

A window to another world

For me, the lockdown isn't isolation. Isolation is what I experienced in the days after my 36-year-old brother took his life. I was staying with my parents; the three of us united by a grief deeper than even our most loving relatives could understand. In an atmosphere thick with silence and despair, books were my only escape.

Many people say that bereavement has dulled their love of reading, or stopped them reading entirely. Concentration is difficult. Inauthentic portrayals of grief are irritating. But I have found that reading novels which treat grief with understanding and respect can be a source of comfort. I would like to share the books that have not only touched me in my grief but also tell excellent, entertaining stories about subjects ranging from dystopian futures to the Renaissance.

"Oryx and Crake" by Margaret Atwood

Jimmy appears to be the only human to left alive after an apocalyptic event. As he struggles to survive in a wild, empty landscape he thinks back over his previous life.

When I first read this book, I was bored by the post-apocalyptic sections. I wanted to skip to the next flashback and find out what had caused the disaster. Rereading it recently, however, I realised I had become Jimmy. Somehow, I had survived the end of the world and I was stumbling around without any real clue why I was still here, how to survive or what to do next.

"The Remains of the Day" by Kazuo Ishiguro

Elderly butler Stevens is full of regrets as he looks back over his life. He despairs over the mistakes he has made and the opportunity for love he allowed to slip away. Stevens became a companion for my own despair. The book offers hope that the life you have yet to live can still bring comfort, contentment and even change.

"A Single Thread" by Tracy Chevalier

In 1930s Winchester, Violet is grieving the deaths in the trenches of her fiancée and brother. She finds friendship among a group of women who are embroidering kneelers (cushions) for the choir at Winchester Cathedral. The kneelers are real and can still be seen today. I particularly liked the book's description of the Cathedral's West Window, smashed by Cromwellian forces

in 1642. The stained-glass pictures were beyond repair, so the pieces were stuck back together in no particular order. Like the window, Violet and Britain as a whole have been shattered by grief and are forming new patterns.

“How to be Both” and other books by Ali Smith

Ali Smith is the author I turn to for escape and comfort in the run-up to birthdays, Christmas or anniversaries – whenever I know the wave of grief is going to hit. Reading “How to be Both,” a novel which jumps between Renaissance Italy and the present day, I was touched by the reality of Ali Smith’s depiction of the grief of her teenage protagonist. This is an author who understands. Grief and mourning are part of the background of many of her books, and her endings bring a form of comfort which is never as simple as ‘getting over it.’

I hesitate to recommend “Hotel World” only because it begins with a death by falling of a young woman. I found this part incredibly hard to read but having got past it, I was touched by the portrayal of other characters and in particular the dead woman’s sister.

We all know the isolation that comes with grief is as prevalent in a crowded house as an empty flat. At a time when we cannot physically escape our surroundings, it is still possible to hide out in a good book. If your world has ended; if you are full of regret; if you are looking for new ways to heal or simply want someone to understand, the right book could be the answer.

By Catherine