



## Life-Changing Literature

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Phoebe Power

**W**HEN I WALKED the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage a few years ago, I didn't read a book for five weeks. Walking with a ten-kilo pack means you really have to assess what 'essential' means — and pages are heavy. I decided that I needed a notebook more — and other than this and the guide with its necessary maps and phone numbers, I was free from any kind of literature. From childhood I have read in cars, buses and trains, in doctor's waiting rooms and always before sleeping. When they were no longer there, I realised that I'd taken the unbroken chain of stories that formed the background of my life for granted.

In fact, the lack of reading material was not a problem at all while on the pilgrimage. I didn't take a smartphone or camera either, and all this helped to embrace a period of living in the present. As pilgrims we were captivated by the landscape as it changed around us, concerned with the basic facts of where we would eat and sleep, and charged with the energies of one another in the encounters and conversations that shaped each day. I had no desire to exchange the Camino's simple, yet rich, community life for a fictional world. The way itself was charged with the language of people and nature, which I listened to and expressed verbally as poems and in my journal.

After five weeks of this time of non-reading, a kind of abstinence with its own unexpected fullness, something amazing happened. I read a book again. There were not too many kilometres left to walk and my body knew it — I was getting tired. On a shelf in a hostel, there were a few volumes



abandoned by previous travellers. One was a slim paperback which looked new, pristine and unread. Gingerly, I opened its smooth white cover and read the first few paragraphs. I was instantly hooked and absorbed in the narrative, savouring each delicious, delicately constructed sentence like I had never known sentences before. Here were nouns and verbs! Here was a scene I could picture, conjured like a genie — characters, a whole world. It was a moment of re-enchantment with the nutritious goodness of imaginative language.

That book – it was *The Bookshop*, by Penelope Fitzgerald – gave me a boost in the final week of the walk like some kind of multivitamin drink or medicinal broth. Stowed away with the blister plasters, insect-bite cream and spare socks in my pack it felt like a secret, life-giving nectar, concentrated with hidden powers; I nibbled a little each day until it was finally gone, the story consumed.

Taking a break from our usual routines can force us to notice the things we have grown used to and even dependent on — for me as a bookworm, that included my everyday diet of novels and texts. Putting them aside for a while meant I could come back — with renewed wonder, delight and respect for the life-giving nourishment of good literature.