

Existential Novels

Full results

Supplementary material for Mick Cooper's *Existential psychotherapy and counselling: Contributions to a pluralistic practice* (Sage, 2015), Appendix.

One of the great strengths of existential philosophy is that it stretches far beyond psychotherapy and counselling; into art, literature and many other forms of popular culture. This means that there are many – including films, novels and songs that convey the key messages of existentialism. These may be useful for trainees of existential therapy, and also as recommendations for clients to deepen an understanding of this way of seeing the world.

In order to identify the most helpful resources, an online survey was conducted in the summer of 2014 to identify the key existential films, books and novels. Invites were sent out via email to existential training institutes and societies, and through social media. Participants were invited to nominate up to three of each art media that ‘most strongly communicate the core messages of existentialism’.

In total, 119 people took part in the survey (i.e., gave one or more response). Approximately half were female ($n = 57$) and half were male ($n = 56$), with one of other gender. The average age was 47 years old (range 26–89). The participants were primarily distributed across the UK ($n = 37$), continental Europe ($n = 34$), North America ($n = 24$), Australia ($n = 15$) and Asia ($n = 6$). Around 90% of the respondents were either qualified therapists ($n = 78$) or in training ($n = 26$). Of these, around two-thirds ($n = 69$) considered themselves existential therapists, and one third ($n = 32$) did not.

There were 288 nominations for the key existential novel. The following table gives the novels that were nominated by the respondents, in order of how frequently they were nominated and then by title. Comments from participants are also given for each novel. Where participants gave similar comments for more than one novel, the comments are only presented with the first novel.

Very many thanks to everyone who participated in this survey.

Title (nominations)	Author	Comments
The Outsider (21)	Albert Camus	The greatest existential novel written. Dying for the truth./ The stranger felt strangely familiar when I read it./ Presents issues about alienation, dissociation and ultimately a story that deals with authenticity or its absence./ Important because of what it says about the human condition, particularly regarding the importance of self-reflection and self-awareness in becoming fully human. The transition of the Stranger is beautifully illustrated./ They negotiate key existential dilemmas./ Excellent story about feelings of estrangement./ Provides a model of living authentically, without attempting to fit a mould or behave according to norms, and ultimately dying authentically, by accepting not religion but that the universe is indifferent. I think this brings up really interesting questions about the extent to which anyone should want to live, or die, authentically.
Nausea (15)	Jean-Paul Sartre	Brings you face to face with the existential condition./ Explored themes of meaning(lessness), purpose and freedom. Once I began reading it I couldn't put it down, despite the nausea./ Great illustration of some of the "darker" elements of existentialism. Displays how man is condemned to freedom and the suffering that accompanies this./ A journey into the mundane and dealing with nothingness on an everyday basis./ How to create a meaningful life and make responsible choices in freedom; is true self-development possible?
Crime and Punishment (7)	Fyodor Dostoevsky	A man's inescapable relationship with existential guilt and agency.
Man's Search for Meaning (6)	Viktor Frankl	Tapped into my own felt sense of being able to create experience internally, alone and individually. That I somehow influence what I am experiencing and thus expressing in my life./ A great depiction of living with meaning despite the suffering that life brings. This illuminates the "tragic optimism" that the human condition is bound to./ Brings an enlivened sense of lived experience of meaning as life force to the reader./ A "must be read" for everyone. No other comments.
The Death of Ivan Ilyich (5)	Leo Tolstoy	How death reminds us to live a full life./ About key challenges of the human condition, not merely local or idiosyncratic problems. Challenge each of us to negotiate the great problems of living (existing) such as freedom and limitation, our smallness (fragility) and our greatness (boldness, capacity to transcend), our isolation and our interpersonal connections, and the problems of meaninglessness and meaning/awe./ The growth of awareness and openness to the importance of meaning and relationships in life.
Metamorphosis (5)	Franz Kafka	Just bizarre./ Presents issues that deal with identity, family relation, loneliness and ultimately rejection./ A metaphor of the process of any inevitable transformation.
Steppenwolf (5)	Herman Hesse	A story about loneliness and the need to connect to another person./ I couldn't even begin to describe why. It just is one of the ultimate existential pieces of literature. It is life.
The Brothers Karamasov (5)	Fyodor Dostoevsky	
The Plague (5)	Albert Camus	My favourite novel of Camus because it explores how there are adversarial and threatening conditions of life (death) that cannot be avoided, and yet the relatedness we have that is our salvation./ Engages in deep reflections about what it means to be human. An honest look at the human condition.
The Trial (5)	Franz Kafka	Experiences with "nothingness" and absurd in "Dasein"./ A parable about dealing with the ultimate meaninglessness, arbitrariness, and unfairness of life./ Questions of life, death, and subjective reality.
The Unbearable Lightness of Being (5)	Milan Kundera	Existence has no weight, no substance./ Deals with the struggle to make life meaningful in a more mundane manner, what Frankl calls the secular logos.
The Lord of the Rings (4)	J. R. R. Tolkein	All about life./ A text about the power of true friendship./
1984 (3)	George Orwell	Creates a sense of total meaninglessness in suffering, and shows how reality can be created and recreated and manipulated, and how any potential meaning can be undermined and exposed as an illusion (i.e. 'do it to Julia')./
When Nietzsche Wept (2)	Irvin Yalom	

Catch 22 (2)	Joseph Heller	Explores the essential paradox: you're damned if you do, you're damned if you don't. Its genius lies within its acceptance of absurdity as the basis of reality.
Infinite Jest (2)	David Foster Wallace	Though scripted to entertain the reader, the material and protagonists make the reader think beyond surface thought about life and the meaning we attach to it.
Notes From the Underground (2)	Fyodor Dostoevsky	
Orlando (2)	Virginia Woolf	
One Hundred Years of Solitude (2)	Gabriel Garcia Marquez	Never ending cycle of life.
Siddhartha (2)	Herman Hesse	The spiritual journey through life and a search for meaning.
The Alchemist (2)	Paulo Coelho	Tapped into my own felt sense of being able to create experience internally, alone and individually. That I somehow influence what I am experiencing and thus expressing in my life.
The Alexandria Quartet (2)	Lawrence Durrell	
The Book of Disquiet (2)	Fernando Pessoa	
The Bible (2)		Many humans through space and time.
The Catcher in the Rye (2)	J. D. Salinger	
The Fall (2)	Albert Camus	
The Heart is a Lonely Hunter (2)	Carson McCullers	
The Little Prince (2)	Antoine de Saint Exupery	
The Perks of Being a Wallflower (2)	Stephen Chbosky	Insight to the self through questioning characters who try to make sense of an absurd world.
To Kill a Mockingbird (2)	Harper Lee	
Veronica Decided to Die (2)	Paulo Coelho	
1Q84	Haruki Murakami	
A Confederacy Of Dunces	John Kennedy Toole	
A Girl's Guide to Modern European Philosophy -	Charlotte Grieg	Really accessible, about the protagonist learning about existentialism whilst going through her own life decisions.
A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius	Dave Eggers	
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man	James Joyce	About someone finding himself but in order to do so flying in the face of parents, country, religion and convention, to choose "himself."
A Stranger on Earth	Boeli van Leeuwen	Excellent story about feelings of estrangement.
A Tale of Two Cities	Charles Dickens	
A Country Doctor	Franz Kafka	

All Quiet on the Western Front	Erich Maria Remarque	
Anna Karenina	Leo Tolstoy	
Finding Fish: A Memoir	Antwone Fisher	Wonderfully depicts the actions of the protagonists, especially how torn they are in their everyday lives because of the influence of various events and situations in their past. They have to struggle through situations that demand current actions. But their decisions on how to behave are influenced by former developments. The text shows the deeper thoughts and feelings of their protagonists and how they are related to other characters. The language used in this text is excellent.
Atomised	Michel Houellebecq	Crime and punishment: guilt, freedom.
Beneath the wheel	Herman Hesse	
Blankets	Craig Thompson	
Blood Meridian	Cormac McCarthy	Where are we going anyway? It never turns out as promised, life that is. We can be certain we will continue to make mistakes.
Brave New World	Aldous Huxley	
Breakfast of Champions	Kurt Vonnegut	
Candide	Francois Voltaire	Focuses on the need to accept one's limitations and to see life for what it really is.
Ceremony	Leslie Marmon Silko	Moving, deep and incredibly human, Dalva is the story of a remarkable woman and her life.
Dalva	Jim Harrison	
Dandelion Wine	Ray Bradbury	Easy and sincere language regarding question of life and death.
Darkness at Noon	Arthur Koestler	
Die Bücherdiebin	Markus Zusak	
Die italienischen Schuhe	Henning Mankell	
Drachenläufer	Khaled Hosseini	
Eat Pray Love	Elizabeth Gilbert	
Factotum	Charles Bukowski	
Fahrenheit 451	Ray Bradbury	
Fight Club	Chuck Palahniuk	
Flesh and Blood	Michael Cunningham	All about life.
Frankenstein	Mary Shelly	Deals with the struggle to attain meaning via the I-Thou encounter, and inherently social, dialogical aspects of human existence in a world that has allowed technology and the blind desire for scientific progress to blind us to deeper meanings in life and the need for social connection.
Freedom	Jonathan Franzen	

God Emperor of Dune	Frank Herbert	
Gone With The Wind	Margaret Mitchell	Birth, love, death. What else is there?
Gravity's Rainbow	Thomas Pynchon	
Harry Potter books	J. K. Rowling	I don't really want to separate out any single book as they each engage with key existential themes as does the entire story which is spread over the 7 books and 8 films. All of the books require the characters/readers/viewers to engage with death, freedom, loss and a wide array of existential concerns. It has relationally at its heart - whether it's Lilly Potter's protective love of Harry, Hermione's conviction that friendship is above all else, or the almost DNA like quality of Harry being one of Voldemort's Horcruxes. In particular the story illustrates the place of choice in our situated existence. Harry, and the other characters, could be victims of circumstance but the story shows how we are part of our life project, choosing implicitly and explicitly as we go ahead. Whether this be the place of choice when subject to the sorting hat's deliberations in the first book or the choice to return to earth/life and continue to live when having been the victim of Voldemort's 'Avada Kadava' spell. In some respects this focus is relentless. Snape is initially assumed to be a one dimensional bitter, nasty and potentially evil character but he is an illustration of complexity, choice, love in the face of dislike and ultimate values. I could go on ... but for these reasons and the fact that these stories have had SUCH a remarkable reach, I suspect that they will stand the test of time and offer generations an inroad into the consideration of existential thinking.
Haroun and The Sea of Stories	Salman Rushdie	A glorious novel in my view with a superb child/adult viewpoint.
His Dark Materials	Philip Pullman	
Ice and Fire	Andrea Dworkin	
Identity	Milan Kuyndera	
If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things	Jon McGregor	
Illusions	Richard Bach	
In Search of Lost Time	Marcel Proust	
Independence Day	Richard Ford	
Invisible Man	Ralph Ellison	The title says it all really - to be not seen, heard, acknowledged.
Iron in the Soul	Jean-Paul Sartre	Brings you face to face with the existential condition.
Islands in the Stream	Ernest Hemingway	
It's Kind of A Funny Story	Ned Vizzini	"Take these verbs and enjoy them. They're yours, Craig. You deserve them because you chose them. You could have left them all behind but you chose to stay here."
Jane Eyre	Charlotte Bronte	A story of a woman's existential journey... her rise from poverty and abuse and her courage to experience conditions such as homelessness, hunger, and less security in order to create her life. It also explores relationships, seeing people for who they truly are beyond the apparent ugliness, and mystery.
Jude the Obscure	Thomas Hardy	
Kassandra	Christa Wolf	A war novel, disturbing but clear in its language, it shows how very few deeply grown up humans find their way into relating to everything around.

Krabat	Otfried Preußler	
Legion	William Peter Blatty	Deals with the modern crisis of global meaning-in-life in a world that has lost faith, a struggle for what Viktor Frankl calls the eternal logos.
Les Dieux Voyagent Toujours Incognito	Laurent Gounelle	
Lying on the Couch	Irvin Yalom	Existential themes throughout.
Malone Dies	Samuel Beckett	
More Than This	Patrick Ness	'You said we all want there to be more than this! Well, there's always more than this. There's always something you don't know.'
Mrs Dalloway	Virginia Woolf	
Notes From an Exhibition	Patrick Gale	
Oliver Twist	Charles Dickens	
Paarbildung	Urs Faes	
Pennington's Seventeenth Summer	K. M. Peyton	A young man's awakening to the oscillations of authenticity and inauthenticity and the struggle to remain true to oneself.
Les Ames Grises	Philippe Claudel	About personal responsibility and feelings of guilt.
Pope Joan	Donna Woolfolk Cross	About a very brave women from the Middle Ages in Europe who has a very strong will and curiosity for learning, for authenticity and for life.
Regeneration	Pat Barker	
Revolutionary Road	Richard Yates	
Roumlus -- My Father	Raimond Gaita	
Secrets of the Tides	Hannah Richell	Has existential themes throughout.
She Came to Stay	Simone de Beauvoir	De Beauvoir is super-readable and her novels play out the theories that she and Sartre were grappling with in ways that bring them to life completely. <i>She Came to Stay</i> deals really well with their theories of conflict and relationships.
Slaughterhouse 5	Kurt Vonnegut	Questions the very fabric of reality, the stuff it is made from, and creates a god in a single earthbound character.
So Long See You Tomorrow	William Maxwell	
Songs of the Dying Earth	Various	Spooky stuff about the end of mankind.
Sophie's World	Jostein Gaarder	
Spring Snow	Yukio Mishima	
Stones by the River	Ursula Hegi	
Stranger in a Strange Land	Robert A Heinlein	
Stupeur et Tremblements	Amelie Nothomb	Describes an attempt by the protagonist to adapt to a new culture and having to decide whether to fit in or be who she feels is right for her. She experiences anxiety and depression related to being ostracized.
The Age of Reason	Jean-Paul Sartre	Sartre's 'Being and Nothingness' condensed and readable!

The Book Thief	Markus Zusak	
The Castle	Albert Camus	
The Chronicles of Narnia	C. S. Lewis	
The Corrections	Jonathan Franzen	
The Dispossessed	Ursula K. Le Guin	
The Edible Woman	Margaret Atwood	
The End of the World News	Anthony Burgess	
The First Man	Albert Camus	
The Flood Invades my Spirit	Kenzaburō Ōe	
The Glass Bead Game	Herman Hesse	
The Great Gatsby	F Scott Fitzgerald	
The Heart of Dog	Mikhail Bulgakov	
The Hundred Year-Old-Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared	Jonas Jonasson	A text about accepting things as they are and handling difficult situations.
The Idiot	Fyodor Dostoevsky	
The Island, Aldous Huxley		About hope and meaning for mankind.
The last three days of Fernando Pessoa	Antonio Tabucchi	
The Last Temptation of Christ	Nikos Kazantzakis	
The Lord of the Flies	William Golding	
The Late Mattia Pascal	Luigi Pirandello	About a man who fakes an identity and discovers the negative repercussions of such ... that there are consequences to trying to abandon who he originally was.
The Magic Mountain	Thomas Mann	Questions of life, death, and subjective reality.
The Man Who Planted Trees	Jean Giono	Each of them touched me at a deep level.
The Mantle	Nicholas Gogol	
The Marriage Plot	Jeffrey Eugenides	
The Odyssey	Homer	
The Old Man and the Sea	Ernest Hemmingway	About lone courage in the face of failure.
The Outsider	Colin Wilson	The first book I ever read that made realistic sense to myself.
The Picture of Dorian Gray	Oscar Wilde	A metaphor about the reality as a mirror of our inner world. It's about interrelationship between who we are and what kind of world is around us and vice versa.

The Rings of Saturn	W. G. Sebald	
The Shipping News	Annie Proulx	I loved The Shipping News when I first read it - it is a story of man who finds himself going home after the loss of his relationship and how the environment is really harsh but he finds himself.
The Sea, The Sea	Iris Murdoch	
The Rosie Project	Graeme Simsion	
The southern highway	Julio Cortazar	
The Story of the Cape (in 'Tales of the Hasidim')	Martin Buber	One of the first that taught me what existentialism really is. I think the last line is masterly.
The sufferings of the young Werther	Johann Wolfgang Goethe	
The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry	Rachel Joyce	Harold Fry may not stand the test of time but it's something I read relatively recently that worked for me!
Warum Sara Lacht und Josef Weint	Peter Egger	Biblical stories are full of the core messages of existentialism. The book offers 31 commentaries and renarrations for children and adults of the most important stories of the book of Genesis. The renarrations are guided by a scholarly approach. They are based on the original Hebrew text and incorporate knowledge drawn from biblical research, ancient oriental science, archaeology and especially the results and insights of existential psychology. The protagonists of the bible are represented as real human beings, they are neither idealized nor castED in black, in order to bring them to life. The author of this book made the Grundausbildung für Existenzanalyse (basic training for existential psychology) guided by Alfried Längle in Bern (Switzerland). The book was recommended by psychotherapists to their clients.
The Wasp Factory	Iain Banks	
The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle	Haruki Murakami	Surreal and absurd, and also addresses the tension between isolation and connection, and between reality and imagination.
The Woman Destroyed	Simone De Beauvoir	
The World According To Garp	John Irving	
This is Between Us	Kevin Sampsell	
To the Lighthouse	Virginia Woolf	I wanted to see a woman writer in the top 3!
Until I Find You	John Irving	Novel 3 is a text about different apperception of different persons.
Voss	Patricia White	
Wallander	Henning Mankell	Wallander is at least quasi-existential with doubts on what makes sense to what he does and is aware of matters and conflict to obssession, will, choice.
Way of the Peaceful Warrior	Dan Millman	
We are all Completely Beside Ourselves	Karen Joy Fowler	
Winter's Children	Christopher Hawkes	Recounts the life of a young man who suffered trauma and how this dictates his life until the present moment when he needs to decide how he will continue if this trauma is his major driving force.

From Caucasia, With Love

Danzy Senna

Zorba the Greek

Nikos Kazantzakis
