



Femme fatale Natalie Portman at the Paris premiere of *Jane Got a Gun*, a Western in which she plays a widow who takes on the gang that killed her man

Forget Proust: what readers want is a short story machine

France

Charles Bremner Paris

A flight of the imagination is transforming one of the bane of French life — waiting for service in state offices — into an opportunity to immerse oneself in the written word.

The Alpine city of Grenoble has scored a surprising hit with automatic dispensers that offer free printed short stories to citizens waiting for their bout with bureaucracy.

After they have taken a number for the queue at the town hall or other public office, people can push a button to receive fiction of one to three minutes' reading time on scrolled paper that is similar to supermarket receipts.

The initial 600 stories are drawn from the best on Short-Edition, a Grenoble-based publishing application that has 10,000 writers and 141,000 subscribers. The story dispenser scheme, which opened in the city in the autumn, has revealed a public thirst for the printed word in an age of screens.

It has attracted national attention



The machine dispenses free fiction on paper similar to a supermarket receipt

and potential business from abroad. "The written word isn't dead," said Christophe Sibieude, co-founder of Short-Edition. "The paper format provides a break from omnipresent screens. People may not have reacted so strongly to our vending machines six years ago, when smartphones hadn't become essential to all parts of our lives."

People awaiting service have voiced support for the scheme. "It transports you. Once you've started the story, you're no longer in the waiting room at the

town hall," a woman told TFI television news. "You've taken off with the characters and you spend a happy moment."

The Short-Edition team came up with the idea when watching people retrieve chocolate from a vending machine. "We said that we could do the same thing with good-quality popular literature to occupy these little unproductive moments," Mr Sibieude said.

Their machine, which has no screen and just three simple buttons, was adopted by Éric Piolle, Grenoble's glamorous Green party mayor, who has made a name with projects for "reimagining the city centre as a place of shared experiences".

The publishers say that the public's appetite for fiction reflects France's continuing taste for reading and writing stories. A poll in 2013 found that 17 per cent of the population had written a manuscript.

Writers like the idea of their work being enjoyed by people in queues, said Nicolas Juliam, a civil servant who contributes to the site. "It is very gratifying to be read, whatever the place."

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Boko Haram kills 26 in Cameroon

Yaounde At least 26 people were killed in three suicide attacks in the far north of Cameroon, a region often targeted by the Boko Haram Islamist group. The attacks took place in a market in Bodo, near the border with Nigeria, in one of the deadliest incidents to hit the area. A further 30 people were injured. The jihadists have killed at least 17,000 people and made 2.6 million others homeless in the past six years. (AFP)

Refugee centre worker killed

Stockholm A teenage asylum seeker allegedly stabbed to death a 22-year-old worker at a refugee centre in Sweden. Police said a resident at a centre for youths aged 14 to 17 near Gothenburg had been charged with murder. (AFP)

Italy welcomes Iranian president

Rome President Rouhani of Iran has arrived in Rome on the first state visit to Europe in 17 years by an Iranian president. His visit to Italy and France aims to attract foreign investment after the lifting of international sanctions. (AFP)

Tito's descendants miss his millions

Belgrade Descendants of Josip Tito, the wartime leader of the Partisans and Yugoslavia's president from 1953-80, will inherit none of his possessions, worth millions of dollars, after a Serbian court ruled that they belonged to the state. (AFP)

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