BIG IDEAS FROM LITERATURE

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HOW BOOKS CAN CHANGE YOUR WORLD

BIG IDEAS FROM LITERATURE



THE SCHOOL OF LIFE PRESS



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BIG IDEAS

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WHAT ACTUALLY IS LITERATURE?

‘Literature’ isn’t a word most people use every day – in fact, you might go for ages without ever hearing it. And maybe you feel a little confused by it. But you probably already understand the basic idea: because *literature* is just a fancy way of talking about …

stories that teach you important things.

It’s an interesting combination: a story *and* – in a way – a lesson. Almost all of us *like* stories. It’s something to do with how our brains work: we want to know what happens next. But lessons, on the other hand, are often *far less* exciting. A lesson is something you might *need* to understand but don’t particularly want to or just find it difficult to concentrate on.

So, quite early in human history people hit on a genius idea: the idea of literature. Why not use a story to teach a lesson? Why not combine something we really like with something that’s helpful but maybe a bit dull?

Soon we’re going to be looking at the first story that was ever written down – it’s quite fascinating and contains lots of adventures. But it’s got a secret. Along the way it’s cleverly teaching a big lesson; a lesson about how to be a good friend – which is one of the best things you can ever learn. When you read the story, the lesson sort of slips into your mind and stays there – even though it felt like you were just reading an adventure story.

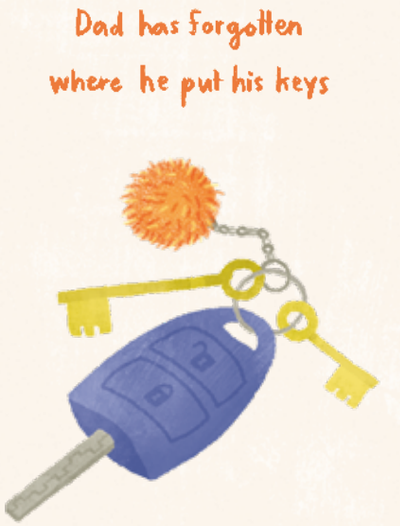


So, what other sorts of lessons might a typical story be trying to teach you? Sometimes it might be trying to teach you a very practical skill. In the 1920s an English writer called Arthur Ransome wrote an adventure story – *Swallows and Amazons* – about some children who like sailing boats. It’s rather thrilling and along the way the writer tucked in lots and

lots of lessons about how to manage a small boat, and how to win a race against some bitter rivals. And more recently a writer from Malawi, William Kamkwamba, wrote a book that tells you how to build your own windmill. You'll meet William and his clever windmill in Part Two.

But practical skills are not the most common type of lessons that literature wants to teach you. Most often, literature tries to teach you how to be *wise*. Being wise is a very important kind of skill – it means being good at doing something. But it's not a practical skill. It doesn't necessarily mean being clever and learning lots of facts; it's more about understanding yourself and the world around you a bit better. It means being able to understand your feelings and getting better at dealing with the millions of problems (big and small) that come from being human and having to live with other just as complicated people.

So, what is a wise idea? To get a picture of what that means let's start by looking at people (who are sometimes ourselves) who do things that aren't particularly wise at all ...



A COMMON (BUT NOT SO HELPFUL) IDEA

Panic, run around, wave arms, shout at the rest of the family.

A WISER IDEA MIGHT BE ...

Stay calm, laugh a little, think very hard about the last place the keys were seen and get everyone to help look for them.



A COMMON (BUT NOT SO HELPFUL) IDEA

Feel very hurt. Imagine it's true and that everyone hates you.

A WISER IDEA MIGHT BE ...

Wonder what's wrong with this person. What problem have they secretly got that makes them want to be so mean? Remind yourself that what they said is not fair and maybe feel a little bit sorry for them instead.

You're upset and your mum doesn't understand what's upsetting you



A COMMON (BUT NOT SO HELPFUL) IDEA

Shout and tell her she's mean and she'll never understand. Maybe slam a door on the way to your bedroom and stay there by yourself, feeling even more miserable.

A WISER IDEA MIGHT BE ...

Take a deep breath and try to explain it clearly to your mum. Maybe she still won't understand (but maybe she will) and she might be able to help you feel better anyway.

You feel a bit lonely



A COMMON (BUT NOT SO HELPFUL) IDEA

You think everybody is having fun without you and nobody likes you.

A WISER IDEA MIGHT BE ...

Make a small effort to connect with someone, even if it's just a smile or a brief 'hello' and see how that feels. Maybe they feel like you and need a friend, too. Remember, you are not alone – there are lots of people who like the same things you do.

Being *wiser* is really to do with understanding life better – and giving you ideas so that you can handle lots of different situations.

But how can a story help with that? Let's look at an example: why don't we start with a story that's really aimed at very young children. The lesson isn't very difficult, but it shows how even a simple story can teach a little bit of wisdom.

In 1918, the author Beatrix Potter, living in England, wrote a very short book called *The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse*. It's a rather sweet story of a mouse, called Timmy, from a farm in the countryside who falls asleep in a basket of vegetables that are about to be delivered to the city. In the city, he meets Johnny Town-Mouse, who is fun and smart and very polite. But the country mouse doesn't really like living in the city – there's a scary cat and the town-mice are always madly rushing about; so Timmy goes back to the quiet life in the country. Then Johnny comes from the city to the



farm for a holiday – but he gets frightened of the cows and he finds it all a bit dull; so he goes back to the city. And that's really the story.

What this story shows us is that different people (or mice!) like different things, and that's OK. Johnny likes city life and Timmy likes the countryside, and when they try out each other's lives they feel scared, uncomfortable and out of place. Maybe to you that's not a very exciting idea, you probably understand it already. But how did you learn it? Perhaps by meeting other people, going to school or even reading a similar book.

The story helps because it *shows* different little mice liking different things. It's teaching a wise idea through a sweet story.

That's for younger children – but what about a more complicated story? *The Boy at the Back of the Class*, by Onjali Raúf, is a modern story about a mysterious new boy, called Ahmet, who arrives at a school in London one day. He doesn't say anything, he doesn't look at anyone and he doesn't go into the playground at lunch or break time. He just sits at the back of the class.

But some of the other children *think* they know all about him: someone 'knows' he's been expelled from his last school and he's so dangerous he's not allowed in the playground; another is sure that Ahmet is from a very wealthy family and he's hiding at their school to escape from kidnappers.

If you were in the class with Ahmet, how might you feel? What might you think about him?

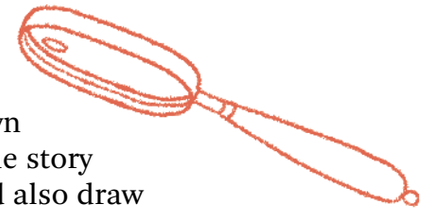


It's pretty understandable that some people jump to conclusions. But they are just making assumptions – they don't really know anything about Ahmet. A really interesting option is just saying: 'I don't know what he's like yet. I can see he's shy but I don't know why. I don't know who he is, but I'd like to find out by getting to know him.'

It turns out that Ahmet is a refugee from Syria. He's been through some very horrible experiences, but eventually he makes some very good friends at school and some amazing things start happening.

It's a funny thing: it can be really helpful to say 'I don't know'.

The problem is you quite often feel you are supposed to know already. It can sound more exciting and impressive to say 'I know' than to say 'Actually I don't know'.



Often the wise ideas that literature wants to teach aren't *new*. Beatrix Potter – with her story about the mice – was probably inspired by the ancient collection of Greek stories known as Aesop's Fables. And Onjali Raúf, with the story about Ahmet at the back of the class, could also draw comparisons with an idea from an Ancient Greek philosopher called Socrates who lived more than 2,000 years ago. Socrates was famous for saying: *'The only thing I know is that I know nothing.'*

It's a funny and important thing about *wise* ideas. They might have been around for a long time but we need reminding of them. That's why we need great stories to keep on beaming wise ideas back into our brains.

So, that's what *this* book is all about. It's about finding out all the wise ideas that lots of different books (some of them very surprising) are trying to teach you via a story – and how these ideas can help you.