

4 Books That Brought Me Out of My Comfort Zone

Because reading should bring comfort and enjoyment, but sometimes, challenge us too

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Why do we read? The wealth of genres available suggests that some of us read for comfort, escapism, knowledge, or to improve ourselves. Whilst these are all perfectly valid reasons, it's also worth thinking about

reading about themes, perspectives, and societies that go beyond our own comfort zones.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, it has been estimated by the proofreading service, *Global English Editing*, that 35% of the [people in the world](#) have read more books than usual this year.

With normality disrupted, is it no wonder we have turned to books more? Books can give us all sorts of benefits, but when thinking about our reading habits during a pandemic, it is worth looking at this from a mental health perspective.

The Benefits of Reading — But Why It Should Also Challenge Us

Reading can force us to be [mindful](#), take us away from the blaring digital world that we have become more reliant on, and force us into the present by talking one page at a time. “Bibliotherapy” is a relatively new form of reading therapy being used in clinics, libraries, and schools to promote recovery in people with [mental health difficulties](#) in some places in the world.

With these mental health benefits in mind, it is one explanation for why so many of us have taken to reading during the pandemic. But reading to improve our mental health can also be coupled with challenging and

educating ourselves. Reading fiction is one of the best ways to do this. Not only are you benefiting from its natural escapism, but in many cases, fiction forces you to put yourself within the shoes of others.

A central theme with my reading habits in 2020 was choosing books that challenged me. In this respect — the books that follow have forced me to go beyond what's comfortable — as I have learnt about different issues experienced by characters I wouldn't necessarily encounter in my daily life.

Each has changed my perspective on a range of issues — highlighting why it's important to read books that challenge us.

An American Marriage, Tayari Jones

Literary fiction

Celestial and Roy are a newlywed couple — for a brief moment — they indulge in the feeling of being married and the excitement of spending the rest of their lives together. Until one incident changes everything. Roy is wrongly accused of a crime he didn't commit and is sent to jail for the rape of a woman.

"Much of life is timing and circumstance, I see that now."

Whilst in jail, Roy desperately tries to keep his new marriage alive, whilst sending Celestial letters and hoping for a better future. But Celestial cannot continue to live her life waiting for theirs to start. In many ways, it is a story about relationships and love but heavily tainted by the blatant racism that lays at the heart of the American criminal justice system and how it has the power to alter lives.

Why Did it Challenge Me?

Reading this as a white woman, made me realise this situation would never happen to me. Reading from the point of view of Roy, a black man, wrongly convicted for a crime he didn't commit purely on the grounds of his race and circumstance — was a learning experience for me.

I grew up in a considerably white town. Until fairly recently, I knew very little about racism and how it perpetuates the very systems that we typically view as 'just.' Therefore, reading about these types of experiences that I wouldn't usually be exposed to in my life, was essential for me.

"Twelve years is what they gave him. We would be forty-three years old when he was released. I couldn't even imagine myself at such an age. Roy understood that twelve years was an eternity because he sobbed right there on the defendants' table. His knees gave way, and he fell into his chair, The judge paused and

demanded that Roy bear this news on his feet. He stood again and cried, not like a baby, but in the way that only a grown man can cry, from the bottom of his feet through his torso and finally through his mouth..."

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists, Robert Tressell

Political fiction

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists was written during the early twentieth century and tells the story of a group of Edwardian workers. Owen, the outspoken socialist, makes it his mission to persuade and educate the rest of the group on the importance of a fairer society. He tries to make them realise the extent of their exploitation and how little it achieves — but he is always fighting an uphill battle.

In many ways, this book could be regarded as a socialist manifesto. But in others, it is far more than that. Through Owen, as readers, we learn that poverty is not about misconceptions such as laziness, but is more often than not, a political choice.

It's rhetoric surrounding the workplace, and the unskilled versus the skilled worker highlights how we still undervalue certain people in society. Nurses and cleaners make up the groundwork of our society; however, they

are still persistently [underpaid](#). Throughout the novel, Owen makes a case for a redistribution of wealth, workplace rights and an overhaul of the capitalist system which in his eyes, is responsible for the vicious cycle of poverty they find themselves in.

“Every man who is not helping to bring about a better state of affairs for the future is helping to perpetuate the present misery and is, therefore, the enemy of his own children.”

Despite being written long ago, it contains an essential insight into the reality of working-class, Edwardian poverty, poor workplace conditions, and poverty workers' experience to keep themselves alive. Of course, it is inherently political, but it also teaches readers about human and societal values. Such as fairness, equality, and decency.

Why Did it Challenge Me?

Despite it being set during a very different time, it made me re-evaluate all the problems within our own society whether that's the persistent gender pay [gap](#), poor sick pay, or people not being eligible for financial help during the Covid crisis when they've had to stay at home during lockdowns.

Above all, the descriptive scenes of the workplace — most notably — one in which a young boy, Bert, who is

told off for trying to light a fire to keep himself warm — made me realise how brutal and hard work manual labour jobs in the Edwardian period were — and how little rights they had.

Such A Fun Age

Fiction

Emira is a young black woman, living in Philadelphia and trying to find her feet. She works as a babysitter for a middle-class, white blogger who thinks she's all clued up on race. Through the perspective of Emira, the novel deals with the casual forms of racism and microaggressions that many of us (particularly white people) may not usually notice in our day to day lives.

“Emira had met several “Mrs. Chamberlains” before. They were all rich and overly nice and particularly lovely to the people that served them. Emira knew that Mrs. Chamberlain wanted a friendship, but she also knew that Mrs. Chamberlain would never display the same efforts of kindness with her friends as she did with Emira: “accidentally” ordering two salads and offering one to Emira, or sending her home with a bag filled with frozen dinners and soups.”

Switching between Emira's perspective, and Alix's, the blogger, *Such a Fun Age* is a poignant, comical and revealing portrayal of the present world and the half-

hearted ways in which white people commonly approach the subject of race. Alix thinks she is all clued up on what it's like to be a black woman, as she has plenty of black friends, and after all, employs a young black woman.

Stephanie Hayes, writing in [The Atlantic](#), sums her character up brilliantly in stating that the novel, "satirizes the white pursuit of wokeness." Furthermore, this switching between two completely different characters [means](#),

"Alix's myopia isn't lost on Emira. Writing from the younger woman's point of view, Reid renders white people whose eagerness to shed their blinkers results in fumbling attempts to identify with black people — as much to burnish their own images as to genuinely connect with others."

Why Did It Challenge Me?

It made me realise that some of the ways I used to approach talking about race — were wrong. By reading about Emira's experience with her boss, Alix, I was exposed to the realities of casual racism. Something, as a white woman, I have never experienced myself. This is obviously something I will never understand, but after reading this, I feel more aware and educated about it.

Reading this forced me into the perspective of Emira, a character living completely outside my own bubble. It

opened my mind up to how the daily lives of others can be so different. Most of all, it forced me to stop and think.

Keep the Aspidistra Flying, George Orwell

Political fiction

This book encapsulates the dilemma that many young, recent graduates like myself, have to deal with. Do you strive to embark on a career that's safe and stable, or pursue something you love, even if it takes longer and involves many more hurdles along the way? Gordon, the protagonist, has a safe job at an advertising firm; however, he gives this all up to work in a bookshop, for a slither of his previous salary.

After leaping into the unknown, he tries to stand against the capitalist society he feels he is forced into.

Deliberately quitting a good job, and living below the poverty line, Gordon thinks he is making a robust, political stand. He tells the reader how he hates money and how this rampant need fuels every part of our society.

However, Gordon eventually realises the errors of his ways — as he learns his actions aren't realistic because they aren't encouraging a change to the system.

"The mistake you make, don't you see, is in thinking one can live in a corrupt society without being corrupt

oneself. After all, what do you achieve by refusing to make money? You're trying to behave as though one could stand right outside our economic system. But one can't. One's got to change the system, or one changes nothing."

Why Did It Challenge Me?

In this current job climate, it was a reminder that at the moment, no industry is 'safe' and that there is no such thing as a 'proper' job. Those jobs such as advertising, marketing, retail and hospitality — that we were always taught—were secure and ripped apart during the pandemic. It made me think about my own plans and perceptions of the job market.

Additionally, Gordon's inherent dislike of money and the capitalist world reignited my desire for a more minimalist outlook and society. After all, money is never the route of all happiness.

Reading fiction is an enjoyable form of escapism, but it can also teach us a lot about other peoples' lives, and challenge our own ideas and values. We can often become comfortable living in our own bubbles and reading the same books we have always turned to.

But reading fiction can help challenge our own comfort and promote a more diverse world view — when dealing with subjects such as race, society and culture. By

reading fiction, we get to be inside the minds and live inside others' shoes we may never encounter in real life. Thus, it's a form of stepping outside that comfort bubble, a form of social education, and a way of understanding people.