

Reasons for reading: why literature matters

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Abstract

Recent research in England suggests that opportunities for children's and young people's reading for pleasure may have been curtailed as a result of other curriculum imperatives. Under pressure to raise standards, there has been a strong emphasis on meeting objectives and managing the curriculum, but reasons for reading in the first place appear to have been neglected. In particular, little explicit attention has been paid, either in research or policy documentation, to why literature still has a clear role to play in English education. Taking as its starting point a selection of surveys and policy documents before moving to consider views from theorists, writers and young readers, this article seeks to stimulate debate about why reading literature still matters.

Key words: reading, literature, children's literature, reading theory, adolescent readers

Introduction

In the first phase of the UKLA 'Teachers as Readers' research, 1,200 primary teachers responded to a questionnaire about their personal reading habits, their knowledge of children's literature and the way they used literature in the classroom. The data seemed to suggest a narrowness of scope, both in terms of knowledge about literature and how it might be taught (Cremin et al., 2008a, b). The research team, although acknowledging that the situation in primary schools is more subtle than their findings alone suggest, offer possible reasons why the data are dispiriting:

"This complex picture, while no doubt influenced by technological and childhood changes, is also arguably shaped by the recent and widely recognised professional focus on tests and targets. Pressured by the need to ensure curriculum coverage of nationally set objectives, many perceive that teachers in England may have reduced opportunities for independent reading for pleasure and neglected the reason for reading in the first place" (Cremin et al., 2009, p. 11).

The second phase of the 'Teachers as Readers' project was therefore expressly designed to extend teachers' awareness of their personal practices as readers, their knowledge about children's literature and its potential use in the classroom (Cremin et al., 2008c, 2009). Two key aims were to develop communities of readers

within and beyond school and to help young people become independent readers who read for pleasure with confidence and enthusiasm. The intentions of this second phase appeared to be to restore teachers' and students' enjoyment of reading for its own sake and to rescue literature from its more subservient role of providing extracts for linguistic analysis or being used as a mere stepping off point for other kinds of literacy work.

Although 'Teachers as Readers' was a primary phase project, another cross-phase report, *English at the Crossroads* (Office for Standards in Education, 2009), on how the English curriculum in both primary and secondary schools in England appears to have changed in the 3-year period between 2005 and 2008, offers similar conclusions. Drawing on 242 inspections of schools as well as other evidence from National Strategy evaluations, discussions with teachers and assessment data, the report states:

"The current survey found that schools, especially in the primary phase, devoted a considerable amount of time to reading. However, few had developed a clearly articulated policy, based on a detailed understanding of how pupils become readers. They used many initiatives and strategies but often in a fragmentary way ... Therefore, although there was a great deal of activity related to reading, it was not always integrated effectively or directed sufficiently at producing enthusiastic, independent readers" (Office for Standards in Education, 2009, p. 23).

It is interesting to look back through editions of this UKLA journal, *Literacy* (formerly *Reading, Literacy and Language*), to see whether such concerns about reading and literature are reflected in articles published over the last decade or so. A quick glance reveals – as one might expect of an influential subject association – that contributors pay close attention to new developments in the English curriculum such as the impact of new technologies and the relationship with new literacies; greater acknowledgement of popular culture in the classroom; innovative thinking about multimodality and visual literacy; more recognition of the importance of learning in different media such as film or graphic novels. By comparison with the wealth of articles focusing on these areas, however, a mere handful concern themselves specifically with reading literature, the only exception being picture book literature. Articles about other literary forms – prose fiction, poetry and plays – are scarce (Hadley, 2002; Hopper,

2005; Kenner et al., 2008; Martin, 2003; Westbrook, 2007). There is little or no interconnection between them and therefore little overt sense of how reading and literature are currently rationalised within English curricula. Three articles buck this trend because they *are* linked, in this case to another influential research project – *The Reader in the Writer* – led by Barrs and Cork (2001) and based at the Centre for Language in Primary Education in London (now the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education). One article discusses the research project itself (Barrs, 2000); another documents research with primary age-range student teachers which picks up on the project's commitment to reading novels aloud in class (Collins, 2005). A third, 'Putting literature at the heart of the literacy curriculum' (Nicholson, 2006) reflects on a professional development initiative which built directly on the findings of *The Reader in the Writer*. These three pieces are possibly as close as *Literacy* comes to addressing the question of why and how literature might be taught in the early 21st century and it is instructive to note that not only is their attention on the wider picture of the literacy classroom as much as it is on literature per se, but the articles are spaced apart over a period of 5 years. For the most part, therefore, the importance of literature in the curriculum appears to be more or less taken as read within the pages of *Literacy*; it is assumed rather than discussed.

What about the inspection process? Has that, too, contributed to our neglect of reasons why reading – and reading literature especially – might be important in the first place? *English at the Crossroads* makes frequent mention of reading for pleasure and students' wider reading outside school and is critical of schools whose rhetoric about reading is not followed through in practice:

"Although the schools visited routinely exhorted pupils to read widely, only the best gave this enough curriculum time or used it to promote and monitor pupils' wider reading outside school" (Office for Standards in Education, 2009, p. 39).

In the outstanding schools, on the other hand:

"there was a planned and coherent approach to developing and promoting pupils' wider reading outside school" (Office for Standards in Education, 2009, p. 53).

In one school:

"Literature was at the centre of the department's work . . . The teachers read passionately and talked constantly to each other about books. As a result, there was a continuing dialogue across the department" (Office for Standards in Education, 2009, p. 34).

However, whether the emphasis is on reading widely and independently or on teaching literature, the report does not address rationales for reading and literature,

attending more to schools' and departments' management procedures.

Over 20 years ago, Alastair West undertook a fascinating piece of research exploring the different ways in which three secondary schools influenced their students' reading development. In two linked articles for *The English Magazine*, he reported some of his key findings, for example:

"All three schools placed a high valuation upon reading in their rhetoric, but only one had discovered ways of giving that high valuation any structural form within the working practices and social relations of the institution" (West, 1986, p. 7).

In that one school, Baydon, where students exercised choice over their wider reading with their choices validated in assessed coursework and their progress as readers explicitly and informatively reported, engagement and achievement in reading were noticeably higher than in the other two schools even though both were more socially advantaged. Although West offers some criticisms of the way in which teachers at Baydon were possibly somewhat limited by predominantly liberal humanist views, and thus not particularly diverse in the way they taught literature, he nevertheless notes that:

"Baydon was a school that organised itself for readership. All the social aspects of readership – how people become readers and how readers behave – were acknowledged at Baydon and built into their working practices" (West, 1987, p. 18).

This position chimes with the aims of 'Teachers as Readers' and, indeed, with some aspects of *English at the Crossroads*, but what West's study also has at its very heart – fuelled, no doubt, by the intense literary theory debates going on at the time – is a sense of what the teachers in all three schools thought that reading literature was for, espousing as they did a "liberal humanist view that literature contributes to the individual's moral and emotional education by facilitating a greater understanding of the self, the world and others" (West, 1986, p. 5).

Although such a position would not – either then or now – be universally shared, in this instance it was at least acknowledged overtly as a set of values informing the project teachers' work and, as such was available for scrutiny and debate.

Returning to the present, a policy document in which a rationale is offered is the final report on the government-commissioned independent review of the primary curriculum (Rose, 2009). It states:

"The powerful, not to say unique, contribution to children's enjoyment and comprehension of language – and to their emotional development – from deep engagement with

story telling and regular exposure to excellent literature is recognised throughout early years and primary education. This tradition should be strongly upheld alongside the direct teaching of reading and writing" (Rose, 2009, p. 58).

However, if we analyse the language of this statement, values inscribed in the rationale emerge. 'Exposure' is arguably an odd choice of word to collocate with literature; it is more commonly used in connection with danger, extreme heat or cold, infection or radiation! Ironically, it therefore suggests something against which young people might need protection. Literature is also here presented as a 'tradition' to be 'upheld', with all the implications of status and power those two words connote. Furthermore, it is to be experienced 'alongside' the teaching of reading, rather than as an integral part of the process. Later in the report, there is another suggested rationale for reading: that children "can decode familiar and unfamiliar words so effortlessly as to be able to concentrate fully on the meaning of the text, which is the goal of reading" (Rose, 2009, p. 61). Here, the human dimensions of enjoyment, comprehension and emotional development suggested earlier are no longer in evidence.

The English National Curriculum includes a statement about the importance of subject English as a whole, offering a more integrated and inclusive view of literature which links reading, writing and critical understanding (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2007). Here, the rationale for literature appears to be its role in developing a sense of cultural identity, and the argument that reading offers pleasure and access to knowledge, while understanding about language enables choice and appreciation of the choices others make. These are substantial claims, which also bespeak certain values about literature written in English (as well as about language, culture, identity) and, indeed, textual power, but they are not subjected to further scrutiny or discussion.

The Arts Council – a national development agency for the arts in England, funded by government and National Lottery money – in a consultation document on children's literature, takes a slightly different stance. Here the power of literature lies in its potential to nourish and enrich young people's lives:

"We see children's literature as the touchstone for a healthy and sustainable literary culture. Children's writers and illustrators reach readers at their most dependent and travel with them through to young adulthood and beyond. This reading is among the most important – transforming – undertaken in any reader's life" (Arts Council England, 2003, p. 3).

The idea of authors and young readers as fellow travellers, on different but companionable journeys, is an interesting one. It suggests an element of choice and

direction, of young readers actively engaging in the culture of reading, not merely exposed to literature. However, the statement which arguably brings the best of all the above together comes from Robin Alexander's (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: Final Report and Recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, a substantial document which presents alternative views to the Rose report.

It is, perhaps, no coincidence that Alexander's statement occurs in a chapter which itself forms a rationale, entitled 'What is primary education for?'. Before attempting an answer to this vast question, Alexander defines the terms he will use. Of the word 'aim' he writes, "An *aim* we take to be a broad statement of purpose, a road to travel rather than the terminal point represented by those *objectives* which translate aims into specific actions (Alexander, 2010, p. 195). One of the 12 aims he lists is 'Exciting the imagination'. Children's imaginations need to be excited, he writes, in order that children can:

"advance beyond present understanding, extend the boundaries of their lives, contemplate worlds possible as well as actual, understand cause and consequence, develop the capacity for empathy, and reflect on and regulate their behaviour ... [W]e assert the need to emphasise the intrinsic value of exciting children's imagination. To experience the delights – and pains – of imagining, and of entering into the imaginative world of others, is to become a more rounded person" (Alexander, 2010, p. 199).

Although the statement is all-encompassing, it could easily read as a rationale for reading literature. The word 'exciting' is telling, not least because it is here used as a verb, as befits its meaning which is, literally, *setting in motion*. However, the goal of becoming "a more rounded person" would make a good starting point for further debate and discussion, not least if deliberately set alongside the earlier rationales for literature already mentioned, and others.

Having explored briefly how rationales for literature are represented (or neglected) in a selection of policy documentation, I next touch on some of the research conducted during the last 15 years in England into young people as readers to see what purposes, if any, are suggested for their reading of literature. By the time they reach their teenage years, most young people are able to read, so the need for a clear rationale for reading literature is arguably even stronger. However, it features less prominently than one might imagine.

It is not uncommon for reading research to include questionnaires as an important data collection method (Benton, 1995a,b; Clark and Foster, 2005; Hall and Coles, 1999; Hopper, 2005). These questionnaires seldom include questions about young people's reasons for reading, though. Where they do, the type

of questioning and subsequent analysis of data can be limited. Clark and Foster's project – *Children's and Young People's Reading Habits and Preferences: The Who, What, Why, Where and When* – does attend to the question of why young people choose to read. However, respondents are told to tick as many statements as they wish from a fixed number of options to complete the sentence 'I read because ...' rather than being given freedom to articulate their own reasons. The options are: "it is a skill for life; it will help me get a job; it teaches me how other people live and feel; it helps me understand more of the world; it is fun; it helps me find out what I want/need to know; it gives me a break (escapism); I have to; it helps me understand more about myself" (Clark and Foster, 2005, p. 109). How these options were arrived at and the values which underpin them remain unexamined in the report, as does the decision to allow respondents to tick as many as they want rather than just one. Furthermore, the subsequent data analysis is purely statistical with no accompanying explanations. For example, the research finds that:

"the majority read because it is a skill for life and will help them find what they need/want to know. Almost half the pupils also said that reading is fun and that it will help them get a job. Two-fifths of pupils read because it helps them understand the world better and because it teaches them how other people live and feel; a third of pupils read because it is a form of escape. However, a fifth said that they read because they have to" (Clark and Foster, 2005, p. 24).

What we gain, therefore, is *knowledge* about what options young readers have selected rather than deeper *understanding* about *why* young people read.

In the 'Teachers as Readers' project, respondents were offered a slightly different task. They had to rank the following five statements about literature in order of importance: "it develops reading; it develops writing; it widens knowledge; it engages the emotions; it develops the imagination" (Cremin et al., 2008c, p. 40). However, as with Clark and Foster's research, these particular findings are relatively under-explored and hence do not add very much to our understanding of why these teachers read or what they perceive literature to be for. If we *do* want to discover more about rationales for reading, it seems we must look elsewhere. I therefore turn next to theorists who have influenced my own thinking about reading and literature and whose ideas might offer starting points for renewed debate.

Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* (1938/1995) and *The Reader the Text the Poem* (1978/1994) are texts both still often cited today. Her theorising developed during many years' teaching in universities in the United States. There are several potentially crucial pedagogical implications of her ideas. Some of

these implications stem from her identification of two particular ways of reading with two distinct ends: the *efferent* and the *aesthetic*. Efferent reading is reading which aims to glean knowledge to carry away from the text (e.g. knowledge about Victorian London from reading one of Charles Dickens' novels). Aesthetic reading focuses on the reader's affective, lived experience of a text. Rosenblatt's argument is that whether an efferent or aesthetic reading occurs – or a mixture of both – depends on the stance adopted by the reader. Rosenblatt's notion of the imagined work which is created as a result of the interaction between text and reader but which is not the same as either of them, emphasises the distinctiveness of each person's reading and, likewise, throws into question the hegemony of the *text*, lending support instead to the notion of authorised *readings*. Nevertheless, these readings are still dependent upon the text, usually with attendant awareness of the text's author and literary/historical contexts. Text and author therefore exert some force on the reading process but neither is the ultimate arbiter of any 'correct' reading. Nor is that what reading is for. Rosenblatt suggests, very importantly, that the reading created in the transaction between the reader and the text be seen as an event in time, susceptible to revision in the light of other such 'events', which jostle with it, whether constructed by different readers or by the same reader rereading the same text at a different time. However, these events have some purpose:

"The reader, reflecting on the world of the poem or play or novel as he conceived it and on his own responses to that world, can achieve a certain self-awareness, a certain perspective on his own preoccupations, his own system of values" (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994, p. 146).

This notion of the reading process as both dynamic and reflexive is a key point of connection between Rosenblatt's ideas and Wolfgang Iser's. While Iser's work is situated within a largely philosophical tradition of literary theory, his ideas have been influential in education because they offer theoretical justification for the kinds of practice many literature teachers strive to achieve, especially in classrooms where literary study is seen as a democratic entitlement for all students, not merely for those who seek to pursue it voluntarily at the post-compulsory stage. In his preface to *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Iser states what might well stand as a key aim for many literature teachers, namely "to facilitate intersubjective discussion of individual interpretations" (Iser, 1978, p. x). In classrooms where teachers seek to encourage individual students' readings of texts and increase their power as critical readers of literature, such an invitation is welcome. Continuing to outline the rudiments of his theory, Iser summarises how he perceives the relative roles of author, reader and text:

"As the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text and relates the different views and

patterns to one another he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion, too" (Iser, 1978, p. 21).

His argument that readers are motivated and that reading is creative sits comfortably with Alexander's aim mentioned earlier of exciting the imagination.

A further implication of Iser's notion of the realised, or virtual, work accomplished by each reader is that the text therefore cannot be the same as its meaning, a misconception that has often bedevilled literary work in secondary English classrooms, not least where the end has been a public examination and it becomes all too easy to revert, under pressure, to the quest for single meanings and right answers. But two major questions remain, notably what are texts for and what is the motivation required by any reader to set the reading process in motion?

Iser's answer is that textual realisations have a reality which complements lived reality in the world. Referring specifically to the idea of reading a literary text, Iser argues that it offers readers the opportunity to "transcend the limitations of their own real-life situation; it is not a reflection of any given reality, but it is an extension or broadening of their own reality" (Iser, 1978, p. 79). The idea of transcendence is imbued with connotations of higher rather than different values. In *The Redress of Poetry* Seamus Heaney offers a similar but essentially more democratic suggestion about literature, in this case poetry:

"Its projections and inventions should be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated . . . As long as the coordinates of the imagined thing correspond to those of the world that we live in and endure, poetry is fulfilling its counterweighting function" (Heaney, 1995, p. 8).

Despite the difference in values, however, Heaney and Iser share a commitment to the motivating function of literature: its potential for readers to recognise the distinctions and connections between real and imagined worlds.

Another influential thinker in this field is Robert Scholes. His career as researcher and teacher of English in American universities spans more than half a century and, like Louise Rosenblatt, his theories stem from the exigencies of the classroom. In 1985 he published *Textual Power* (Scholes, 1985). In it, he shows the interrelationship of the roles of reader and writer and, crucially, questions what textual study is for. Although he agrees with Iser that "reading and writing are important because we read and write our world as well as our texts, and are read and written by them in turn" (Scholes, 1985, p. xi), and argues that textual activity provides a means to *reflect* on the world, he goes even further, stressing that textual activity is a means by which to *act* within and upon the world. He

arrives at this conclusion via his analysis of what he argues are three essential principles of textual study: reading, interpretation and criticism. Although each has a vital role to play, it is criticism, according to Scholes, which brings the student to maturity because, like writing itself, it is "a way of discovering how to choose, how to take some measure of responsibility for ourselves and for our world" (Scholes, 1985, p. 73). To take a critical stance, furthermore, is neither to pin down world- or word-meanings, nor to fabricate them; rather it is a process of interacting with them. Like Iser and Heaney, Scholes addresses what he believes to be the purpose of textual study. He uses the science fiction of Ursula Le Guin as his example, but might perhaps argue the same for any literature:

"When science fiction really works it does not domesticate the alien but alienates the domestic. It takes us on journeys where we meet the alien and find that he is us. If Le Guin is right, it is only after such a voyage of alienation that we might hope to be reconciled to our own humanity" (Scholes, 1985, p. 128)."

Where Iser suggests reading literature as a way of *transcending* reality and Heaney offers the idea of it serving a *counterweighting* function to reality, Scholes argues that literature offers readers *reconciliation* with that reality. To that end, he is emphatic about the part teaching plays in this development, helping students to learn about the textualised nature of the world and how they can themselves engage with the multiple discourses with which it is woven: as readers and writers, interpreters and critics, in other words as human beings who have textual power.

Scholes is mindful of both teachers and students who, pragmatically, in each other's presence, engage in a process of textual study which is incomplete if it is not both evaluative *and* generative, receptive *and* creative, responsive *and* productive. He is deeply concerned that students should be creative writers as well as creative readers. For Scholes, learning the craft of the writer through writing is as essential to the acquisition of textual power as learning the craft of reading through reading.

His most recent book, *The Crafty Reader*, explores reading as a craft rather than an art, craft being an activity which "connects literature to life" (Scholes, 2001, p. 12). Scholes articulates what he means, characterising the craft of reading as a process which "expects readers to read as different individuals and admits that poems, like other texts, may both please and persuade – that they might be for use and not merely for contemplation" (Scholes, 2001, p. 27). Through discussion of his own readings of a variety of popular cultural texts, Scholes echoes and enacts the intention he professes in all his works, namely:

"to connect the ordinary with the extraordinary: the humble text with the exalted text, the sacred with

the profane, the common reader with the uncommon writer, and the common writer with the uncommon reader" (Scholes, 2001, p. 138).

In the final part of this article, I want to take up the notion of connections between writers and readers, specifically writers and readers of literature, to see what they suggest might be reasons for reading in the first place. Two threads in particular seem to bind them: one is the notion that writing and reading literature, if nothing else, are acts of imagination to explore possible worlds; the other is the notion that writing and reading literature are specifically human activities which have at their heart what it means to be human in all its diversity and commonality.

An often-cited critic, reader, teacher and writer of children's literature is Aidan Chambers. The opening chapter of *Booktalk: Occasional Writing on Literature and Children* (Chambers, 1985) is an address to the 1981 meeting of the International Association of School Librarianship called 'The role of literature in children's lives'. In it, he rehearses ideas with which many will already be familiar, especially about the vital role of narrative in people's lives. Here it is interesting to recall specifically what he has to say about what reading literature is for. At the heart of his argument lies a belief that:

"it is this particular use of language – the literary use that some have called 'storying' – that defines humanity and makes us human. I would say that this particular form of language and our skill in using it empower us in being more what we are, and make it possible for us to conceive of being more than we are" (Chambers, 1985, p. 2).

For Chambers, then, the power which stems from reading literature not only has the potential to enable us to be more than we are, but also to conceive that we might be more than we are. Literature is a means by which to think, not a medium through which we are told what to think. Reading literature is therefore both an aesthetic and an intellectual pursuit. It is indeed *multimodal*, exciting the imagination so that readers recognise *actual* worlds and, simultaneously, create *possible* worlds. As Jerome Bruner so aptly said of narrative, it places readers in the position of 'sub-junctivising reality' (1986, p. 26), of not only reflecting on what *is* or what *was*, but also asking what *might be*.

Novelist and playwright, David Almond, expands on this idea of the relationship between reader and writer in the 'Afterword' to his play, *Wild Girl, Wild Boy*:

"Any good story, no matter how controlled it appears on the page, is not a tame trapped thing. It still has wildness in it, a yearning to break free of its neat lines and numbered pages. And it does break free. It leaps from the page, and moves far beyond the control of the author, as soon as a reader begins to read it" (Almond, 2002, p. 88).

When a story takes the form of a play, the process is particularly striking. Watching rehearsals for *Wild Girl, Wild Boy*, he observes:

"As soon as the lines were spoken, they became something new – at once very like and very unlike the way I'd heard them in my mind. And each time they were re-spoken, they changed again. I saw what happened in silence in a reader's mind happening in a stage-like space before me" (Almond, 2002, p. 89).

Almond's experience as audience for the play he himself has written is a reminder of the recreative potential of *all* literary experiences. Such ideas about reading as an imaginative act, in which the forces exerted by text and writer have the potential to excite corresponding forces in the reader, offer powerful rationales for working with literature in the classroom. The notion of literary reading and writing as specifically human endeavours offers a further rationale. Beverley Naidoo is a writer who insists on this point in every aspect of her work. In her acceptance speech when awarded the Carnegie Medal for *The Other Side of Truth* (Naidoo, 2001), she said:

"In my writing, I have always aimed to reveal the impact of the wider society and its politics on the lives of my young characters ... Literature is a bridge into other worlds. It offers a route into exploring our common humanity" (Naidoo, 2001).

The Other Side of Truth is a novel whose story is triggered by the turmoil of political events in Nigeria in the 1990s. Its central character is Sade, daughter of a courageous Nigerian journalist, who with her young brother is smuggled into the United Kingdom when their mother is shot dead. The novel is dedicated to "all young people who wish to know more", an acknowledgement that much as young readers of literature might enjoy venturing into the realms of the imaginative, equally they want to know about the here and now – the human condition – and, crucially, to journey back and forth between the two.

In my research over the last decade or so, I have spent a great deal of time asking young people in the early years of secondary schooling about their personal reading habits, especially – but by no means exclusively – their reading of literature (Cliff Hodges, 2009). There is not space here to outline the research in great depth, but I will end with a few excerpts from what a group of 12–13-year-old students with whom I have recently been working wrote when mapping their personal reading journeys or said in recorded semi-structured group interviews with me. Their perspectives seem to lend weight to some of the ideas outlined above. While the students diverge widely as readers, interested in an extraordinarily varied range of reading matter, they concur on a number of points, specifically that reading literature excites the imagination and

prompts them to reflect on themselves as human beings as they shuttle back and forth between literature and life.

For example, one girl wrote about some of her favourite genres:

"I mostly read thrillers, sci-fi, horror, fantasy and some true life stories, I love all these books because it distracts me, takes me away to somewhere else and even though you know most of it is never going to happen there is still hope and possibilities. The stories tell me that if I don't feel like I am fitting in then there are others that feel the same way even if they are not all real" (Andie) (All students' names have been changed to ensure anonymity).

She understands the distinction between realism and reality and enjoys the distraction reading enables; however, she simultaneously acknowledges that its attraction is closely bound up with the business of her daily life, offering the chance to "contemplate worlds possible as well as actual" (Alexander, 2010, p. 199) and actively reflect on both. The books she listed as her all-time favourites bear out her eclectic taste with choices ranging from Michelle Magorian's Second World War romance, *A Little Love Song*, to Kevin Brooks' bleak and gritty *The Road of the Dead*. Further evidence of her deep engagement with her reading emerged when she later discussed *The Road of the Dead* in the group interview. She ventured that she often becomes quite emotionally involved in what she reads and in this case even found herself (in her words) 'actually grieving' for the murdered girl, Rachel. Her use of the term 'grieving' suggests quite a complex stance towards Rachel, not merely imagining her predicament but engaging affectively with the way she is represented so as to feel a sense of grief at her death.

Another young reader, Abigail, wrote about how much she enjoyed *Molly Moon's Incredible Book of Hypnotism* by Georgia Byng, the first in a series which is itself about a young girl imagining other worlds:

"I have read all the Molly Moon books. I thought, if I tried hard enough I could hypnotise people too. I also wrote to the author and received my very first (hand written) letter, from an author" (Abigail).

Abigail enjoys exercising her imagination, in this instance exploring what might happen in a world where you could hypnotise people, but also pragmatic enough to write to the author. In a separate comment, she wrote about enjoying Louise Rennison's 'Georgia Nicolson' series: "They are fab. Really can relate to them and have brought me closer to my best friend", further evidence of her ease in moving between the world of her texts and the world of her life and her awareness that, as Scholes has it, "we neither capture nor create the world with our texts, but interact with it" (Scholes, 1985, p. 111). Later, in discussion with me, she

elaborated on the appeal of the Georgia Nicolson series:

"me and my best friend, Denise, we read, we read them at the same time and we sit in tutor rooms laughing at each other's books and we've got a real link through the books" (Abigail).

Like Andie, Abigail enjoys a wide range of types of reading including fantasy. In her interview she said she was reading *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* for the third time, clearly gaining aesthetic pleasure from her reading of Rowling's work.

"I love the way that the author kind of makes up these things that no one else knows about and no one else has any idea how she comes up with them ... You know they're not real and you know they can't happen and it's not possible, because it's, yeah, just fictional, but it's so real the way she writes it and you can just imagine it happening, like behind some wall somewhere or something" (Abigail).

Those last few words are an interesting variation on the idea of transactional reading: the author's text and the reader's imagination working together to create a fantastic reading event but tantalisingly other-worldly, just out of reach "behind some wall somewhere".

In the same group interview, Thomas had this to say about *The Hobbit*, a book that he had really enjoyed:

"I sort of connect to it in a different way because it's completely fantasy, like there's no way it could happen, but you don't have to connect to it in a real way" (Thomas).

Thomas appears to be quite comfortable with the notion that it is possible to enjoy fantasy for intrinsic pleasure without having to justify any links with the actual world. He is widely read and has strong views about what he likes and dislikes, and why. He hated David Almond's *Skellig* because "It didn't have anything meaty in it, didn't have any substance", but enjoyed mystery detective books by writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler which he described as both interesting and exciting. When discussing the current popularity of spy stories, he shrugged off the fact that it might be to do with concerns about terrorism and suchlike. A keen reader of Robert Muchimore books and Charlie Higson's 'Young James Bond' series, he suggested:

"Everyone likes to imagine it – I mean no one likes to say – everyone likes to imagine themselves as a spy" (Thomas).

As well as enjoying different types of fantasy, many young readers – as Beverley Naidoo says – want to know more, and not just about the here and now. Lily wrote that Judith Kerr's *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*

really helped her understand what happened in the Second World War. Michael Morpurgo's *Twist of Gold*, a novel about two children who leave their mother dying during the 19th-century Irish potato famine and undertake a journey across America to find their father, she found to be "amazing. I read it 6 times" (Lily). The commitment involved in rereading a book so many times is interesting: writers like Kerr and Morpurgo certainly offer knowledge for readers to take away from their novels, but the aesthetic process is clearly also an enjoyable aspect of repeated rereading.

Charlie had read *An Ordinary Man: The True Story behind Hotel Rwanda* (Rusesabagina and Zoellner, 2006). He was still, however, trying to make connections between the book and his life's experiences. He was a keen reader of Chris Ryan and Andy McNab's SAS-style fiction, but *Hotel Rwanda* was very different. In the group conversation I had with him, he started by asking me:

"have you see the film Hotel Rwanda? . . . I've read a book on it . . . I read the book before the film and it was just shocking . . . some of the things that happened it was just unbelievable. It's just how, it's that we had peacekeepers over there and we just stood back and watched and we couldn't intervene" (Charlie).

Charlie is an exceptionally keen reader especially of adult literature. He was one of the few members of the group who also said he read the newspaper quite thoroughly. His family got the *Daily Mail* and the *News of the World* on Sundays, and he said, "I always start off on the back page . . . go through about fifteen pages and then I'll turn over to the front again and I'll go sort of inwards like that". He also enjoyed many different sports and with his friend Steve attended the local branch of the Army Cadet Force. Interestingly, his incredulity at the events in *Hotel Rwanda* seemed to stem from reading at the limits of his human understanding. His known world had collided with his reading about an almost impossibly brutal situation, not only beyond his grasp but beyond the scope of United Nations peacekeepers as well. The book was forcing him to readjust and re-evaluate. Despite his penchant for adult literature and fluency with the written word, here it appears his skills were not enough:

"the only film I've seen that was better than the book was Hotel Rwanda. The film was really good, because the book you just sort of, it was quite difficult to understand how hard it must have been but once you see the film you could see all the emotions on people's faces" (Charlie).

Mehmet found Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* powerful in a rather different way. I had said I was interested in the power that

words on the page can have to make people cry or laugh. He extended this point:

"I mean I don't think it's always just a physical reaction. I think it's kind of like – it's gonna sound like a bad thing – a mental scarring for life. Like . . . some books can make you think completely differently about something, like when I read The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time I thought completely differently about people with Asperger's and it made me . . . realise how hard their life is actually. Cos when you're reading a book you, you feel it from their point of view" (Mehmet).

This idea that the effects of reading literature stay with you well beyond the duration of the reading is not uncommon. Although the power of texts to linger is seldom cited as an argument for reading literature, it is often an outcome of doing so, not least where the literature provokes thought about moral, social or spiritual issues. Freya had read Gabrielle Zevin's *Elsewhere*, the story of a young adult girl killed in a road accident narrated from an imagined place 'beyond the grave':

"This was a really good book. It certainly made me wonder. It's almost like this book carried on after I finished it. I thought about it a lot more than any other book" (Freya).

Continuing to mull over a book after you have finished reading provides ideal conditions for another reason for reading: active and critical reflection of the kind advocated by Scholes. Interestingly, both Lily and Abigail, on separate occasions, suggested that they had begun to enjoy interpreting and critically analysing their school reading. The way Abigail put it was:

"Last year, in Year 7, our English teacher, I think she really got me to think about our books differently . . . I've always enjoyed reading, but like I used to just read a book and like the story, but now I kind of read more into it, think about what they're doing and maybe their past or what you think's gonna happen. Yeah, I just see them differently now, I'm looking for things" (Abigail).

Lily made a similar point, describing one such text as having a "second meaning . . . it was kind of like one story and then if you looked deeper into it there was a separate story in it".

These young readers, then, like the many others I have interviewed over the past few years, do not have a homogeneous or fixed position on what reading literature is for. They differ in what they read as well as whether, where and when. What they share, however, is having reasons for reading in the first place, distinctive though those reasons might be, whether to know more, to entertain themselves, to

imagine, feel and reflect. If educators and researchers neglect the reasons for reading – for reading and studying literature in particular, which has been my concern here – an opportunity is missed to build on what is arguably one of the most powerful and important elements in the process.

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