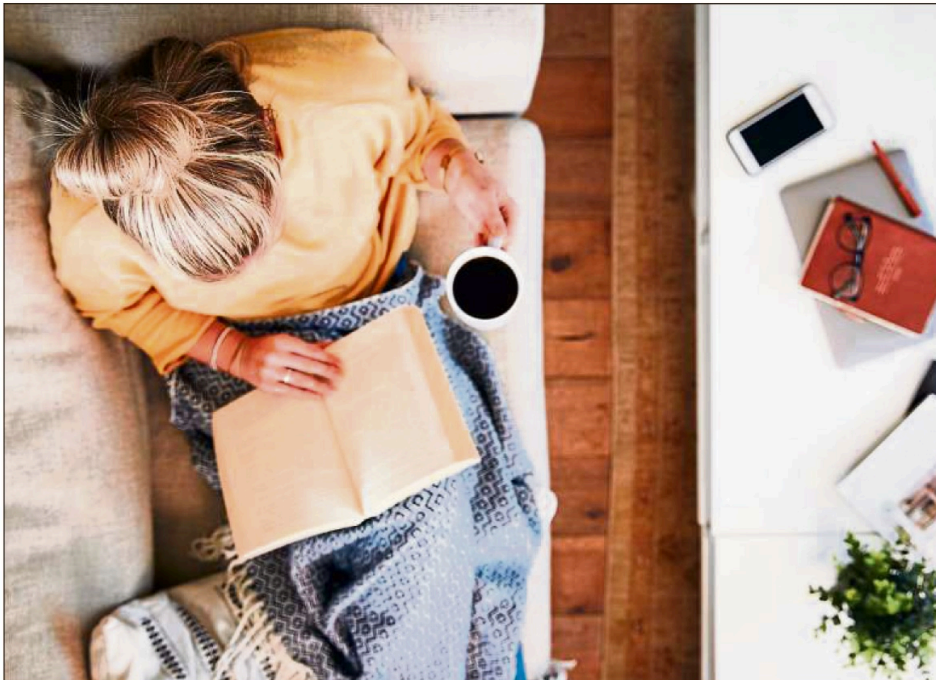




END OF A CHAPTER: The novel is under threat in the GCSE curriculum

Every young person should get lost in a book

THE Education Authorities, in their wisdom, have come up with the novel idea of removing the study of novels from the GCSE curriculum. First they came for poetry; now they've come for prose. What next can they cull in the cause of illiteracy?

Truly, we're living in an increasingly philistine age, breeding a generation of technological hotshots but intellectual and cultural ignoramus. You think I'm exaggerating? An alarming survey published recently by Renaissance UK revealed that, of the 20 most popular titles in secondary schools, 11 are by Jeff (Diary of a Wimpy Kid) Kinney, four by David (Gangsta Granny) Walliams, with JK Rowling's first and simplest Harry Potter coming in an inglorious 19th. The study examined the reading habits and levels of comprehension of more than a million pupils in the UK and Ireland and discovered that perfectly capable 13-16-year-olds are consistently choosing books at least three years below their chronological age. So much for intellectual challenge and the development of a critical sense.

At that age and stage in my day there was a heavy emphasis on the classics in the school curriculum. The richness of Dickens's David Copperfield and A Tale of Two Cities was only appreciated later, since we hadn't enough historical knowledge of either Victorian England or the French Revolution at the time, but we spouted our received opinions and passed the exams. More modern socially relevant classics like The Catcher in the Rye, To Kill a Mockingbird and Lord of the Flies only made it onto the list in the sixties.

The habit of reading used to be caught, rather than taught. Mine is the last generation reared without the perpetual burble of the radio and the flicker of a screen in the background.

Anita
ROBINSON



We read for want of any alternative, my father behind a newspaper, my mother reading and crocheting simultaneously. My omnivorous literary consumption plummeted when I discovered Radio Luxembourg under the bedclothes and we acquired a television set. Only a love of language and the library saved me from pop perdition and carried me through to finer things. There were of course the 'set' novels for O and A-level and later at college – internationally recognised authors, though I never really got to grips with George Eliot's Middlemarch (due to feminist pressure) being reprinted with the author's real name, Mary Anne Evans. With all the pretentiousness of studenthood, I tackled War and Peace, ostentatiously carrying it about

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under my arms for weeks. Truth to tell, I only read the 'peace' bits, since I can't be doing with battles.

The thing about being exposed at an impressionable age to the best writing, is how it informs the mind, alters perceptions, provokes thoughts and hones analytical skills, under the guise of a cracking good story. The critical appraisal of a novel poses ethical questions, the dissection of character, analysis of the plot, richness of vocabulary and overall reader satisfaction – an exercise that has caused ructions since in many an adult group, including my own, renowned for heated debate.

Every young person needs the transcendental experience of 'getting lost in a book', travelling with the characters through their trials and triumphs, savouring the skill of a writer whose phrases perfectly convey a narrative in language they might never frame themselves. Without challenge they will never progress. Without perceptive guided study of novels these are skills lost to our students – and they'll be all the poorer for it.

Language is a living thing, constantly evolving. Every generation sheds redundant words and phrases and coins fresh ones for new purposes. Only Shakespeare remains an immutable sacrosanct heart-scaled to students five centuries on. Perhaps some enterprising scribe will translate it into text-speak for the rising generation?

As for intellectual rigour – In the category of 'you couldn't make it up', I note that a New York university has published an academic paper on how students perceive the use of the full stop in messaging. Apparently it comes across as 'abrupt, unfriendly, less sincere, less positive'. Words fail me. Aristophanes (who introduced the full stop in the third century BC), thou shouldst be living at this hour.

ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 1 1920

York Street Riot

AFTER an intermission during Sunday night, rioting broke out afresh in Belfast yesterday morning with the disturbance in this instance involving the centre of the city. There had been continuous disturbances in the vicinity of Henry Street, off York Street. About eight o'clock when the shipyard workers were on their way to Workman, Clark and Co's and the Queens Island, stone-throwing was resumed. Exchanges took place between side-streets and passing workers and this led to missiles being thrown, both the houses in the side-streets and the tramcars containing the workers receiving attention. Bodies of the men left the cars and rushed towards crowds grouped at various streets. Within a short time the whole length of York Street was involved in a running fight of a very fierce description.

After some time revolver shots began to mingle with the general din of the stone-throwing and the shouts of the crowd and any people who lingered in the vicinity from curiosity began to make themselves scarce. It was quite an unusual hour at which to witness disorder of such magnitude in the very heart of Belfast. Numbers of shipyard workers were injured by stones.

At this stage a military party arrived and a post was formed in York Street near Frederick Street, the soldiers lining across the street between the two crowds. An armoured car also came on the scene. The military demonstration had no effect and it was not until several rounds of machine-gun fire had been used that the street began to clear. Four were fatally injured in the course of the firing.

Carson in Negotiations

THE following statement was issued yesterday evening from the Old Town Hall, Belfast, the headquarters of the Ulster Unionist Party: 'Sir Edward Carson has called upon all loyal citizens to assist the authorities in quelling disturbances and restoring peace.'

'Negotiations have been going on with the government and an important statement is expected to be delivered at the Ulster Unionist Council...'

Magistrate Murdered

A TERRIBLE tragedy was enacted at Eden, near Glenties, County Donegal on Saturday night when Major G H Johnston, JP (70) was shot dead in his own house. Described as one of the grand old men of the county, he was most popular.

Sectarian attacks by nationalists on shipyard trams were a feature of the 1920 disturbances. As the subsequent inquests showed, most of those shot dead were innocent civilians caught up in the early morning melees. Carson's statement hinted at an imminent announcement on the formation of the Ulster Specials which would absorb the UVF and Imperial Guards in the countdown to partition.

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