

LITERARY YORK

Narrow, shadowy medieval streets and iconic architecture, a colourful history and a rather bohemian, academic atmosphere have always made York a rich source of inspiration for authors over the centuries.

So, are you sitting comfortably? Then we'll begin. Once upon a time, long ago, in the 8th century, a writer and historian named **Bede** (673-735) lived in the North East of England. Among the 40 or so books that he wrote was the Ecclesiastical History of the People of Britain, now considered to be the first great Anglo-Saxon work of literature. The Venerable Bede played a vital role in York's history. As tutor to **Egbert**, then Bishop of York, Bede advised him to apply to the Pope to make York an archbishopric. The application was successful and Egbert became the first Archbishop of York in 734, making York independent from Canterbury and a powerful religious capital in its own right.

To this day, **York Minster** – Northern Europe's largest medieval gothic cathedral – dominates the city of York and influences the daily lives of the people who live and work in its shadow, as well as attracting visitors from all over the world who come to marvel at this architectural masterpiece.

Charles Dickens was one such regular visitor, who wove detail from the Minster into Nicholas Nickleby, when he wrote about the "*five maiden sisters... all of surpassing beauty*" who "*dwelt, in the ancient city of York.*" Four of them were aged between 22 and 19 but "*...if the four elder sisters were lovely, how beautiful was the youngest, a fair creature of sixteen!*" This story was inspired by the Minster's Five Sisters Window, which has remarkably survived wars and fires to remain the largest area of grisaille glass anywhere in the world. Dickens used to give readings from his novels, the first time in 1858, at the now vanished Festival Concert Rooms, on the corner of Blake Street and Museum Street.

Other famous literary visitors have included **Charlotte** and **Anne Bronte**, who stayed at the George Inn, Coney Street in 1849. **Wilkie Collins** – author of *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* – visited York on a number of occasions and set part of his 1862 novel *No Name* in the city in which Captain Wragge even describes his stroll along the city walls.



Daniel Defoe, the author of *Moll Flanders* and *Robinson Crusoe*, was a frequent visitor to York. The first line of *Crusoe* reads: "*I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, to a good family...*" Defoe also wrote *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* and praised the antiquities of York.

York was a prominent centre of the book publishing business in the 17th century. At number 35 Stonegate, the sign of the Holy Bible, dated 1682, still hangs over the ornately carved doorway of what was once Francis Hildyard's bookshop, which was visited even by Royalty. At that time, booksellers were often publishers as well, and **Laurence Sterne's** novel *Tristram Shandy* was published here in 1760. And above number 33, at Stonegate's entrance to Coffee Yard, sits the bright red "Printer's Devil",

a carved sign which indicated the location of the print works up until the 18th century. The apprentices, who carried the hot plates, were known as the printer's devils.

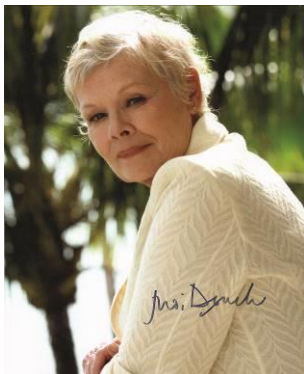
Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, sits on the corner of Minster gates, leaning on a pile of books, to advertise the bookseller's shop below, where authors and literary readers met as members of one of Britain's earliest book groups.



The Bloomsbury literary group, which included **E. M. Forster** and **Virginia Woolf**, met in York from 1904 up to the Second World War, and York's Bloomsbury Guesthouse is named after the group.

W.H. Auden, one of the most popular 20th century poets (whose popularity was re-ignited following John Hannah's tear-jerking rendition of Funeral Blues in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*), was born in York in 1907, the son of George Auden, a local GP. Auden swapped old York for New York, where he spent most of his adult life, but enthusiasts still beat a path to the old York family home – at 54 Bootham.

Fans of award-winning novel *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* will feel they almost know York if without visiting, having read vivid accounts of the life of Ruby Lennox, who lived with her family above the pet shop in the shadow of York Minster. Author **Kate Atkinson** was born in York in 1951 and used her hometown as the setting for the book, which won the prestigious **Whitbread Book of the Year** prize in 1995 with her. A stage version of the story was premiered at York's Theatre Royal. Her novel *Started Early, Took My Dog* mentions Bettys Tea Rooms when a fictional detective Jackson Brodie enjoys a cup of perfectly made coffee in there.



The sisters **Margaret Drabble** and **A. S. Byatt** were both educated in York's Mount School, as was **Judi Dench**, another native. The surrounding Yorkshire countryside has provided a backdrop for some of A. S. Byatt's novels, including her 1990 Booker Prize winner *Possession*.

York University boasts its share of successful contemporary authors too, including **Jung Chang**, author of the award-winning book *Wild Swans*, and **Graham Swift**, who established his career as an author with the novel *Waterland*.

Fiona Shaw is yet another York writer, feted for her novel *The Sweetest Thing* – the story of Harriet, one member of a poor fishing family on the Yorkshire coast, and Samuel, the Quaker philanthropist she meets on her escape to York.

LITERARY YORK TODAY



Today York enjoys a lively literary scene. One of York's most fascinating contemporary literary figures is **Jack Mapanje**, who lives in exile in the city after being forced to flee his native Malawi, in Africa. He was Head of the Department of English at the University of Malawi when arrested in 1987 after his first book of poems, *Chameleons and Gods* (published in 1981), was banned in the country. He was

released in 1991, after spending three years, seven months and sixteen days in prison following an international outcry against his treatment. He has since published another collection, *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*, and has co-edited two anthologies, *Oral Poetry from Africa* and *Summer Fires*.

Matt Haig found commercial success with *The Radleys*, which describes a family of vampires living in Bishopthorpe. He is also the author of *The Humans*, a sci-fi comedy. Another popular writer is **John Baker**, who has written several novels set in York, usually of a crime nature. Crime is also the topic in **Nuala Casey's** novels.

Jack Sheffield has written a nostalgic humorous story *Silent Night* about a headmaster Jack returning for an eighth year to the village primary school in Ragley-on-the-Forest (an amalgam of Huby and Sutton-on-the-Forest) in 1984. It is the era of the miner's strike, Trivial Pursuit, Band Aid and Cabbage Patch Dolls. Their school choir is to sing a carol in a church in York, and is going to be on television. Helping to keep his excited children, not to mention their parents, under control during these momentous events taxes Jack and his staff to the limit. And at the same time, Jack has his own problems to deal with.

York poet **Caroline Bird** was won the Poetry Society's Simon Elvin Young Poet of the Year Award two years running (2000, 2001) and she was shortlisted for the Poetry Review magazine's Geoffrey Dearmer Prize in 2001.

Not surprisingly, York is a veritable bookworm's paradise.

Bookshops in the city range from the many second-hand and antiquarian bookdealers, including the **Minster Gate Book Shop**, **Ken Spelman's** on Micklegate, run by ex-students of York University, and **Janette Ray Rare Books** on Bootham, which specialises in architectural, design and garden books.

[Minister Gate Book Shop](#)

Ken Spelman Books www.kenspelman.com

Janette Ray Rare Books www.janetteray.co.uk



Shambles – Apparently the famous wizardry street, Diagon Alley, in J.K Rowling’s Harry Potter, was based on the enchanting 14th century walkway, Shambles. With its leaning, crooked buildings and cobble street, it’s easy to see why. Shambles is now home to the ‘Shop that Must Not Be Named.’

Yorkwalk’s Literary Walk explores particular sites around the city connected with all these authors and many more besides. Other intriguing walks by Yorkwalk include a Richard III Trail, a range of Inaccessible Tours of places not

usually open to the public, and even a Historic Toilet Tour – surely a rich source of inspiration for budding writers! Yorkwalk tours all begin from the Museum Garden Gates and take 1-2 hours.

www.yorkwalk.co.uk

York Literature Festival began in 2007 and has grown steadily since. Each year the festival features a range of diverse events for adults and children at venues all over the city. The programme includes author and speaker events, performances, workshops, poetry, theatre, cinema, reading groups, and any relevant literature-related artistic activity. For festival times and information see www.yorkliteraturefestival.co.uk

If you want your accommodation in York to have a literary theme, stay at the **Bronte Guesthouse** (no direct literary connection!), five minutes from Bootham Bar. www.bronte-guesthouse.com or The Bloomsbury Guesthouse, www.bloomsburyhotel.co.uk.



For more information and to book your stay in York:

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