

Literary fiction, you might think, is in wonderful health. Book festivals, from Scotland, to Wales, to England, are flourishing. There are many people eager to become authors of literary fiction: creative writing courses have proliferated. The British, you could argue, are more used to novels than with any other artform. Britain is, after all, the country of Austen, the Brontës and Eliot.

Look at the facts, though, and a more worrying picture emerges. Financing for the arts in Britain suffered a great blow after the global financial crisis: spending on theatre and concerts became impossible for many. A decade on there have been some signs of a recovery, albeit fragile. But this is not so for sales of literary fiction, which have not recovered from the recession. The arrival of the smartphone, offering a game or the latest headlines when one is stuck on a train or waiting for a bus, has had an impact. This matters to writers and to readers. For the vast majority of writers, life has got tougher. The Arts Council research suggests that 1,000 writers, at the very most, are able to support themselves on sales of literary fiction alone.

As for readers: one might ask why it matters. Perhaps one should be content to regard the literary novel as an artform of the 19th and 20th centuries, and accept the probability that Dickens would have been pitching to Netflix. But of course the novel remains important. It unleashes universal truths through attention to the particular and the specific, and above all, it places the reader in other places, other times and other skins.

At this time of year, however, many readers can help in their own way: by picking up a great new novel, sinking into an armchair, and enjoying its pleasures.