

BOOKS THAT MADE  
A DIFFERENCE TO  
**Philippa  
Gregory**

The grande dame of the historical novel on the reads that took her to other worlds, and shed light on her own.

**A**S A CHILD WHO LOVED reading, I developed a real library habit. Every Saturday, while my mother played tennis, I was allowed to go to our local library, where I would take out the maximum number of books that I could. My favourites were from the Little Grey Rabbit series. In fact, when I was about 4, it was through studying one of these books intently that I taught myself to read.

We didn't have television at home, so I continued to read voraciously growing up. But it was only when I went to Sussex University, in the UK, that I fell in love with history. It changed my life completely. History answered all the questions I had ever asked about life. And it still does.

I never planned on becoming a writer. I wanted to be a lecturer, but while I was applying for positions after my doctorate, I started writing a book, just for fun. I wrote *Wideacre*, my first novel, at quite a pace, in the white heat of creative energy. But, in a way, my PhD was an apprenticeship in novel writing, since it involved reading more than a hundred 18th-century English novels. I was looking at the period just before Jane Austen, when authors were still figuring out the novel – how to structure it, how dialogue affected it.

*Wideacre* was an instant success, but it only gradually became clear to me that this would become my career. That was more than 20 novels ago, and it's been brilliant.

*Historian and author Philippa Gregory's latest novel is The Red Queen. Her next book, The Lady of the Rivers, will be published later this year. For more information, visit philippagregory.com*

## ON THE MAKING OF THE FILM VERSION OF

### *The Other Boleyn Girl*

"When I first saw the actors on location, there was a haunting moment when it almost seemed as if they were real, actually in Tudor England, and we, in modern clothes, were the illusion. It was extraordinary to see something that I had imagined suddenly become solid and real. To see them in costume performing a scene in an ancient setting was almost more powerful than watching them on screen. It was magical." —Source: bookbrowse.com



## DUNE

By Frank Herbert

I'm mostly drawn to books that grant you access to another world. As a teenager, I adored this first title in the literary science fiction series. *Dune* offers a completely other place with its own philosophy, political system and theology. And it has an extraordinary geography. It had such an impact on me. I really enjoyed the matriarchal system it outlined. There's a church, a priestess order, founded on women's insight. I remember loving that!

## CLARISSA

By Samuel Richardson

This 18th-century classic is about the sex war between men and women. Clarissa is kidnapped by a man who wants to marry her for her inheritance and falls in love with her. She repeatedly refuses him, and the story ends tragically. It's incredible to read, because it's epistolary, written in the form of letters. It offers a brilliant psychological portrait: As the reader, you know Clarissa actually loves her captor, but *she* doesn't know it. That's the power of first-person narration. The reader has to read intelligently and make a judgment on the protagonist. I've used first-person narration as my signature style for this very reason.

## ANNA KARENINA

By Leo Tolstoy

Anna is a wonderfully flawed, brilliantly described character. But what I like most about this novel is that it's not just about the doomed love affair

between her and the wonderfully handsome Count Vronsky. The subplot is about how he tries to farm in a modern way in Russia by emancipating the serfs. In a sense, this second thread tells the reverse story about finding happiness if you work at it.

## BIRTHDAY LETTERS

By Ted Hughes

His last poetic work is a collection of more than 30 years' worth of poems Ted Hughes wrote in remembrance of his famous poet wife, Sylvia Plath. It was significant to many people, because it was widely believed that her suicide could have been avoided. At the time of her passing, Hughes had left Plath for another woman, so people thought quite bitterly of him. Just before his death in 1998, he published this, which clearly shows that he was filled with remorse, and that he had

loved her deeply. It made me reconsider what people had said about him.

## THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK

By Doris Lessing

What this Nobel Prize-winning author has had the courage to do, with this book and others, is take her personal life and fictionalise it in a way that is completely successful. I read it just before a particularly difficult time in my life. When I turned 40, I felt stuck, professionally and in my personal life. Then I met Doris Lessing. I cringe to remember how I sat at the foot of the couch she was seated on, but she didn't seem to mind, and I was comforted to be beside a woman who'd been through such extraordinary political and emotional difficulties. I thought, If Doris Lessing can go through all that and come out the other side, I'll be all right, too.

—As told to Deidre Donnelly

