

NO BOOK HAS EVER CHANGED MY LIFE

The claim that 'this book will change your life' is often made but rarely questioned. It seems to be generally accepted nowadays that reading is a 'life-changing' activity. I would like to see the evidence. I have read a lot of books in the last sixty years, but none of them has changed my life.

Events change your life, circumstances change your life, parents change your life, friends change your life, politicians change your life, other people change your life. Hell, as Sartre told us in *Huis Clos*, is other people. *Huis Clos* itself might give you something to think about, but it won't change your life as other people will, making your life hell or heaven as the case might be.

What books do is more or less what Lord Reith thought the BBC should do: inform, educate and entertain. Preferably all at the same time. What fiction in particular does is to inform, educate and entertain by creating an imaginary world in which anything can happen. Events in the real world can change your life, events in an imaginary world can't.

Pretending is something which, as far as I know, only humans do, which suggests that it might be something quite important, without which we would be less than human. It is the faculty which allows you to imagine that things could be different, that it doesn't always have to be like this. Of course, when you close the book, nothing has changed. The same old reality persists. We only need books because human kind, as T.S.Eliot told us, cannot bear very much reality.

Reading won't change your life, but the imaginative capability that writers and readers need and that all human beings and no animals possess is what makes change possible. Animals have to rely on evolution, we can do better. We can use our imaginations.

So while I regard the claim that any one book is capable of changing anyone's life as misleading, I regard books in general - and a few in particular - as being capable of bringing about the circumstances and causing the events that change all our lives. Books in general because they keep alive the spirit of imagination in all of us, a few in particular because they have been the inspiration for significant social change.

I can think of no works of fiction that have led to that kind of change. Fiction, plays and poetry are there to shock or amuse us, to make us feel fear and pity, to provide the catharsis that makes it easier to face real life again when the play or book or poem is finished. Fiction collectively, in all its forms, is the expression of our collective imagination. No matter whether we experience it in isolation or in company with others, it is always a collective experience. As individuals we enter a world created for us by someone else. Reading is never something we do on our own, there is always someone else.

The few books that have undoubtedly changed lives have done it in a different way, not by creating an imaginary world, but by describing the real world and showing how it could be changed. *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith changed lives, *The Social Contract* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau changed lives, *The Rights of Man* by Thomas Paine changed lives, *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels changed lives. Religious books like the Bible and the Koran and the Baghavad Gita changed lives too, though there the dividing line between fact and fiction becomes blurred.

My own reading has been more fiction than fact, probably by about twenty to one. It started with Richmal Crompton's *William* books and went on from there in much the same spirit. What I mean by that is that I believed in them all - Sherlock Holmes, Bertie Wooster, David Copperfield, Tess Durbeyfield, Mrs Dalloway and the rest - in the same way that I believed in William Brown. Short or long, traditional or experimental, realistic or fantastic, the act of imagining is at the heart. Let's pretend starts in childhood and, with luck, stays with us until we die, which might be when we need it most.

The closest a book ever came to changing my life was when I read that William's favourite method of getting into and out of his house was to climb out of his bedroom window and down a drainpipe. The dividing line between fact and fiction is always blurred for a nine year old. I tried it for myself and for a long time William's method of going in and out was mine too. It could have changed my life permanently but I lived to tell the tale, better informed, better educated, better entertained and with an imagination permanently enlarged.

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