



What Makes a Good Contemporary Novel

KS4 ENGLISH LITERATURE

Ages 13-16 ⌚ 4 min read

What Is a Contemporary Novel?

A **contemporary novel** is a story written recently (usually in the last 20–30 years) about modern life and modern people. Unlike historical novels set in the past, contemporary novels show what it's like to be alive **right now**—with smartphones, social media, modern problems, and today's issues. They're set in the real world we recognise.

Characters You Believe In

The best contemporary novels have **authentic characters**—people who feel real and believable. They make mistakes, have confusing feelings, and struggle with problems that actually matter. Good authors show us what characters think and feel, not just what they do. A well-written teenage character sounds like a real teenager, dealing with real concerns like identity, friendship, family pressure, or belonging.

Think of it like watching a friend's life unfold rather than reading a made-up fairytale—you recognise the messy, complicated feelings.

A Story That Grips You

Good contemporary novels have **strong plots** that keep you reading. The story needs a clear problem or tension—something the characters want or need to figure out. The plot should have **twists and turning points** that surprise you, and the ending should feel earned, not random. Readers want to care about what happens next.

Meaningful Themes

The best contemporary novels explore **important themes**—big ideas about life, society, or what it means to be human. These might include friendship, racism, mental health, family breakdown, climate change, or inequality. Good authors don't preach; instead, they show us these themes through the characters' experiences, letting us think for ourselves.

Think of it like learning a lesson from watching a friend's story unfold rather than someone telling you what to think.

Authentic Voice and Language

Contemporary novels often use language that sounds **modern and natural**. Writers might include dialogue, slang, or even text-speak that feels truthful to how young people actually talk. The **narrative voice**—the way the story is told—should be distinctive and engaging, whether it's funny, sad, angry, or thoughtful.

Connection to Today's World

The best contemporary novels reflect **real social issues**—poverty, immigration, identity, technology, or environmental problems. They don't shy away from complex topics. By exploring these through fictional characters, readers can understand different perspectives and feel less alone in their own experiences and questions.