## From Shakespeare to Knausgaard: 66 Classics You Were Supposed To Read But Most Likely Didn’t

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Translation © Rachel Rankin

**FOREWORD**

Joan Didion once said that we tell each other stories in order to live. An extreme example of this is Scheherazade who, in *One Thousand and One Nights*, is forced to tell stories that are so exciting, fascinating and mesmerising that the king will let her live for one more night. And then another. And then another.

Because people love good stories.

At the same time, each person only has a certain number of nights and we don’t have time to engage with every single story. No matter how good they are.

That’s where this book comes in.

Because although we can’t delve into every story, there are many we could benefit from knowing a *bit* more about. For many good reasons. One is that research shows that literary narratives increase our ability to empathise with other people. Another is that literature helps us to gain a different kind of awareness of our surroundings. And more importantly – they make us social champions. After all, look how well it ended for Scheherazade. She survived for over a thousand nights and in the end got married to the king himself. That’s why Therese and I have made a list of sixty-six classic literary works which we believe are particularly useful for acquiring social success – whether you’re talking about winning the lunch break, a party, or the gym.

Before we start delving into the list, however, there are a few things that might be useful to know, such as what a literary classic actually is, and how you can possibly recognise one.

The short answer is that a literary classic is a work which is considered to be among the most prominent within a nation’s cultural heritage. There are also characteristics that are more inherent to the text, however. For instance, a classic is one that you can read and re-read and still get new insights from. Or, it is a text that it feels relevant even though it was written hundreds of years ago. Another distinguishing feature is that classics are usually written by men. Why, you may ask? The answer, of course, is that within patriarchal structures men are simply much better writers than women. There’s a lot of evidence to support this. In the book *Why Read the Classics?* (1991), Italo Calvino makes a long list of authors who only have one thing in common, which is that they’re all men. In fact, he can’t think of a single woman he’d like to mention. Other facts that point in this direction is that one hundred men have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, but only fourteen women. And if we look to Norway – which statistically is one of the least patriarchal countries in the world – the NRK radio P2 Prize for Best Novel has been awarded to eighteen men and only five women. Maybe, in the future, women will become as good as men in writing novels, but that day is a long way away. In the meantime, we can take comfort in the fact that we’re allowed to write books at all. At this point, we must add that there are also very few non-Western men who have written “classic literature”. This show us as we do not only live in a patriarchy, but in a civilisation where white men have for a long time been allowed to speak at length about many things. That is a fact that the selection in this book is unavoidably tainted by.

With that, you already know a great deal about literary classics. And this is just the foreword. In the pages that follow, we will help you to both identify them and lie convincingly about having read them. This is our gift to you.

You’re welcome. And good luck!

**Frankenstein**

Mary Shelley

**Publication date:** 1818; 1831

**Genre:** Novel

**Original title:** *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*

**Summary of Book:** Man creates life, but soon realises that everything that comes after is exhausting.

**Why is this a classic?**

Firstly, Mary Shelley’s book is no less than the very first science fiction novel. This genre is characterised by a focus on innovative technology – Frankenstein is a doctor who uses a kind of home-grown knowledge to create new life, after all. But when he sees what he’s created, he becomes utterly repulsed and just tries to forget the whole thing. This results in The Creature hunting Frankenstein, killing much of his family, and then Frankenstein hunting The Creature, and then both of them dying.

(Illustration: “I’ve created life!

We.”)

**How to impress?**

Not many people know that the author behind *Frankenstein* was an eighteen-year-old woman who got the idea while travelling around the Alps with her lover, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and a number of other people during the coldest summer in living memory. This, moreover, was something that the first reviewers of the book weren’t interested in finding that out, but simply assumed that the book was written by a man. Another thing to note is that even though Frankenstein is often used to refer to the monster, it’s actually the name of the doctor. The former is consistently referred to as The Creature throughout the novel. We should also mention that The Creature is not particularly malicious in the beginning, but turns evil because he is constantly rejected due to his hideous appearance. Here we find a feminist theme inspired by the author’s mother – Mary Wollstonecraft – who, in her time, authored the text *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1782) in which she protested against the gender-differentiated philosophy of contemporary society and pointed out that women should be valued as people, just like men are. It’s also worth mentioning that few literary works have had such a wide impact on popular culture as *Frankenstein*. It’s been turned into everything from comics to books and feature length films, and was even the inspiration for the eighties hit “China in Your Hand” by the band T’Pau.

(Illustration: “IT’S ALIVE!”

“Great.”)

**Who to impress?**

The answer to this is, without doubt, the IT department. The subtitle *The Modern Prometheus* refers to the figure of Greek mythology who – against the will of the gods – gave mankind fire. The fire in this context represents technology and knowledge. The central theme – that is, the question of how far we can stretch knowledge before everything goes to hell – has proven itself to be extremely relevant in modern times, which means that the book can be brought up in conversations about everything from smartphones to cryobiology.

Now, you might be thinking that medical doctors will also be impressed. This is wrong. They are actually incredibly sceptical of *Frankenstein*, and particularly of the message that doctors are megalomaniacs who see themselves as masters over life and death. That is, of course, one hundred percent correct, but unfortunately, we as a society haven’t yet reached a point where we can speak out and say that people working in this field ought to wind their necks in a bit. So if you don’t want to end up being blacklisted by your local GP, it’s best not to mention Frankenstein at all.

Besides this, a third group to impress is feminists. In addition to acting as a reminder that women have always been “the second sex” – *Frankenstein* is a good example of what would happen if men could give birth to children. They would think it was awesome for about five minutes, and then they wouldn’t be able to take it anymore. All feminists – and mothers – find this insight absolutely hilarious. Because it’s true.

**Quotation**

*What can stop the determined heart and resolved will of man?*

**The Old Man and the Sea**

Ernest Hemingway

**Publication date:** 1952

**Genre:** Novel

**Original title:** *The Old Man and the Sea*

**Summary of Book:** Old man catches a big fish. Then he loses it.

(Illustration: “I identify with the proximity to the prey and the contact with nature…but, I mean, I’m not old.)

**Why is this a classic?**

You can’t lie about knowing the classics without having at least one book by Hemingway in your repertoire. He is an early literary rockstar because he was involved with acitivities such as big-game hunting and war, loved bullfighting, and lived in Paris during what we now know as the Modernist era. *Modernism,* by the way, is a common denominator for radical movements within art, architecture, literature and music which rose to prominence in the Western world in the early 1900s. The capital of Modernism was Paris, which meant that Hemingway could go to cafes with people like Gertrude Stein, Picasso, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Matisse and T.S. Eliot. We should also mention that these people are known as “the lost generation” because they found themselves in Paris in the 1920s with a feeling of having lost their youth to the First World War.

Hemingway is known for having written many classics, but there are two reasons why *The Old Man and the Sea* is on this list. Firstly, the story is relatively simple to summarise, and secondly, this was the book for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. For those who need a bit more fish-meat on the bones, the book is about Santiago the fisherman who has been expelled from his village because he hasn’t caught a fish in eighty-four days. The others believe he is a so-called *salao*, which signifies the most magnificent form of bad luck. In addition, they suspect that he has simply become too old for fishing and that he should retire. However, Santiago doesn’t give up. He heads out onto the sea and catches a massive fish which pulls him further and further away from land. An epic battle ensues, and when Santiago has finally overpowered his prey, he is injured and exhausted. In the end, he manages to get home, but on the way the fish is eaten by sharks. However, when the other fishermen see its skeleton on the beach, they realise that Santiago still has what it takes.

(Illustration: “Moby-Dick was too long – do you have a shorter book about men and the sea?”

“Now you’re in luck”)

**How to impress?**

This was the very last book Hemingway wrote, and he authored it at a time when many believed that his writing career was over. So the novel is, in itself, a kind of huge fish. But that’s not all. The discussions surrounding the different ways in which the fish – and the novel – can be interpreted are still ongoing. People bring up themes such as mortality, faith, suffering and old age, together with how human beings can sometimes triumph over their own shortcomings. Hemingway himself allegedly said that “I tried to make a real old man, a real boy, a real sea and a real fish and real sharks. But if I made them good and true enough, they would mean many things.” That sums up the whole thing pretty well.

**Who to impress?**

Men who enjoy hunting and fishing have often heard of Hemingway and walk around with a feeling that he is one of them. Such men can comprise a conversational challenge, because they frequently find other people uninteresting, but this book can actually serve as a sort of trump card, both because it is written by Hemingway and because it’s about a Man who catches a gigantic Fish. We read literature in order to see ourselves, after all, and it’s precisely the idea of men catching large animals that really hits home here. Also, there’s a bit of a bromance between Santiago and the fish, which is also something huntsmen and fishermen can relate to.

The book will also strike a chord with pensioners. At the start, Santiago wonders whether the fishing ought to be handed over to the young, but as it turns out it’s the whippersnappers who ought to learn from the old man. A third group who will be impressed is America-aficionados. They love Hemingway, regardless of whether or not they’ve actually read him. One tip is for example to remark with astonishment that “this book merely adds to the series of stories about Americans fighting against huge beasts of the sea.” Then your conversation partner can think of everything from *Moby-Dick* to *Jaws* (1975) and will nod admiringly. One final group is people with a predilection for Cuba, who might both be aware that this is where the novel is set and that Hemingway himself lived on the island for many, many years. Much longer than he lived in Paris. This makes them jump with joy. Or roll a good cigar.

**Quotation**

*He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish.*

**The Divine Comedy**Dante Alighieri

**Publication date:** 1321

**Genre:** Epic poetry

**Original title:** *Commedia/Divina Commedia*

**Summary of Book:** Midlife crisis in Hell.

**Why is this a classic?**

It is almost impossible to measure the massive impact this work has had on Western literary history. Dante’s work single-handedly put an end to the medieval Christian epic poem while simultaneously foreshadowing the Renaissance. And that’s just the beginning. What you need to know is that we’re dealing with a long narrative poem which is split into three parts: Inferno (Hell), Purgatorio (Purgatory) and Paradiso (Heaven). The story begins with a middle-aged Dante getting lost in a dark forest. Fortunately, he meets his favourite author, the deceased Virgil, who promises to escort Dante through Hell and Purgatory. In heaven, his ex-girlfriend Beatrice takes over, and towards the end, Dante can head home as a new and improved person.

(Illustration: “You sure this isn’t just the plotline of a videogame?”)

**How to impress?**

One useful thing to note is that Dante originally called the work *Commedia*, probably because, a comedy was a text with a happy ending according to the rules of antiquity. The first time the word “divine” appeared in the title was in an Venetian edition printed in 1555, and this has stuck ever since. It’s also useful to know that Dante was a sucker for synchronicity, which means that the verse lines are in groups of three (*terza rima*), while each line has eleven syllables, and each volume has 33 songs each (apart from the first book which has 34, but that’s just because the first song acts as a kind of introduction).

We might also note that *The Divine Comedy* is a so-called quest-narrative which describes in a masterfully symbolic way how we all move through life, while reminding us that it’s wise to pay attention to what we’re doing so we don’t end up in eternal damnation. To really hammer this message home, Dante is rather detailed in his description of Hell. Among other things, he explains that it’s divided into nine circles, where people are placed according to the kind of sin they are guilty of. The part about Hell is, of course, the most famous because humans like to read about catastrophes and celebrities.

**Who to impress?**

People who travel frequently to Italy and consider themselves cultural tourists think Dante is the bee’s knees. They might not personally have read him, but they are guaranteed to have seen his grave in Ravenna or visited the Dante museum in Firenze, so such references will act as a confirmation of their own cultural formation. Other potential candidates are theologians, literature buffs and Freemasons, who all think the comedy is a top-notch depiction of how marvellous and complex a human life is. If you passionately utter that you sometimes feel like you’ve lost your way in a huge wood, you will immediately have a friend for life. At the same time, Dante’s epic poem has been quite widely exposed, so for this particular literary text a degree of knowledge can actually be found within the population as. a whole. This means that you can cause a bit of a positive stir if you, for instance, exclaim during a long PTA meeting that “this is like being in Dante’s seventh circle!”

(Illustration: “And here we have those who raise their hands during “any other business” at PTA meetings.”

**Quotation**

*In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself, in a dark wood, where the direct way was lost*.

**Alice in Wonderland**

Lewis Carroll

**Publication date:** 1865

**Genre:** Children’s Novel

**Original title:** *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

**Summary of Book:** Young girl tries to catch a white rabbit but gets distracted by a crazy hatmaker and an angry queen. In the end, she goes home.

(Illustration: “I think my reputation is a bit unfair – nowadays, the most I’ll have is a bit of cough syrup in good company”)

**Why is this a classic?**

This is an unbelievably influential story that most people have some kind of relationship to. Since its publication in 1865, *Alice in Wonderland* has never gone out of print and has been translated into a total of 97 languages. Carroll’s novel was one of the first to break with the genre of children’s literature, which until then had been extremely didactic and educational and had as its primary goal to teach children how to keep the books, grow carrots and mend their own clothes. Compared to these books, *Alice in Wonderland* stood out as pure entertainment – something a lot people duly interpreted as a sign of Doom. We should also remember, however, that the texts that break with established genres are, of course, the ones which usually end up becoming classics.

To sum up the plot, we meet Alice, who is sitting with her older sister who is reading. She is terribly bored, up until she sees a white rabbit, follows it and falls into a rabbit hole which takes her to Wonderland. There she goes on to meet a series of peculiar creatures, such as a gigantic blue caterpillar, a talking cat, a crazy hatmaker and an angry queen. It’s kind of fun, but also kind of tiring, and in the end, she gets fed up and goes home again.

**How to impress?**

One morsel of useful knowledge is that this book is really about becoming an adult. The story begins with Alice sitting by the riverbank, annoyed that her older sister is reading a book without pictures. In fact, she’s so bored that she falls asleep, and there are many suggestions that everything that happens down the rabbit hole is merely a dream which serves to process the kind of mental transition period that Alice is in. That’s why she asks so many questions to the creatures she meets, and that’s also why she only gets inane answers in return. That, after all, is how interaction with the world frequently feels. Especially during transition periods.

**Who to impress?**

Linguists and people who listen to BBC Radio’s “Word of Mouth” find this book excellent because it contains a lot of wordplay and language games. Which they love. Any reference to *Alice in Wonderland* will engender a fanatical expression across their faces, signalling that you might think twice before mentioning it. Other people who admire the novel are psychologists and drug addicts, as the the symbolism allows interpretation in the direction of both a pretty serious identity crisis *and* as a substance-induced trip. The latter interpretation is partly the fault of Jefferson Airplane’s song “White Rabbit” (1967), which describes the experience of taking psychedelic drugs. The most important group, however, is young people who feel that life is dull, that it rains all day, and that adult life can be compared to a book without pictures in it.

**Quotation**

*Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had np pictures or conversations in it, “and what is the use of a book,” thought Alice, “without pictures or conversations?*

(Illustration: “Do you have any books which are a bit more boring, completely without pictures?”)

**Wuthering Heights**

Emily Brontë

**Publication date:** 1846

**Genre:** Novel

**Original title:** *Wuthering Heights*

**Summary of Book:** Unlikable couple make life hell for themselves, each other, and everyone else.

**Why is this a classic?**

This is a marvellous novel which has continued to fascinate and bewilder readers since 1846. It was published three months after Charlotte Brontë published *Jane Eyre*, and one short year later, Emily died of consumption at thirty. That’s the kind of thing people did the nineteenth century. It’s a bit difficult to describe the plot of this novel because there is so much going on. People usually talk a lot about the love story between Heathcliff and Catherine, but even more so the novel thematises all the battles we as human beings fight with ourselves, each other, and the world surrounding us. What is more, *Wuthering Heights* is a vicious attack on essential Victorian institutions, and most of all the family. Emily Brontë dispels the myth of family comprising an enclave of safety and love in a cold and chaotic world, and writes about domestic violence in a manner that is shocking even to modern readers.

**How to impress?**

As mentioned above, most people think of *Wuthering Heights* as a story of passionate suffering and longing, especially if they know and love Kate Bush’s epic song ‘Wuthering Heights’ (1978). But it is really a story of unbridled feelings such as anger, jealousy, envy, love and grief, as well as critique of how nineteenth century society was built on a puzzling combination of religious hypocrisy, social hierarchy and female oppression. When it came out, the novel caused quite a stir, and literary critic Terry Eagleton has concluded that Emily Brontë shows us that culture is just as violent as nature. This is something the Victorian artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti would also have agreed with. He described *Wuthering Heights* as a “fiend of a book – an incredible monster”, with the story unfolding in hell “only it seems places and people have English names there”.

(Illustration:

“This is really about class and the patriarchy.”

“Ok.”)

**Who to impress?**

*Wuthering Heights* is to women what *Moby-Dick* is to men, partly because Heathcliff and Catherine are driven by the same kind of uninhibited desire as Captain Ahab. Brontë, however, is not inclined to pester the reader with detailed descriptions of whale fishing and different kinds of harpoons. For this reason, this novel should always be brought up in conversations with women, especially if there are suggestions that they also love Kate Bush. If so, just press ahead. One claim you could potentially make is that “everyone thinks that *Wuthering Heights* is a love story, but one might claim that it’s more concerned with humankind’s inherent need for freedom. How suffocating the social hierarchy of nineteenth century England was!” Conversation won.

(Illustration:

“You know you can’t pass the exam just by listening to Kate Bush, right?”)

**Quotation**

*My great thought in living is himself. If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of it.*

**To the Lighthouse**

Virginia Woolf

**Publication date:** 1927

**Genre:** Novel

**Original title:** *To the Lighthouse*

**Summary of Book:** English family on holiday cannot decide whether or not to go to the lighthouse.

**Why is this a classic?**

This is yet another work of Modernism concerned with painting a realistic picture of human consciousness. On the surface, the plot revolves around Mr and Mrs Ramsay who are holidaying with their eight children and a number of family friends in a summer house on the Isle of Skye, and the book opens with them trying to decide whether or not they should to go to the lighthouse. Like every other Modernist work, however, the real focus lies beneath the surface on the thought processes of the various characters. In order to describe these adequately, Woolf uses a technique called *stream of consciousness*, which involves recording all the digressions and fragmented thoughts and impressions that flow through human consciousness at any given moment. In other words, Woolf is part of the same crew as Proust and Joyce.

(Illustration: “Oh, sorry, I forgot you’re afraid of Virginia Woolf”)

**How to impress?**

In addition to describing thought processes, Woolf is concerned with killing off Mrs Ramsay, because she represents a female ideal that has its roots in Victorian England and prevents women from gaining equal rights. Mrs Ramsay is an example of the so-called “angel in the house” who, like Ibsen’s “skylark”, should float around in the house like an angel and be there for everyone else and have no desires, wishes or goals of her own. In other words, this is a model which declares that women should get married, have children, and then look after everything and everyone. As a counterweight to Mrs Ramsay, Woolf presents us with the character Lily Briscoe who is an artist and recognises that she can’t ever get married because that would force her to give up her career. And humanity. We should also mention that *To the Lighthouse* is divided into three different sections, which is an ironic nod to the monumental nineteenth century “triple decker” which was the standard format for novels during ths period. Mrs Ramsay dies in part two, and this passage is guaranteed to make you cry, even though you do realise that Victorian family life was intensely undesirable and that Lily Briscoe is the great hero of the novel. Literature is just as complicated as life itself, after all.

**Who to impress?**

Firstly, everyone who has tried to read *To the Lighthouse*. Since it’s a pretty short book, many people start reading with vim and vigour, but an extreme lack of surface story usually leads to intense fatigue pretty early on. Your references to Woolf will therefore lead to a combination of astonishment and derision, both of which are rooted in the fact that you actually managed to plough through the entire text. Incidentally, those who have read it are convinced that this is the best book in the world, so if you should happen to meet one of these people, you will have a friend for life. In addition, families with small children might also be impressed, especially since the opening scene is a pretty good description of how difficult it can be to decide whether or not to go outside on any given Sunday. Especially when daddy really just wants to stay home and “philosophise” – which in contemporary terms means that he wants to head into the den and watch Tottenham versus Manchester United.

(Illustration:

“He really wants to go to the lighthouse today.”

“Unfortunately, the weather forecast is bad for the next ten years.”)

**Quotation**

*[Mr Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty.]*

**The Brothers Lionheart**

Astrid Lindgren

**Publication date:** 1973

**Genre:** Novel

**Original title:** *Bröderna Lejonhjärta*

**Summary of Book:** Some children die, and some children take their own lives. That’s just the way things are.

**Why is this a classic?**

This novel functions as a reminder that literature for children is both valuable and important and should probably occupy a much larger space in the classics bookshelf. It is also one of those books parents usually consider reading to their children before deciding against it, both because they still struggle with trauma from when their own parents read it to them and because they can’t bear to cry in front of their own offspring. If so, however, they need to pull themselves together and woman up. As far as the story is concerned, *The Brothers Lionheart* introduces us to Karl (Rusky) and Jonathan who stick together both in this life and the next, and have to fight dragons and other forms of wickedness. The hardships never really seem to end.

**How to impress?**

On publication in 1973 *The Brothers Lionheart* quite a commotion because not only does it thematise the fact that children die, but it even states that they sometimes take their own lives. Many thought this both evil-minded and irresponsible. But Astrid Lindgren didn’t agree. All she said was that she took children seriously and that sometimes even children die. Also, being human is difficult, but we need to learn to be brave and fight the dragons of the world as best we can.

(Illustration:

“Isn’t story-time in the evening lovely!”)

**Who to impress?**

Everyone who subscribes to a Humanist approach to life view *The Brothers Lionheart* as a top-notch book because it gives hope that life can be sublime and full of meaning even if you don’t have a particular religious persuasion. Humanists like the sound of this. The novel can also go down well with people who are a bit sceptical of the concept of classic literature in general. They’ll often feel disappointed that children’s literature, which is a genre they can relate to and perhaps feel like they know, is not really useful. And this frustrates them. When you pull out Astrid Lindgren from your sleeve, however, and claim that she should have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, they will cheer up immensely. And they will buy you drinks.

(Illustration:

“But my book helped me to accept death”)

**Quotation**

*Jonathan told me how there are things you have to do, even if they are dangerous.*

*“Why is that?” I asked.*

*“Because if you don’t you are not a human being, you’re nothing but a little louse,” Jonathan replied.*

**The Neapolitan Novels**

Elena Ferrante

**Publication date:** 2011 – 2014

**Genre:** Novel series

**Original title:** *L’amica geniale* (2012);

*Storia del nuovo cognome* (2013);

*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* (2013);

*Storia della bambina perduta* (2014)

**Summary of Book:** Friendship is wonderful. And a bit of a hassle. And the same goes for life.

**Why is this a classic?**

Here, this is actually a timely question because Ferrante’s novels are fairly recently published and not everyone agrees that this quartet should be considered a classic. We’re making an executive decision, however, saying that it can. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the novels have been translated into over forty languages, with the final volume being nominated for both the Strega Prize and the Booker Prize. Secondly, Ferrante is a magnificent storyteller who manages to masterfully describe both human relationships and societal development in post-war Italy. Through four books, we learn about everything from dialects and contrasts between north and south to class differences and the links between politics and organised crime. And all by following the friendship between Lila and Lenu. These two girls grow up in a poor neighbourood in Naples, and while Lenu moves away to get an education, Lila stays behind.

(Illustration:

“It started as a school project, but now it’s too late to tell everyone that the all the novels were written by a 13-year-old from Stoke-on-Trent.”)

**How to impress?**

The first thing you should know is that “Elena Ferrante” is a pseudonym and there is constant speculation on who is hiding behind the author’s name. Here, we can note that those who believe Ferrante is a man tend to base this on the writer’s ability to analyse and reflect upon great societal changes, whereas those who believe it’s a woman often talk about the deep authorial insight into friendship relations and gender roles. This can be a good bombshell to drop in social gatherings before helping yourself to a glass of Barolo.

(Illustration:

“You’re my besht friend in all the world!

And thish is the besht book group in all the world!”)

**Who to impress?**

Women like men who like Ferrante. As we know, world literature is full of examples of two men who stick together through thick and thin, from Don Quixote and Sancho Panza to Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, as well as Huckleberry Finn and Jim, and it’s refreshing to finally be able to follow a friendship between two women. What is more, women like it when men acknowledge that female friendships are just as universal as those between men, and that such relations do not solely revolve around menstruation. In such cases we tend to smile to ourselves and think that yet another step has been taken in the direction of true equality. It can also be relevant to bring this quartet up in conversations with women who are in the middle of a divorce. Conversation with people in crisis have a tendency to stagnate – even in good company – but you can fix this by mentioning that, in *The Story of the Lost Child*, Elena is told by her ex-mother-in-law that “a woman separated, with two children and your ambitions, has to take account of reality and decide what she can give up and what she can't”. You can then discreetly mention how how annoying ex-mothers-in-law can be and how unfair it is that women are always the ones who have to choose, while men can largely say yes to everything life has to offer. And then get yet another glass of Barolo.

**Quotation**

*The plebs were us. The plebs were that fight for food and wine, that quarrel over who should be served first and better, than dirty floor on which the waiters clattered back and forth, those increasingly vulgar toasts. The plebs were my mother, who had drunk wine and now was leaning against my father’s shoulder, while he, serious, laughed, his mouth gaping, at the sexual allusions of the metal dealer. They were all laughing, even Lila, with the expression of one who has a role and will play it to the utmost.*

**In Search of Lost Time**

Marcel Proust

**Publication date:** 1913 - 1927

**Genre:** Seven volumes of novels

**Original title:** *À la recherche du temps perdu*

**Summary of Book:** Frenchman fills page after page with descriptions of things he’s thought about.

**Why is this a classic?**

Along with James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Proust’s novel in seven volumes is perhaps the most famous example of Modernist texts aimed at depicting how human consciousness actually works. (Yes, Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* can also be found in this category). This ambition has three concrete consequences. One, Proust stands out as a man of many digressions, two, that he constructs extremely long sentences, and three, that he ends up needing seven books to say everything he wants to. As most people know, digressions are not always of universal interest. And Proust can, for example, go on about curtains and food habits without being particularly concerned with making it exciting or fascinating for a reader. This is not his point. What he aims for is to provide the reader with a truthful rendition of what it is like to experience time within the human consciousness. For Proust, it is its own reward to recognise and realise how spontaneous recollections make it possible to restore traces of the past.

(Illustration:

“Madeleine cakes

10 kroner

Note: Contains nuts and can lead to Modernist literature”)

**How to impress?**

The most famous reference in this work is the so-called madeleine cake, which, when dipped in tea awakens key childhood memories in protagonist Marcel. This cake has become a metaphor for how objects can act as sensory triggers for childhood memories. This is known as “Proustian memory” and represents a knowledge which can be useful in social gatherings. You can, for example, justify buying childish food such as bubble-gum ice-cream by saying something like “this ice-cream is my madeleine cake”.

**Who to impress?**

*In Search of Lost Time* is a title that will be familiar to many people, so its impact is wide-reaching. Those who will be most impressed are probably cultural tourists or people who own property in Provence. They will nod in recognition and maybe even claim that they’ve read a volume or two – an example that you might consider following. Apart from those who have an MA in French or have written a dissertation on Proust, most people won’t have read all seven volumes. That’s why it’s best to act like you’ve read only one or two. No point in exaggerating. We would also like to add that Marcel Proust, in good autobiographical style, names his main character Marcel, and that Karl Ove Knausgaard was inspired by this strategy when he wrote *My Struggle*. This fun fact can be weaved into conversations about autofiction in general and Knausgaard in particular.

(Illustration:

“In the middle of the meeting, I realised that our search for knowledge about the new flooring had led us astray.”)

“We shouldn’t let Marcel take the minutes for the church members meetings.”)

**Quotation**

*When a man is asleep, he has in a circle around him the chain of the hours, the sequence of the years, the order of the heavenly host.*

**My Struggle**

Karl Ove Knausgaard

**Publication date:** 2009 – 2011

**Genre:** Novel series

**Original title:** *Min kamp. Første bok* (2009);

*Min kamp. Andre bok* (2009);

*Min kamp. Tredje bok* (2009);

*Min kamp. Fjerde bok* (2010);

*Min kamp. Femte bok* (2010);

*Min kamp. Sjette bok* (2011)

**Summary of Book:** Man with daddy issues buys broccoli while thinking about Hitler.

**Why is this a classic?**

This work made Karl Ove Knausgaard the most internationally famous Norwegian writer – perhaps with the exception of Jo Nesbø – so you should have some knowledge of it in order to be a social butterfly. The first book is generally known to thematise the death of the main character’s father, while the second revolves around how Karl Ove himself copes with being a father. The following three mainly offer descriptions of his upbringing and years as a student, before the final volume mainly gives us an unbearably long essay about Hitler. In hindsight, it can seem like all six volumes are really just the description of a male midlife crisis, but there is a lot to self-recognition and insight to be found.

(Illustration:

“*My* struggle has sold over six million copies.”

“But mine is six volumes in total!”)

**How to impress?**

In Norway, this was the work that peaked the genre of autofiction, and *My Struggle* is still the talk of the town in many cultural circles. Personally, we like to hold back on the compliments and say that, while the books clearly have their good qualities, it’s problematic to talk about autofiction because this genre doesn’t actually exist and that the focus on the personal life of the author creates a reading experience characterised by sensationalism, something that benefits no one. We might also add that writers have gone on about themselves and their families for years and years – and perhaps even point to Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* – without making a big deal about it. Statements like these might ensure the attention – and also the respect – of the listener. But, this is of course also a question of taste and also depends on how everyone feels on that particular day.

(Illustration:

“That’s probably me eating a prawn sandwich on the pier on page 435.”

“No, it’s me!”

“Pfft, it’s Jo Nesbø.”)

**Who to impress?**

The *My Struggle* series can be compared to Nick Cave’s album *Murder Ballads* (1996), which was bought by both people who liked Kylie Minogue and old fans who had followed Cave ever since he used to climb onto loudspeakers and shoot heroin. In the same way, *My Struggle* is one of those literary phenomena that everyone ends up reading, whether because they want to see if they themselves are mentioned or because they loved *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* (2004). For this reason, a lot of people nod knowingly when you mention this work and be able to discuss it, but it’s only when you claim to have ploughed through the final volume that people get really impressed. In spite of the rave, most people only got to book two or three, and, what is more, the general consensus is that the part about Hitler is long and boring. This is for you to confirm. Then people will be relieved that they didn’t spend time on it and happy that they clearly read all the best bits. We must also take into account, however, that there are also literature buffs who believe that Knausgaard revolutionised the novel as a genre with *My Struggle,* by painstakingly describing the creative struggle to find his own voice and forcing readers to follow a narrative voice that is simultaneously a fictive character and the author himself. For this reason, Knausgaard’s series can impress in almost all situations.

**Quotation**

*For the heart, life is simple: it beats for as long as it can. Then it stops.*