

CHACR DIGEST #9



Feast on fiction

Picture: Link Hoang on Unsplash

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Captain Katie Spence is in the Educational and Training Services, and is currently a teacher and OIC at York Army Education Centre. Her lifelong love of literature has led her to take a year-long career intermission starting this September, where she will do an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Chester and write her first novel.



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10 RECOMMENDED READS FOR LEARNING ABOUT THE WORLD AS IT WAS, AS IT IS NOW, AND AS IT MIGHT BE

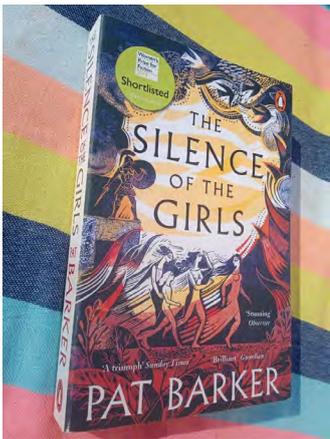
The summer holidays are rapidly approaching, so it's time to pick out the perfect beach read or novel for lounging in the garden with. However, fiction shouldn't just be a guilty pleasure relegated to the confines of your annual leave or considered a luxury you never have time for. Picking up a novel can be as educational as reading a non-fiction book, albeit in a slightly different way. When you immerse yourself in a novel, you're not simply reading a story; you're actively improving your emotional intelligence.

In the Army, we talk a lot about how important emotional intelligence is, and how we should all aspire to empathetic leadership. Luckily, your amount of emotional intelligence is not a fixed quantity, rather it's a skill you can grow and develop over time, and reading emotive literature is one way of cultivating this. Empathy is one of Daniel Goleman's five components of emotional intelligence (explained in his 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence*), and what better way to practise putting yourself in someone else's shoes than reading a story from the perspective of a stranger, or from a point of view you might never have considered before, or about an issue which maybe doesn't affect you personally.

Social skills are another part of emotional intelligence, which doesn't just mean 'being likeable' – social skills are about improving how you interact with people, finding common ground, and understanding what others need from you. Reading a book by someone from a different country or culture to yours is such a useful experience, because you can learn a lot about cultural values and nuances from what is (and isn't) included in fictional stories by thinking about what issues the author has chosen to focus on and what angles they tell the novel from. A story doesn't have to be true to be valuable.

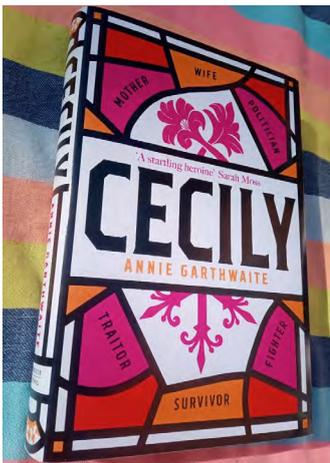
Finally, fiction is an incredibly useful tool for developing self-awareness (yes, another one of Goleman's components of emotional intelligence). You can learn a lot about yourself by reflecting on how you react to a story – perhaps you find yourself disagreeing with a character's moral choices, or wishing they'd acted in a different way, or you realise you're feeling uncomfortable with the way someone or something is portrayed. Moving beyond your initial gut reaction of 'I like this book or 'I don't like this book' is vital if you want to use fiction to develop your self-awareness. Always ask yourself: what, specifically, has led to you reacting that way?

Give it a go – try supplementing your reading diet with a healthy dose of fiction, and see if you become a more empathetic, emotionally intelligent, self-aware leader. To get you started, here are ten books published within the past five years by authors from a range of countries and backgrounds to help you learn about the world as it was, as it is now, and as it might be in the future.



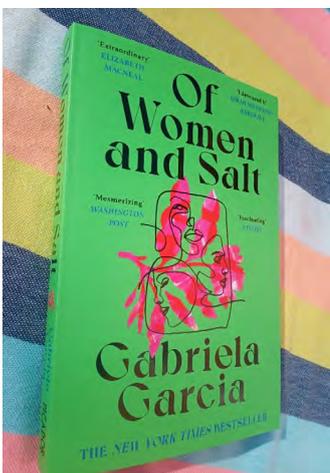
THE SILENCE OF THE GIRLS (2018) – PAT BARKER

In a dazzling retelling of Homer's *Illiad*, Yorkshire's own Pat Barker tells the story of the Trojan War from the perspective of Briseis, a noblewoman who is taken as a prize of battle, and from the perspective of Achilles, the famous Greek warrior to whom Briseis is presented. Briseis learns how to survive among her country's enemies, and through her we see the psychological effects of war on women and how sexual violence is wielded as a weapon of war (perhaps not the right book for you if you're avoiding those themes). As Achilles' trophy, she is ideally placed to observe the diplomacy, politics, and internal power struggles within the Greek forces – the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon is a brilliant demonstration of how ego and pride can cultivate a truly toxic leadership environment. The historical details are worked into the prose with such seamlessness and events unfold with such vividness that *The Silence of the Girls* barely feels like historical fiction – even my husband, who never reads fiction, absolutely raced through it. This book made a huge splash when it came out, so if you've already read and enjoyed it, you should read *Daughters of Sparta* (2021) by Claire Heywood.



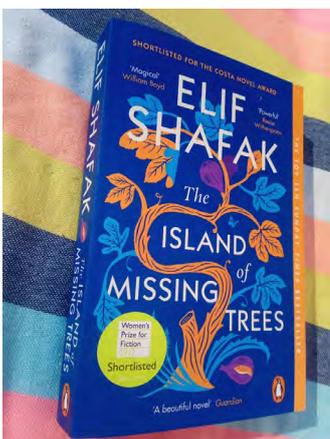
CECILY (2021) – ANNIE GARTHWAITE

Annie Garthwaite's stunning debut novel retells the War of the Roses from the perspective of Cecily Neville, wife of Richard Duke of York and mother of Richard III. As a character, Cecily herself is magnificently nuanced – we see how she negotiates politics and the effects of war in the mid-15th Century with ruthlessness and ambition, but also vulnerability. The depiction of how Cecily gains, keeps, and uses power in the margins of masculine politics is the stand-out feature of the novel; she relies much more on careful use of language and clever diplomacy to achieve her political goals. When I went to hear Annie Garthwaite speak at an event last year, she spoke about her career as an international businesswoman and how when Richard was 'deployed,' Cecily was essentially managing a business operation at the scale of an FTSE company while also being pregnant most of the time. Some of the scenes where Cecily is trying to juggle all this – or where she is the only woman at the table – feel strikingly modern, and will resonate with any woman who works in a very male-dominated environment. If you've already read *Cecily* and are after another novel where women are put front and centre in military history, you should read *Tsarina* (2020) by Ellen Alpsten.



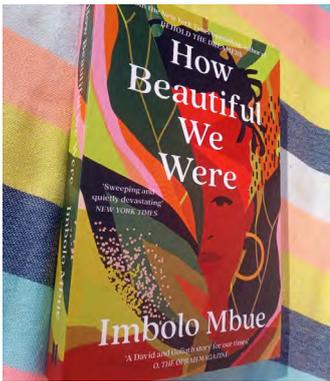
OF WOMEN AND SALT (2022) – GABRIELA GARCIA

This gripping novel tells the story of five generations of Cuban women. *Of Women and Salt* charts the intergenerational effects of immigration and trauma. The storyline hops between timelines, with each storyline giving a snapshot of a different woman's life. The vast span of the snapshots demonstrate how long-term the effects of conflict can be. The book opens with María, a cigar roller in 1866 Cuba confronted with the political unrest of the revolution against Spain. We skip to her great-granddaughter, Dolores in 1959, who is living through both domestic violence and the violence during Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution. The narrative shifts to present-day Miami, where Dolores' daughter and grand-daughter are struggling with a strained mother-daughter relationship and the lasting psychological effects of immigration. Gabriela Garcia writes in unflinching detail, and broaches some dark moments with sensitivity – although this might not be the book for you if you're avoiding themes of addiction, abuse, or suicide (or if you have an attention span which can't follow multiple storylines!). If you've already read *Of Women and Salt* and would like another novel exploring how the past affects different generations, you should read *Homegoing* (2016) by Yaa Gyasi.



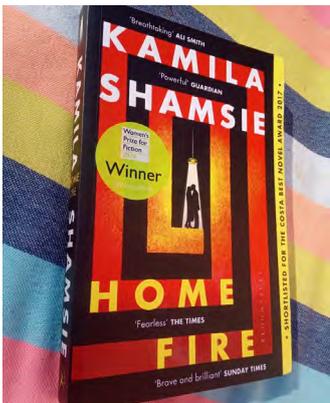
THE ISLAND OF MISSING TREES (2021) – ELIF SHAFAK

Elif Shafak's latest book is not to be missed. This novel tells the captivating tale of a Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot who fall in love amid the violence of 1970s Nicosia. Life in post-colonial Cyprus is drawn with striking intensity; through the eyes of the young couple, we see the 1974 coup and the struggles of living in a divided country. There are also chapters set in present-day London which focus on their teenage daughter who is trying to learn about her family's past so she can process her own identity and connections to Cyprus. Interestingly, some of the story is narrated from the point of view of a fig tree – I was originally a bit sceptical about this, but it works beautifully because the fig tree's long memory provides an original way to explore how conflict affects the natural world as well as the human one. The dedication to this book says it all – "To immigrants and exiles everywhere, the uprooted, the re-rooted, the rootless, and to the trees we left behind, rooted in our memories." If you've already read *The Island of Missing Trees* and would like another unusual historical novel narrated by trees, you should read *The True* (2019) by Amanda Marks.



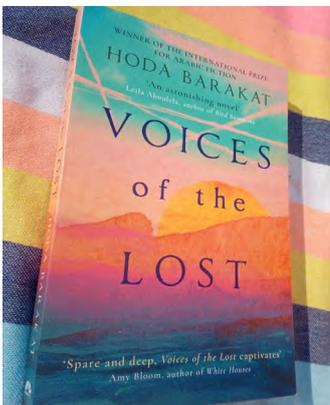
HOW BEAUTIFUL WE WERE (2020) – IMBOLO MBUE

I read *How Beautiful We Were* about a year ago and it still haunts me. This novel is about a fictional African village whose farmland, air, and drinking water has been polluted by an American oil corporation. The story follows Thula, who grows up among the death and sickness caused by the oil company, and then devotes her adulthood to pursuing justice for her long-suffering village. It's a book full of 'wicked problems.' Characters grapple with moral dilemmas where there is often no correct choice available – how do you solve a decades-long stalemate? Will arming themselves cause more damage than good? Will appealing to the Western media help them or hinder their cause? Although the issue at the core of the novel is the effect of environmental damage, Imbolo Mbue weaves in a range of interconnected issues such as globalisation, capitalism, the role of activism, and colonialism. If you've already read *How Beautiful We Were* and are keen to read more about environmental issues, you should read *The Inland Sea* (2020) by Madeleine Watts.



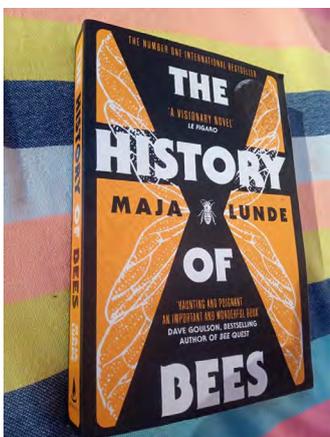
HOME FIRE (2017) – KAMILA SHAMSIE

Home Fire is an enthralling novel which digs into so many complex issues for such a short book. Set in present-day London, *Home Fire* tells the tightly plotted tale of two British Muslim sisters who are trying to navigate the conflicts between family, love, religion, and politics when their brother becomes radicalised by a terrorist group. I found *Home Fire* thought-provoking and compelling; its exploration of Islamophobia in British society and underpinning question of what it means to be British make it an absolute must-read. It's a modern retelling of *Antigone*, but you don't need to know the original story to enjoy this book. However, fans of classical literature will spot the parallels between the main characters and those in Sophocles' original play. There are also similarities in the central themes of the story, such as the clash between family duty and civic duty. It was also the winner of the 2018 Women's Prize for Fiction, if you need any more convincing to pick up a copy! If you've already read *Home Fire* and are looking for another adaptation of this myth, you should read *The Children of Jocasta* (2017) by Natalie Haynes.



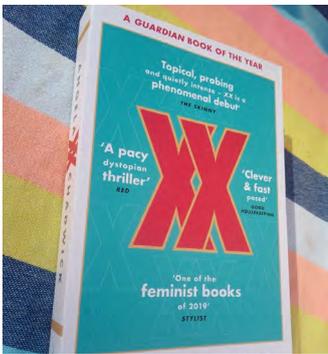
VOICES OF THE LOST (2020) – HODA BARAKAT

Voices of the Lost won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, and every time you turn the page it's impossible not to think how well-deserved the accolade is. It's not narrated in a traditional style, rather we hear the story through five loosely linked letters sent by refugees from an unnamed war-torn country. Not all the letters reach the intended recipient; each one is followed by an internal monologue-style confession from the person who has found it. Each letter-writer is going through a different struggle related to their displacement – for example, we hear from an escaped torturer, a former sex worker, an undocumented immigrant. Some of the letters are not comfortable reads, but they feel compelling, urgent, and deeply personal. This might not be the book for you if you're avoiding themes of sexual violence or domestic abuse – it does get quite graphic in parts. However, for anyone seeking to understand the far-reaching and heart-breaking human consequences of war, Hoda Barakat's *Voices of the Lost* would be a good place to start. If you've already read and enjoyed this book, you should read *You Exist Too Much* (2020) by Zaina Ararat.



THE HISTORY OF BEES (2017) – MAJA LUNDE

This unusual novel is a mix of historical fiction, contemporary literature, and dystopia. The driving question of the story is 'what happens when all the bees die out?', but it's about so much more than that. Told across three cleverly interconnected timelines, we see the importance of bees through the eyes of a Hertfordshire academic in 1851, the precariousness of modern ecosystems in 2007 Ohio, and the long-term effects of mass biodiversity collapse in China in 2098. The chapters set in the future are at the same time engrossing and disconcerting, and elegantly illustrate just how profoundly connected each facet of modern society is: the loss of pollinating insects means humans have to hand-paint pollen onto trees which creates the need for a huge workforce of manual labourers, the lack of crops affect food and resource availability, and so on. In all three of the storylines, the study, farming, or absence of bees deeply affects the characters' family and personal lives, and is underpinned by the impossible dilemma between individual self-interest and sacrificing what you want for the greater good. If you've already read this and are looking for more bee-themed literature, you should read *The Bees* (2014) by Laline Paull.



XX (2018) – ANGELA CHADWICK

XX is powerful, provocative, and a difficult novel to categorise: it has a hint of sci-fi, and touch of dystopia, with a bit of politics thrown in there for good measure. It depicts a near-future Britain where scientists have developed a new kind of IVF where male chromosomes are no longer required, and which always results in a female baby. The book focusses on the political backlash and complex social fallout of this new technology, as well as the personal toll it takes on the lesbian couples who have decided to put themselves forward for the medical trial. This story is a must-read for anyone interested in media and communications – in XX, we see the effects of social media hysteria, disinformation campaigns, and dangerously polarised news coverage. If you've already read XX and are searching for another gritty dystopia about motherhood and reproductive rights, you should read *Blue Ticket* (2020) by Sophie Mackintosh.



THE STARTUP WIFE (2021) – TAHMIMA ANAM

This near-future satirical novel is about a genius coder called Asha who creates an algorithm which has the potential to replace religion. She founds a wildly successful tech start-up with her husband Cyrus, whose eccentric personality and egocentrism rapidly begin to threaten both their marriage and their business. Through Asha's eyes, we see her frustrations at being gradually edged out of her own company by the white men who dominate the playing field, despite her being the brains powering the whole operation. *The Startup Wife* deftly explores the role of religion in society and the far-reaching consequences of the artificial intelligence revolution. Issues of race, class, and gender are ingrained into the story but never take centre stage – rather, they are subtly brought to light in the workplace interactions between Asha, Cyrus, and the investors in their start-up. If you've already read *The Startup Wife* and are after another book which deals with race and gender, you should read *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Bernadine Evaristo.

WANT TO MAKE READING FICTION A HABIT?

- Join a civilian book club. It's so refreshing to hear non-military viewpoints, and not having the choice over what you read means you're exposed to a whole range of books you might not usually select for yourself.
- Sign up to a monthly book subscription service where they post the books to you. A great idea if you haven't got the time or inclination to find a new book club every time you move to a different posting, and many have online forums where you can discuss your thoughts on the book.
- Support your local independent bookshop. The pandemic was tough for indie booksellers, and they're usually more than happy to give advice on what book to choose depending on what genres or authors you've enjoyed in the past.
- Sign up to Audible. This is ideal if you don't have the time to sit down with a book. So many books now have audiobook versions, you can listen along on your commute or dog walk (or gym session, if you don't find that too weird!).
- Pick up the 'fiction book of the month' at your nearest branch of Waterstones. You can generally rely on them to be decent choices and they're often on an offer like buy one get one half price / get a free coffee.
- And of course, follow @katiespencey on Twitter for weekly reading recommendations!

OUT NOW...

● Politics and political leadership will change, public perceptions will ebb and flow, Army leadership will change, world events will evolve and erupt, but our purpose will remain the solid foundation upon which we will need to build; and we will continue to need to build in a measured way for our best guess of the demands of the future, and much more flexibly and rapidly for the unexpected events that will inevitably challenge us. We can only be consistently fit for purpose if we have enduring clarity of what that purpose is. This edition of *Ares & Athena* provides very useful food for thought in that foundational respect." – **General Sir Patrick Sanders, Chief of the General Staff, reflects on the purpose of the British Army in the latest edition of Ares & Athena.**

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