

# ∞ READING ROUND ∞

## Life-Changing Literature

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**H**AS MY LIFE BEEN CHANGED by literature? I need to think twice. It is people, rather than literature, I would credit with that kind of power. Sometimes, it's true, those people came bearing books. And then there are the people I could only have met through their writings, because they were long gone before I was born. And the books, whose titles dot my map — landmarks, meeting points, obstacle courses, pleasant detours. When I'm tuning the background hum to my thoughts — scrolling through the stations — the mix contains all these voices. Which must be a symptom that, yes, literature does shape my life, even if it has not perhaps changed its course.

Of the many instances that come to mind, here are a few. The English teacher who introduced us in the second form to Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, to Shakespeare's Prospero, Miranda and Caliban, and the theories of Sigmund Freud, and then, two years later, to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Freud was a threshold moment: discovering that there was a language to describe the crooked pathways between motivation and action felt like being given the key to everything. And I fell in love with Eliot's poetry (as well as with my English teacher).

Much of the poetry I'd previously encountered had seemed poetic in a way that set it slightly apart from life. Reading Eliot, I saw the images, got caught up in the rhythms with no awareness of separation. *Internalised* is the word. But instead of losing myself, as happens in childhood reading, it was as if I were gaining a more intelligible sense of connection to real things.

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To go back even earlier, at primary school we were always being read Bible stories and encouraged to listen in a spirit of absolute faith that, however incredible the story – a disembodied finger writing on a wall, a blind girl suddenly able to see – these events had actually happened. It's here that my belief in narrative as a medium that can accommodate complex realities probably took root. Despite my academic education, I still often catch myself reading like a child, with – as Coleridge put it – a willing suspension of disbelief.

Growing up with all those *makeths*, *beholdeths*, *thees* and *thous* meant that, when I did get to Shakespeare, his language seemed a normal way to express dramatic situations and overpowering emotions — much better, in fact, than the everyday modern English we spoke in middle-class north London. Another thing literature taught me is that we carry many voices in our mother tongue.

I can't end without mentioning Thomas Hardy. At fifteen, Tess Durbeyfield became the first literary love of my life (when I recently re-read the novel, my feelings had disconcertingly morphed into those of a protective parent). *The Return of the Native* made me yearn to live in an open landscape like Egdon Heath — gorse, heather, the distant glint of sea. I had no idea how this could one day happen. But here I am. It's March: on the cliff path near my house, an Arctic wind, and bursts of hot gorse-yellow as far as you can see.