

# ∞ READING ROUND ∞

## Life-Changing Literature

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Amaal Said

I DON'T KNOW IF THIS is a mistake on my part, but I've always gone to literature to shake something in me. I've sought out moments of clarity, feelings of wonder and awe. Sometimes I think I'm asking for too much but then I remember those times my world has been changed by a book, or by an author that taught me something completely new. I was used to making up stories. Coming up with names; making up universes. As a young girl engaging with literature, I thought this was what you did. You didn't use yourself. You stepped into another world altogether.

When I discovered *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, I was changed. Here was Cisneros writing vignettes that felt true to my life. Her descriptions of the neighbourhood, the characters that made that neighbourhood and the problems they faced were all so familiar to me. I realised maybe I could do that. I could write about my neighbourhood too. I could tell the stories of my aunts and uncles. The long-distance phone calls between my mum and the siblings she wasn't sure she'd ever see again. The guilt of moving away from your family but the need to do so to survive and to live well. The main character in the book is always moving. It doesn't feel like a house is hers. I was that girl too. In 'A Smart Cookie' her mum tells her 'I could've been somebody, you know? Esperanza, you go to school. Study Hard.' It sounds exactly like something my mum would say to me too. I thought, *That's it, I'm writing from my own world. I'm making space for the stories I've grown up around.*

Toni Morrison's writing also changed me. It felt like fate finding her novel

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*Beloved* in Hayes End library. I went there as a teenager looking specifically for Black women writers. It was the first time I was so captivated by the writing that I walked and read at the same time. I got off the bus and needed to know what was happening next. I sped through a lot of her novels, in love with her writing. At Morrison's ability to make me feel. I kept thinking about her words and the worlds she had written about well after the book was finished.

Discovering the work of poet Warsan Shire changed me too. Here was a Somali woman who was doing away with shame and writing her reality. Receiving her debut poetry collection and rushing to find my mum and saying, 'Look! She's a Somali girl too and this is her own book.' That was the first time my mother understood what I was doing. The secretive writing I did on the computer. The notebooks I carried around and made notes in. Asking her for story after story. I'm grateful for Shire's writing. I felt like it was the permission I needed to continue writing, and to believe that my work might one day reach someone who needed it.