

∞ READING ROUND ∞

Life-Changing Literature

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THERE ARE PLACES in the world where it's still difficult, sometimes impossible, to get hold of a book. My last novel, *Paper Sparrows*, published in 2020, was dedicated to my aunt and uncle who lived in Lebanon, but they weren't able to get hold of a copy. My uncle passed away the following year, and my aunt is still unable to find a copy. I'd post one if I thought it would ever get there, but I know it wouldn't.

So, growing up in Lebanon, what books did I have access to? Well, mainly they were ones that were brought over by family members from abroad, or happened to appear in the classroom at school, or in the tiny local bookshop. There wasn't a huge amount of choice, and there were no public libraries, so those books I did manage to find were read again and again until they had to be held together with sellotape.

Later, in the UK, almost every book I read seemed to be life-changing. Books by Dickens and Austen. Harper Lee and Scott Fitzgerald. Hilary Mantel and Ted Hughes. But as I try to pinpoint when things first changed for me, I have to go further back — to one of those childhood books held together with sellotape.

It was the first book I ever bought for myself. A temporary bookshop had been set up in school that, for once, was selling not the dry-as-dust textbooks we queued up for at the start of every academic year, but rather books that might be categorised as 'fun'. The one that caught my eye was called *Stories from the Sands of Africa*. The stories in it were set in villages

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and deserts, and peopled by characters who had few possessions and little to eat; and yet here were all the jealousies and deceits, lies and aspirations that I could have dreamt of. The characters had familiar Arabic names like Munir, Sabah and Mariam, but this was a world full of strange creatures and dramatic situations. There were beetle-eating ghouls and clever goats, abandoned children and talking dogs, sultans who swapped places with beggars, and women who disguised themselves as men. Female characters weren't sidelined. Nor were children. In these stories, anything was possible.

When my family left Lebanon in the middle of the civil war, *Stories from the Sands of Africa* was one of the few things I brought with me to the UK. On its cover, a girl sits astride an alligator whose open mouth bristles with sharp teeth. She's being swept downstream to who knows where. But she looks happy.

I feel lucky that I now live a life in which I have access to a huge number and variety of books. But *Stories from the Sands of Africa* was that early lesson in the power of storytelling. Like all books, it was a reminder that there is an elsewhere and an otherwise. A different way to think and act. A different way to be. And that is indeed life-changing.