselves in a literary culture we deepen our understanding of others, we step outside our own bubble and open ourselves up to the lives of others. Because this is the most direct way to access another human's imagination, to share ideas and ways of seeing the world.

Humans have always been storytellers -- and will continue to be, if they continue to listen to stories, seek stories, value stories and learn to communicate through storytelling

Literature helps us think and feel, and can be joyful, transcendent, pleasurable, spiritual.

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Because telling stories is a fundamental part of what makes us human - it's what helped us learn from each other and understand different perspectives.

"Literary culture matters because stories can help us understand lives and experiences that we might otherwise never encounter. They can make people feel seen, give language to things that are difficult to express, and create a sense of connection between people who may have very little else in common.

It also matters because writing is not only about producing books. The process of creating, sharing and discussing stories has value in itself. A healthy literary culture gives people permission to tell stories that matter to them, even when they are not yet published or commercially successful.

For me, literature is one of the ways we make sense of ourselves and the world around us. That feels especially important when so many different experiences and voices need to have a place within our culture.

Writing my own novel has made me realise how much the act of telling a story can matter before anyone else has even read it.

Funding for the arts is at an all time low. Funding for writers is even lower, kids I know have said they never read, it's boring. Mind you I'm not surprised, with the English lit syllabus still stuck in the 1920s-50s. It matters because being lost in a book, lost in a story, opening your horizons and seeing things from other people's perspective, or seeing your own perspective there on a page, being seen for who you are, being represented by other people's words. Couldn't matter more. Literature holds up a mirror to society, allowing space for reflection, contemplation, communication and understanding. It both captures the now and creates a legacy for future generations.

Pleasure, stimulus, critique, exchange of thought.

Preserving good mental health, learning, and staying sharp.

It's an essential part of humanity

Because we aspire to more than mere existence, and a literary culture is a vital part of this.

It matters because it is needed.

It is fundamental to human existence. Without creativity humans are lost.

'Literary Culture' matters because it allows complex ideas to be realised and shared, because it has a permanence that not all arts forms have and because it demands an intellectual process to be realised.

Because reading is decreasing, education is decreasing.

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It matters because people are reading less, the illiterate numbers are up and because people in general are getting dumber.

Because life is worth living when I realise that other humans have had the same problems and conflicts as I am having. I read on to see how they managed life. This brings me hope to carry on if things are not going well.

It directly helps people stay entertained and informed whilst maintaining cultural preservation/education.

To me, books and reading are the most accessible forms of art. And the value of art is well-researched.

"You can't fix stupid", and with the onslaught of social media and the real threats of AI, the public conversation is at risk of stupidity, generated by Advertising taskmasters, politicians and niche opportunists pushing narrow ideological agendas. It enables humans to communicate ideas, observations and feelings across time and space.

It encourages a calmer and more reflective way of engaging with life and society, free of the facile chatter of the sel-promting milieu of social media

For me, reading is vital. It's like food! I also write, which is hard work but helps me stay in touch with "me". Reading matters because, to paraphrase my gran, when you're in a book, you're out in the world. Books can teach us so much about lives and cultures that we'd otherwise know nothing about. Hopefully, that leads to a deeper understanding of other people, both near and far. Reading also gives me a break from reality, which can only be a good thing! Also, some of my dearest friends are people I've met through writing.

It is a foundation for a civilised society, it teaches empathy, character, morality, ethics, the nature of evil, so much I couldnt list them all

Books, stories and reading are essentially elements for human understanding of shared our existence. Books are the only way in which readers can experience other people's thoughts unfiltered.

It matters because it is our history and aerial is what helps define us and those that came before.

Literary culture is a vital element in intellectual life, culture generally, and the maintenance and development of civilisation.

Reading is important for the mind, body, soul.

Because stories and literature help us learn about the lives of others. Writers teach us how to make sense of the world, about different cultures, different beliefs, and about empathy and compassion. They teach us how to feel. In this world of AI where people are outsourcing all thinking, feeling, and pleasure, it is so important to help

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people reconnect to the arts and literary culture. I think it is essential for a compassionate society.

it increases your empathy and imagination

Because if this aspect of culture withers and only other art forms such as painting or film flourish, it will be a vast impoverishment of our general culture, as if we'd lost an entire dimension in the way we perceive the world.

This is what educates, inspires and enhances us, and makes us human.

Because books don't come from nowhere and nothing. The myth of the individual writer is exactly that, a myth. Literary culture is not individual geniuses handing down their words to people; it's communities, telling stories together, helping to expand the boundaries of understanding and possibility. Through this, we get to know ourselves better.

Literary culture is the cornerstone of human evolution… of consciousness.

Because everyone deserves to see themselves in literary culture. Stories of different cultures and backgrounds can help to build an understanding of these differences, especially in such divided times.

More than ever in these perilous times, with our human voice challenged by AI, do we need to defend our literary culture. It matters because it is part of us. Not some machine.

The vast bulk of literary culture is designed to retain the reader's interest using suspense or titillation or shock or horror; the typical 'page-turner' eventually finds the reader on the last page breathing a virtual sigh of relief that real life isn't that challenging after all.

In my view, the literary culture that really matters has less to do with the presentation of 'facts', but is more about the creation of facts, if I may put it that way. Original, creative writing 'sees into the life of things', to quote Wordsworth.
But what does that mean?
In Zen writing, for example, the goal of the teacher is to awaken the student into seeing things, as it were, for the first time. In the 13th century, Dogen wrote: 'To be enlightened is to be intimate with all things.' Wordsworth would concur. The presentation of facts is the finger pointing to the moon; the literary culture I am drawn to looks not at the finger but at the moon. This is literature in which every word counts, no sentence is wasted, a literature where euphony, cadence and the mot juste are all as important as the content, enabling the story to be read again and again, each time, as it were, for the first time.

It becomes more than just a rewarding experience, as stated in *1, but a shared spiritual experience emerging from the same source consciousness, the reader not only being an active participant but a virtual co-creator of the story and its inhabitants.And why does that matter?

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In a polarised, fragmented and volatile world —with 85 seconds to go, according to the Doomsday Clock (!) — a literary culture which aspires to awakening us to the beauty, fragility and impermanence of life, along with its co-creative, shared experience of unity consciousness, is now more essential than ever.

Literary culture matters because it is testament to how we as a society have learned to express what is most important to us. And it is the truest and most open form by which we can share those expressions as a society.

Reading sustains people mind, body and soul. Without literary culture we would lead duller and less satisfying lives.

It allows us to reflect and transcends the everyday. Humans are not robots and need deeper engagement in the world.

Literature matters, because it enriches our lives

More than ever, of course it matters. Original human thought is absolutely vital to the survival of the species. Surveillance, AI, fascism overlap arm in arm to destroy the human capacity for imagination. But we will prevail.

It matters because there's nothing like it in the world of literature and sharing ideas and experiences are always helpful and attractive to all concerned.

We learn, grow and evolve from story. We explore the world, it's issues and others minds through story. We develop empathy and understanding through story.
Story improves our mental health as it builds connections and can lift our mood.
Hence, literary culture matters and should be for all.

Because reading for pleasure improves not just educational attainment but personal happiness and empathy.

Stories are a way of recording our history, whether fictional or true. They capture something of who we were, what we believed and how we experienced the world at a particular point in time. They also help us make sense of the chaos that is life, giving shape and meaning to experiences that might otherwise be difficult to understand.

Because reading increases our inner awareness and helps us understand other people. Because reading is an activity that does not create a "product" and therefore poses a challenge to capitalist value systems

Reading opens minds

Yes. Its fundamental to building an intellect

It makes people empathetic

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Stories matter. They can simply entertain, provide escape into imagined worlds, help with empathy by giving a window into a world you aren't familiar with; reading and writing can be cathartic.

Ideas matter, communication matters, having both a shared sense of culture and a way of discovering and embracing new aspects of it.

Because literature enriches us all. It Broden our minds, triggers news thinking and lift us up out of the day-to-day grind to be something bigger and better than we are now. Without a strong and positive literary culture, we will begin to lose that.

As Q 1: a literary culture creates empathy which in turn creates a more gentle, compassionate and tolerant society.

Because it elevates disciplines that are unfashionable but invaluable, including creativity, insight, and the telling of unvarnished truths. In that sense it is a pushback against 20th century celebrity culture and 21st century influencer culture.
Does it matter? Yes, because it's a place to air issues without the polarising tendencies of social media and politics.

"At the most basic level, anyone who is illiterate will struggle to access most areas of life from form filling, or passing a driving test, to understanding an instruction manual. Then there is the way an absorbing story can transport you to another world, or help you to understand people or situations outside your own experience.

Also, places where literary culture thrives, like libraries, are often community hubs which bring local people from different age groups and cultures together to participate in activities which entertain and inform, as well as encouraging better integration and understanding.

Because it shapes us, makes us, gives us opportunities to interact, discuss, reflect and grow.

It informs and entertains us. It keeps the language alive and lively. It connects us with the past and projects into the future

We need to question things, and consider concepts and ideas that may be outside the mainstream. We need to understand life and ideas and experiences outside of our current worldview.

It broadens our perspective and encourages to be more open and responsive citizens of the world.

It connects us, whoever, whatever and wherever we are. It helps us to grow, flourish, think and feel.

Because without it there would be lower quality writing and fewer opportunities for authors

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To realise that you are not the only way to be, often enough, might stop people being jerks.

“Physical survival in rough times
. Emotionally topping me up. It's why I am still soft and not mean hearted."

Writing matters. It’s an expressive form of art that can be practised by people who might not normally connect with art. While technology provides opportunities for people to write, we find the opposite trends - people appear to choose not to write. Because of its broad nature it has the potential to touch so many lives.

It matters because it makes us pause from everyday life and reflect and it enriches our lives.

it feeds us and nourishes us providing links which oil our minds and hearts

I am a writer and a reader. Literature has been a central part in my life from a very early age, and without it I believe I would be a lesser person. I believe reading fiction expands horizons, helps people understand others, and also to not feel so alone. Writing helps my mental health and my understanding of myself and my life. To me, books are fundamental to our lives.

Because it's how we communicate

Literature matters but the culture can get in the way

Without it we are nothing. Without books and writers there is no record of our progress, no suggestion of hope for the future. There is nothing without literature. It's the oldest form of humanity - telling each other stories and documenting our own.

Broadens perspective

Because ideas matter. Because creativity matters. Because empathy matters. Because we need to be able to connect and share ideas with one another. It could help us to save our species from extinction, for one thing.

Because it measures, fosters and promotes the best of international artistic production. Even those arts which communicate through not verbal or written means ultimately need a literary counterpart.

Literary culture is not just literary. It is everything written down in books and opens doors in the mind. It teaches patience, philosophy, critical thought and connects the reader through the writer to a wide circle of people, both past and present.

For the same reason any art matters

Because without it we are atomised beings with failing connections and a weakened understanding of each other: a morally impoverished and more selfish race. Literature not only gives people pleasure (pleasure in reading, pleasure in writing) but also brings them together (ideas, experiences, and in person with events like

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courses, workshops, readings, social events etc). A good literary culture encourages people to express themselves, think critically about what's going on around them, and also fosters a sense of community that has nothing to do with awards or sales figures.

It is an embodiment of human culture. With a three thousand year plus history of importance that reminds of the past, connects us to the present and offers visions of the future.

It can bring emotional and mental value to people, as well as intellectual value. It can soothe and anger and work as catharsis so people can process emotions in a safe way. It connects people and, ideally, is a leveller - film adaptations and audio books also help with this.

It generates positivity, both through experience and creation. This is accessible to all and can also be an outlet for all. Different ideas can be shared and appreciated. Ideas have an outlet and are appreciated. It not only fosters positive spaces and atmosphere, but is good for mental health.

Because it demands a willingness to think other than in terms of the next five minutes and the instant answers offered by those who should know better.

Because if writing ends, culture and education ends!

Without literary culture and art the human condition is not elevated above mere mortal or machine, with the threat of AI making this currently particularly pertinent. It reminds us of what it is to be human.

It fires the imagination and can help us on an emotional level.

Because the internet and social media in particular can muddle our sense of the world and literary culture brings us back to the human and particular, and our senses and emotions

If we don’t have it we will be taken over by AI and that will be the end. The left brain tech bros have no concept of it in their soulless new monoculture that is being foisted on us or let in to our lives like a new trojan horse.

"without such, knowledge and wisdom would be diminished"

It’s critical to individual thinking in a world of AI and technology, our creative and literary abilities are entirely unique to us and it’s so important this isn’t lost as society develops.

It's an important part of the arts. Just like music, theatre, and applied arts, society would be a lot poorer (and more miserable!) without it.

A very good way of learning, expanding and challenging one's view of the world.

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Creates empathy and develops philosophies

Without a literate community, people stop asking questions and thinking critically about issues. They stop discussing and sharing different perspectives which breeds understanding and empathy. A literary culture helps promote a literate community and show the value of literacy in the community.

Literature can broaden understanding and empathy. Reading and writing combine entering others' worlds with our own imaginations in a way that's not available through engagement with other art forms such as TV or cinema.

It matters because the less literate we become as a society the more divided and insular we become. Books open new worlds and new perspectives.

Because it teaches other perspectives; it can aid understanding of different cultures. If taught more in schools, it might prevent kids falling for narrow-minded, prejudiced ideologies that can influence some youngsters. If the curriculum cannot cope with the addition of psychology, literature offers an alternative path to understanding people.

There have been many studies that show that reading and writing are good for health and wellbeing, and children who read have greater outcomes as they get older. Stories are hugely important, both true and fictional, to who we are, connecting with ourselves and others - learning about people with different lived experiences. The thrill of reading and writing, the pleasure it brings.

It is a spur to innovation in the form, to shared inquiry, to a shared culture/community of practice in which we participate in a shared endeavour in service of humanity, human rights, empathy and democracy.

It's a central part of the arts, and has social and political functions as well as pleasure. It leads on to other experiences, private and public, including visual art and music.

Creating various routes into reading for those who don't consider reading 'for them'. It is crucial to society. Whenever literary culture is threatened, or is generally accepted to be of lesser importance than the sciences, a degradation of the human condition can freely gather speed.

I’m not sure if it does

No free civilisation is sustainable without a literary culture and none is worth living in without one. Restricting the reporting of facts and the suppression of imagination is the hallmark of a worthless, warmongering state.

Increasing understanding, knowledge, punctuation, grammar and spelling well-being and social values... stories are core to our cohesion as a society and civilisation. Language used for imagination, connection, complex truths is more important than ever as increasingly it becomes the tool of simplification, binary attitudes of hate and untruths.

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I don’t understand the question

It can be popular culture or more serious. It’s a way of entering other people’s lives backgrounds and cultures and experiences. It can entertain or make us think or both

Stories are how we explain our worlds to each other and how we build our own understanding of what it means to be human

Without stories, poetry, song lyrics, we would exist in a void. Literary culture lends meaning, shared experiences, memories, and entertainment, knowledge, understanding to our lives.

Literary culture is a reflection of who we are. It functions in the same way as recorded history. Writers are historians by default

we are in a crisis of people not only not being able to read and engage with literature overall, but also in a crisis where people are simply not reading anything including their own emails for work. reading and comprehending matters because how else are we meant to explore other worlds and perspectives? how are we meant to trust people are reading anything we send at all? how will our world continue going forward when no one is taking in a single written word?

It provides a - potentially softer, or oblique- way to show and debate meaningful topics and experiences that people might find incendiary, and interpret differently, or that might otherwise not be widely understood or talked about at all. It provides a vehicle for us to explore our shared humanity and can promote empathy for others and the world around us.

In using stories to explore the human condition, literary culture acts to show us who we are in all our varied forms.

It helps to broaden horizons, but also help to connect with like minded people about literature.

It should allow everyone the opportunity to find pleasure and reassurance in books, to grow empathy and connect with people like themselves or people who are different. Books are a unique way to step into someone else’s mind and view their world in a way that films, games or tv just can't replicate.

It matters because we’ve shown people learn empathy from fiction and learn multitudes from non-fiction. If it didn’t matter, ‘they’ wouldn’t be trying to stop us reading certain books. We need to be literate and aware to know our rights and engage with authority. National phenomena like Agatha Christie, Sherlock Holmes, Milton, Shakespeare give us a literary identity.

If it disappeared, so would most of my life, wisdom, pleasures and ambitions. It is a store of accumulated wisdom reaching to us from the ancients and still being added to and disseminated by current and recent generations.

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It's important for those within the culture but also those on the outside who would benefit from being brought in

Freedom of expression. Freedom to make up your own mind, make your own choices. And because it changes lives - I speak from direct experience, as a industrial-city working-class lad from a household that possessed no books. The discovery of the local library literally saved my life.

It makes an impact on the development of language and the literary arts and encourages expressive essays. It also cultivates discernment - knowing how to communicate effectively and not destructively

It provides a space to express the deepest hidden parts of me

It ramps up a country's soft power, attracts visitors and is economically important (people buy books, attend literary events, pay for accommodation and food). Just look at what happens in Ireland.

Literacy in general is important and the culture around literature helps encourage reading for pleasure. Also ongoing debate about the terms of 'good' and 'bad' literature help to promote examples of both, allowing for a richer, more stimulating culture.

Yes. I'm still angry that I didn't get my first book published until I was 40. Breaking down doors? Didn't know there were doors! SO many steps removed from that. Unless it's visible and accessible every day then it still feels unattainable.

Language is our primary tool of understanding the world around us. Fashioning language into story or poem is a way of ordering our existence and testing meaning in the face of a baffling existence.

It is important for increasing broader awareness of cultural issues and supporting with improving literary rates nationally. In a world which is so divided, it helps increase nuance in debates, that you don't have to see the world in black and white. Ultimately it helps make people realise we're all the same

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

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