



Literature in Britain today

an Ipsos MORI poll of public opinion
commissioned by the Royal Society of Literature

March 2017

#LiteratureMatters

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Published by
The Royal Society of Literature
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London WC2R 1LA

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First published 2017

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Speed read summary

Conclusions drawn by the Royal Society of Literature	Evidence from Ipsos MORI survey
<p>Literature is not just for specialists – it is widely read and owned by the British public.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 75% of people (adults in Britain) have read something in the last 6 months which they consider to be literature. • 90% of people who have read a novel in the last 6 months consider that novel to be literature.
<p>There is significant appetite among the public to read more literature.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 56% of people who do not currently read literature would definitely or probably like to read it in the future.
<p>Literature is valued highly in British society. It plays an important role in people’s lives, especially by fostering empathy for others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 88% of people agree that literature should be part of everyone’s education. • 67% believe that literature comforts people in times of stress. • 81% of people agree that literature helps people understand other points of view.
<p>Britain’s long tradition of literature is flourishing.</p> <p>British readers admire a richly varied array of classic and living writers, although women and minority ethnic writers are under-represented.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writer most commonly considered to be a writer of literature is Shakespeare, with Dickens coming a close second. • The living writer most commonly considered to be a writer of literature is J K Rowling, who comes third. • Out of 400 writers named by the public as writers of literature, half are living, 69% are novelists, 31% are female, and 7% are Black, Asian or Mixed Race.
<p>A substantial minority of people have little or no knowledge of literature.</p> <p>Men and people from disadvantaged social groups are particularly likely to miss out on literature.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20% of people cannot name a writer of literature. • 15% of people believe that literature is too difficult to understand. • Readers of literature are more likely than others to be white, to be female, to come from higher socio-economic groups, and to use the internet.
<p>Public libraries are crucial to sustaining and building engagement in literature.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The factors most likely to encourage more reading of literature are recommendations of what to read, cheaper books and more local libraries.

Foreword

Historians will have many reasons to remember 2016, for ill or good. Somewhere on the list of notable shifts may well be the Nobel Committee's bold decision to break ranks with the past and award the Literature Prize to Bob Dylan, singer, songwriter and lyricist – certainly an immensely popular world great, but in many people's eyes, perhaps even his own, not a writer of *literature*.

The RSL's decision to commission an Ipsos MORI poll to gauge public opinion on literature, though hardly directly related to the Nobel, shares in that ground-breaking spirit. We have trusted the public, here represented by nearly 2,000 people, to define on their own terms what literature is for them – without being given prescriptive guidance on merit.

“Literature, in its ability to cross borders, engage imagination and sharpen understanding...may matter more than ever.”

What do people in Britain consider literature to be? In what ways does literature matter to them? And what might encourage them to read more? The results are heartening.

Shakespeare and Dickens come top in the literary ranks closely followed by J K Rowling – and then there are 400 others, a medley of writers of all kinds, over half of them living.

As for the ways in which literature is valued, the British public seems to have much in common with Barack Obama, himself a great writer as well as an omnivorous reader. 81% of our sample believe that “Literature helps people understand other points of view”. Obama, in a conversation with the American novelist Marilynne Robinson, noted:

...the most important stuff I've learned, I think I've learned from novels. It has to do with empathy. It has to do with being comfortable with the notion that the world is complicated and full of greys, but there's still truth there to be found, and that you have to strive for that and work for that. And the notion that it's possible to connect with some[one] else even though they're very different from you.

Or, as our very own J K Rowling puts it:

Imagination is not only the unique human capacity to envision that which is not, and, therefore, the foundation of all invention and innovation. In its arguably most transformative and revelatory capacity, it is the power that enables us to empathise with humans whose experience we have never shared.

The British public also want to read more and this report highlights the ways in which that more could be achieved.

It makes fascinating reading. It also signals that the Royal Society of Literature's forthcoming campaign *Literature Matters* is something that people will welcome in these troubled times. The Society's remit has ever been “the advancement of literature”. As we near our bicentenary in 2020, literature, in its ability to cross borders, engage imagination and sharpen understanding – as well as provide the necessary relief of escape – may matter more than ever.

Dr Lisa Appignanesi OBE FRSL
Chair, The Royal Society of Literature
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#LiteratureMatters

Introduction and commentary

The definition of literature and rationale for the survey

This survey is, as far as we know, the first time anyone has attempted to find out how many people read literature, what literature means to them, and which writers they consider to be writers of literature.

It rightly falls to us at the Royal Society of Literature (RSL) to ask these questions on a national basis, because we are the body responsible under Royal Charter for “the advancement of literature” in the United Kingdom. The answers, of course, depend on what is meant by the richly debatable term “literature”, as distinct from other sorts of writing. The Oxford English Dictionary defines literature as “written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit”, and such consideration of artistic merit is a nuanced and complex process. Literary judgement is both personal and social – a distillation of such factors as experience, education, intuition, ideology, sensitivity, intellect and feeling.

So, when setting literary questions for nearly 2,000 members of the British public, we avoided stipulating the criteria. If the survey respondents asked what was meant by “literature”, their Ipsos MORI interviewer replied that it was entirely up to them. Hence the survey’s findings about literature in Britain today are based as closely as possible on Britain’s own understanding of what literature means.

“The survey’s findings about literature in Britain today are based as closely as possible on Britain’s own understanding of what literature means.”

This is not to say that the findings are incontestable, of course. We acknowledge and relish the fact that the results are open to interpretation. In planning the survey, our governing Council, which is made up of distinguished writers elected from our Fellowship, was quite aware of the potential pitfalls of opinion polls and the arguable paradox of summarising literary experience in statistical form. But we have been impressed by the expertise of our colleagues at Ipsos MORI, and we see the survey as one means for the RSL to fulfil its national remit – by listening to what the country has to say about literature.

The findings will help inform the work of the RSL itself, especially as we prepare for our bicentenary in 2020. Our development plans include a new set of activities under the title *Literature Matters*, aiming to explore the value of literature through talks, publications, projects and awards.

We hope, too, that the survey will prove useful to others in the literary field and beyond. But our goal above all is to generate debate. This report is aimed much less at conclusion than at discussion.

The popularity and value of literature

The survey findings are in many ways very encouraging. Literature is read by three quarters of the British population (see page 11). There is near-consensus (88% agreement) that literature should be part of everyone’s education (page 18), but it is far from a purely academic field. Only 15% of people find literature too difficult to understand, and literature is not at all limited to the classic texts generally found in the school or university curriculum. When asked to name a writer of literature, Shakespeare and Dickens are the most common answers, but readers are just as likely to come up with living authors who are popular, commercially successful, or who write for children: J K Rowling, for example, comes a close third. (See page 23.)

The overall list of 400 writers named by the public is arguably the most definitive summary that exists of Britain’s literary canon – certainly one of the most democratic. Though there will undoubtedly be debate about missing names, the list is in many respects marvellously eclectic. 90% of people who have read a novel in the last 6 months consider that novel to be literature (page 15). Clearly the term is not one that puts people off or belongs only to specialists. Literature is widely owned by the British public. It represents the books that people enjoy and love.

Literature also genuinely adds value to people’s lives. Two thirds of respondents agree with the statement “Literature helps people through times of stress” (page 18) – a finding which is reflected, for instance, in the common practice of reading poetry at funerals, and in the use of reading and creative writing in mental health and other community settings.

“Literature is widely owned by the British public. It represents the books that people enjoy and love.”

There is even wider agreement (81%) that “Literature helps people understand other points of view” (page 18). When the wording for this statement in the survey was being discussed by the writers on the RSL Council, one suggestion was: “Literature prevents terrorism”. That might have been an over-claim, but literature does give readers insight into situations and states of mind that lie outside their direct experience, and in this way – especially in an age when political conflict and violence are perhaps increasingly derived from the demonising of others – literature emerges as more crucial than ever to bridging differences of viewpoint, culture and identity.

Increasing engagement in literature: libraries, writers’ earnings and the internet

Well over a third of people (38%) would probably or definitely like to read more literature in the future, and this rises to 56% of those who do not read literature at present (see page 20). Again, far from being elitist or off-putting, literature turns out to be something people love, long for or aspire to. There is a tremendous opportunity here for all of us in the literary field to tap into the public’s appetite for literature.

When asked what would help them read more literature (page 22), respondents’ top three responses are:

- recommendations of what to read,
- cheaper books,
- more local libraries.

Local libraries may come third in this list, but they are equally relevant to meeting the needs expressed in the first two points – with librarians and library activities helping people choose their reading, and with free accessibility removing any financial barrier. A properly resourced public library service is vital to sustaining and increasing the engagement in literature that this survey makes clear is such a valuable component of British society. Like many others, we at the RSL have been appalled to witness the proliferation of library cuts and closures in recent years. We are currently considering how

“A properly resourced public library service is vital to sustaining and increasing the engagement in literature.”

we may be able to use the RSL’s influence to help address this concern.

The survey respondents’ request for cheaper books is more problematic. We are an organisation led by writers, and we see writers’ earnings being squeezed alarmingly. Research has shown that British authors’ average income fell between 2005 and 2013 by 29% to an average of £11,000 per year (Gibson, Johnson and Dimita, *The Business of Being an Author: A Survey of Authors’ Earnings*, Queen Mary University of London/Authors’ Licensing & Collecting Society, 2015). The main reasons behind this are pressure on booksellers – especially supermarkets and big online retailers – to reduce costs, and this has led in turn to smaller advances and tighter contracts for writers, as well as confusion about earnings from digital formats. The RSL has joined with the Society of Authors, the Authors’ Licensing and Collecting Society and the Writers’ Guild in a collaboration called UK Writers aiming to campaign for a fairer deal for writers, especially in contracts and copyright. But the present survey makes clear that this campaign needs to reach a much wider audience, if the majority of readers are to understand that literature depends on writers being able to make a reasonable living.

“Literature depends on writers being able to make a reasonable living.”

The priority given by the survey responses to reading recommendations is a need that the RSL, like many other literature organisations, aims to meet through public events, talks and readings, visits to schools, publications, and awards that draw attention to individual books and authors. Some of our latest initiatives are designed specially to offer encouragement and guidance for reading: book groups for our Members, an online vote to find the nation’s favourite second novel, and every month one of our Fellows recommending books for reading groups on our website.

The link between using the internet and reading literature is another notable finding of the survey – or, more markedly, the low level of internet usage among non-readers of literature. 73% of literature readers use the internet for hobbies or interests – slightly above the general population at 70% – but, among non-readers of literature, the level drops to 59% (see page 16).

“The internet appears to enable and support a love of literature.”

This data no doubt partly reflects social differences: the survey also shows that non-literature readers are likely to come from poorer socio-economic groups, and that they simply have less access to the internet (page 16). But the association of literature with web usage appears to refute the common view that serious reading will decline if people spend too much time in front of their computer screens. On the contrary, the internet appears to enable and support a love of literature. The biggest opportunities for building engagement in literature – along, perhaps, with some of the most fertile future directions for literary writing itself – are to be found online.

Barriers to literature, limitations of the research

A significant minority of people have little or no interest in literature. 11% of the survey respondents expect to read less or no literature in the future (page 19). For many of this group, the main reasons are the pressures of contemporary life – 23% of them don't have enough time, 18% are too busy – which at least suggest that literature might become a possibility for them if their circumstances change. For others, the reasons seem more intransigent: 15% have other hobbies and 19% simply do not like reading (page 21).

The demographic data (pages 14-15) suggests that underlying social forces may also be at work here. People who read literature undeniably come from all sections of society, and their distribution across age-groups and regional locations varies little from that of non-literature readers or the population as a whole. But people who do not read literature are more likely than the general population – and *significantly* more likely than literature readers – to be from poorer social grades, to have lower levels of education, to come from black or minority ethnic groups, and to be male.

Arguably, the findings on class and education demonstrate that reading literature can bring tangible life benefits – boosting academic achievement, employability and wealth. But the causal relationship could equally be the other way around, with lower income and educational attainment acting as barriers to engagement in literature. Such social exclusion is also implied by the ethnicity data: the under-representation of Black, Asian and Mixed Race people among

literature readers almost certainly reflects the well-documented disadvantage of ethnic minority groups in social mobility and other life outcomes.

The data on gender bucks the sociological trend, with women (another group generally disadvantaged in the population) outnumbering men among literature readers by 54% to 46% – a pattern which is even more evident among non-literature readers, whose female to male ratio is 42% to 58%. Clearly literature appeals strongly to many women, but there seems to be a question about how to attract more men, especially those from less privileged backgrounds, to take up reading.

However, if literature's readers are more likely to be female than male, its recognised writers are more likely to be male than female. The findings from our analysis of the list of 400 writers are estimates which need to be read with considerable caution (see page 26), but, even allowing for a substantial margin of error, some clear patterns emerge – notably that 69% of the writers are male.

In terms of cultural reach, it is pleasing to see that nearly half the writers (44%) are from overseas, and that these include nationally prestigious poets from Pakistan (Allama Iqbal), Poland (Jan Kochanowski, Adam Mickiewicz) and Romania (Mihai Eminescu, Nichita Stanescu), suggesting that migrant literary traditions have found a place in British multiculturalism.

In terms of ethnicity, though, the 400 writers are much less diverse: only 7% are Black, Asian or of Mixed Race, compared with 13% of the British population (and therefore of our survey respondents). This is in some ways a questionable comparison – an international and partly historic sample of writers inevitably varies from the contemporary population of the UK. But it is also striking that the 50 authors most frequently named

“If literature's readers are more likely to be female than male, its recognised writers are more likely to be male than female.”

in the survey are all white, and that only two Black or Minority Ethnic writers (Haruki Murakami and Zadie Smith) are named by more than one respondent (see page 27). It seems that the equality initiatives of recent decades – in such areas as publishing, literary prizes and the school curriculum – have

only partially filtered through to general reading habits and perceptions of the canon. Building ethnic diversity remains a priority for all of us who work in the field of literature.

Many of the survey findings suggest needs and opportunities for further research. We are conscious that by limiting respondents to *reading* – which we did to make the questions understandable and the answers manageable – we excluded many other channels through which literature can be experienced. We did include audio books and e-books, but we had to leave out theatre, film, television, radio, poetry readings and all other kinds of performance or live event. These non-print-based literary channels may well prove vital to winning a wider readership for literature in the future.

How you can help

We welcome comments on this report and ideas for the *Literature Matters* activities that we are planning to develop at the RSL. Despite being Royal, we are a small charity looking to play a national role in championing literature. We can do this only with help from others. We are looking for individual lovers of literature to join our Membership, other organisations to collaborate with us in projects and campaigns, and would especially welcome business support through corporate partnerships. If you might be able to help us in any way, please get in touch.

Tim Robertson

Director, The Royal Society of Literature

Twitter: @RSLDirector

#LiteratureMatters

Background and aims of the research

This report summarises facts and opinions about literature from a representative sample of 1,998 members of the British public.

The survey has been commissioned by the Royal Society of Literature, the UK's national charity for "the advancement of literature". Founded in 1820, the RSL runs a range of literary activities, including talks, prizes, a magazine and outreach to schools. It is governed by its Fellowship of distinguished writers.

Leading up to its bicentenary in 2020, the RSL will be raising public debate about the value of literature through a new theme of activities called *Literature Matters*. The survey aims to inform the development of this initiative, and to start generating the debate.

Recognising its national remit, the RSL decided to ask the public about the following topics:

1. How widely is literature read in Britain today?
2. What kinds of writing are generally considered to be literature?
3. Who reads literature, and how do they compare with those who don't?
4. What attitudes do people have to literature? – how much is literature valued?
5. Would people like to read more literature?
6. What prevents people from reading more literature?
7. What might encourage people to read more literature?
8. Which writers do people regard as writers of literature?
9. Do writers of literature have any common characteristics?

Ipsos MORI produced the specific questions to investigate these topics. To make the questions clear and the results wieldy, it was decided to focus the survey solely on the *reading* of literature (as opposed to other ways of encountering literature, such as through performance, film or broadcast).

It was acknowledged from the outset that "literature" (as distinct from other kinds of written work) is a term intrinsically open to varied interpretation – indeed, that one of the questions for the research was to see what collective meanings might emerge – and so it was decided to empower the survey respondents to use whatever definition of literature they chose.

Methodology

The survey was carried out by Ipsos MORI between 23 September and 11 October 2016. Interviews were conducted face to face in home among a nationally representative sample of 1,998 adults aged 15+ in Great Britain (excluding Northern Ireland).

Capibus, Ipsos MORI's weekly face-to-face omnibus survey, was utilised for this research as the sample produced via this vehicle is designed to be highly robust. Data are weighted by age, gender, region, working status, social grade, tenure and ethnicity to the known population profile of adults aged 15+ in Great Britain. The full data sets are published on Ipsos MORI's website.

Where results do not sum to 100%, this may be due to computer rounding, multiple responses, or the exclusion of "don't know" categories.

Ipsos MORI was responsible for the fieldwork and data collection and not responsible for the reporting or interpretation of the survey results.

The findings include a list of writers named by respondents, and this list was the subject of further analysis by the RSL (see page 25).

The findings

1. How widely is literature read in Britain today?

Key finding

- **75% of adults in Britain have read something in the last 6 months which they consider to be literature.**

The first question sought to find out about levels of general leisure reading. Respondents were shown a list of different kinds of written material, and asked which they had read – including printed and online material, e-books and audio books. Reading for work, school or college was excluded, to ensure that the responses reflected people's personal choices.

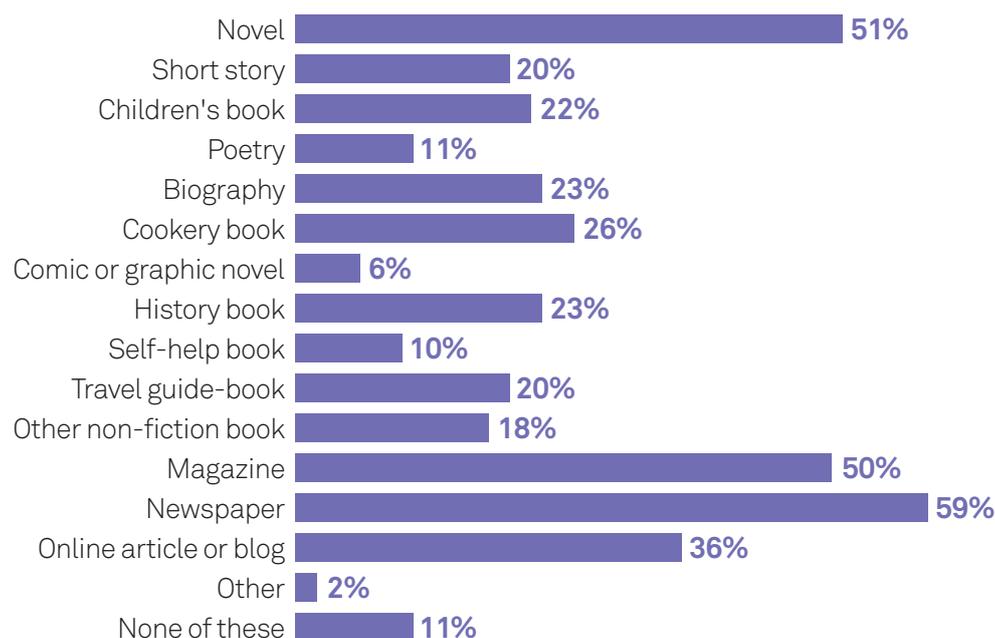
Overall, 89% of respondents had read something in the last 6 months. Newspapers, magazines and novels were the most common types of reading matter, all read by more than half the sample. The least common types of reading matter were poetry, self-help books and comics or graphic novels.

These findings are broadly in line with other research into levels of general reading in the UK:

- The Book Trust's *Reading Habits Survey 2013* found that 86% of adults in England read books of some kind (Glead, DJA Research/ The Book Trust, 2013).
- A YouGov Survey in 2014 found that 75% of British adults have read and finished a book for pleasure in the past year [*Reading is alive and well in Britain*, YouGov 2014].
- The Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport reported in 2015 that 64% of adults in England and Wales read in their free time [DCMS *Taking Part 2014/15, Focus On: Free Time Activities* Statistical Release November 2015]

Table a. Levels of general reading

Which of the following, if any, have you personally read in the last 6 months? Please include any printed or online material, and also any e-books or audio books. Please do not include things you have read just for work, school or college.

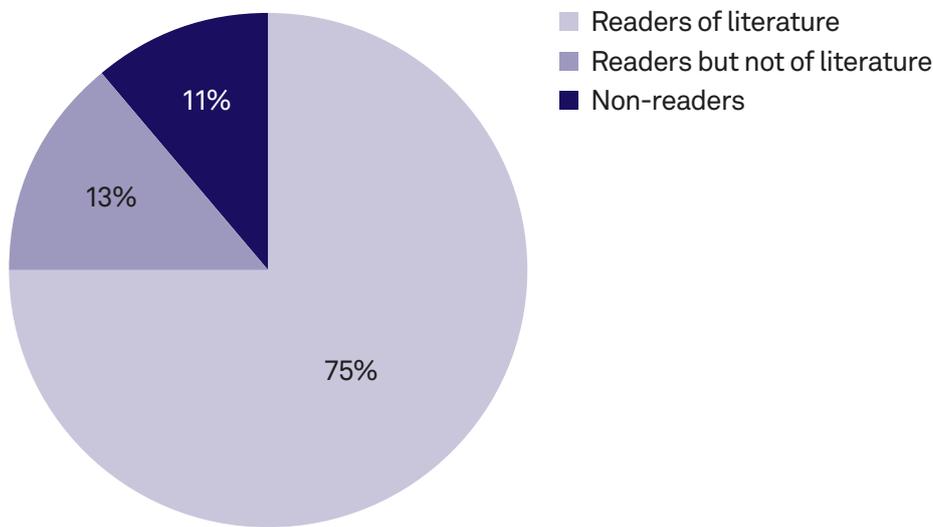


Those respondents who had read something were then asked which of their reading matter they considered to be literature. If the respondents asked the interviewer what “literature” means, they were told that it was entirely their choice to decide what counts as literature.

85% of these reader-respondents had read something which they consider to be literature, which represents 75% of respondents as a whole.

Table b. Levels of reading of literature

This question was put to the 89% of respondents who had read something:
Of the things you have read in the last 6 months, please could you tell me which, if any, of these you might consider to be literature?



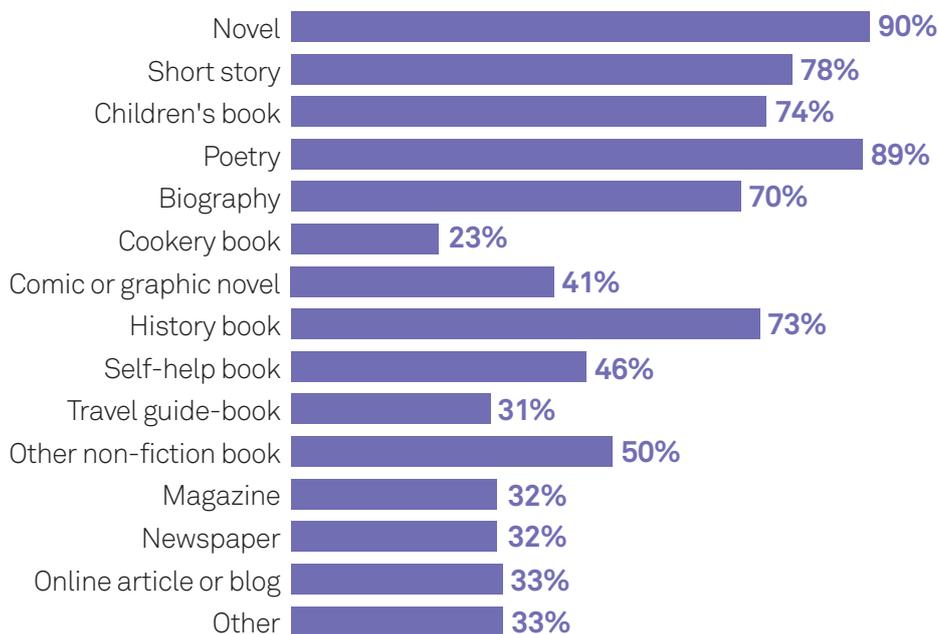
2. What kinds of writing are generally considered to be literature?

Key finding

- 90% of people who have read a novel in the last 6 months consider that novel to be literature.

Of the reading material which respondents considered to be literature, the types most commonly mentioned were novels, poetry, short stories, children's books and history books. The types of material least likely to be considered literature were cookery books, travel guides, magazines, newspapers and online articles.

Table c. Types of reading material considered to be literature



3. Who reads literature, and how do they compare with those who don't?

Key findings

Readers of literature are significantly more likely than other people to:

- be white
- be female
- have higher levels of education
- come from higher socio-economic groups
- have access to and make use of the internet.

A comparison of demographic data on those respondents who had read literature in the last 6 months, and those who had not, indicates that the two groups are similar in terms of age and regional distribution. However, literature readers are significantly more likely to be female, to be white, to come from higher socio-economic grades, and to have higher levels of education. Literature readers are also more likely to have access to the internet, and to use the internet for hobbies, interests, social networks, forums and blogs.

The **ethnicity categories** follow those used for the Census by the Office for National Statistics. Although the survey sample overall is representative of the ethnic diversity of the population, Ipsos MORI advised that the numbers within most individual ethnic groups were too small to be used reliably for cross-referencing, so data is reported just for two overall categories.

The **social grade** data follows the NRS (National Readership Survey) categorisations:

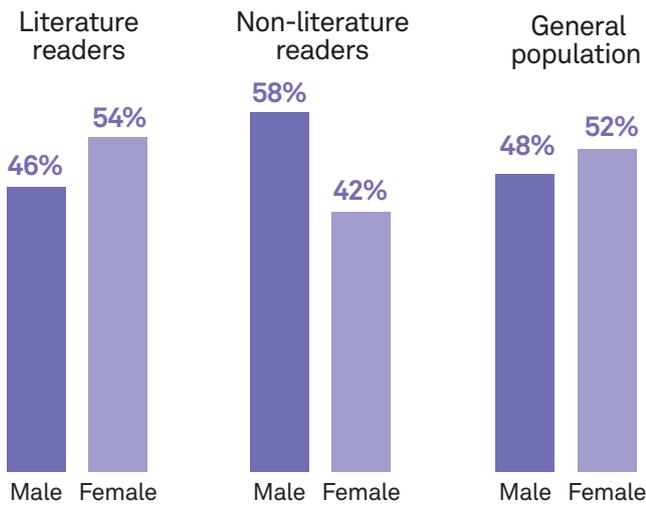
- A Higher managerial, administrative and professional
- B Intermediate managerial, administrative and professional
- C1 Supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional
- C2 Skilled manual workers
- D Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers
- E State pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only

The data for **level of education** excludes those who replied 'still studying', 'don't know' or 'other'.

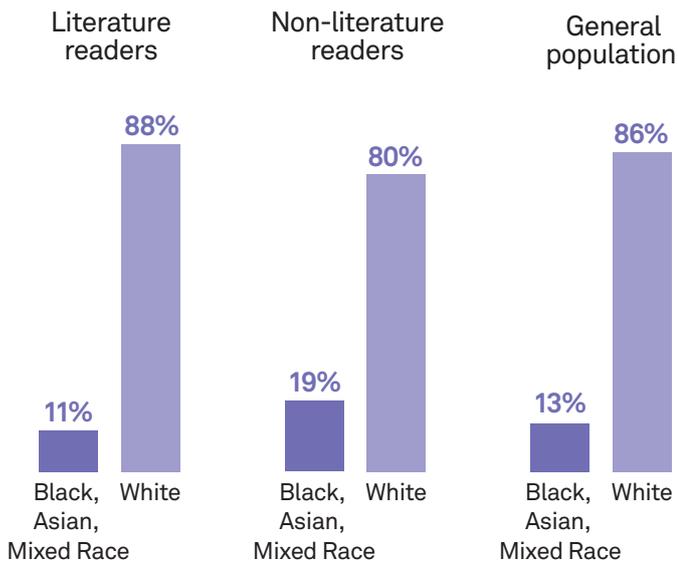
The **regions** are based on HM Government Offices for the UK. Scotland is included in North, Wales is included in Midlands. (The survey did not include Northern Ireland.)

Table d. Personal characteristics of literature readers and non-literature readers

Gender



Ethnicity



Age

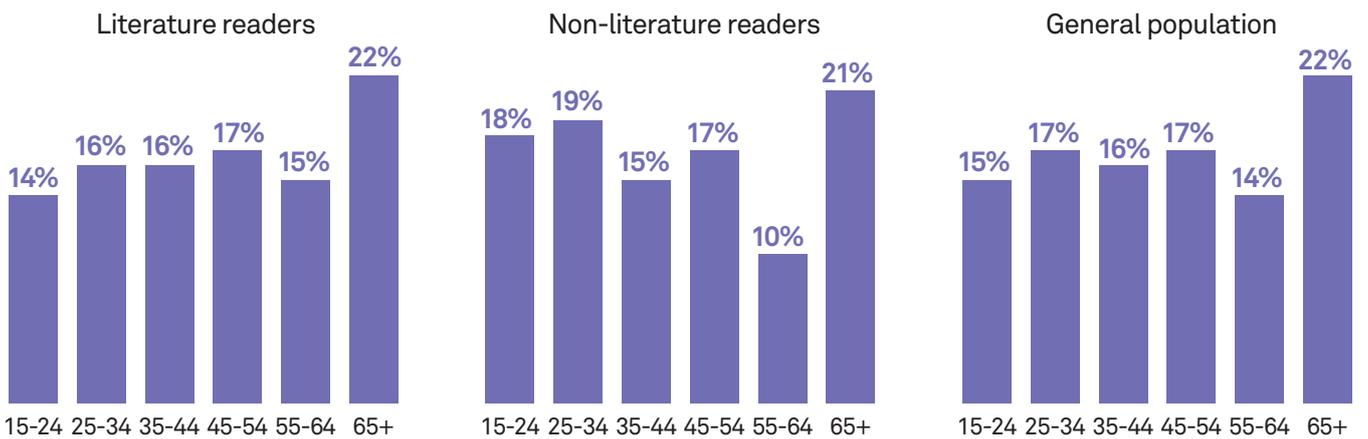
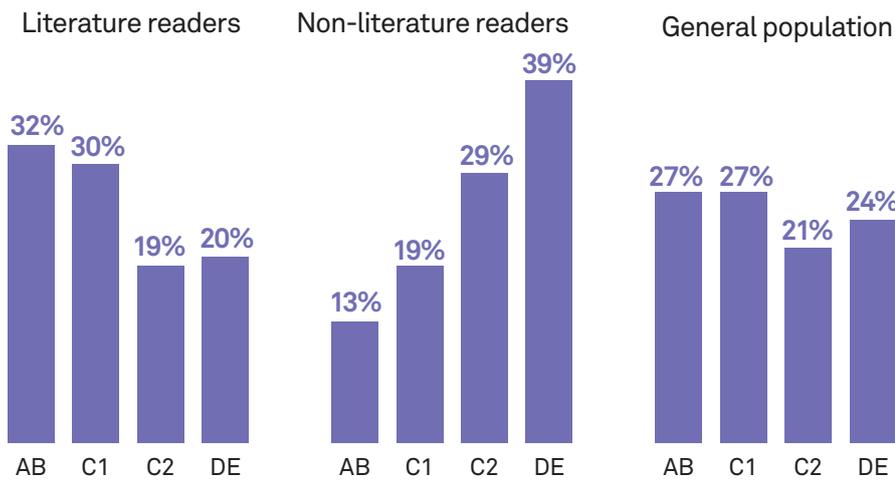
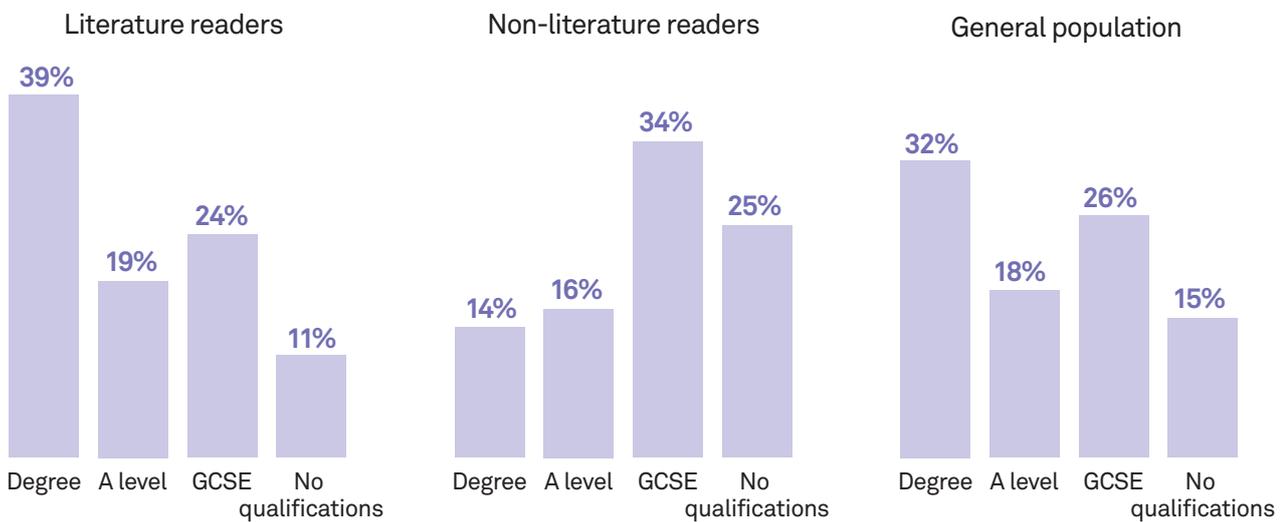


Table e. Social characteristics of literature readers and non-literature readers

Social grade



Level of education



Region of the UK

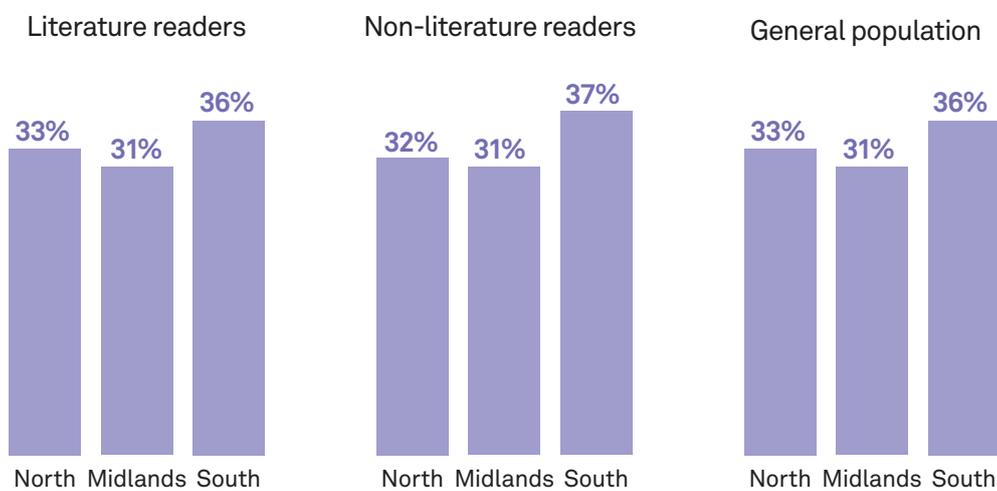
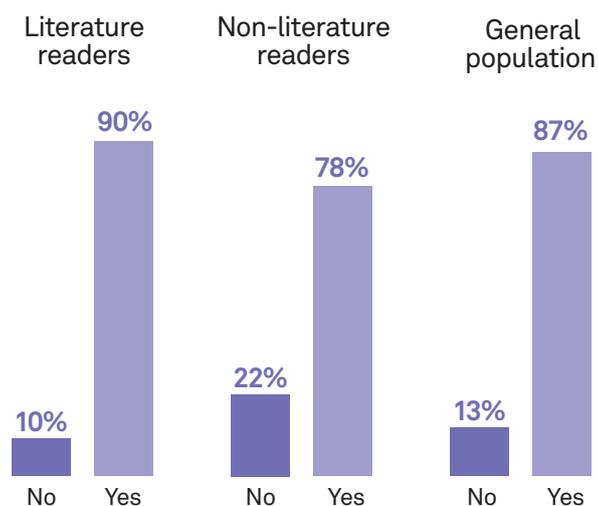
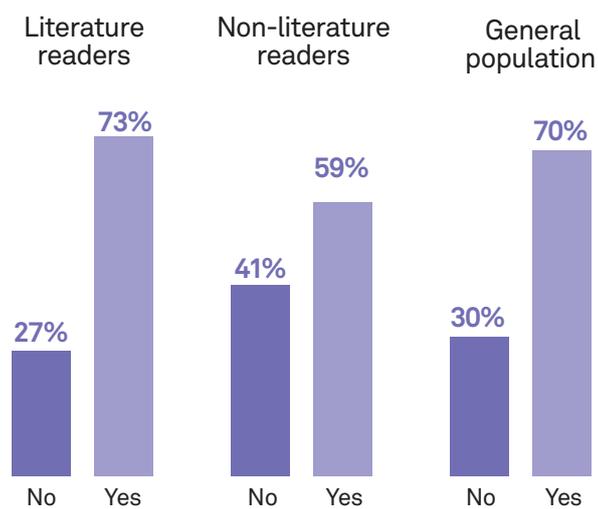


Table f. Internet usage by literature readers and non-literature readers

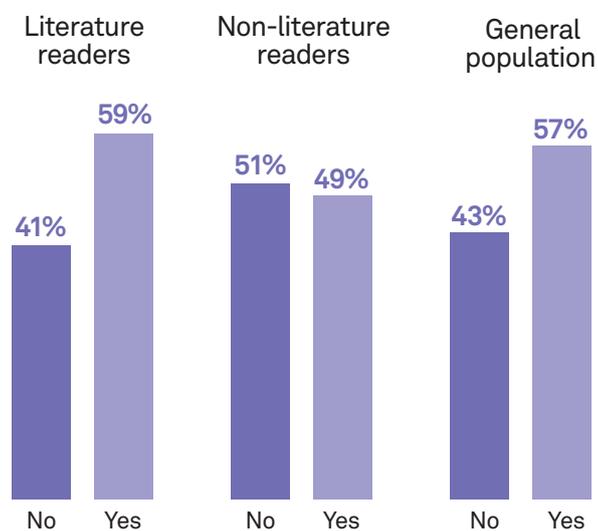
Access to the internet at home



Use of internet for hobbies/interests



Use of internet for social networks/forums/blogs



4. What attitudes do people have to literature? – how much is literature valued?

Key findings

- **88% of people agree that literature should be part of everyone's education.**
- **81% of people agree that literature helps people understand other points of view.**
- **15% of people believe that literature is too difficult to understand.**
- **A third (33%) of people believe that literature doesn't matter to most people.**

Interviewers read out five statements about literature, and respondents were asked to say how strongly they agreed or disagreed with them.

The strongest levels of agreement were found for the statements that literature should be part of everyone's education and that literature helps people understand other points of view. Over two-thirds (67%) of respondents also agreed that literature comforts people in times of stress, while only 15% felt that literature is too difficult to understand. However, a third of respondents (33%) agreed that literature doesn't matter to most people.

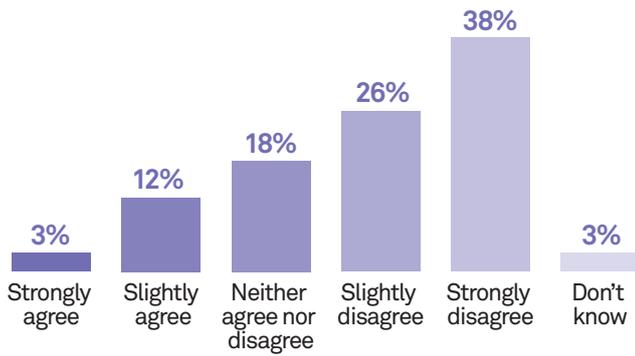
Through cross-references, some significant differences can be found between readers of literature and other respondents:

- "Literature is too difficult to understand" – significantly fewer literature readers than non-readers agreed with this (12% / 21%).
- "Literature should be part of everyone's education" – significantly more literature readers than non-readers agreed with this (92% / 74%)
- "Literature helps people understand other points of view" – significantly more literature readers than

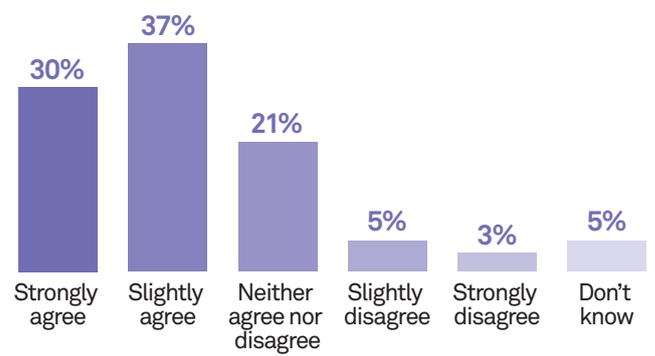
Table g. Attitudes to literature

Please could you tell me how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about literature?

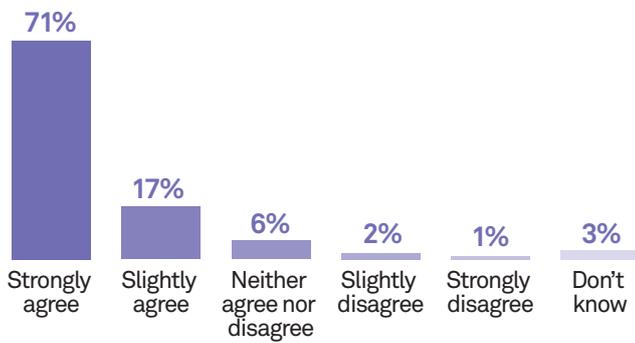
'Literature is too difficult to understand'



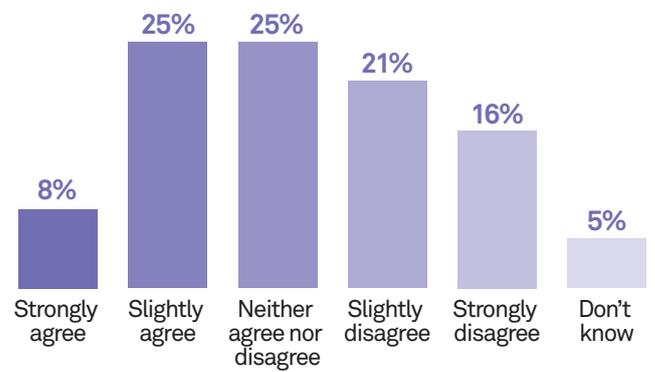
'Literature comforts people in times of stress'



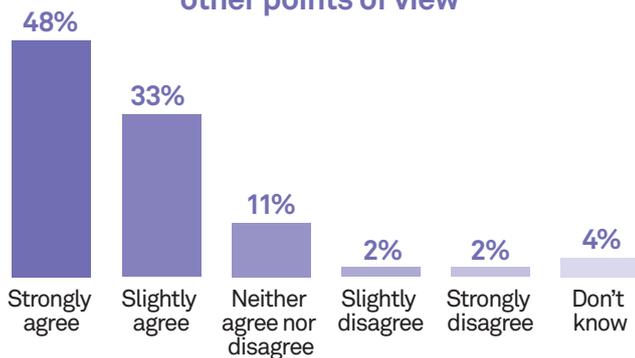
'Literature should be part of everyone's education'



'Literature doesn't matter to most people'



'Literature helps people understand other points of view'



5. Would people like to read more literature?

Key finding

Over half (56%) of people who do not currently read literature would definitely or probably like to read it in the future.

All respondents were asked about their future intentions around the reading of literature. Of the total sample, well over a third (37%) expressed an intention definitely or probably to read more literature in the future.

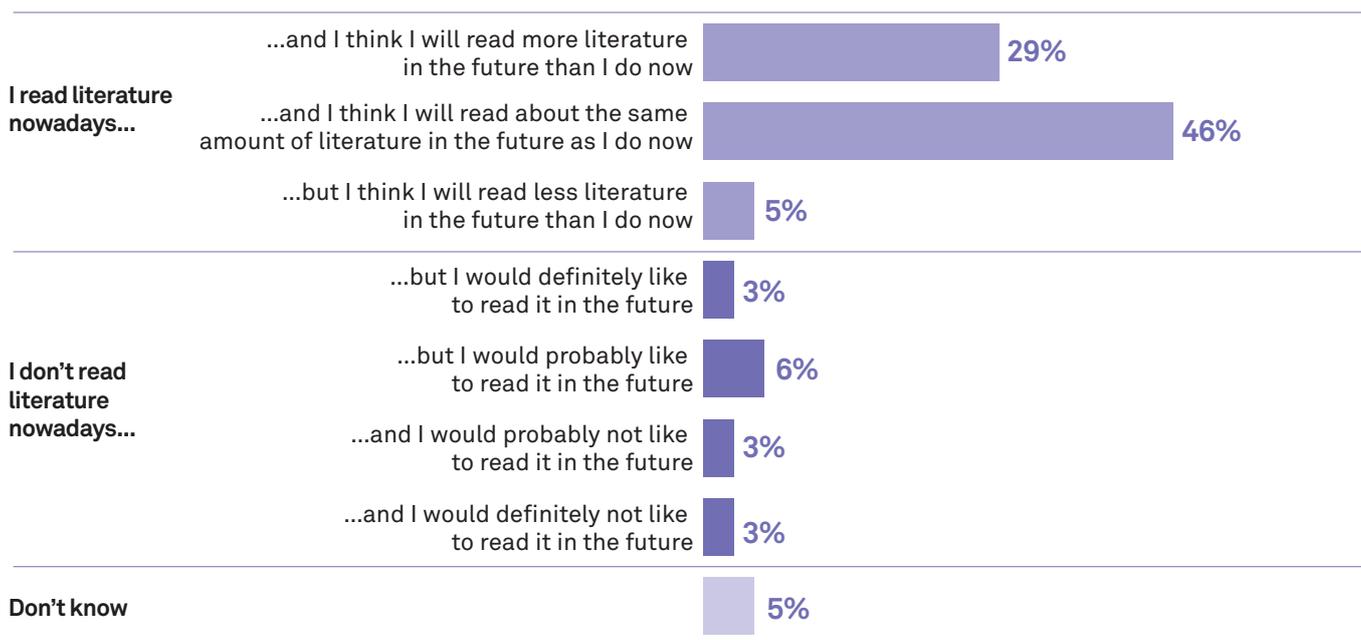
Of those respondents who currently read literature, the vast majority (93%) intend to read more or about the same amount of literature in the future.

Of those respondents who do not currently read literature, nearly a fifth (19%) would definitely like to read it in the future, and a further two-fifths (37%) would probably like to, making a total of 56% with positive future intentions.

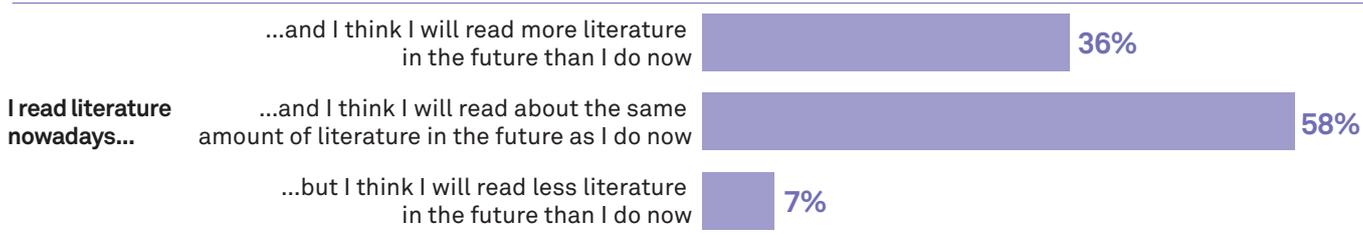
Table h. Future intentions about reading literature

Which ONE of the following best describes how you feel about reading literature in the future?

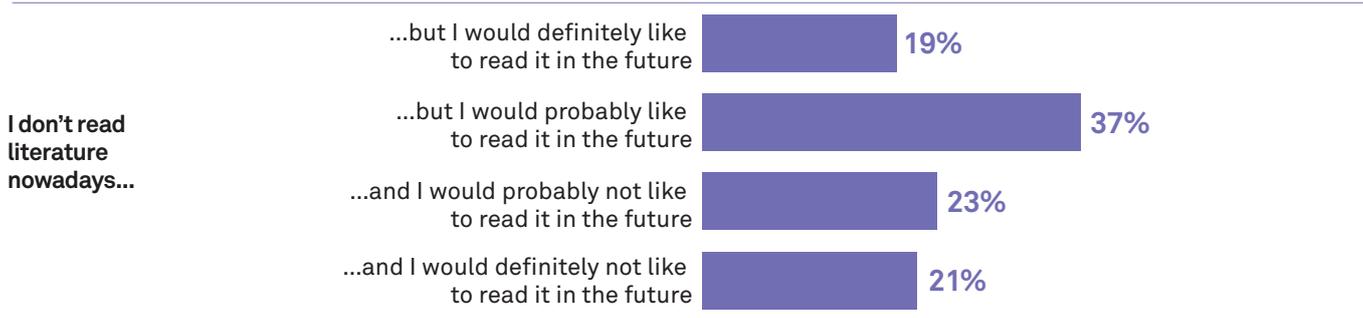
(i) Whole sample



(ii) Literature readers



(iii) Non-readers of literature



6. What prevents people from reading more literature?

Key findings

The most common reasons for not reading more literature are:

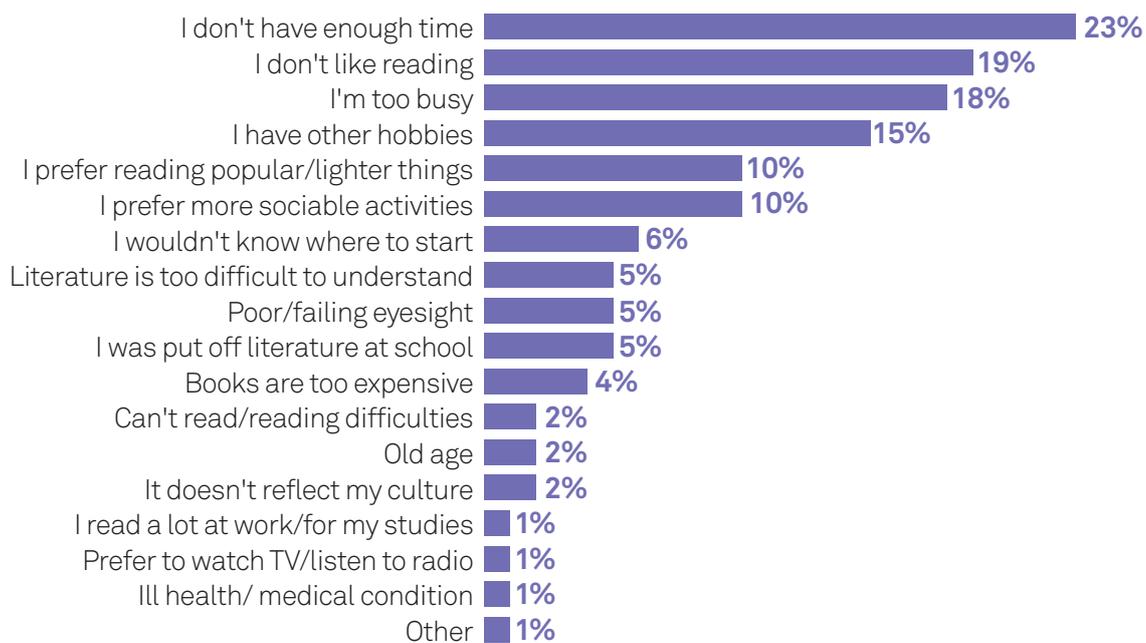
- not having enough time
- not liking reading
- being too busy.

The 11% of respondents who expect to read less or no literature in the future were asked their reasons for this.

The most common replies were not having enough time, not liking reading and being too busy. The least common replies were ill health, preferring to watch TV or listen to the radio, and having lots of reading for work or studies.

Table i. Barriers to reading more literature

Question to all respondents who think they will read less, or would not like to read, literature in the future:
Reasons for reading less (or not liking to read) literature in the future.



7. What might encourage people to read more literature?

Key finding

The factors most likely to encourage people to read more literature are:

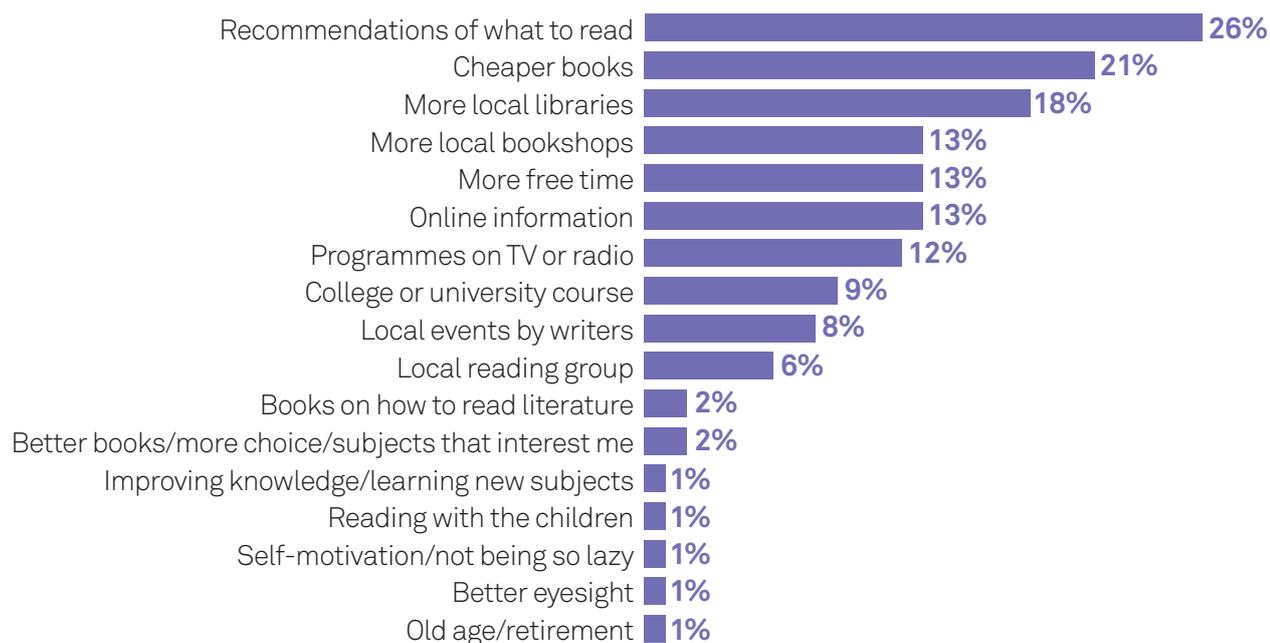
- recommendations of what to read
- cheaper books
- more local libraries.

The 84% of respondents who had positive expectations about reading literature in the future (intending to start reading literature, or to read more than at present or the same amount) were asked what might encourage them in this intention. The most common responses were recommendations of what to read, cheaper books, and more local libraries. The least common responses included retirement, better eyesight and self-motivation.

Table j. Encouragements to read more literature

Question to all respondents who think they will read more or the same amount of, or start to read, literature in the future:

What might encourage you to read more, or start reading, literature in the future?



8. Which writers do people regard as writers of literature?

Key findings

- The writer most commonly considered to be a writer of literature is Shakespeare, with Dickens coming a close second.
- The *living* writer most commonly considered to be a writer of literature is J K Rowling, who comes third.
- In total, 400 writers were named as writers of literature.
- 20% of people could not name a writer of literature.

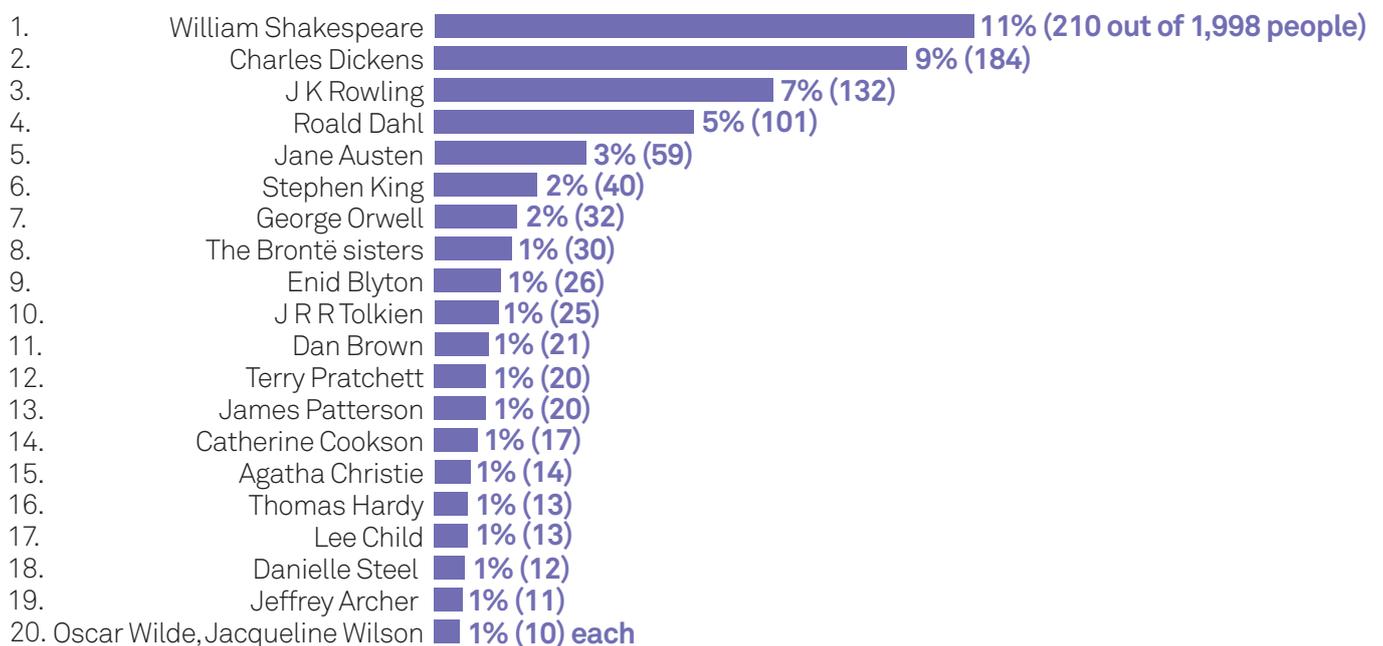
All respondents were asked if they could name a writer, living or from the past, whose work they would describe as literature. If respondents asked what was meant by literature, they were told that this was their choice.

2% of respondents answered No – they could not name a writer of literature – and another 18% said that they didn't know, were not sure or couldn't remember.

Some names given by respondents were discounted, because the RSL could not recognise them as published writers.

Table k. Top 20 named writers of literature

Can you name a writer or author, living or from the past, whose work you would describe as literature?



Named writers of literature (outside the top 20)

Named by 9 people

Patricia Cornwell
John Grisham
Wilbur Smith
William Wordsworth

Named by 8 people

T S Eliot
Peter James
D H Lawrence
Harper Lee

Named by 7 people

Jilly Cooper
Ernest Hemingway
Ian Rankin
John Steinbeck
Leo Tolstoy
H G Wells

Named by 6 people

Robert Burns
Ken Follett
Dick Francis
E L James
C S Lewis
Andy McNab

Named by 5 people

John le Carré
Jackie Collins
Arthur Conan Doyle
James Herbert
Rudyard Kipling
George R R Martin
Daphne Du Maurier
Virginia Woolf

Named by 4 people

Lord Byron
Martina Cole
Bernard Cornwell
Josephine Cox
F Scott Fitzgerald
Frederick Forsyth
Graham Greene
James Joyce
Alistair MacLean
Ian McEwan
Beatrix Potter
J D Salinger
Robert Louis Stevenson
Mark Twain

Named by 3 people

Kate Atkinson
Margaret Atwood
Paul Auster
Bill Bryson
Geoffrey Chaucer
Joseph Conrad

Clive Cussler
Daniel Defoe
Julia Donaldson
Fyodor Dostoevsky
Winston Graham
Anthony Horowitz
John Keats
Marian Keyes
Dean Koontz
Robert Macfarlane
Hilary Mantel
Michael Morpurgo
Jodi Picoult
Alexander Pushkin
Ruth Rendell
George Bernard Shaw
Anita Shreve
Zadie Smith
Barbara Taylor Bradford
Anthony Trollope
David Walliams

Named by 2+ people

(higher because of statistical weighting)
Cecilia Ahern
Louisa May Alcott
J M Barrie
J G Ballard
Tom Clancy
Ann Cleeves
Wilkie Collins
Mihai Eminescu
Sebastian Faulks
John Green
Philippa Gregory
Torey Hayden
Jack Higgins
Homer
Conn Iggulden
Hammond Innes
Sophie Kinsella
W Somerset Maugham
Peter May
Stephenie Meyer
Jojo Moyes
Haruki Murakami
Philip Pullman
Philip Roth
Chris Ryan
Dylan Thomas
Colm Tóibín
Rose Tremain
Evelyn Waugh
P G Wodehouse

Named by 2 people

Lewis Carroll
Len Deighton
George Eliot
Elizabeth Gaskell

Robert Goddard
Harold Pinter
J B Priestley
Nora Roberts

Named by 1 person

Ben Aaronovitch
Dan Abnett
Douglas Adams
Ashfaq Ahmed
Faiz Ahmed Faiz
Mitch Albom
Dante Alighieri
Woody Allen
Isabel Allende
Hans Christian Andersen
Lynn Andrews
Virginia Andrews
Maya Angelou
Simon Armitage
Reza Aslan
W H Auden
Denis Avey
Isaac Azimov
Louise Bagshawe
David Baldacci
James Baldwin
R M Ballantyne
Iain M Banks
Linwood Barclay
Mary Beard
Sybille Bedford
Antony Beevor
Alan Bennett
Ashwini Bhatt
Mark Billingham
Maeve Binchy
Terence Blacker
Malorie Blackman
William Blake
Lawrence Block
Jorge Luis Borges
Malcolm Bradbury
Terry Brooks
Elizabeth Barrett Browning
John Buchan
Charles Bukowski
Anthony Burgess
Jim Butcher
Garth James Cameron
Albert Camus
Dale Carnegie
Daniel Carney
Paul Carson
Angela Carter
Barbara Cartland
Eleanor Catton
Miguel de Cervantes
Kimberley Chambers

Freddie Spencer
Chapman
Bruce Chatwin
Deepak Chopra
Arthur C Clarke
Jeremy Clarkson
Harlan Coben
Kathy Collins
Michael Connelly
Alistair Cooke
Graham Cooke
Douglas Coupland
Dilly Court
Brian Cox
Pat Craven
Michael Crichton
Aleister Crowley
Charles Darwin
Jane Davis
Richard Dawkins
Matthew De Abaitua
Alain de Botton
Walter de la Mare
Jeffery Deaver
J Delaney
Philip K Dick
Monica Dickens
Monty Don
Robert Douglas
W E B Du Bois
Alexander Dumas
Gerald Durrell
Lawrence Durrell
Brett Easton Ellis
Catherine Elliot
Geoffrey Elton
Steven Erickson
Barbara Erskin
Ian Cameron Esslemont
Janet Evanovich
Alex Ferguson
Elena Ferrante
Henry Fielding
Thomas Firbank
Fanny Flagg
Ian Fleming
Gillian Flynn
John Fowles
John Francome
Anne Frank
Marilyn French
Sigmund Freud
Mary Fulbrook
Diana Gabaldon
Neil Gaiman
David Gemmell
Tess Gerritsen
Lewis Grassie Gibbon
Cathy Glass
Nikolai Gogol
William Golding

Iris Gower	Eimear McBride	Doris Stokes
Charlotte Greig	Anne McCaffrey	Oliver Stone
Neil Gunn	Alexander McCall Smith	William Makepeace
Hamka	Frank McCourt	Thackeray
Graham Hancock	Lisa McLnerney	Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o
Sophie Hannah	Charlotte Mendelson	Leslie Thomas
Robert Harris	Adam Mickiewicz	Colin Thubron
Thomas Harris	Henry Miller	Thucydides
Cynthia Harrod-Eagles	Spike Milligan	Alan Titchmarsh
Lilian Harry	A A Milne	Joanna Trollope
L P Hartley	David Mitchell	Harry Turtledove
Jonathan Harvey	Richard Montanari	Leon Uris
Max Hastings	Alan Moore	Laurens van der Post
Seamus Heaney	Sarah Moss	Jules Verne
Mick Herron	Iris Murdoch	Penny Vincenzi
Herman Hesse	Vladimir Nabokov	Doreen Virtue
Georgette Heyer	Pablo Neruda	Voltaire
Andrea Hirata	John Norman	Alfred Wainwright
Victoria Hislop	Ben Okri	Alice Walker
Alice Hoffman	Panalal Patel	Julie Walters
Alan Hollinghurst	Sharon Penman	Alan Warner
Murry Hope	Christopher Pike	Sarah Waters
Khaled Hosseini	Rosamunde Pilcher	Ruby Wax
Elizabeth Jane Howard	Nicholas Pillegi	Orson Welles
Victor Hugo	Sylvia Plath	Irvine Welsh
Allama Iqbal	Edgar Allen Poe	Robert Westall
John Irving	Alexandra Potter	Patrick White
Christian Jacq	Tulsidas Ramayan	Dennis Wheatley
Henry James	Peter Ransley	Julian Wilson
P D James	Arthur Ransome	Jeanette Winterson
Richard Jefferies	John Rector	W B Yeats
Yang Jiang	Douglas Reeman	Muhammad Yunus
Alan Johnson	Kathy Reichs	Benjamin Zephaniah
Paul Johnston	Erich Maria Remarque	Emile Zola
T Llew Jones	Louise Rennison	
Joan Jonker	Rick Riordan	
Norton Juster	Harold Robbins	
Joseph Kanon	Andrew Roberts	
Jessie Keane	Johnny Rogan	
Cathryn Kemp	Karen Rose	
Simon Kernick	Michael Rosen	
Jack Kerouac	Veronica Roth	
Judith Kerr	Patrick Rothfuss	
Barbara Kingsolver	Carl Sagan	
Robert Kiyosaki	James Salter	
Theo Knell	Jill Salvis	
Jan Kochanowski	C J Samson	
Chris Kyle	Jean-Paul Sartre	
Linda La Plante	George Saunders	
Derek Landy	Simon Scarrow	
Stieg Larsson	Anna Sewell	
Maureen Lee	Gerald Seymour	
Alison Littlewood	Sidney Sheldon	
H P Lovecraft	Mary Shelley	
Robert Ludlam	Karin Slaughter	
Norman Mailer	Juliusz Slowacki	
Karen Maitland	Dan Smith	
Olivia Manning	Socrates	
Katherine Mansfield	Sister Souljah	
Scott Mariani	Stephen Spielberg	
Howard Marks	Nichita Stănescu	
Christopher Marlowe	Kathryn Stockett	
Gabriel Garcia Marquez	Bram Stoker	

9. Do writers of literature have any common characteristics?

Key findings

Out of the 400 writers named as writers of literature:

- 31% are female
- 7% are Black, Asian or Mixed Race in ethnicity
- 44% are non-British (mostly American)
- 51% are living writers.

The list of writers is dominated by novelists. After Shakespeare, the most frequently named playwright is Oscar Wilde, the most frequently named poet is Wordsworth.

In all, exactly 400 writers were named by the survey respondents as being writers of literature. The RSL has analysed these writers by their demographics and literary forms. This has inevitably involved some generalisations and assumptions, and the data needs to be read with caution.

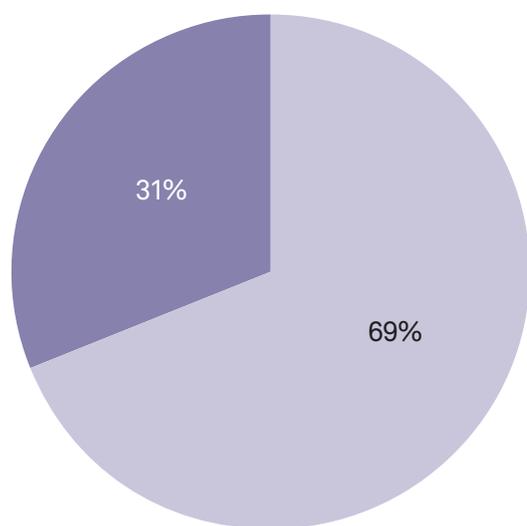
We are particularly conscious in the case of ethnicity that best practice is for self-definition by the subjects, and it was not feasible for us to obtain this information directly from the writers, so we have had to rely instead on publicly available information. Despite this caveat, we have decided that data on ethnicity of the writers is too valuable to be omitted from the report.

In terms of nationality, we have classified by continent, sometimes making case by case decisions about how to categorise individual authors who have moved between countries. For literary genre, we have classified writers by the genre for which we feel they are best known. We apologise in advance for any mistakes and will gladly rectify if notified by the writers concerned.

The list of writers is long and varied. The facts that respondents were able to name only one writer, and that the bulk of the writers were named by just one or two respondents, mean that only tentative conclusions can be drawn, but some common characteristics do emerge clearly: writers named as writers of literature are likely to be novelists (75% of the total), to be male (69% of the total) and to be white (91% of the total).

Cross-referencing with the data on the respondents also indicates some patterns, especially in terms of gender. For example, women were much more likely than men to name Jane Austen (5% compared with 1%), while there was near gender parity among those naming J K Rowling (6% men, 7% women). However, the small number of respondents per author makes this kind of analysis impossible for most of the list.

Table I. Named writers of literature by gender

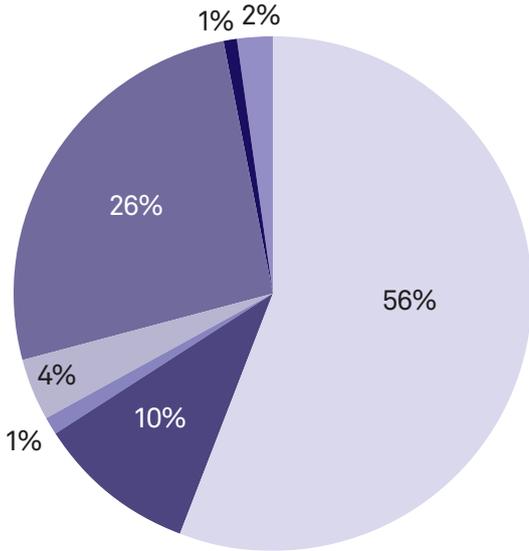


■ Male
■ Female

The 10 most frequently named female writers

1. J K Rowling
2. Jane Austen
3. The Brontë sisters
4. Enid Blyton
5. Catherine Cookson
6. Agatha Christie
7. Danielle Steel
8. Jacqueline Wilson
9. Patricia Cornwell
10. Harper Lee

Table m. Named writers of literature by nationality

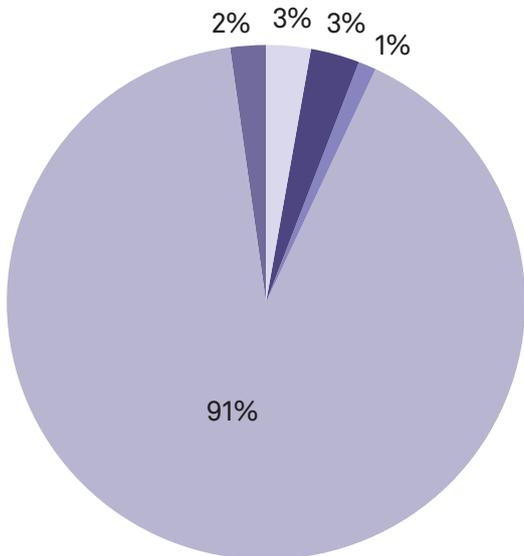


- British 56%
- Other European 10%
- African 1%
- Asian/Australian 4%
- North American 26%
- South American 1%
- Multiple 2%

The 10 most frequently named non-British writers

1. Stephen King
2. Dan Brown
3. James Patterson
4. Danielle Steel
5. Patricia Cornwell, John Grisham, Wilbur Smith
8. Harper Lee
9. Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Leo Tolstoy

Table n. Named writers of literature by ethnicity

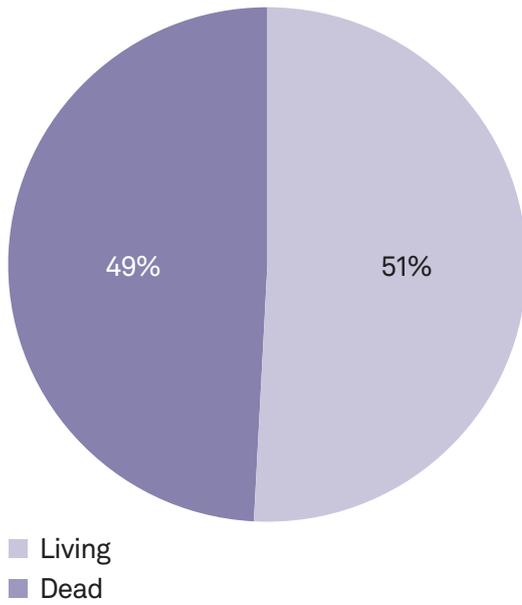


- Asian 3%
- Black 3%
- Mixed Race 1%
- White 91%
- Other/Unknown 2%

Black, Asian and Mixed Race writers named by more than one respondent

1. Zadie Smith
2. Haruki Murakami

Table o. Named writers of literature – living/dead



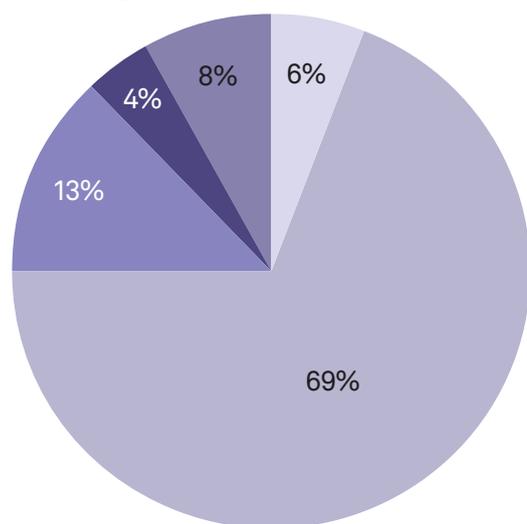
The 10 most frequently named living writers

1. J K Rowling
2. Stephen King
3. Dan Brown
4. James Patterson
5. Lee Child
6. Danielle Steel
7. Jeffrey Archer
8. Jacqueline Wilson
9. Patricia Cornwell, John Grisham, Wilbur Smith

The 10 most frequently named pre-20th century writers (died before 1900)

1. William Shakespeare
2. Charles Dickens
3. Jane Austen
4. The Brontë sisters
5. William Wordsworth
6. Robert Burns
7. Lord Byron, Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain
10. Geoffrey Chaucer, Daniel Defoe, Fyodor Dostoevsky, John Keats, Alexander Pushkin, Anthony Trollope

Table p. Named writers of literature by literary genre



- Children's and Young Adult 6%
- Fiction 69%
- Non-fiction 13%
- Play- and screen-writing 4%
- Poetry 8%

Writers by genre named by more than one respondent:

Writers for children and young adults

1. J K Rowling
2. Roald Dahl
3. Enid Blyton
4. Jacqueline Wilson
5. C S Lewis
6. Rudyard Kipling
7. Beatrix Potter
8. Michael Morpurgo, Anthony Horowitz, Julia Donaldson, David Walliams
12. J M Barrie, Stephenie Meyer
14. Lewis Carroll

Poets (excluding Shakespeare, the Brontë sisters and Hardy)

1. William Wordsworth
2. T S Eliot
3. Robert Burns
4. Lord Byron
5. Geoffrey Chaucer, John Keats, Alexander Pushkin
8. Mihai Eminescu, Homer, Dylan Thomas

Playwrights

1. William Shakespeare
2. Oscar Wilde
3. George Bernard Shaw
4. J M Barrie
5. Harold Pinter, J B Priestley

Non-fiction writers

1. Bill Bryson
2. Robert Macfarlane
3. Torey Hayden
4. Peter May

Crime novelists

1. James Patterson
2. Agatha Christie
3. Lee Child
4. Patricia Cornwell
5. Peter James
6. Ian Rankin
7. Arthur Conan Doyle
8. Martina Cole
9. Ruth Rendell
10. Ann Cleeves
11. Peter May
12. Robert Goddard

Romantic novelists

1. Catherine Cookson
2. Danielle Steel
3. Jilly Cooper
4. E L James
5. Jackie Collins
6. Josephine Cox
7. Winston Graham, Marian Keyes, Jodi Picoult, Barbara Taylor Bradford
11. Cecilia Ahern, Sophie Kinsella, Jojo Moyes
14. Nora Roberts

Science fiction writers

1. H G Wells
2. J G Ballard

Fantasy writers

1. J K Rowling
2. J R R Tolkien
3. Terry Pratchett
4. C S Lewis
5. George R R Martin
6. Philip Pullman

Horror writers

1. Stephen King
2. James Herbert
3. Stephenie Meyer

Thriller writers

1. Dan Brown
2. Jeffrey Archer
3. John Grisham, Wilbur Smith
5. Ken Follett, Dick Francis, Andy McNab
8. John le Carré
9. Frederick Forsyth, Alistair MacLean
11. Clive Cussler, Dean Koontz, Ruth Rendell
12. Tom Clancy, Jack Higgins, Chris Ryan

Historical novelists

1. Bernard Cornwell
2. Hilary Mantel
3. Philippa Gregory, Conn Iggulden, Rose Tremain

Current Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature named in the survey

Simon Armitage
Kate Atkinson
Margaret Atwood
Antony Beevor
Malorie Blackman
Alain de Botton
Richard Dawkins
Sebastian Faulks
Robert Harris
Max Hastings
Alan Hollinghurst
Robert Macfarlane
Hilary Mantel
Ian McEwan
David Mitchell
Michael Morpurgo
Ben Okri
Philip Pullman
Ian Rankin
Andrew Roberts
Michael Rosen
J K Rowling
Zadie Smith
Colin Thubron
Colm Tóibín
Rose Tremain
Sarah Waters
Jacqueline Wilson
Jeanette Winterson

Deceased Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature named in the survey

Agatha Christie
Gerald Durrell
Lawrence Durrell
T S Eliot
Dick Francis
William Golding
Winston Graham
Graham Greene
Thomas Hardy
L P Hartley
Seamus Heaney
Elizabeth Jane Howard
P D James
Rudyard Kipling
C S Lewis
Daphne Du Maurier
Iris Murdoch
Harold Pinter
Ruth Rendell
George Bernard Shaw
J R R Tolkien
Evelyn Waugh
W B Yeats

Acknowledgements

Thank you from the RSL to everyone who has made this research possible, including:

- the 1,998 members of the public who were interviewed in their homes for the survey;
- the 400 named writers – with our apologies for any incorrect assumptions we have made in categorising them;
- Ipsos MORI for all their expertise in producing, carrying out the survey and guiding us through the data, especially Penny Bowden and Linda Joseph;
- Fellows, Members and supporters of the RSL whose donations have enabled us to fund this project, as with so many other RSL activities;
- the RSL Council for their input to the planning and wording of the survey, especially Lisa Appignanesi, Jonathan Keates, Deborah Moggach, Kamila Shamsie and Timberlake Wertenbaker;
- Derek Westwood for graphic design of the report;
- the RSL staff team, especially Will Dalziel, Intern through the University of Sussex Graduate Intern Programme, for his work on the list of authors, and Communications Manager Annette Brook, who has managed the project.