German, English and history, and did calisthenics. In the afternoons they took turns recounting stories, made up or from movies or books. They recited poems, sang songs and exchanged recipes. Art distracted them from their sorrow – they never shared sad memories – but it also lent structure to their days. Deprived of freedom, they still governed their own time. "It seemed to me", writes Cantacuzino, "I was in a territory where nothing bad could happen to me anymore."
Irina Dumitrescu is a critic and professor of medieval literature at the University of Bonn.

CLAIRE LOWDON

"Jane Austen seems to belong to no century", wrote Elizabeth Bowen. "Her 'modernity' has been commented on – which is, I suppose, an agreeable way of saying that she is still some distance ahead of us." We all know exactly what this means. The literature that endures is the literature that deals in fundamental, unchanging truths. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Middlemarch*, *War and Peace*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *The Portrait of a Lady* ... Don't mistake these books for optional luxuries just because they're fun. In times of tension and conflict they can give great comfort: not by providing an escape route, but by reminding us of our common humanity – and humour.
Claire Lowdon is a critic and novelist.

LARA PAWSON

Destruction is accelerating, tension is everywhere. We are in conflict with ourselves and with the planet. There is no escape. When I go to a gallery or pick up a book I don't expect a way out, but I do want the experience to shift my understanding and disrupt my thought. If it does not, it has failed.

To See Stars Over Mountains (2022) is a visual diary by Vlatka Horvat. It spans 2021, with an image for each day. These are photographs with a twist. Mainly depicting Horvat's London neighbourhood of Tottenham, they show blocks of flats, tarmac roads, playing fields, streams, a canal. But each photograph has been doctored: drawn on, sliced into, glued on, disfigured. They invite dreaming, laughing, imagining. They suggest precarity and fragility. They offer hope.

Most striking is their long-term effect. Horvat's work has opened new paths in my mind. Wherever I go I see orange curls coming out of trees, curious mirrors on roads, cut-ups and fold-outs that don't really exist. Except, now, they do.
Lara Pawson is the author of In the Name of the People: Angola's forgotten massacre *and the memoir* This Is the Place to Be.

BORIS DRALYUK

Writing can serve as a vehicle for those who seek to express – that is, to externalize – their pain, and that is a worthy enough purpose at times when pain flows from our pores. As both a writer and a reader, however, I find literature to be most useful when it serves as a space to rearrange and reconstruct what seems hopelessly disordered – even if only briefly and on the smallest of scales. There, in the words of Wallace Stevens, our "blessed rage for order" is fleetingly satisfied in "ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds" than the explosions, real and psychic, that threaten to undo us.
Boris Dralyuk is a poet and translator, and Associate Professor at the University of Tulsa.

MARY BEARD

The ancient Romans knew that appropriate reading could help you get through crisis and grief, from political exile to the death of a child. It was common for poets to turn their pens to writing "consolations" for their suffering friends. But they also knew that *writing* could be a useful weapon in the face of disaster. The poet Ovid wrote his *Tristia* (sad poems) when he was exiled to the Black Sea; and the death of Cicero's daughter prompted a stream of writing, including some of his best-known philosophy (the *Tusculan Disputations*, *On the Nature of the Gods*, etc). Crisis can be good for literature.
Mary Beard is the Classics editor at the TLS*, and author of the forthcoming* Emperor of Rome.

LAURA BATES

Literature is never more urgently needed than when we lose our way. In times of conflict and destruction it provides a mirror to force us to see and acknowledge what is broken, and a map for how to reach a better place. Books such as *Empireland: How imperialism has shaped modern Britain* by Sathnam Sanghera and *Legacy of Violence: A history of the British empire* by Caroline Elkins should enable us to learn from the atrocities of the past. Books such as *Invisible Women: Exposing data bias in a world designed for men* by Caroline Criado Perez and *Tenants: The people on the frontline of Britain's housing emergency* by Vicky Spratt force us to reckon with inequality in our society and the destruction it wreaks on the most marginalized. Memoirs such as Gloria Steinem's *My Life on the Road* can give us a generous, uplifting sense of the possibility of change and how we might play our part. But it is fiction, and art more widely, that gives us the space to breathe, imagine and hope in times of conflict, as with the recent celebration of the literature of Ukraine through a partnership between Lviv BookForum and Hay Festival, which allowed art to shine out of great darkness.
Laura Bates is the founder of the Everyday Sexism project and author of Fix the System, Not the Women.

HANNAH CRITCHLOW

I'm going to answer this very much from my area of expertise, neuroscience. A study published in the *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* in March 2022 investigated what happens in the brain when people look at pieces of art that they like. Perhaps unsurprisingly it sparks an active process in the brain, increasing gamma and alpha wave activity. These frequencies of electrical oscillations are associated with creativity, relaxation and the ability to access disparate circuits across the brain to engage in more joined-up thinking. They are not the brain waves associated with feeling stressed or overwhelmed by immediate threat. Rather, they are brain waves that help us to reflect and think in a more innovative, creative way. So, to the question: art has the potential to alter the physiology of our brain, to alter how we process information from the world around us, with possible longer-term ramifications rippling out across societies and generations.
Hannah Critchlow is a neuroscientist and broadcaster, and the author of Joined-Up Thinking: The science of collective intelligence and its power to change our lives.

ANDREA WULF

As we hurtle towards climate catastrophe, some of us might have lost hope, but I believe that art and literature can still make a change. Most of our environmental debates – at least in the political arena – are based on data projections, statistics and figures. This scientific approach is, of course, incredibly important, but I think we also need artists, poets and writers to help us change our behaviour. At the heart of this is imagination. How can we understand what is at stake not just intellectually, but also emotionally? Sometimes an artist can visualize the threats of climate change more effectively than a scientific report can, or a novelist can paint a portrait of our potentially terrifying future more evocatively. Take the Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson, who brought blocks of glacial ice from Greenland to London, Copenhagen and Paris. With these melting ice blocks he created a tangible experience of global warming and disappearing Arctic ice – more powerful and visceral for some of us than plain numbers. In 1798 the young German poet Novalis wrote that the "sciences must all be poeticised", an idea that seems more important today than ever before.
Andrea Wulf is a historian and the author of Magnificent Rebels: The first Romantics and the invention of the self.

VANESSA CHAN

Literature has always offered us a chance of greater understanding of things and places we don't know. But for a long time these windows into other worlds have been written by those who imagined the lives of others in far-flung, exotic lands. Now literature is providing entry points into these same unfamiliar worlds – fiction, yes – but written by the people who have either lived close to these stories or who are descended from survivors of these histories. Through Rachel Heng's novel *The Great Reclamation*, for example, we learn about how Singapore was formed by building and claiming land from the sea. Through Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* we learn about colonisation and slavery through Ghanaian history. Through Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* we learn about the occupation of Korea by Japan. Through Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* we learn about politics, power and class in contemporary India. Literature's windows have become much more expansive, the storytelling more truthful, and our world is brighter for it.
Vanessa Chan is a novelist.

CRESSIDA COWELL

As Children's Laureate in 2020, I was asked by the World Health Organization to do a video message about reading. Books provide an escape into other worlds, but they also give children tools. Words are the pathway of thought: the more words a child has, the more they can think about their emotions and the world around them. This is especially important in times of stress.

A great children's book distils messages about emotions, resilience and conflict while retaining a lightness of touch. There's a fantastic children's book on almost any topic, from Michael Rosen's *Sad Book*, about bereavement, to Nadia Shireen's *Barbara Throws a Wobbler*, about emotions, or Malorie Blackman's *Noughts and Crosses*, which encourages teenagers to think about big, difficult subjects, or the graphic novel *Illegal* by Eoin Colfer, Andrew Donkin and Giovanni Rigano, about one refugee's experience.

And these books aren't patronising or dishonest. It's us adults who dance around; children mostly go to the heart of things. In the words of E. B. White, author of *Charlotte's Web*: "Anyone who writes down to children is simply wasting his time ... They are the most attentive, curious, eager, observant, sensitive, quick and generally congenial readers on earth".

Children's experiences of conflict should be valued as much as any adult's. Books such as Judith Kerr's *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* are essential historical records.
Cressida Cowell is the author and illustrator of The Wizards of Once *and* How to Train Your Dragon.

DON PATERSON

I think art is just something we make or don't make, and if we make it, make it well or badly. The society that values the arts, and excellence in them, is probably the more spiritually healthy, not least because it has the means to revive its own hopes when they flag. It's easy to deprioritise the arts in troubled times, but that's often just a quiet sign that things have become hopeless. As far as literature goes, I still want to believe that its most important use is to facilitate the human imagination, which is the main engine of both solution-finding and empathy with the suffering of others. One of the unfortunate side effects of the current "marketplace of lived experience" is that it can too easily leave the imagination with nowhere to go, if it values "performed authenticity" above all else. But Primo Levi left us unable to forget the specific horrors of the Holocaust not just because he "bore witness", but because of the wise, memorable and original manner in which he did so. Style – "art" – isn't a trivial thing. It's the difference between something being truly understood or not, felt or not, and often remembered or not. And one might argue that the straits in which we find ourselves place writers under a greater moral obligation to write well than ever before.
Don Paterson is a poet, professor and jazz musician. His most recent book is Toy Fights: A boyhood.

FFLUR DAFYDD

In the wake of Brexit, feeling hopeless and fractured and disconnected from other countries against my will, I found that reading exciting contemporary works in translation by writers from across the European Union was a way of striding boldly through those borders that were being closed to us, filling me with great hope that works in translation would still flourish and that art would still tell the world who we are, whatever our governments decided. One work I read during this time was *Diary of an Apprentice Astronaut* by