# Despite fewer readers, novels remain vital in a distracted digital age



In an era where digital distractions abound, the decline in reading habits among Britons raises questions about the future of literature. A recent YouGov poll has revealed that 40% of the British adult population has not read or listened to a book in the past year. This statistic echoes a concern articulated by author Philip Roth, who predicted in 2000 that the literary era was drawing to a close, convinced that increasing screen time would deplete society’s ability to engage deeply with literature.

Roth's concerns seem well-founded, as studies suggest that the average attention span has plummeted from 12 seconds in 2000 to a mere eight seconds today, even shorter than that of a goldfish. This decline is largely attributed to the proliferation of smartphones and the internet, which have fostered an environment rich in distractions. According to research, the shift towards digital consumption has not only diminished concentration but has also altered cognitive functions, compelling many to navigate this digital landscape with ever-increasing multi-tasking abilities, though at the cost of focused thought.

Interestingly, despite the bleak statistics, the YouGov poll also reveals that among those who read, a significant 55% prefer fiction. This appetite for novels contradicts the idea that literature is fading into obscurity. Talk to booksellers and publishers, and they confirm a persistent demand for long-form narratives. According to experts, while the digital age inundates us with information, it simultaneously creates a yearning for deeper understanding and wisdom, qualities that novels can uniquely foster. The distinction between knowledge and wisdom, as emphasised by literary voices, becomes increasingly crucial. Novels possess the capacity to nurture empathy and emotional intelligence, illuminating aspects of the human condition in ways that shorter forms of media often cannot achieve.

Elif Shafak, a prominent voice in contemporary literature, asserts that novels play a vital role in helping us navigate turbulent times. She notes a noticeable uptick in younger audiences attending literary festivals and book events across the UK. As societal tensions escalate, it appears that many are seeking solace in fiction, where complex narratives can challenge polarised perspectives and foster understanding—a timeless necessity, especially in an age marked by conflict and division.

Shafak draws a powerful parallel with ancient narratives, referencing the Epic of Gilgamesh as an enduring exploration of human experience. The narrative introduces us to a flawed protagonist grappling with themes of friendship, loss, and the quest for meaning. Gilgamesh's journey, fraught with existential challenges, ultimately leads him to a more compassionate existence, a narrative arc that resonates with readers even thousands of years after its inception. This enduring appeal of the long-form story highlights literature's ability to transcend time and engage with universal human truths.

Despite the alarming survey results indicating diminishing reading habits, it is clear that the essence of storytelling retains its significance. As society grapples with information overload, the need for depth, empathy, and contemplation in literature becomes ever more apparent. Indeed, the act of reading serves not only as an escape but as a profound means of connecting with others and enhancing our understanding of the world.

As we move forward, embracing both the challenges and the demands of modern life, the role of novels in nurturing the human spirit and fostering wisdom cannot be overstated. The long-form narrative may very well serve as our guide through a chaotic world, reminding us that stories have the power to transform, heal, and unite us in our shared humanity.

### Reference Map

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## Bibliography

* <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/may/11/given-up-on-reading-elif-shafak-on-why-we-still-need-novels> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
* <https://yougov.co.uk/entertainment/articles/51730-40-of-britons-havent-read-a-single-book-in-the-last-12-months> - A YouGov poll reveals that 40% of Britons haven't read or listened to a book in the past year. The median Briton has read or listened to three books in the same period. The survey also highlights that 66% of women and 53% of men have engaged with books in the last year. Additionally, 65% of individuals aged 65 and over have read at least one book, compared to 53% of those aged 18 to 24. The study underscores a significant decline in reading habits among the UK adult population.
* <https://time.com/6302294/why-you-cant-focus-anymore-and-what-to-do-about-it/> - An article from Time magazine discusses the growing concern over declining attention spans, attributing it to the constant use of phones and the internet. Research indicates that increased task switching and digital distractions significantly reduce concentration. Experts suggest that while technology exploits our natural cognitive functions, it doesn't permanently alter them. To improve focus, the article recommends reducing smartphone use, prioritizing important activities, taking breaks, and ensuring adequate sleep. Achieving better focus requires deliberate effort and environmental adjustments.
* <https://time.com/3858309/attention-spans-goldfish/> - A study by Microsoft Corp. reveals that the average human attention span has dropped from 12 seconds in 2000 to just eight seconds, now shorter than that of a goldfish. This decline is attributed to the increasingly digitalized lifestyle, with the mobile revolution playing a significant role. The study involved a survey of 2,000 participants and EEG brain activity studies of 112 individuals in Canada. Researchers found that heavy multi-screen users struggle to filter out distractions but also noted an improvement in multitasking abilities.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/jul/24/more-than-a-third-of-uk-adults-have-given-up-reading-for-pleasure-study-finds> - A study indicates that more than a third of UK adults have ceased reading for pleasure. The 16- to 24-year-old age group had the lowest level of regular readers (32%), with nearly a quarter saying they have never been regular readers and 44% saying they are lapsed readers. In contrast, 62% of adults 55 and over said they read regularly, defined as reading at least once a week. The study highlights a significant decline in reading habits among younger adults.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/mar/06/new-poll-finds-40-of-britons-have-not-read-a-book-in-the-past-year> - A new poll by YouGov finds that 40% of Britons have not read or listened to a book in the past year. The median British adult has read or listened to three books in the past 12 months. The survey also reveals that 66% of women and 53% of men have engaged with books in the last year. Additionally, 72% of remain voters and 54% of leave voters reported reading in the past year, indicating a political divide in reading habits.
* <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/two-in-five-havent-read-a-book-in-the-past-year-yougov-data-shows> - YouGov polling shows that the median Briton has only read or listened to three books, with 40% of the public not reading or listening to a single book in the past year. The survey also highlights that 66% of women and 53% of men have engaged with books in the last year. Additionally, 65% of over-65s and 63% of 50-64 year olds have read at least one book, compared to 57% of 25-49 year olds and 53% of 18-24 year olds.