

The Dream I Held in My Hands



Dedicated to the memory of Jane Slowey

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Memories of Books That Inspired Reading

Dedicated To The Memory Of Jane Slowey
1952 - 2017

THE
LETTERPRESS
PROJECT

Jane Slowey: An Appreciation

In October 2017 The Letterpress Project lost one of its founder members and I lost a personal friend of almost 30 years. She died from a disease she fought off once but couldn't keep at bay a second time and she died too young, with, I'm sure she'd have said, far too much left to do and experience.

I first met Jane back in the 1990s when she was an elected Labour Councillor in Birmingham and I worked as an officer for the same authority. When she became the Chair of Community Affairs (could she have had a more appropriate role?), we worked closely together and from that time onwards, wherever Jane went on to work, we would find time to meet, talk and engage in a bit of plotting and planning. We both loved the challenge of a new project and this would be a constant link between us.

What I always admired about Jane was her determination to get things done and her unbreakable belief in the values of social justice and community. Whenever we came up with an idea for a new project or a different way to do something that would further these progressive values, she always followed it through and was untiring in trying to make them happen.

Within the voluntary sector in which she developed her sparkling career, this ability to think laterally and get things done was almost universally recognised and appreciated – you'll find many such tributes to Jane online from her former colleagues and the award of a CBE and two honorary doctoral degrees attest to the respect in which she was held. Almost everyone who spent time with Jane would use a common description of the experience – inspirational.

Our plotting and planning sessions over coffee and cake nearly always dissolved into sharing and comparing the books we'd been reading that had grabbed our imagination. One afternoon I floated the notion of a new community book project to promote the reading of real, physical books that we both loved so much – and she was immediately on board.

Jane brought her enthusiasm and skills to the Letterpress Project and we were all enriched by her contributions. Whilst our loss is grievous, the loss to her family is incalculable and I hope this book, a tribute to Jane's ability to inspire those she met, goes a little way to filling the gap she left behind. We asked people to honour Jane's memory by thinking about which books inspired their imaginations – and as you'll see the response was exceptional.

Terry Potter

Chair, The Letterpress Project

And a word from Jane's family

"We all have great memories of reading with my mum and sometimes she used to ring me up just to tell me how wonderful a book she had just finished was. She loved reading contemporary fiction, particularly by women, and she was also an avid crime reader, particularly PD James and Ian Rankin. In addition to this she read a lot in French and Italian and loved the Inspector Montalbano books. Reading was a massive part of her life and she was great at recommending good books and making astoundingly astute choices of books as presents."

Rachel Slowey

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the contributors who gave their time and effort to this enterprise so freely and creatively. We have taken the decision not to provide biographical backgrounds for the contributors as a deliberate democratic initiative to make no distinction between published or professional writers and those who don't see themselves primarily as writers. Everyone represented here has submitted their piece as their own individual tribute to Jane's memory.

We would also like to acknowledge the work of Neil Gaiman whose beautiful comment - "A book is a dream that you hold in your hands" – provided us with the title for this publication.

We would also like to thank the members of the project management committee who have given advice and support and thanks in particular to Brian Homer who has made a vital contribution to the design and production of this publication.

And special thanks to Gary Bullock for the cover drawing.

About The Letterpress Project

At The Letterpress Project we believe that there is something very special about reading books. Holding them in your hands, turning the pages, catching the smell of paper old and new, marveling at the skills of the illustrator and letting the weight of all those pages settle in your hand or on your lap – it's an invitation to a journey that can take you anywhere.

We think that books are a gateway to ideas and adventures that expand our understanding of the world and ourselves. All reading can do that but nothing does it better than the collation of paper and ink bound between two covers that, when you open it, transforms into a relationship between you and the author.

The Letterpress Project is a not-for-profit initiative. The project's constitution and details of the Management Committee can be found on our website:

www.letterpressproject.co.uk/about/what-we-do

If you wish to contact the Letterpress Project please email:
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Katy Country Mouse To The Rescue

Chis Collett



Although my parents were keen regulars at the local library, there were few other books in the house when I was growing up - apart from the many different versions of The Bible. I have no memory of my parents reading to me as a child either, something my sister has confirmed. However, it wasn't an experience I missed out on. My first memory of being read to was as an essential part of a fortnightly weekend ritual, when, alternating with my older sister, I stayed overnight at the house shared by my (paternal) nana and a maiden aunt, who was an infant school teacher. Sunday morning meant climbing into nana's bed, with its warm and gloriously soft, feather mattress. I would pass her the milk-bottle lensed NHS glasses she wore, and with a

plate of wafer-thin sandwiches, soggy with homemade marmalade, for sustenance, the adventure would begin.

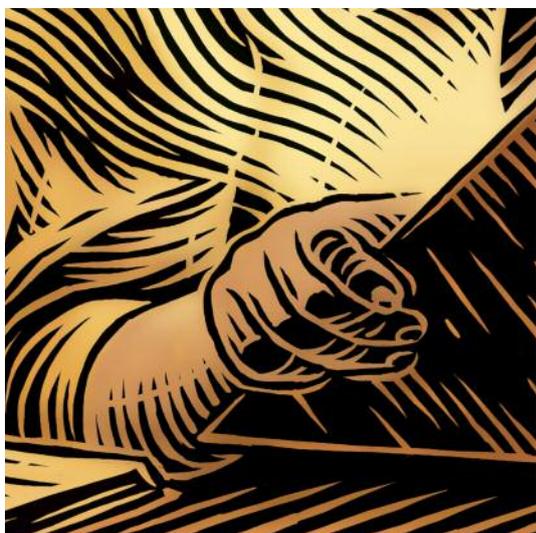
Seminal to the experience was 'Katy Country Mouse to the Rescue', a book in the Ladybird format though part of the Jack and Jill series, which was read countless times. What I was too young to appreciate, but what must have been true, was that nana was a skilled reader of stories. I knew this tale by heart, but can still almost feel the frisson of tension and anticipation that came with the turning of each page, when a new and dangerous threat confronted our heroine on her mission; the fox, the owl, a stream, the 'high peaks' of a furrowed field. It's perhaps no coincidence that from the point at which I became a serious reader (and later a writer), my preferred genre has always been thriller and suspense. 'Katy Country Mouse to the Rescue' was also ahead of its time (this was the early 1960s) with a female protagonist who is something of an adventurer and who balks at nothing. In the rescue party itself females outnumber males three to two and while the males have their uses - a frog who can swim and a mole who can dig - it is Katie who has all the inspired ideas and drives the action.

The illustrations, unattributed in the book, are detailed and accurate, from the barn owl that swoops chillingly down on the tiny rodents, to the blue roan spaniel guarding the farm. Less realistic are the main characters' Edwardian dress and the fact that Montague Mole digs them out of one tight spot - with a shovel.

All this reading pleasure sadly came to an end when I decided to push my luck and insist that it was my turn for the sleepover, on a week when I'm guessing everyone else knew full well that it was my sister's turn. I threw such a tantrum that my mum took the opportunity to end the sleepover routine altogether; something I suspect she'd wanted to do for a while. But Katie Country Mouse found its way to me and has stayed on my bookshelf ever since.

The Books That Inspired Me To Read

Mark Cronin



My earliest memories of books involve sitting with my classmates on a carpet in primary school being read to by my teachers. This was always a magical time where we were whisked off to incredible places by stories involving giant peaches, golden tickets, flying monkeys and wizards. These words and the enthusiasm with which they were given to me fed my imagination and I always eagerly anticipated our next story time.

The first book I remember reading at Junior School was 'My Bodyguard' by Joe Claro a story which centred around a young boy who was protected by a troubled loner from the school bully. I don't think this book made me an avid reader but it did teach me

that books can and do deal with real social issues. Most of the subsequent books I read as a teenager were connected to school work but I was lucky to have a progressive English teacher who was keen to present us with a wide range of literature. I remember being gripped by the intrigue of 'Sizwe Bansi is Dead' by Athol Fugard a story of greed and poverty on a small island and the promise of a better life with the discovery of a giant pearl.

The classic 'Of Mice and Men' by John Steinbeck and the relationship between Lenny and George was a compelling story of friendship and tragedy. 'My Mate Shofiq' by Jan Needle felt relevant to my experience of growing up in Birmingham going to an inner city comprehensive with friends whose families came from all over the world. However, it was my encounter with 'The Island' by Aldous Huxley which was the first time that I actively sought out more books of his to read and turned me into an avid reader. I'll never forget the first few pages which swept me off to an exotic location and the subsequent story full of philosophical and political discourse which posed important questions in my mind.

The second Huxley book I read 'Brave New World' was equally compelling and it was at this point that I fully appreciated how books could consume your full attention and time seemed to stand still. From this point on I have sought out books which replicate this feeling (not always successfully) which make me think and feed my imagination. There is little doubt that for me books and stories hold a special place in my heart and mind, an opportunity to escape, explore and grow.

Book Memories

Barbara Argent



Books did not impinge upon my life in very early childhood. I have no recollection of being read bedtime stories – my mother was not herself a reader. My father on the other hand seemed to spend all his spare time reading, but always heavy tomes. I think they were about philosophy and religion and needed to be propped up on a brown metal bookstand which lived beside his armchair. As we lived in a small village, no libraries were available, and certainly no bookshops in the 1930s. No magical moment of inspiration occurred in the village school, my only memories of learning to read and write being of parallel lines between which words had to be carefully fitted. It was a technical exercise.

Everything changed when we moved to Norwich and my infant teacher began to introduce Story Time in the afternoon. I was always the first to sit to sit cross legged at her feet every day. The awakening moment occurred during a story about a Magic Tree on which you had to knock three times to open a door into Wonderland. No memories of Wonderland have remained – only the delicious anticipation of approaching the tree and doing the knocking, which we did every day during story time.

From then on reading became very important and I spent many long hours at home sitting in my little blue and gold wicker chair in the sitting room balancing large books on my knees. It occurs to me now that my father always bought large books for my sister and me, perhaps to reflect his own preferences for these? Or perhaps it was how children's literature was presented in those days – huge anthologies containing an exciting mixture of stories, fact and fiction, pictures and poetry that made every turn of the page a new adventure. 'The Mammoth Wonder Book', the 'Big Christmas Wonder Book' and 'Animal Life of the World' come to mind – maybe they were annuals, but they sure did keep me happily occupied for many hours. I did not have any comics myself as they were probably frowned upon, but I do remember enjoying Film Fun with my friends, and waiting for my father to finish the Daily Express so that I could pounce on the 'Adventures of Rupert Bear'.

Later on we moved to London where I had easy access to the library and I can remember looking for the Jalna books, Baroness Orkzy and 'The Scarlet Pimpernel' and especially the Just William books which were so exciting that they had to be read while I was walking home bumping into things. I also enjoyed books about animals, informative ones with different species inhabiting places I had never heard of and all the weird and wonderful creatures to be found at the bottom of the sea. Another reading memory of this period is of summer holidays with my friend Meg at her aunt's house in Kent, where we had access to her uncle's collection of Punch volumes. We spent hours under the trees munching apples, where we tried, sometimes successfully to work out the humour in the very entertaining cartoon type drawings and captions contained therein.

Illustrations were memorable, Arthur Rackham, Tenniel and others are easily recalled to mind even after seventy/ eighty years.

Memories of Galldora

Karen Argent



Those of you that like browsing charity shops will recognise how variable this experience can be when looking for children's books. Just the way that they are often poorly organised can send me into a rant. Who on earth thinks that it is a good idea to stuff them all into a box for instance? And sometimes they are placed on an inaccessible shelf jammed in with sundry stuffed toys. But many shops, like Oxfam Books in Chipping Norton, display them very well and give them the space and care that they deserve with plenty of covers facing out to entice people like me. It is quite unusual to find something lovely that I haven't already got so just imagine my squeak of pleasure when I spotted one that took me with a swoop back to my childhood.

'The Adventures of Galldora' by Modwena Sedgwick is a collection of little stories about a much loved rag doll based on a Children's Hour series first broadcast in 1953. I had briefly enjoyed the book when I was five years old but after well over fifty years of forgetfulness, it was like recognising a dear old friend. The cover was immediately familiar to me but it was the black and white illustrations inside that really reminded me of happy times spent poring over the book and the short stories within it. I think that I must have been given the book as a present or perhaps I had it at school? Most of my books were borrowed from the library but this one made such an impression that I must have kept renewing it if it didn't belong to me. I think that I must have had the stories read aloud to me by one of my parents or possibly a teacher as I was rather young to read them by myself. On the other hand, I have no memory of learning to read so perhaps I was relatively advanced for my age?

The premise of using the perspective of a lost toy is tried and tested territory for children's books. Marybell, the careless little girl who owns Galldora is constantly placing her in precarious situations and then losing her. So for instance, she takes her dolls and teddies out for a trip in a pram and then abandons it in a river while she goes home to fetch soap and a scrubbing brush. She becomes distracted and forgets all about the pram until much later, by which time it has tipped over and Galldora has been washed downstream. Amongst her many exciting adventures she survives being used as a nest for a robin's eggs, a scarecrow and being dragged down to the bottom of the river by fishes. In one story she even has the opportunity to act opposite Mr Punch as an understudy for Judy in the puppet show and is a resounding success when she hits him with a big stick.

What makes Galldora such a memorable character is that she is a rag doll embodiment of Pollyanna with her relentless optimism, generosity of spirit and philosophical take on the world. Since I also remember enjoying the film of Pollyanna at about the same age, I think that this might be the key to its appeal. I was a bit of a goody goody child who loved to please and, like most five year olds, also had a strong sense of justice. I wasn't a brave child who liked to do anything risky and was impressed with how Galldora managed to escape from several unpleasant situations by

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remaining calm and patient as she waited for the inevitable rescue by adults. She regards her predicaments as being educational and takes an interest in the strange and often peculiar creatures that she encounters, in a rather Alice like way. No matter how wet, dishevelled and dirty she becomes as a result of the adventures, she is always cleaned up and made as good as new in the comfort of her home.

I really enjoyed rereading this little book because I don't think that my adult self is terribly different from my five year old self. My favourite story then and now is the one where she sits on the windowsill in the nursery worrying about what she can give the other toys as a present to celebrate her birthday the following morning. By chance, the window blows open and enough snow comes in to allow Marybell to make an individual snowball for all the toys, who are all thrilled to bits and congratulate Galldora as they assume that she has made the snow available deliberately because she is so kind and clever. I still worry all the time about everything and anything and, like Galldora love returning to my cosy home from my adventures. Actually, as I get older I prefer things that happen on familiar territory rather than out in the big bad unpredictable world.

Reading Memories

Evelyn Arizpe



I was very fortunate in that I grew up in a Mexican family with a love of books and reading and in which Irish and Scottish ancestry had embedded a tradition of speaking (and teaching) English. I was born in the mid-1960s and in my early childhood lived in Mexico City, in the same building as my maternal grandparents. This proximity meant that when my mother was busy, either Grandma or Grandpa would read or tell bedtime stories to my younger brother and myself. As well as singing nursery rhymes and lullabies, my grandmother, a primary school teacher, often told me traditional Mexican tales but she would also make up stories about fairies and good little children. My grandfather would also make up stories, mostly funny ones and ones

about adventures and treasure, but as we grew up, he began to read to us in English from his favourite books, classics like 'Tom Sawyer', 'The Count of Montecristo' and 'Ivanhoe'. I loved these moments, when his attention was completely devoted to us and we laughed and talked. As I recall, there was never a sense of having to rush through a story and there always seemed to be time for one more.

At the time, there was an American bookstore in the city from which my parents bought me my

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favourite books: large hardback illustrated children's story books, mostly published in the US by Golden Books but also by Disney. There were also some illustrated books published in the UK by Odhams, including one with poems for children. My brother claimed for his own the books with the bright, busy illustrations of Richard Scarry; he also claimed the Dr Seuss books, for which I was glad because I did not like either the stories or the illustrations. Nearly all the children's books we had were in English with the exception of a famous series of classics, "within reach of children", published by Araluce in Spain. These were small books containing abridged versions of Aesop's Fables, tales from Homer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Scott and many others, with only a few illustrations, which fascinated and terrified me. Many years later, when I was studying Latin American literature at university, memories of my childhood books sparked the question that led me to study children's literature because I wondered where all the children's books in Spanish had been when I was little (but that is another story).

My mother's sister lived with my grandparents and she also often read to me or we coloured in the pages of non-fiction 'activity books' that also had spaces for stickers. She was at the university studying art history and I would watch her read and underline her books; my 'Golden Picture Dictionary' ended up with a lot of underlining as well! My father did not read to us, but he did buy us our own record player and my brother and I repeatedly listened to English recordings of nursery rhymes, songs and fairy tales, often following the story in the little books that came with the 45' records ("Listen to the story, look at the pictures and read the words" they instructed). We listened to them so often that I can still repeat every word of some of those stories. Later, when I had my own children who grew up in the UK at the turn of the 21st century, surrounded not only by a huge amount of books but also CDs, videos and television programmes -and this was before internet days- this memory made me wonder about the benefits of having fewer books (and other texts) because we got to know them so well they were almost part of the family, as opposed to my daughters who as young adults remember only a few of their own early childhood books.

I learned to read before going to kindergarten. My grandmother taught me using the American primer series 'Dick and Jane' and although I now see how limited and monocultural they were, I enjoyed them and found them interesting (perhaps because they were about a life that was so different to mine). From then on, I've never stopped reading and I have no doubt that my life and career were shaped by the generosity and love involved in all those hours of shared stories, words and pictures.

White Hawk

Valerie Jenner



It's hard to say what comes first – a disposition of the soul or an influence from the world. I have an early memory of sitting with my father, mother and brother after a trip to the public library on a Saturday afternoon. We each had a book although I could not read yet, but I was “pretending” to, copying what my family did.

I spent a lot of time with stories and pretending, playing being other people; so no surprise really that I became an actress and communicator. I first read ‘White Hawk’ by Kathleen M Gadd sometime between age seven and nine because I remember acting out scenes and extended stories about its characters in the south London council flat we moved to when I was seven. I still have the book – so it must

have been precious to me to travel alongside me for sixty years!

I see now that it was part of an ‘Active Reader’ series for “boys and girls who find no incentive to effort in the conventional ‘literary’ reader”. I can’t say I ever really needed an incentive but it was a story of “Red Indians”, politically questionable now in its nomenclature, but full of everyday life so different from my own in the fourth floor flat of a working-class family. It was full of the outdoors, nature and communal living that my family hadn’t been part of in generations.

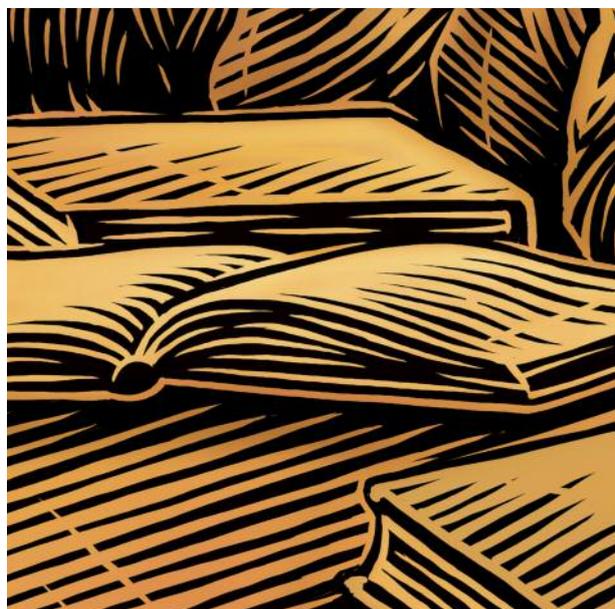
These characters were fully human and spiritual: “Lone Elk went deep into the woods. He pushed his way through the thickets and crept through the tangled undergrowth. Then he curled up in a clump of bushes, and prayed to the wood spirits that they would show him what animal was to be his medicine. He fell asleep and dreamed he saw an otter beside a river.”

It was I suppose more directed towards boys – full of male characters “doing”: hunting, fighting, making things, choosing wives! The females were all in their teepees although I liked the sound of their embroidered dresses – I’ve always liked a good frock. I just played at being a brave and loved the completeness of the lifestyle. I have never since believed in the savage enemies of all those cowboy films and never in the heroism of the cowboys.

And I think those books that helped me live other lives in my imagination, lives connected to nature and wider than gender stereotypes, are still needed, even more so. Books that reveal the truth that we all share a common humanity and we all live on precious land still.

Wrath of Ages

Brian Homer



I'm not sure I can put my finger on what exactly got me reading and inspired me. For me reading is important and has always had a strong association with feeling that wrongs need to be righted and a better society created.

I come from a “respectable” working class background and my family “knew their place” and never wanted to be confrontational. They were so worried about what people might think that, for example, one aunt would say “never move your furniture in daylight – you don’t want people seeing what you’ve got.” Mind you she turned out to be the bravest of the lot when she faced cancer in later life.

My family were not at all radical – we did have newspapers at home but they were the Express, the Sunday People and the Sunday Express. But we also took the Reader’s Digest and Increase Your Word Power was an important part of my teenage years. And there were books and reading - Mom in particular usually had one on the go – nothing too high brow though and lots of classics like Dickens.

It was my Dad’s sister’s husband Harold who probably had a hand in widening my newspaper reading – he was a lifelong socialist and inveterate Guardian reader from its Manchester Guardian days. So, in my secondary education days I started reading it too.

And it was in those days that my book reading widened too. I was the first in my part of the family to pass the 11 Plus and to go on to Higher Education, I ended up at a grammar school with no idea what to expect and because of my parent’s own lack of experience of it I was on my own.

I wasn’t academically a high flyer, sporty or not very bright – you had to be one of those things to get attention. I was seriously average and struggled in English with writing until an English teacher suggested I write about things I was interested in rather than stories. That was a revelation – I could write about hovercraft and cars.

This must have contributed to my shock success in the winning the Fifth Form English prize much to the astonishment of the Headmaster. When I went in to see him to tell him what books I had chosen for the prize he could not contain a patronising tone when I said I wanted the two (weighty) volumes of the history of Birmingham by Conrad Gill and Asa Briggs. “How on earth did you know about that?” He could not conceive that such an ordinary boy as me could go to Hudson’s Bookshop and do some research. More fool him.

Things looked up in the Sixth Form where, in retrospect, one of the most important influences was the teacher who ran the General Studies course. General Studies sounds dull but its loss has weakened well-rounded education particularly when led by someone as erudite as our teacher. He piqued our interest in all sorts of issues and reading.

I’m pretty sure it’s during this period that I first read Steinbeck probably the ‘Grapes of Wrath’. I

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read most of them but it was ‘Grapes of Wrath’ that stuck with me with the grim tale of whole families having to migrate across the US from the Dust Bowl to California to look for work and some kind of security. I acquired a sense of the injustices of the world and a hope that they could be eradicated.

Other books followed: such as ‘The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists’ and ‘Catch 22’ as well as a developing interest in oral history with books broadcasting the voices of ordinary people – like the series of books out of a community project in Hackney. And I got a copy of Studs Terkel’s seminal book ‘Working’ before it was published in the UK.

I got involved in the radical folk scene around the Grey Cock Folk Club in Birmingham and had contact with Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger’s Singers Club in London and later the Critic’s Group (which included Michael Rosen) who influenced the birth of Birmingham’s own Banner Theatre. Charles Parker had produced the Radio Ballads with MacColl and Seeger which were based on oral history recordings and he was one of the founders of Banner. With the late Don Perrygrove, I interviewed Yorkshire miners and Arthur Scargill in Barnsley for Banner’s first production Collier Laddie.

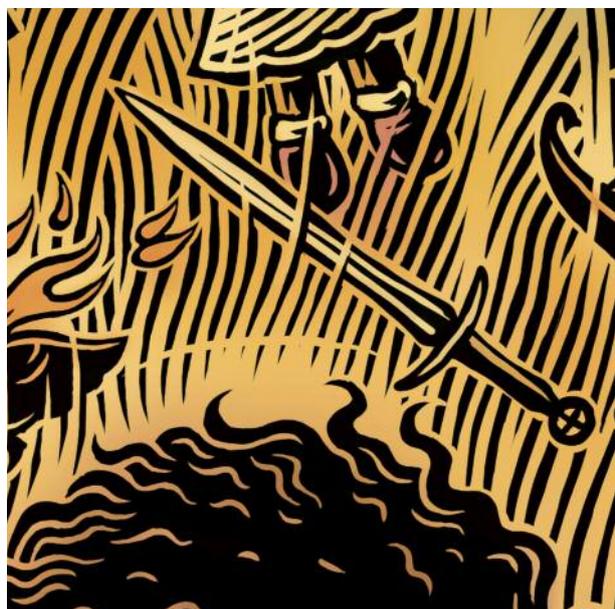
Without books and reading I doubt I would have had or taken these opportunities or other that I later got involved in. And as they say reading is for life so I’m still reading. Over Christmas 2018 I read Peter Carey’s latest novel, ‘A Long Way From Home’ which in a kind of way takes me full circle. It starts out being about a car trial around Australia in the 1950s but along the way becomes a book about Australia itself, the effect of Colonialism on the indigenous Aborigines and their relationship to the Colonial conquerors.

And in the current political situation here in the UK and abroad reading is not just about looking backwards to earlier times, it also gives the background and tools to analyse some of the reasons we are where we are.

Reading has given me information and inspiration and it seems more important than ever that education should include not just meeting arbitrary targets but also give everyone the opportunity to learn in depth about the world and society and the people we live and work with.

How I Became A Nerd

Steve Dixon



I must have been about fourteen when I realised. I still remember the day – a dark, dank Sunday afternoon during the winter, where I could find nothing to do and television was strictly off-limits. I'd picked up a Mastermind quiz book, and inside were lists of questions from previous contestants' specialist subjects. Idling through it, I stumbled upon a list of questions I actually thought I could answer. Sure enough, I got every single one right. I knew the name of Gandalf's sword (Glamdring), the type of trees that grew in Lothlorien (Mallorn), and the name given to Aragorn by Eomer (Wingfoot). There was no escaping it – I had become a Tolkien nerd.

I'd been first introduced to Tolkien by a wonderful primary school teacher called Mr Beeley, who was probably also a fellow nerd. He'd already brought his dog into school, and yes, he'd named him Bilbo. Mr Beeley read 'The Hobbit' aloud to the entire (mostly rapt) class. I was captivated, and re-read the book at home, noticing with interest the passages that Mr Beeley had cannily left out. But it was not enough. I needed more.

I asked for 'The Lord of the Rings' for Christmas, and was probably about ten when I read it for the first time. Undoubtedly, I didn't understand everything I was reading, and seem to remember getting confused between Saruman and Sauron, but I was completely hooked on Tolkien's fantasy world. Yes, some bits were complicated, and others downright silly, but basically this was a world of good versus evil, one where the (literally) little guy triumphed, and one which I could escape into from a deeply unhappy and unstable childhood. So I re-read it. And then I read it again.

I devoured everything by and about Tolkien from this point. I re-read 'The Hobbit' and followed it immediately by re-reading 'The Lord of the Rings'. I forced myself through 'The Silmarillion', marvelling at how, in this intricate history, the whole plot to 'The Lord of the Rings' could be summarised in just over a page. 'Leaf by Niggle', 'Smith of Wootton Major', 'The Adventures of Tom Bombadil', 'Farmer Giles of Ham', even 'Unfinished Tales' (compiled by Tolkien's son, Christopher): all were satisfying, but left me strangely unsated. I always came back to 'The Lord of the Rings'.

I'm not sure how many times I read it during my teenage years – probably at least twenty. I would always read the introduction and all of the appendices. I remember at least one time reading the whole book in two or three days – and then immediately starting it all over again. I was never put off by its length - indeed, I would agree with Tolkien in that the book is too short. Nor was I deterred by Tolkien's gradual change in style, from the frivolity of the first few chapters to the florid and archaic approach by 'The Return of the King' that borders on a verbose pomposity. What I remember is a feeling of sadness each time I finished it, an emptiness and loss and sense of "leaving" something. There was a permanence here that my real world sadly lacked. I probably knew most of the characters better than I knew my friends.

I haven't read it now in a long time. Perhaps I haven't needed to. I still have my original, rather battered three volume copy published by Allen and Unwin that I occasionally fondly glance at. It's over forty years old now. I will certainly introduce it to my daughter, when she wants to read it, although it saddens me that, like many of her generation, her imagination may be sullied by Peter Jackson's cinematic feast. But I'll buy her a new copy. I will always keep those three volumes in that cardboard cover, all held together by several decades of tape. It's there on the shelf, should I ever need it again.

Plupp Builds A House

Gill McGillivray



What joy looking back at my favourite childhood books! Like most children, I enjoyed books with beautiful illustrations such as the Blackie edition dated 1961 of 'Grimms Fairy Tales' re-told by Williams Ellis, books that appealed to my four year old self's sense of fantasy and magic by Enid Blyton (a sign of the time), and books which simply told an engaging story such as the 1961 edition of Aesop's and La Fontaine's Fables re-told by Goulden.

I chose 'Plupp Builds A House' to write about here as, in my view, it combines all these. I'm not sure I could say this or any other book had a transformative or inspirational impact on me as a child. Appreciating books and the pleasure

of reading felt more a gradual process as I progressed from picture books to classic novels such as Lorna Doone. Books were a constant presence in my childhood, often being birthday and Christmas gifts from parents, aunts and godparents. I know I was fortunate to have a family who appreciated the pleasure of reading, notwithstanding that my mother and her sister were both primary school teachers. I'm grateful to them all for encouraging me to be a reader.

That I still have the rather dog-eared and loved copy of 'Plupp Builds A House' bought for me by my aunt on my fourth Christmas is testimony to its favoured status. Its Swedish author and illustrator, Inga Borg died in 2017 aged 92. Her oeuvre of children's stories about indigenous animals of Scandinavia as well as several titular tales about Plupp, a little elf, were published in Swedish but a few were translated into English and French. As I'm writing this, I'm minded of a children's TV series of the 1960s called Tales from Europe, which I adored for its sense of 'otherness', fantasy and magic; it seems being transported to exotic lands was a significant attraction to me (and maybe explains my love of travel as an adult!)

'Plupp Builds A House' tells the story of Plupp and his friends who lived in the mountains in Lapland. I had no concept of where Lapland was but I was transported to a far- away place of

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strange, unfamiliar creatures, icy weather, mountains and no humans. Foreign travel was beyond our family's means when I was a child; travel meant a trip to Cornwall or Morecambe in the summer holidays.

Plupp was sad as he didn't have a home of his own. He visited his friends in their homes – an ermine, a lemming, a fox, a beaver, and they all got together to build a house out of wooden branches, moss, rock and turf for Plupp to live in. The animals continued their adventures through the seasons, returning home in time to hunker down together for the winter in Plupp's warm and cosy new house. It told a simple story of friendship, helping one another and shared experiences, thus conveying ideas that four year olds can understand. The illustrations are colourful and yet capture the icy, rather bleak landscape of the far North.

I must have had the story read to me initially at age four, probably by my mother, but I have clearer memories of reading it and my other favourite books alone. I think I had quite a solitary childhood being an only child until aged ten. My mother worked so I was often left to my own devices but it also brought freedom to play indoors and out, and to occupy myself, a facet of childhood probably experienced by many children of the 1960s. I would never consider myself a bookworm as a child - I was not to be found reading under the bedclothes with a torch or sitting under a tree glued to a book. As an only child for most of my childhood, I had no siblings to borrow, deface or lose my treasured books. I still have several of the books gifted to me by family with inscriptions to remind me of how old I was, who it was from and the occasion for which it was bought. These experiences are likely to have founded my lifelong love of reading which I have endeavoured to pass on to my children. I look forward to choosing books for grandchildren in the future; browsing bookshops is always a treat. I still appreciate the experience of picking up a traditionally bound, hard-back book, anticipating being transported to new places and times in history or the future, meeting strangers, making friends, being challenged in how I see the world. This is how I interpret what Neil Gaiman meant by 'a book is a dream that you hold in your hands'.

Great Expectations

Brian Carr



“Pause you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day.”

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (Chapter IX)

The book that made me a reader first arrived in my awareness not - as you might expect - in the form of pages, but in the form of a television mini-series. It kept me fixed in front of a flickering TV screen in the evenings of October 1981, as summer darkened into autumn. The series was the BBC adaptation of ‘Great Expectations’, and I was eight years old.

I didn’t fully understand every twist and turn as I watched the drama unfold, but I was captivated by Stratford Johns as the convict Magwitch, looming out of the graveyard mist; and by Joan Hickson’s eerie portrayal of Miss Havisham, the jilted bride living among cobwebs and shadows. The scene in which her wedding dress catches fire and sends her careening across the room in flames haunted my dreams for years to come (in fact, it still does).

The television adaptation was, however, merely a portal into a broader, deeper experience. I read an abridged version of the book soon after – one of those ‘classics illustrated’ editions for children – and not long after that, the full Charles Dickens work. It wasn’t the first novel I ever read, but it’s the first one I remember so vividly engaging me on visceral, emotional, and intellectual levels. I later re-read it at university and closely studied the means by which Dickens achieved his effects, but those first simple encounters with Pip and his friends (and enemies) are the ones I remember most fondly.

Therein lies the explanation for my love of the book, perhaps. Those friends and enemies never fall into neat categories. Magwitch is terrifying, but kind; Estella, haughty but abused; Miss Havisham, a pitiful monster; even our hero Pip, though undoubtedly good-hearted, is at times seduced by status and pride, before life – both metaphorically and literally – knocks some humility into him. There is a happy ending, of sorts, but the Pip and Estella who walk together from the garden of Satis House at the end of the last chapter are permanently damaged souls.

In other words, the characters are human - a complicated mix of virtue and vice, success and failure, dreams and disappointment - and so the novel taught me something about life. It also spoke deeply to me of the kind of life I wanted to lead. I thrilled to Pip’s realisation of the value of kindness and inner worth over the prevailing status symbols of social class and wealth, and of the importance of extending that kindness to those in need of help. As I read, I repeatedly found myself wondering at how some of the characters in the story seemed to have their priorities entirely back-to-front.

It’s something I still wonder at today - usually about real people as I watch the news. However, I take at least some comfort in the knowledge that I have the daily opportunity, in my role as Chief

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Executive of Birmingham Voluntary Service Council, to make a small contribution towards upholding the values Dickens cared about so deeply, and wrote about with such conviction. BVSC is an organisation that supports local community groups, volunteers, and people-centred organisations as they work to build a more just and equitable society. In recent years, we have established several acclaimed social action programmes which work to support unemployed young people, isolated older people, and adults who are dealing with multiple complex needs, including homelessness, substance misuse, risk of criminality, and mental ill-health.

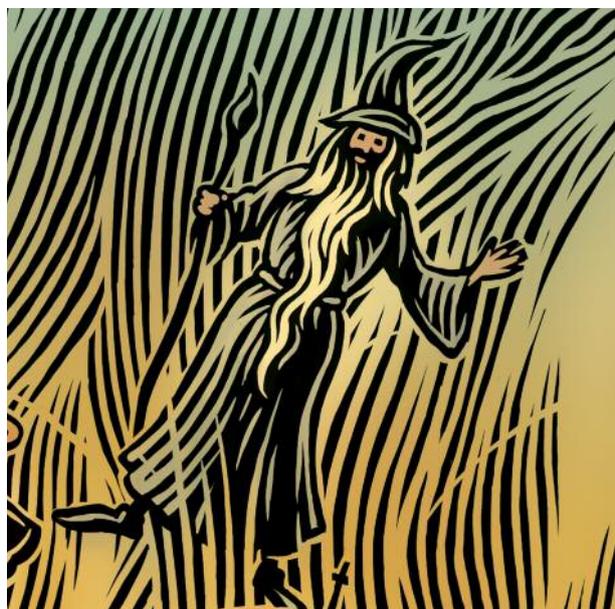
I have been Chief Executive of BVSC since 2005, having been appointed to the position following a period of ‘acting up’ when my predecessor left. That predecessor was Jane Slowey – the subject to whom this collection is dedicated – and it is she who invited me to cover the role when she left to take up her new position at the Foyer Federation. She encouraged me to go for the permanent position, too. She mentored me and pushed me, encouraged me and challenged me, and she modelled the type of inspirational, generous leadership I continue to aspire to today. I learned my most valuable leadership lessons from her – mainly about seeing the biggest possible picture whilst remembering what it’s really all about: the welfare and improved prospects of the people we’re here to serve.

So, like Pip, I know what it feels like to have a benefactor, and to appreciate that nothing we achieve is ever achieved alone. The friends we make along the way perhaps mean more than any of us can ever know.

Great Expectations has continued to be one of those friends, as have Dickens’ other novels, and many more books and authors besides. Last month, on a trip to London to see a show, my partner and I took a detour to the Charles Dickens Museum, which is situated in Doughty Street, in a house in which Dickens lived for several years. As I entered one of the rooms, I found myself standing before the very desk where Dickens wrote ‘Great Expectations’. I was taken rather by surprise at the strength of my emotional reaction to the sight – a catch of the breath, a lump in the throat – but really, I shouldn’t have been. Great Expectations was always more than just a book to me. It was the beginning of a journey of consciousness which continues to inform my life and my work to this day.

Growing Up With Clayhanger

Jonathan Taylor



As a child and young teen, reading for me was primarily an escape route. It represented a joyful escape from Stoke-on-Trent, my derelict hometown, and from what I perceived to be the mundanity of life with ageing parents, one of whom – my father – was starting to behave in strange and unexplained ways. He'd retired when I was ten from his job as headmaster of a Stoke high school, with a terrible nervous breakdown; and thereafter, he seemed to age before my eyes. His driving got slower and slower; his hair went white; he pottered about the house, spending more and more time in front of the T.V.; and he started forgetting things, losing his temper at the drop of a hat. I had no idea what was wrong – and for many years, nor did my parents.

So I used J. R. R. Tolkien, Isaac Asimov, Brian Aldiss, C. S. Lewis, et al, as a means of escape from Stoke and my rather enclosed life at home and school. And then, at seventeen, I came across the novel 'Clayhanger' (1910), by Potteries author Arnold Bennett.

We'd been set the task, at the start of sixth-form college, of researching and writing an essay about any aspect of Stoke's history or culture. No-one thought of doing literature, but I'd heard of Bennett through my parents – and also through a local saying, which they often quoted, and which had haunted them, I think, since moving to the area eighteen years before: "Nobody ever comes to Stoke. Nobody ever leaves Stoke, except Arnold Bennett, and even he had to write about it." So I set myself the task of reading as many Bennett novels as I could. As an s.f. and fantasy fan, who hadn't read many "classics," I thought I'd hate them.

By this time – 1990ish – my father was visibly ill, and he'd started taking out a lot of his bad tempers on me, in particular. I didn't know what was wrong, but knew something was, and that it was something to do with his brain. Then, reading one morning in the deserted college common room, I stumbled across a passage in Bennett's 'Clayhanger' about parental illness – a passage in which the main character, Edwin, realises that his father, Darius, is very ill:

Edwin ... half shouted: "Better not sit there. It's chilly. Come into the dining-room a bit. Come on."

Darius held out a hand, with a gesture inexpressibly sad; and Edwin, almost before he realised what he was doing, took it and assisted his father to his feet and helped him to the twilight dining-room, where Darius fell into a chair. Some bread and cheese had been laid for him on a napkin, and there was a gleam of red in the grate. Edwin turned up the gas, and Darius blinked. His coarse cheeks were all wet.

"Better have your overcoat off, hadn't you?"

Darius shook his head.

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“Well, will you eat something?”

Darius shook his head again; then hid his face and violently sobbed.

At seventeen, I instantly recognised the role reversal in this passage – of a once-dominant father-figure reduced to reliance on a son – down to the detail of assisting a weakened father by hand to a chair.

Further on, I read about Darius’s diagnosis, and the way in which his son Edwin is the last to hear what is wrong:

Big James wagged his head and his grandiose beard, now more grey than black, and he fingered his apron.

“I believe in herbs myself,” said Big James. “But this here softening of the brain – well –”

That was it! Softening of the brain! What the doctor had not told him he had learned from Big James. How it happened that Big James was in a position to tell him he could not comprehend. But he was ready now to believe that the whole town had acquired by magic the information which fate or original stupidity had kept from him alone ... Softening of the brain!

“Perhaps I’m making too bold, sir,” Big James went on. “Perhaps it’s not so bad as that. But I did hear –”

Edwin nodded confirmingly.

I read this passage when I was still a few months away from finding out what was really wrong with my father, finding a name for it – at a time when I too felt like the very last person to know. I recognised many of Darius’s symptoms as similar to my father’s; and it was the first time I’d ever seen anything analogous to my own experience in print. It’s hard to imagine it now, given the relative wealth of information out there, and the attempt to be more open about such things – but in the early 1990s, my family, like many others, never talked openly about illness. I’m not even sure I knew the word “dementia,” except in its more pejorative form of “senile dementia” or “demented,” as in mad. There seemed to me no real representations of mental illness on T.V., or in any of the books I’d read, and none of my friends’ parents seemed to be anything but fighting fit. And of course, there was no internet on which to look up my father’s symptoms. So I was totally in the dark, and felt – until I read about Edwin’s experiences – utterly isolated by the experience of growing up as my father “grew down” with illness.

My father didn’t have “softening of the brain,” as they used to call it; he suffered from Parkinson’s disease, as well as an associated form of dementia, and a strange brain syndrome called ‘Capgras Syndrome,’ whereby he misidentified a significant other – in his case, me – and became convinced that I was being impersonated by an evil double. I had no idea of these things at the time – I just experienced the developing symptoms directly, viscerally, sans nomenclature, without any idea what was going on. In that sense, reading about Edwin and his father was the closest I came to a kind of (displaced) diagnosis.

It was a revelation, a moment of illumination: oh, other people have been through something not

dissimilar, and it's possible to stage this in literature. I had no idea. Everything I'd read up till then had been – for me, as a reader – a means of escape, of difference. What 'Clayhanger' taught me above all was that there was another kind of pleasure in reading, alongside that of difference and escape: the pleasure of recognition. At a time when my father was starting to misrecognise me – mistake me for someone else – I found that texts could recognise me in a different way, as a reader. I'd never read anything before which was so close to my own life, and I sobbed on reading those few chapters. No book had made me cry before; books had made me gasp, laugh, jump, but never cry. It was what Herman Melville calls "the shock of recognition." As the literary theorist Wolfgang Iser puts it, "the manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition, and in this respect the literary text acts as a kind of mirror." At certain magical moments in reading, we see ourselves recognised, or reflected back, from texts. In that sense, Clayhanger was the first mirror into which I looked.

But, as Iser goes on to say, it is a distorted mirror: though I too was born and grew up in Stoke, I clearly wasn't the same generation as Edwin, and my father's condition was very different from "softening of the brain." In this way, I think literature is never just one thing or another – never just recognition or escape, sameness or difference, convergence or divergence. It's always an unstable mixture of the two. The mixture, whether one thing predominates, or the other, depends on both the text and the reader. They meet somewhere along the spectrum. It's possible for two different readers to find in a novel very different balances of identification and escapism. I'm currently reading Harry Potter to my twin daughters – and while they find it exciting as escapist fantasy, I keep thinking: oh my goodness, poor Harry and Hermione, they must be so traumatised. As Iser says, the text recognises the reader's own disposition, experiences, emotions, expectations, and also reshapes them in a new image. 'Clayhanger' reshaped me, articulating things about growing up in Stoke, about a father-son relationship infected with illness, about a reversal of roles, about care, which, up till then, neither I nor anyone around me had put into words. When I finally came across the real names for my father's condition, a few months later, the revelation was not nearly so emotionally powerful: it was literature, not medicine, which understood our experience first and perhaps best.

The Flight of the Doves Changed My Life!

Anna McQuinn



I learned to read very early and was a voracious reader – I don't know what age I was exactly, but I must have been quite young to be such a fan of Enid Blyton's collections of stories of Mr Pinkwhistle!

I was given The 'Naughtiest Girl in the School' as a present and, because I didn't know how such books worked. I read it the same way as I did Mr Pinkwhistle – choosing a random 'story' to start off with then another... It was incredibly confusing!

The stories were all about the same person, a girl called Elizabeth, but I couldn't work out what was going on! I must have read about four 'stories' before realising they were

chapters (I didn't even know the word!) of one long story. I had to start at the beginning and read all the way through – which was rather spoiled by the fact that I'd already read the penultimate chapter!

Once I got my head around it, I really enjoyed this new kind of book and getting my teeth into longer stories – more Naughtiest Girl stories followed, then the St Clare's series, 'Malory Towers', the 'Five Find-Outers', the 'Adventure of Spiggyholes', the 'Famous Five and Mr Galliano's Circus'. I just ate them up.

The books were full of girls called Felicity and Gwendoline and Penelope – playing lacrosse, eating cress sandwiches, radishes and drinking ginger beer. Growing up in rural Ireland in the 1970s, I had never met anyone called Gwendoline or Penelope and I had no idea what cress or radishes were (in fact I grew radishes one summer just to find out – reader, I didn't like them!). I was shocked that the children were allowed drink Ginger Beer – which I assumed was alcoholic (I didn't realise it was the same thing as Ginger Ale) – but I adored the books anyway and read and re-read them endlessly.

Then I was given Walter Macken's 'Flight of the Doves' (1968). It's about a boy called Finn and a girl called Derval. The children run away from an abusive uncle to find their granny in Galway. Well, when I came to that bit, I was so excited. Galway! I'd heard of Galway – it was real. I had even been there. To this day I remember how the world shifted on its axis as I read this book. Suddenly the world inside the book was real and tangible and meaningful. Children like me were IN it.

I read the book more than 40 years ago – I even had to search the internet to get the title – but I can still remember clearly that the girl cut her hair and pretended to be a boy so people looking for the children wouldn't recognise her and take her back. I remember a bit where the children were helped by a Traveller family and how kind they were. I remember them eating hot potatoes with their hands and still think of that whenever I peel a hot potato now. I remember it like it happened to me. Suddenly books were something I was IN!

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Flight of the Doves began a voyage of discovery for me. This was an era before ‘teen’ (and even more so, before ‘tween’) literature. Tweens and even teens can still be tough times for readers – outgrowing their childhood favourites but often not ready for adult themes quite yet. Back then it was nigh on impossible to find material for an avid and very able reader in her teens. I went on to read Macken’s *The Silent People* – a moving adult novel set during Ireland’s Famine. This led to ‘Famine’ – a magnificent book by Liam O Flaherty and then O Flaherty’s short stories both in English and in Irish.

My journey continued with ‘Across the Bitter Sea’, by Eilís Dillon then ‘Quiet Flows the Don’ (Aleksandrovich Sholokov) and on to a raft of Russian writers.

It’s amazing how these early experiences influence and shape your life. I continued to have a passion for Russian fiction and it was my major at University College Cork, studying Chekov, Dostoevsky and Turgenev before I moving on to specialise in the Gothic Novel.

Research into the origins of publishing as part of my MA thesis on Ann Radcliffe’s gothic novel, ‘The Mysteries of Udolpho’, in turn initiated my interest in the publishing industry itself.

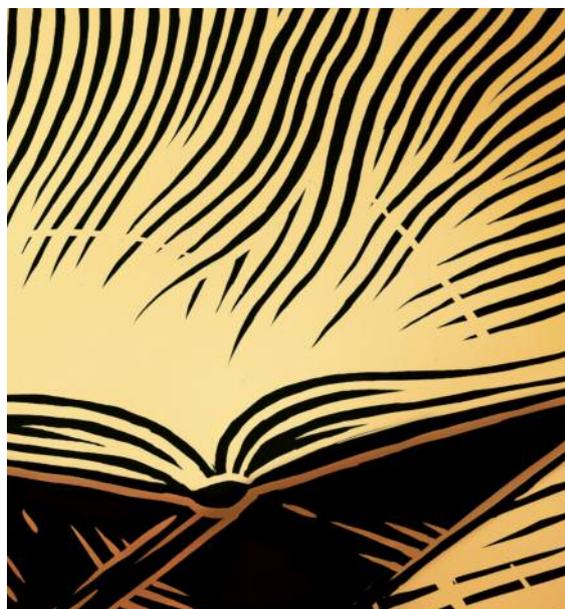
On graduating, I emigrated to the UK in search of work in publishing. I began by sending my CV to feminist houses like The Feminist Press, Women’s Press and Virago and never thought I would end up spending all my working life in children’s publishing – as an editor, publisher and writer.

Now, once more, I find myself back under the influence of that first reading of ‘Flight of the Doves’ – reliving that feeling of discovering someone like me in a book.

It’s a feeling I nurture and keep at the centre of my writing and publishing as I try to make books that include a wide range of children – especially those who don’t see someone like them in a book often enough. So when I write or publish books with little assertive girls or black boys – naughty frogs or grumpy bears, it’s not to fight racism or strike a blow for feminism or counter disabled stereotypes or promote empathy – though, of course, I hope it will do all those things. My driving force is to make sure all children have opportunities to see themselves in books. Books show children the world and they need to see themselves in books to know they have a right to be in the world. I know that – Walter Macken taught me.

Reading and Rereading: Childhood Fascinations

Beverley Brenna



My childhood memories of being read to are part of the landscape of experiences which I think have helped me to be the avid reader (and teacher of reading) that I am today. I can remember stretching out across the end of my parents' bed, a coloring book in process, listening to my mother read from a small collection of children's novels: 'The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew'; or 'Heidi'; or 'Mouse Mountain'. This context for reading was always comfortable, always pleasant, making reading itself akin to any other activity we did for fun as a family. Vocabulary words developed naturally out of this shared experience, and I remember particular occasions where one or the other of us would

outside this shared reading time, use words or phrases from particular books and then we'd chortle, delightedly, at the reference. Because this small group of children's books were read and reread in this fashion, the idea of rereading was always part of my repertoire.

I don't know why our home library was so small, as my parents greatly valued reading themselves and received from relatives various adult books as gifts. I also don't know why we didn't supplement these particular novels with library books for these nightly read-alouds. It must have been quite tedious for my mother to relate the same text over and over. In fact, I remember her groaning with dismay when my next choice was "Mouse Mountain! Again!"

My parents were born in prairie farming communities in the mid 1910s, when school libraries were small, home libraries with children's materials were virtually non-existent, and public libraries had not yet appeared. Perhaps because of this background, library use wasn't yet routine in our household and rereading was commonplace.

And perhaps the groaning was just part of the playful spirit with which my mother approached this shared reading, and maybe at the end of a busy day, collapsing into a familiar book was actually quite pleasant for her. I hope this was the case!

Regardless, the idea that books could be read and reread was ordinary to me, and thus it is no surprise that my childhood independent reading often became a site of rereading. I recall that during my Grade Five year, I reread approximately a dozen times an adventure fantasy novel called 'The Planet of Death'. I recall signing out the book at the school library and seeing my name duplicated, without interjection of anyone else's name, on both sides of the card.

I'm not sure what attracted me to rather obsessive rereadings of 'The Planet of Death', although its adult characters and violent scenes of death and deception were certainly beyond my circle of experience. Perhaps that was the draw. Or perhaps the text of this young adult novel quickly became so familiar that the rereading was truly carefree. Whatever the case, I do realize, looking back, that this choice was a rather odd one for my repeated attention, especially when one considers that alongside it I was reading 'The Blue Fairy Book', 'The Yellow Fairy Book', 'The Green Fairy Book', etc.

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Or perhaps this choice is not so surprising, for fairy tales often feature adult characters, and are certainly not without relatively large quantities of violence and deception.

Perhaps my childhood reading was indeed all about violence and deception.

At any rate, I must have gotten my fill of it, for I now prefer poignant realistic literary fiction that touches the heart and mind.

Interestingly, however, I don't do much rereading anymore except when I am puzzling out how to actualize something in my writing for children. Then I read copiously other books in the genre to figure out how other authors have done it. The knack of showing rather than telling, the pure grace of delineating a setting that also doubles as character development, and the use of dialogue to pull readers into the immediacy of a scene, are things that I continue to dwell on through this kind of studied rereading.

In my own, adult reading life, however, I delight in new work (for both adults and children). Maybe because I am an avid library user, and I am well acquainted with the fact that there are so, so many titles yet to be discovered, I like nothing better than to forage into new fields, and bring home baskets of possibility. Yes, I think that's exactly it.

Close Encounters With A Penguin

Terry Potter



I wasn't a bookish child. I wasn't even bookish in my early teenage years. For me, the inspiration to become the reader I am today only came along when I was maybe fourteen or fifteen and I associate it with a very specific book in a very specific edition.

Until that time I'd been a reader of comics such as *The Hornet* and other ephemeral stuff – I was a great fan of *Look and Learn*, an early example of those weekly publications you could bind in a special folder and build a collection of over several years.

When I sat down to write this particular contribution I had thought I'd maybe focus on either the *Hornet* or the 1965 'Look and Learn

Annual' as my inspiration but actually, the more I thought about it the less I could honestly say they inspired me. After giving it some proper thought, I knew that what I really wanted to write about was the book that made me into a true reader – the book that not only showed me that reading could engage and entertain me but could also introduce me to ideas I didn't come across elsewhere. But just as importantly, I wanted a book that I felt spoke directly to me, even spoke for

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me, and which gave me the chance to build a relationship with an author that has been absolutely central to my intellectual life from that moment until now – and a relationship I will certainly take to my grave.

I also wanted a book that would allow me to share just how important book covers and jackets have been in my reading life. For me book cover art is iconic – it evokes time, place, people and circumstances in my past and has the same power to trigger time travel as Proust found in his tea-dipped madeleine biscuit. The combination of the book's text and the book's design doesn't just enable me to think about what a marvellous piece of writing I'm holding in my hand, it's a portal to how I actually felt about discovering this book for the first time, even what it felt to be the young man I once was sitting on a settee in a small back room in my family's tiny terraced house in inner-city Birmingham in the 1960s.

That book is George Orwell's '1984' – but more specifically, the Penguin Modern Classics edition with the cover illustration called 'The Control Room: Civil Defence Headquarters' painted by William Roberts in 1942. In the way these things happen at an impressionable age, Orwell's prose and Roberts' painting became symbiotically entwined and I find it literally impossible to think of the book without conjuring that cover. Perhaps just as importantly, I associate the book with the person who gave it to me – my older brother, who rather casually tossed it to me one day because he thought I might be interested.

I started reading the book on that very afternoon and didn't put it down until it was finished. I'm not going to lie – there was no epiphany, no moment of blinding insight, no bells and whistles. But it was the planting of a seed in soil that was primed for germination.

Since then I've read 1984 many, many times and in a variety of different editions but none of them have ever come close to superseding that first encounter and none come close to the sheer visceral thrill I still get when I pick up a copy of this Penguin edition with its extraordinary cover artwork.

In Orwell's prose I found something quite extraordinary – a man with a voice and with a sensibility that cut through all the potential barriers created by words on paper, seeming to speak to me directly and to me specifically. His story thrilled, frightened and made me angry in equal measure but, most of all, I was astonished by the refusal to offer easy or reassuring answers. The fate of Winston Smith made me engage with the disturbing truth that no part of our identity is safe from the brutality of totalitarianism - it blows away the belief that there is some part of us that remains private and untouchable by the oppressors.

That may sound like a pretty gloomy message but for me it was the truth that's guided my politics ever since. Inspiration comes in all shapes and forms and we can't pick and choose when it's going to happen or what will turn out to be relevant to us – I'm just glad this book found me when it did and it's a pleasure to celebrate that now.

An Enchantment: The Book That Made Me a Reader

Leila Rasheed



I still have the book. I hold it in my forty-year-old hand, and the ghost of my seven-year-old hand holds it too: an enchantment, like those padlocks on bridges that mean two lovers clasp each other, hand in hand, forever. In 1980s Benghazi, where I grew up, there were no shops, or very few – a baker, a butcher, the souk, and one vast, concrete department store that had nothing inside it but a sack of flour, leaking and weevil-ridden on a pallet. Libya had its own enchantments, curses and hauntings, but for books we had to migrate. I would guess we bought this particular book at Galt or Early Learning, during one of our summer journeys back to England.

I'll put it down here, so you can see it properly.

The first thing you'll note is the fragility. The pages are weathered yellow, and it comes in chunks, this book; sections splitting off from an osteoporotic spine from which the glue has long ago perished. The spine has been Sellotaped and re-Sellotaped until the tape shatters at the touch. Love spells sometimes look like this: like a padlock on a bridge, or an unskilled repair. Spells to keep things, like people, from coming apart.

With a title like 'The Puffin Book of Magic Verse', you would expect a dark cover. But the cover is nothing as obvious as black. It's deep purple, the colour of a Libyan-grown aubergine, burnished by a diet of sun. And now the other magic flickers into life, the magic fire of illustrations. This book may have made me a reader, but it was never just the words that did that. Look at the head on the cover. It must belong to a child, but what a child! The offspring of the Medusa and the Green Man - hair bristling thick with leaves, owls, cats, witches. Genderless, the face doesn't look directly at the reader, but off to one side. The child's eyes and mouth are a little open, not in glee or rage, but in wonder. As if it has just seen something astonishing -and this, mark you, when it, itself, is the strangest thing that any reader could ever have seen. From the very cover, the book isn't inviting you to read it. It isn't daring you to read it. Like the master magician's spell book, it is just there, and you reading it or not is a matter of indifference to it. What child wouldn't open a book on these tempting terms? What are you looking at? Can I come with you?

Open the book, then, and step in. Immediately you are falling into poems, like Alice down the rabbit hole, woozy, twisting, slow and dreamlike. When you find your feet, the floor staggers, tilts you forward. The whole book is on the slant. It leads you onwards, draws you in, down long galleries of verse, past images that shine like stained glass windows. Through section after section; doors in a house haunted by poetry: Charms, Ghosts and Hauntings, Curses, and Changelings. Poem after poem enchants, provokes, intrigues, just like the shy, uncanny creatures on the cover that crept for protection into the accepting, warm and non-judgemental wild mind of a child.

Poetry, like lightning, isn't meant to be grounded, but an anthology like this can act as a conductor. A stroll through the index of first lines demonstrates the range of poems included, from rattling, runaway comic verse - The Resident Djinn and Colonel Fazackerly Butterworth Toast are two characters that will stay with me forever - to this tiny, unforgettable gem

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(translated from a Native American language, and presented, as was sadly common at the time of publication, without context) in the voice of a ghost:

*My friend
this is a wide world we are travelling over
walking on the moonlight*

What all these poems, regardless of form or origin, have in common is that they describe, evoke or embody the mysterious and wonderful. This is a collection that honours the strange, that is wide and unwavering of gaze. Perhaps it could only have been produced in the 1970s, and by a poet of genius – Charles Causley - who was unafraid of childhood.

When we finally closed the wardrobe door on Libya, we gave away most of our toys and packed all our favourite books in our two suitcases. At that time, due to the political situation, there were no direct flights from Libya to the UK. We landed in Malta and changed to another airline. When we took off from Malta, most of our suitcases stayed where they were, with the books inside them. I arrived in Birmingham scattered; trailing words, like feathers, across the wide blue Mediterranean. My books, gone: my world, gone. I would spend a lifetime trying to find that lost world again, seeking pieces of my childhood like Isis looking for her love, through second-hand bookshops and later, online. ‘The Puffin Book of Magic Verse’ was in the one suitcase that survived the journey.

It’s hard to know, if the rest of my books had made it through, whether ‘The Puffin Book of Magic Verse’ would have been so important to me. Perhaps I would have taken the presence of books for granted. As it stands, it is one of the very few things – books or otherwise - I have from my childhood. It haunts me.

When I was young, I used to like to imagine that I would be buried with my books, so we’d biodegrade together, and archaeologists of the future wouldn’t be able to tell the ink from the flesh. Now I’m older, I think that’s a bit morbid, and I know how much burial plots cost. All the same, those pages are yellow with my handling. I have put myself into that book just as it has put itself into me. Bridges and love spells may rust and crumble, but a book can go all the way with you, holding your hand.

Memories of Reading

Alun Severn



I have just realised that I have no recollection whatsoever of being read to as a child. Perhaps this is normal. Perhaps working class children of my generation (I was born in 1954) weren't often read to. I can well imagine that my parents might have thought (and not resentfully or lazily, I hasten to add) that reading to children was what schools were for, and that were they to attempt it themselves they would probably do it wrong. And in fact, there is a fair chance they would have. Dad was a reader – specially before we had a TV set, much less so after that – but Mom, who was brought up partly in care and in any case left school very young, struggled with reading.

The other thing I have no recollection of – at least until I was fourteen or fifteen – is a teacher at any time suggesting books I might enjoy. This was the case until I went to grammar school and it changed then only because some time during our second or third year a friend and I asked our English teacher to give us a recommended reading list. Not books we had to read, not the books we were required to study, but books that were significant, books we should want to read, books we might enjoy. He was a kind and charming man but I still remember the look of surprised panic on his face – as if recognising the gravity of his calling for the very first time.

But my parents did consider reading important and as soon as I was old enough I was enrolled in our local high street library. Its dim Victorian interior and its particular odour of oilcloth and linoleum and furniture polish and library jackets and slightly dusty books is as powerfully evocative now as when I first walked in there nearly sixty years ago. We, my mother and I, went once a week – for it was her job to return my dad's library books and choose new ones for him. She had to try and remember what adventure stories and Westerns and science fiction novels he had read, as well as keep a sort of mental tally of the kinds of books that simply wouldn't appeal to him.

As I grew up, especially as a teenager, books and reading were by then well-established passions, shared with a handful of friends and already feeling like one of those things that would be a constant for life. But where did this passion originally come from? The fact of the matter is, I have no idea. But what I can trace to some degree is how books made me feel, and hence why I carried on reading.

Looking back, certainly until I was at grammar school, it now seems evident that a good deal of luck was involved. Unguided, untutored, the desire to explore books – to simply plug on making mistakes and discoveries, book by book, author by author – somehow matched my own instincts for autodidacticism. Reading was something I wanted to do; understanding who was who in literature – and why – was something I wanted to understand. But that sounds rather cold and determined, and the experience wasn't really like that. Let me try and explain.

From the earliest age, books fascinated me, both as reading and as objects. Indeed, I still recall

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that one Sunday morning, on a rare walk with my father in the local park – I can only have been nine or ten, I suppose – he asked me if I knew what I wanted to do when I grew up. I told him I wanted to be a book-maker. I still remember his puzzled expression. “Do you mean putting bets on at horse racing? How do you know about that?” he asked me. I had no idea what he meant. No, I meant as in making books – I want to make the books they sell in bookshops, I explained. Of course, this never happened, but I did the next best thing, I suppose, I became a bookseller, and it is true that everything I have done that has meant most to me has involved writing of some description.

Anyway, let’s take it as established that for some reason I was one of those hooked by reading at an early age. But even so, this was fairly chaotic reading. I read children’s comic annuals – the staples of the time: Rupert, The Beano, The Dandy, Beezer. But my God, I loved those Christmas annuals – their paper, their smell, the creak of the fresh glossy boards on Christmas morning.

My real memories of reading I suppose commence with my library membership, though. I must have worked through hundreds of children’s novels of the period, probably barely able to tell them apart, I imagine, and certainly unable to judge the bad or the good. But I don’t think this was important. I seem to remember reading children’s novels even then with a sort of imagined nostalgia. The families they depicted, the gorgeous illustrations and line drawings – they were redolent, I suppose, of the kind of life I aspired to, and I suppose I read them in a kind of false-consciousness. But I loved them. I loved the feeling of reading them.

Oddly enough, the first extended series of books I remember reading – being more or less addicted to – were Willard Price’s ‘Adventure’ series (children’s adventure books featuring a pair of child-zoologists), and Richmal Crompton’s William books. Now here was real treasure. Even by the time I began to read them approaching forty William books had been published, and so it seemed that this was a kind of reading that could never run out. They became what I suppose we would now call comfort literature. I read them not to find out about the world but to retreat from it – to exist more fully and more enjoyably in the pages of a book than it was possible to do outside those books. I read then – and do now, I think – because it makes me feel a different person.

For good or ill, I still think this was a powerful lesson, and I still remember an occasion that seems to exemplify what I then got from books – and still do. I was about eleven, I suppose, and on a lovely spring morning that swiftly turned rainy and chill, my Dad insisted on us going for a cycle ride. I wanted to, desperately, partly because I hadn’t had my bike long, and partly to be out cycling with my Dad. I knew even then that it marked a rite of passage of some kind, a special kind of growing up – something that only he and I could do together, because my brother was too young. But I was also terrified – terrified of losing sight of him and becoming lost, terrified of traffic, and especially terrified of having to make right-hand turns, which struck me then as impossibly complex and dangerous manoeuvres and still do.

Anyway, we did get back safely, but not without an episode on a notoriously steep hill, during which the wind lashed at my face and my glasses streamed water and I could barely see. It felt absurdly dangerous and I still sometimes wonder whether my father realised how scared I was, how barely in control of this absurdly large cycle I was.

What I remember most powerfully, however, is this. My mother towelled my hair dry and I changed out of my wet clothes and we had lunch. Afterwards, while they went and watched TV, I

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sat on my own in front of the gas fire and continued reading a William book. A library book. I can still smell it, feel it – the curious slightly sticky covering of its boards. And I remember feeling that life couldn't possibly get any better, any more secure, the pleasure of reading heightened now by a knowledge of what lay out there (the roar of traffic, the slashing, freezing rain, the hurtling sensation of freewheeling downhill) and the fact that I had braved it and it was over.

What I'm now aware of in retrospect is that until I started grammar school my reading was entirely undirected and driven by chance and self-discovery. What I wanted essentially was reading that offered a retreat from the world – an interior life one could enter at will. The fact that it was somehow secret, silent, a solitary activity, was even better. It meant others couldn't follow.

I know there will be some who will say that that doesn't sound an especially positive or healthy attitude to reading. They are even more likely to say that when I admit that that feeling has never entirely gone away. I may now read in a more informed and altogether more sophisticated way (I suppose), but deep down inside (I can feel it) the motivation is startlingly similar. Reading takes me to places I prefer to be; reading makes me feel how it has always made me feel: happy, calm, immersed – somehow larger on the inside, larger in my head: comforted; engaged. It is the interior life I always hankered after, even before I knew such a thing existed.

My Odyssey

Dwayne Brenna



We didn't have many books in the house when I was a child. My dad was a dry land farmer on the Canadian prairies. He spent a lot of money buying an entire set of the Encyclopedia Britannica when I was a young boy. Aside from looking up the location of Viet Nam to prove a point or settle an argument, reading was discouraged, especially in the summer when there was field and yard work to be done. I had to read covertly at times. I remember my mother's garden as a secret arcadia where I devoured books while I was supposedly picking peas for supper.

The book that got me interested in literature at an early age was Homer's 'Odyssey', likely in the prose version adapted by Butcher and Lang (although I can't be sure anymore). It was middle years' reading for my older brother, but the book fell into my hands in the summer before he was to study it. I was in Grade Three at the time, and I decided to read the book secretly to prove to my brother that I was more intelligent than he thought I was. In the autumn, when it became necessary for him to write an essay about The Odyssey, my brother quizzed me about the book's plot and characters, and I provided him

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with answers. Odysseus was on a long journey home and in some way, like Homer, I was his chronicler if only to an audience of one.

Of course, I identified with Odysseus, even at that early age. I could easily imagine myself sailing on the high seas. I don't suppose I understood the magnetic pull of the Sirens on his men or the reasons Odysseus had to be tied to the mast. That understanding would come later in life.

I was fascinated by, and afraid of, the monsters in the book. The man-devouring Cyclops frightened me as much, I think, as it must have frightened the original listeners to Homer's tale. The six snaky heads of Scylla, and her shark-like teeth, were real in my young imagination. Equally as real was Charybdis, on the opposite shore, who drank in the seawaters and belched them out on a thrice-daily basis. Monsters occupy that territory at the farthest reaches of human knowledge. There was a lot I didn't know (and even more that I still don't know today). I imagined monsters at every turn, in the ocean, in outer space, in the dark, and under my bed.

Later in life, I began to view Scylla and Charybdis in other ways. They were representative of all sorts of external gauntlets one passes through, sometimes during hockey games and sometimes during thesis defenses. They were also representative of internal schisms that I could only have been faintly aware of at the age of eight. They were perhaps Eros and Thanatos. They were at once the path to success and the fear of succeeding. They were the devil and the deep blue sea.

Reading the prose 'Odyssey', at that tender age, took me out of land-locked Saskatchewan and offered me adventure of epic proportions. A magnificent feat of the imagination, Homer's narrative challenged me to let my own imagination run wild. It taught me that books can present us with alternative universes, with utopias in which we might want to live and with dystopias that are warnings for the future. In my eight year-old mind, though, I was simply happy with the increased status I achieved by reading the book. I was a repository of some indispensable knowledge for my more accomplished and more athletic older brother. I had something to offer, finally, and with that came a measure of self-worth.

