

# PRESS RELEASE

**Strictly embargoed until Wednesday 1 March, 00.01**



**The Royal Society  
of Literature**

## **Literature is a hugely popular force for good in British society, new research reveals**

**Enid Blyton, Stephen King and J K Rowling are in the top 10 writers of literature along with Austen, Dickens and Shakespeare, according to the British public.**

The ground-breaking opinion poll has found:

- Three-quarters of the British population have read literature in the last 6 months, based on their own definition of what literature is.
- The internet is not a threat to reading – literature readers are more likely than non-literature readers to use the web.
- Literature plays an important role in social cohesion – 81% agree that literature helps people understand other points of view.

Published on 1 March by the Royal Society of Literature, the *Literature in Britain Today* report presents findings from an Ipsos MORI survey of nearly 2,000 members of the public. It is the first research to ask how many people read literature and what it means to them.

The report includes a publicly voted chart of literary authors. Respondents were invited to name a writer they consider to be a writer of literature. The resulting 400 names – topped by Shakespeare, Dickens, J K Rowling and Roald Dahl – are an eclectic mix of classic and popular writers, half of them living and nearly half from overseas, though only 31% of them women and 7% Black, Asian or Mixed Race.

The research also found that a substantial minority of the population have little or no knowledge of literature, though there is considerable appetite to learn more:

- 20% of people cannot name a writer of literature.
- Over half (56%) of those who do not currently read literature would like to.
- 88% agree that literature should be part of everyone's education.

**The full report can be found at [www.rsliterature.org.uk](http://www.rsliterature.org.uk)**

We have several speakers available for interview or comment including:  
Lisa Appignanesi, Hermione Lee, Rick Rylance and Kamila Shamsie, Tim Robertson.

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# Notes to editors

“The RSL has asked the British public to tell us what literature is and what value it carries. The answers are heartening. In an era of increasingly polarised opinion, when Brexit and Trump dominate the political agenda, literature serves as a way of opening up new points of view. It enables people to step into others’ lives. Now, when we urgently need insight into the unfamiliar, literature matters more than ever.”

**Lisa Appignanesi** FRSL, writer, Chair of the Royal Society of Literature

“This is fascinating and positive. I’m happy to find myself voted into a group of 400 such literary luminaries. But I would hate to minimise the significance in our society of the vast numbers, albeit a minority, who do not know or value or love literature. There seems to be a gulf that shuts off 20% of people from the benefits of literature, a gulf that I know the RSL and others are determined to bridge.”

**Michael Morpurgo** FRSL, children’s writer, author of *War Horse*

“The survey suggests that literature is recognised as a force for good in the world. Literature is associated with positive ambitions and the growth of the mind, and those who experience it find their lives nourished and enriched.”

**Simon Armitage** FRSL, poet, Oxford Professor of Poetry

“This is a most important and impressive study. It joins a long line of evidence about the wide extent of reading in the UK, and is, as far as I know, the first to focus specifically on literature. People read now more than ever before in human history. Far from being marginal or in decline, reading literature is mainstream. Congratulations to the RSL for this compelling new piece of evidence, and for celebrating a neglected fact about our national life.”

**Professor Rick Rylance**, Institute of English Studies, University of London, formerly CEO of the Arts and Humanities Research Council

“Literature matters: to society, to education, to future generations. It matters because it widens our scope of life and intensifies our perceptions; it takes us on journeys, invites us to share our lives with strangers, challenges and changes us. I celebrate the Royal Society of Literature for raising literature’s profile in this report.”

**Hermione Lee** FRSL, biographer and literary critic

“I often hear claims made about literature, based on anecdotes or from within a literary echo chamber. But here is a robust survey of public opinion, in which ‘literature’ isn’t seen as an elitist off-putting word, but one that is claimed and embraced by a wide cross-section of society. There is also useful information about the work that needs to be done for literature, with local libraries proving directly relevant to many of the challenges.”

**Kamila Shamsie** FRSL, novelist

## Top 20 writers of literature named by the public

- |                        |                       |                    |
|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. William Shakespeare | 9. Enid Blyton        | 17. Lee Child      |
| 2. Charles Dickens     | 10. J R R Tolkien     | 18. Danielle Steel |
| 3. J K Rowling         | 11. Dan Brown         | 19. Jeffrey Archer |
| 4. Roald Dahl          | 12. Terry Pratchett   | 20. Oscar Wilde,   |
| 5. Jane Austen         | 13. James Patterson   | Jacqueline Wilson  |
| 6. Stephen King        | 14. Catherine Cookson |                    |
| 7. George Orwell       | 15. Agatha Christie   |                    |
| 8. The Brontë sisters  | 16. Thomas Hardy      |                    |

# Report speed read summary (embargoed until 1 March)

Conclusions drawn by the Royal Society of Literature	Evidence from Ipsos MORI survey
<p>Literature is not just for specialists – it is widely read and owned by the British public.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 75% of people (adults in Britain) have read something in the last 6 months which they consider to be literature.</li> <li>• 90% of people who have read a novel in the last 6 months consider that novel to be literature.</li> </ul>
<p>There is significant appetite among the public to read more literature.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 56% of people who do not currently read literature would definitely or probably like to read it in the future.</li> </ul>
<p>Literature is valued highly in British society. It plays an important role in people’s lives, especially by fostering empathy for others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 88% of people agree that literature should be part of everyone’s education.</li> <li>• 67% believe that literature comforts people in times of stress.</li> <li>• 81% of people agree that literature helps people understand other points of view.</li> </ul>
<p>Britain’s long tradition of literature is flourishing.</p> <p>British readers admire a richly varied array of classic and living writers, although women and minority ethnic writers are under-represented.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The writer most commonly considered to be a writer of literature is Shakespeare, with Dickens coming a close second.</li> <li>• The living writer most commonly considered to be a writer of literature is J K Rowling, who comes third.</li> <li>• Out of 400 writers named by the public as writers of literature, half are living, 69% are novelists, 31% are female, and 7% are Black, Asian or Mixed Race.</li> </ul>
<p>A substantial minority of people have little or no knowledge of literature.</p> <p>Men and people from disadvantaged social groups are particularly likely to miss out on literature.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 20% of people cannot name a writer of literature.</li> <li>• 15% of people believe that literature is too difficult to understand.</li> <li>• Readers of literature are more likely than others to be white, to be female, to come from higher socio-economic groups, and to use the internet.</li> </ul>
<p>Public libraries are crucial to sustaining and building engagement in literature.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The factors most likely to encourage more reading of literature are recommendations of what to read, cheaper books and more local libraries.</li> </ul>

**The Royal Society of Literature** is Britain's national charity for "the advancement of literature". Founded in 1820, it is governed by its Fellowship of around 500 distinguished writers. It honours and encourages great writers through Fellowships and literary awards, engages the public in literature through events, publications and outreach to schools, and acts as a voice for the value of literature. The *Literature in Britain Today* report is the first national research that the RSL has commissioned. It feeds into a new programme of activities under the title *Literature Matters*, leading up to the Society's bicentenary in 2020.

### **Technical note**

The research was conducted by Ipsos MORI, using CAPIbus, Ipsos MORI's computer aided face to face in-home omnibus survey.

- Results are based on a survey 1,998 respondents (adults aged 15+)
- Fieldwork dates: 23rd September-11th October 2016
- Data are weighted by age, gender, region, working status, social grade, tenure and ethnicity to the known population profile of adults aged 15+ in GB
- Where results do not sum to 100%, this may be due to computer rounding, multiple responses, or the exclusion of "don't know" categories
- Results are based on all respondents 1,998 unless otherwise stated