

On stories and snow

[Elizabeth Gibson](#)

I have always been a loner. I resisted the label at first, at primary school, and was convinced that I just hadn't found the right friend or crowd yet. I thought a loner was a bad thing to be. Alone. My year group was run by cliques that were hard to infiltrate, so instead I would go for walks under blossomy trees, watch seagulls gliding through the air and dream of flying. And I would read: Michael Morpurgo, or Roald Dahl, or the *Chalet School*.

Like "loner", I resisted the label of "reader", to a degree, as I felt there was more to me than that. Yes, I read, but I also did art and music and loved animals. Funny, though: the only job I ever dreamt of having was an author. I loved Dick King-Smith's *Sophie* series, and drafted my own about a girl called Hannah. I loved Michael Bond's *Olga the Guinea Pig*, and started chronicling the life of my pet rabbit, Floppy. Seeing my work in print, with a beautiful cover, in a shop or library, made me feel happier than anything else. My dreams were bound up in books, always.

Sometimes, the world makes us think certain things aren't good enough because they are supposedly unproductive. Reading isn't as good as writing. Being alone, making memories that are just for you, is not as good as sharing those memories on Instagram. There is no point in doing something if it doesn't have some long-term benefit, whether that's money or fame or good marks. Life brings pressure. So many things you should or could be. I had so many people around me with so many ideas, I was bewildered. I became obsessed with defining myself. I am NOT a loner, I would say, I am just misunderstood. I am NOT just a bookworm. I am an all-rounder. I was so scared of not being enough.

It was all slightly pointless looking back, especially considering that at an awards evening I won the "Bookworm Award". I hadn't fooled anyone, after all. Deep down, I don't think I minded. There was a bookworm-y pride buried in me, a flame that all the productivity pressures in the world couldn't quite put out. Over time, that flame grew into a firework of colours and possibilities. From up in the sky, fireworks can see all around – the world becomes bigger. And during my school and college years I began to learn the link that existed between books and travel, and discover how vital it would become for me.

As part of the school choir I travelled to Belgium, where we went to a theme park. I am not a fan of rollercoasters so I sat and read *Only Human* by Kate Thompson. While everyone else whooshed around screaming somewhere in Belgium, I was in Scotland in an energy crisis, in a world where animals can think and communicate like humans, due to gene manipulation. Or maybe I was in both places, Scotland *and* Belgium. Maybe that was what was so special and memorable about it. The exact combination of where, when and how you read a certain story is unique. It is all yours. I was surprised when my classmates, stumbling back from rides, thought I was missing out. They hadn't spent the past half hour with Loki, the talking Doberman. They'd just been on a rollercoaster.

I went on to study Languages at University, and spent time in France, Spain and China. I did hang out with other people, and have some great memories of hiking, Lazer Quest, and parties. But still, so much of my time was spent alone, either with a book, or with the city streets, or with nature – by a

river or in the mountains. Finally, I began to realise that this is how I am happy, and that there is a connection between these activities. Reading, exploring, and being close to nature: they are all a way to have an experience, an interaction with something else, that is all mine. That is private and wonderful and my choice. I could choose to share my thoughts on a novel by reviewing it or tweeting about it. Or, I could choose for my connection with that story, those characters, that world – to be mine, and mine alone.

Just like I chose to sit on the beach in the South of France as the sun set, gazing at the mountains, how they went from grey to purple as night set in. And how I chose to go to Beijing, travel further than I ever had. The journey took over a day, with three flights and a wait in Moscow Airport. It was snowing as we landed, and inside, hordes of men were huddled around in fur coats, smoking. It was incredibly surreal and as I sat in the middle of it all, reading another Kate Thompson book, *Origins*, I knew nobody else in the universe had ever had that exact same experience. It was really something.

Origins is a mind-blowing book, about what makes us human. It follows two people who are different in some ways, but intrinsically the same, and who turn out to be distant relatives. They discover this via a book, and in a meta way, the novel ends by reflecting on the power of stories. It became even more meta for me, sitting in a country I had never visited. I was so overcome with emotion on finishing that book, knowing that whether we come from lands of snow, or sand, or rainy North West England, we have so much that is the same. And we have stories, to remind us of that. I was cold, and exhausted from travelling, but I felt warm. I was in two places at once: my own mind, where I was in control, and the outside world of new and unpredictable things. And the link between them was the simple block of paper and ink in my hands.

I am no longer ashamed to call myself a loner, or a reader. Creating things makes me feel proud and fulfilled, and documenting them through photography or the occasional Tweet can be fun. But I also let myself enjoy what others have created, from gorgeous graphic novels to hard-hitting poetry, just as I let myself bask in a sunset or run in the sea. There are scary things happening, all the time. It is important to feel strong, and what makes us stronger than somebody listening to us? We write and others read. Others write and we read. Together, we work it out: we give our views and meet in the middle, or come up with something new.

We can travel the world, the universe, to other times, just through words – and we can do all of this while still being ourselves, completely, because no two people will ever have the same reading experience, the same memories to own and treasure. Sci-fi in a theme park in Belgium, mystery in an airport in Russia. Animal tales under school apple trees. We take other people's stories and write our own stories around them, and the chain goes on and on. Meta indeed.

And also quite magical.