

# *The Theatre of Reading*

Reading is one of the most complicated processes the human brain performs. Some specialists in the functioning of the brain say it is the most complicated of all. That's why literature is the most difficult of all the arts for us to understand, appreciate, and interpret. No wonder many people find it hard to become committed readers.

When we read silently to ourselves we are on our own with no one to help us. All we have to guide us are a few shapes we call letters and punctuation, combined into words and sentences, paragraphs and chapters, not to mention arithmetical figures and musical notations, diagrams, maps, scientific equations, and a variety of other abstract signs. These we must bring to life in the theatre of our imagination, if we are to make sense of them. As we do this, we must be our own producer, our own director, our own actors, light and sound designers, music director, editor, and, not least, our own literary critic. And while we perform all these roles simultaneously, we are also the audience, engaged in observing the performance of the story, the poem, the play, or the lecturer communicating in written form ideas and information.

Reading involves not one process but many, not one function of the brain but many functions. It is not a single skill that can be taught and learned like a craft or a factory operation. Rather, it is a multifaceted, multifunctional faculty of the brain that must engage the emotions and the body as well the mind, if we are to gain the fullest understanding and enjoy doing so.

How do human beings become competent in this extraordinary enactment? How do they come to know its transformational power in their lives? How do they come to love it? Are there fundamental experiences in the teaching and learning of readers, experiences that tend to help children and young people become thoughtful, discriminating, committed readers, who gain a profound and long-lasting pleasure from reading? I think there are. I don't have time in this brief talk to describe them all. So I have chosen a few that seem to me to be of such essential importance they underpin all the others.

Let me now present these to you as scenes from the theatre of reading, little dramas in the life-story of one reader, learner and teacher. I mean, of course, myself. I'll talk mostly about the reading of books. But of course I'm well aware that we all read other forms of written language: not only newspapers and magazines and paper documents, but the increasing variety of electronic forms of written communication, which for the young are everyday familiar features of their lives. What I want to say applies to all forms of reading and writing.

And I must begin with a scenesetting Prologue – a general statement of such importance that it conditions everything else I will say.

First, it is a truth not always universally acknowledged that readers are made by readers, and nonreaders are made by nonreaders. No child emerges from the womb genetically programmed to be against reading. In fact, the opposite is the case. We are all born with an impulse to communicate, and to do so by using written signs with ever-increasing sophistication. Everyone knows even from cursory observation that baby children have an urgent desire to look at marks made by people on walls, on canvas, on bits of wood and of course most of all on paper and on the pages of books, and from a very early age they love to make marks of their own. When they are with adults for whom pictures and books have obvious value and give pleasure, children thrive in their developing understanding of what these marks mean and how they can be used. When they are with adults for whom such objects have no value, children tend to grow with an undeveloped understanding and even a dislike of them.

Second, in order to be a reader, there must be something to read. Readers are made by what is available to read. We should not be surprised that children grow up as reluctant readers if the supply and choice of books available to them are very narrow in range and very small in quantity.

Adults who value reading and show that this is so, and the availability of books in large numbers are the two primary essentials in the growth of children as readers. Remove either one and the result is children who have been deprived and who by their teenage years are in need of remedial help. That a very large percentage of the population is deprived in this way helps to explain why we hear so much about young people who do not read as well as they should, who are not fully competent at understanding what they read, and who, in their resentment, behave as if they dislike reading.

That said, and kept in mind, let me begin at the beginning in my Theatre of Reading with:

*Act One Scene One:  
'The Tale of the Laidly [repulsive, horrible] Worme'*

When I was a small boy, I was taken every Sunday after-noon to visit my maternal grandparents. My grandfather was a coal miner. I do not remember him ever reading anything. Indeed, I suspect he was hardly able to read at all. He left school when he was eleven and from that time until he retired he crawled through narrow tunnels deep underground, hacking coal out of the rock with a pick for ten hours every day, six days every week and fifty weeks every year. He was a quiet, patient, kindly man

who said very little and was dominated by my grandmother. I wish I knew what went on in his head during all those years of hellish toil.

One hot August afternoon when I was about three, my grandfather took me for a walk out of the village and through the fields. The wheat was golden, ready for harvesting. The corn was so tall I couldn't see over it. After a while, my grandfather decided it was time for a rest, lit his pipe, and lifted me up so that I could sit on the top of a gate in the hedge. From that vantage point I could see across the fields and beyond the winding gear of the pithead where my grandfather worked to a hill that rose up strangely not very far away. It was like a great big pudding with nothing but grass growing on it and with a flat top on which there was a white stone monument made of rows of columns, which I learned many years later is an unfinished eighteenth-century replica of a Roman temple.

When he had puffed his pipe for a while, Grandfather asked me if I could see the hill. I said I could, and Grandfather said, 'That's where the laidy worme used to sleep at night by wrapping itself nine times round the hill. You can still see the marks.' And indeed you could – a narrow sandy trail in the grass that wound round and round from bottom to top. My attention was riveted by the frightening thought of a garden worm so big it could wrap itself nine times round such a big hill. The 'e' of the ancient use of 'worme' for a legless dragon didn't sound, and I wouldn't have known what it meant anyway.

My grandfather went on to tell me the story of a dragon that used to terrorise the countryside for miles around. No one could kill it, until the brave son of the great lord of the area found a way. He fought the worme and won, but in doing so brought a curse on his family that lasted for nine generations.

Grandfather told the story straightforwardly, without a hint of thrilling dramatics, as if he were talking about the weather or some ordinary incident that had happened in the pit the day before. He was so convincing, I listened all ears, my eyes popping, and believed every word. It never occurred to me that the story was a fiction. It was many years later that I discovered it is a folk tale known as 'The Lambton Worme', though, like all the best folk tales, it does have some basis in historical fact.

My grandfather didn't read, but he had a natural talent as a storyteller. The scene that hot day, with me sitting on top of the gate, and my grandfather leaning against it, puffing his clay pipe and telling the story of the horrible worme, has remained vivid in my memory ever since. Why that story? I'm sure I was told many more which have not remained with me as that one has. I think I know the answer to that question, but it is a topic for another day. All I want to say now is that I am sure

all reading is rooted in hearing. We cannot read what we have not heard said. This seems to me to be a useful rule of thumb for parents and teachers to keep in mind, especially when dealing with children and young people who are reluctant readers – those who for one reason or another are finding it hard to become readers.

*Act One Scene Two: 'The Story of the Tortoise'*

My parents were not readers. There were only five books in the house, one of which happened to be a collection of Aesop's fables in an edition with coloured illustrations. I am an only child, so on rainy days in winter before I was old enough to go to school I would sometimes be bored and to keep me quiet my mother would read Aesop's fables to me while I looked at the pictures. I am sure she must have read all of them. But I remember only one. The story of the tortoise and the hare. You'll know that this is the story of a hare that challenges a tortoise to a race. Of course, the hare is sure he will win. He's so sure, that half way round the course, he decides to have a rest and falls asleep. But the tortoise keeps plodding along at his slow and steady pace, overtakes the sleeping hare and is approaching the finishing line before the hare wakes up, sees what has happened and, though he runs as fast as he can, he fails to catch up and the tortoise wins. The moral of the story is that slow and steady wins the race.

Why have I always remembered that story rather than any of the others of Aesop's many wonderful fables? Perhaps because the truth is that I have always been a tortoise. The only way I can succeed at anything is by plodding steadily along, always more slowly than I'd like but trusting that I'll get there in the end. And what has this got to do with the making of readers? The answer will become clear when I have told you the story of:

*Act One Scene Three: 'Dear Miss Ainsley'*

I was five when I started school. Miss Ainsley was my first teacher and I was her problem pupil. Most of my classmates learned to read by the age of seven. But I had trouble and couldn't read fluently until I was nine. The Head Teacher told my mother I was 'slow', by which she meant I was dull witted, not very clever, lacking in brain power. Perhaps she didn't know the story of the tortoise and the hare. While my quicker classmates got on with other tasks, Miss Ainsley would sit me on her knee and read a book aloud to me while I looked at the pages, in the hope, I suppose, that I would eventually catch on. This used to be called the 'look say' method of teaching people to read and it has a good deal of merit.

But she did something else as well. Every morning she read a story aloud to the whole class. They were usually stories out of the Bible such as Abraham and Isaac or

the Good Samaritan. In the afternoon, she made us act out the story, improvising it under her direction as we went along. Some of us were cast in the leading roles, some of us were supporting actors and members of the crowd, and some of us were the orchestra, playing incidental music and making sound effects with drums and cymbals and toy trumpets and a variety of handmade instruments.

One day Miss Ainsley read us the story of David and Goliath. In the afternoon I was cast for the first and only time as the leading player. I was David and had to slay Goliath, who was played by the biggest and nastiest boy in the class. After I had slain him I was enthroned on Miss Ainsley's special armchair placed on top of Miss Ainsley's desk, with much pomp and circumstance and accompanied by loud music from the orchestra, while the grateful and adoring crowd of Israelites bowed down before me. This was the biggest thrill of my young life.

It is not difficult to see why a boy who was slow at learning – the dunce of his class – would always remember that scene. But my reason for telling you about it is to make the point that what my mother did out of motherly instinct in order to keep me quiet, and what Miss Ainsley did from professional knowledge is something essential in the education of readers. They both read aloud while I looked at the book. By doing this they prepared my mind for the way stories are told, and for the language in which stories are told, and for the sight and sound of words arranged in such a way that they construct meanings of many different kinds. They were providing me with working models that would help me understand what I was reading when I could at last do it for myself.

And Miss Ainsley did something else. She objectified the act of reading. She literally made an object of it. The object she made was the play we performed. By doing this she involved her children physically and emotionally in the making and remaking of stories. In other words, she actively involved their five senses and their bodies so that they *felt* the stories in their flesh and bones and along their nerves, at the same time as they *thought* about them. By doing this she introduced her children to reading by beginning with stories where the human race itself began with them, that is, as magic, as dramatic rituals, which we now call theatre. Children call this playing. But then, so do we adults. What we see in theatres are plays and we say that actors play in them. Acting out stories is basic to human nature. For children, playing by acting out stories is instinctive until they reach the age of self-consciousness. When they become self-conscious – around the age of nine or ten, and especially in adolescence – they like their playing to be formalised into what adults call theatre: stories with scripts that require suitably chosen and designed incidentals like costumes, sound effects, props, special lighting, and an audience to watch the passing scene.

In my personal experience and as an observer of many teachers at work, I know that wise teachers read aloud whatever their pupils' age and level of education. It is as important to read aloud to teenagers and college students as it is to infants. That's how we entice them to choose books to read for themselves. That's how we familiarise them with the literature they have not yet read and think is 'too difficult' but which they need to experience next if they are to develop and grow as readers. That's how we help them to increase the range of their experience of the music of language – for all language, whether spoken or written, is sound orchestrated to make intelligent meaning. And the music it makes is part of its beauty, and is an element in the pleasure to be gained from reading. That's how we best help those who have difficulty and are slow to grow as readers. And even more, that's how we help those who have been damaged as readers because they have suffered from poor teaching or have been starved of books.

Act One of my Theatre of Reading reasserts the fundamental importance of our human roots as makers and users of language and makers and performers of stories. Hearing stories told, hearing them read aloud, and playfully acting them – these are the foundations of our lives as readers.

*Act Two Scene One: 'The story of Dandy'*

As I said, my parents were not readers. But from the time I was about five my mother bought for me every week a popular children's comicstrip magazine called *Dandy*. I expect you had something like it here in Spain. Each double-page spread of *Dandy* was devoted to the adventures of one of a variety of outlandish characters, whose stories were told either in black-and-white or in full-colour cartoon strips with dialogue in bubbles or sometimes with short captions beneath the picture. Most famous of these slapstick characters was Desperate Dan, a cowboy of super-human strength, who had somehow or other landed up in a British town, whose favourite meal was a huge meat pie, and who wreaked satisfying vengeance on the bad guys who terrorised the weak. The comicstrip adventures in *Dandy* were the equivalent of today's television situation comedies, each week's issue providing another episode, in which none of the characters ever changed or grew older or ever seemed to learn anything from their weekly mishaps.

I loved *Dandy* because it was funny, easy to read, ridiculed adults, and always made sure that bullies came off worst in the end. Just as important, it was entirely my own. My parents never looked at it. And had I been foolish enough to take it to school, it would instantly have been confiscated and destroyed by my teacher, because the educational authorities at that time believed these frothy comicstrip delights were morally and educationally bad for you. This ridiculous proposition was

still in force when I became a teacher fifteen years later. Of course, the fact that *Dandy* was banned added to its appeal.

Because I was a poor reader, I enjoyed *Dandy* for another reason. The stories were told almost entirely in pictures. I didn't have to struggle with too many words. The lesson that my teachers at that time had not yet learned, it seems, was the golden rule of all teaching: Begin where the pupil is. Begin with what the pupil knows and likes, and work from there towards what they do not know. Had my teachers known this and read *Dandy* with me, encouraging me to read the words as much as the pictures, I'm quite sure I'd have learned to read fluently and with pleasure much more quickly than I did. This is a rule of thumb that applies at every stage of education. I put it to the test many times when I was a teacher myself.

For example, I remember Philip, a fifteen year old who never read anything, as far as I knew, and would never read anything I thought would suit him and tried my hardest to persuade him to read. One day, in desperation I said, 'For heaven's sake, Philip, there must be *something* you will read?' 'Yeah,' he said with a grin, 'there is.' And he pulled from his pocket a battered copy of a James Bond novel. At that time, James Bond was not regarded as 'educational' and therefore not proper for inclusion in a school library. Not only that but, according to Philip's officially assessed ability, he ought not to have been capable of reading such a book. And what, I asked Philip, did he like so much about the James Bond stories? I didn't expect anything much by way of an answer. All I'd ever got out of him before were a few grunts and mumbled words. But that day we had a conversation that lasted at least fifteen minutes during which he explained why he enjoyed reading the Bond stories. At the end, I borrowed his tatty copy, promising to read it that night, which I did. From that time on, we had many conversations about the James Bond book Philip was currently reading – and often rereading – and I looked for other stories of a similar kind, some of which he did read and enjoy.

That scene with Philip taught me an important lesson. Till then I had thought it was my job to teach my pupils to read what I thought they should read. Philip, and some encounters with others like him, taught me that we not only have to start where our pupils are, but we also have to respect what they willingly read for themselves, whatever we might think of it, and talk with them about it as equal members of the reading club.

However, I need to add one warning remark. These days in Britain I find teachers and librarians are very good at respecting what their pupils read for themselves. They include those books in their school collections and curricula. As a result, there is often a great deal of reading going on and the teachers and librarians

think this is a sign of success. But in doing so they have often lost sight of another truth. To give children *only* what they already know they like and nothing else is just as bad as giving them *only* those books that high-minded adults think are all that should be read in school. Another way of expressing this is to put the question, What does a teacher do? If we ask children to read only what they already know they like, why do we need teachers at all? It seems to me that one definition of a teacher is: Someone who helps you to go where you cannot go on your own.

To repeat the point. We start with where pupils are and with what they know and like *in order to help them go beyond this*, to find and experience what they do not know and would not like without our help.

*Act Two, Scene Two: 'The Story of Worzel Gummidge'*

As it happened, it was not a teacher but my paternal grandmother who helped me take the step from reading *Dandy* to reading long stories told in words in books. I was ten, and had been in hospital with scarlet fever, then a disease that required isolation for three weeks till you were cured. The day I returned home after my incarceration, a book was waiting for me as a gift from my grandmother. It was called *The Adventures of Worzel Gummidge*. I started reading it because in my restricted convalescent condition there was nothing else I was allowed to do.

Worzel Gummidge was a bad-tempered scarecrow with a head made of a mangel-worzel (an old English name for a white turnip), hair made of hay, and a body made of wooden sticks and straw stuffed into an old suit. Worzel not only could talk, but could also stomp about on his stick legs, though only when adults were not around to see him. He made friends and had amusing adventures with two ten-year-old children, a boy and a girl who were staying with relatives on their farm for the school holiday.

I could not have explained at the time why this book captured my attention. Over the next two years I read it thirteen times – and yes, I did keep count! It was the first book I ever read cover to cover, did not want to put down, and reread as soon as I'd finished it the first time. Looking back, I can give some teacherly reasons why I liked it so much. I lived in the country. Farms, fields, and scarecrows were familiar to me. The writer's use of language was straightforward, uncomplicated, and within the scope of my vocabulary. Told in short chapters, so I could break off and catch my breath, so to speak, quite often, the story was mainly composed of events that were not dwelt upon for more than a few sentences, and was neatly balanced between narrative and dialogue.



In other words, there wasn't too much of anything and just the right amount to keep the story moving on and to retain my easily bored, fledgling interest. There were a few full-page illustrations to provide relief from the words and to give me an idea of what the characters and scenes looked like without them having to be described. Everything that happened was viewed from the child characters' perspective. And though I had to believe that a scarecrow could come to life and talk and walk, everything else that happened was based on ordinary everyday realities of the kind I knew about. The story was really about friendship, loyalty, helping one another when in trouble, and the secret lives of children when they are out of range of adults. In other words, I cannot think of a book better suited to my taste, level of ability, and previous reading experience at that time.

By chance, my grandmother had succeeded in solving the greatest difficulty we face when trying to help people become readers. She had matched the right book with the right reader at the right time. To do that successfully day after day with professional skill teachers and librarians need to know two things. They need to know a very large number and variety of books. And they need to know the background, previous reading experience and taste of the children they are trying to help.

Luckily, children's growth as readers doesn't depend only on this. Which is the point of:

*Act Two Scene Three: 'The Story of Alan and the Library'*

Shortly after I first read *Worzel Gummidge* my family moved to a large town where my father had taken a new job. I had never lived in a town before, and had no friends there. I was not happy. But across the road from our house lived a boy of my age, called Alan. After a few weeks Alan befriended me. His parents were regular readers and therefore he was too. And he belonged to the children's section of the town's very good public library, which he visited every Saturday to borrow books he wanted to read during the following week. I must explain that I had never heard of such a place as a public library and had no idea what it was. But in the way that children assume everybody else's life must be like their own, Alan assumed I must be a reader and would know about libraries and would want to join. And he wanted me to join for another reason. You were allowed to borrow only two books at a time, and you had to return them before you could borrow any more. This meant that if I joined we could borrow four books at a time and thus double the number Alan could read that week.

As Alan was the only friend I had and because friends do everything together and, to be honest, because I didn't want him to think I was ignorant or stupid, I joined the library. And Alan being the leader, and quite sure of himself, he picked out the books he wanted us to borrow, which was just as well, because I was frightened out

of my wits by the sight of the huge stacks of books and I didn't have a clue where to start. And so, week after week for two years, I accompanied Alan to the library every Saturday morning, borrowed the books he told me to borrow and read all four during the following week, because that is what he expected me to do. The result was that by the end of the two years, when our friendship cooled, I had become a regular, avid reader, had learned to find my way round the library, and had discovered tastes of my own. For example, I found I loved books that told about life at sea, books about animals I could see on my solitary walks in the countryside near where I lived, and many novels which finally displaced *Worzel Gummidge* in my affections, the thirteenth and last reading of which occurred at the end of that two-year apprenticeship.

I owe Alan a huge debt. He it was, not teachers, who provided the discipline I needed to become a regular reader, he it was who introduced me to a storehouse of many books of all kinds, and he it was who showed me how to navigate among them and find by sniffing and tasting, so to speak, those that I not only wanted to read, but *needed* to read next. This was the best thing a friend could do for me then. And it is one of the essential things that parents, teachers and librarians should do for their children.

However, I must add that though I was reading a lot by the end of that two years, I was only reading to pass the time. I would not have said it was the most important activity in my life.

### *Act Three Scene One: 'The Story of Jim and the Penguins'*

Here is a brief account of this pivotal event in my life based on a longer version, 'Pick up a Penguin', which is included in a collection of my essays, *Reading Talk* (Thimble Press, 2001):

When I was thirteen and a half I was moved to the town's academic grammar school from the high school for less able pupils I'd been sent to at eleven because I was judged not to be clever enough for an academic education. It was at the grammar school that I was taught by the man who helped me take the next step to being a serious reader. Jim Osborn was the strict, witty, brisk, critical, rigorous Head of English, the kind of teacher with whom you did not dare misbehave. For him, reading literature, and talking and writing about it, were the heart of education.

My first encounter with Jim involved the poem 'Kubla Khan' by one of England's greatest poets and critics, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, of whom I had never heard. Jim strode into the room, carrying a record player and a pile of books. As we twenty-five boys watched him with nervous attention he put a record on the player,

looked at us through the thick lenses of his glasses, said 'Listen', and switched the record on. What emerged sounded to us mesmerised pupils like gobbledegook – utter nonsense. After a few seconds, he stopped the record, pointed to the nearest boy and said 'Repeat what you heard.' The boy couldn't. Jim went round the class. No one could. 'Listen!' he said again, this time with stern emphasis. A few more seconds of confusing sounds. Then another tour of the class. 'Repeat what you heard.' Again no one could. Jim gave each boy a copy of the books he had brought with him. He called out a page number and said, 'Listen!' What we heard were the first words of the poem on the page:

*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan*

*A stately pleasure-dome decree...*

Then Jim read the poem to us himself, made a few of us have a go at saying the first lines, and played the whole poem again on the record. After that, he asked us what we thought of it, if we liked anything about it, whether we knew anything about the poet. And when he had let us have our say, he told us the story of the poet, how the poem came to be written, explained the poem in his own words, showed us how the words were orchestrated to make music as well as make sense. He made no concessions. He did not pander or flatter us. He insisted on precision: the right use of words, and a careful attempt to say exactly what we meant. I had never been taught about reading and about language like this before. It was hard, sweated work.

I don't know about any of the other boys in the room that day, but I do know that when Jim left us at the end of the lesson, the pile of books clutched to his chest, the record player hanging from his other hand, and his black academic gown, which teachers wore in those days, billowing around him, the world for me had changed. Words had suddenly, in forty minutes, come to mean more than mere words. I did not yet understand the controlling power of language, but I had felt it. Poetry had come alive. From that moment, nothing anyone said, and no printed word, no sentence, no paragraph, no book was ever the same again, and reading was never again simply a pastime activity.

Because of Jim's teaching, in the following five years I became an avid, thoughtful, serious reader, and learned how to interpret a text of any kind and to enjoy doing it. I also became a regular buyer of books. And because my parents had very little money to spare, I learned to buy only those books that had more to offer than I could take from them in one reading. In other words, I also learned the value of owning copies of the books that really mattered to me and of rereading them.

It was when choosing a book to buy one day when I was fifteen that I came across *Sons and Lovers*, a novel by D H Lawrence. I had never heard of Lawrence, did not know that he is one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. I bought the book because its title made me think there would be some sex in it and at fifteen I was rather keen to find out about that. I began reading it that evening and didn't stop, night after night, till I finished it.

No book had ever captured me so completely since the first time I read *The Adventures of Worzel Gummidge* five years before. And the reason was simple. This was the first time I read a book about myself. Till then, I had thought literature was about other people, whose lives were more interesting than mine. But with *Sons and Lovers*, everything Jim had taught me fell into place and finally made profound sense that I could grasp with my mind as well as my feelings. And why did it have to be *Sons and Lovers*? Because it is a story about a young man whose father is a coal miner – most of my relatives were coal miners – and whose mother is determined that he will not go down the mine and believes that reading and education were the way to a better life. My mother was like that. The boy loves the country and working on a farm. So did I. He has a girlfriend with whom he has a relationship that is more spiritual than physical. So did I. And he is interested in the life of the mind, in reading, in poetry, in his feelings and his consciousness of himself, of who he is and who he wants to be. So was I.

This novel spoke to me, and it spoke for me about everything that mattered to me. It showed me that my life was as interesting as anyone else's. Some people call a book that has such a transforming effect an 'epiphany book' because it reveals you to yourself and shows you what you are and can be. My epiphany book had such an effect on me that the night I finished reading it, I knew instantly that I was a writer and that what I wanted to do – what I had no choice but to do – was to be a writer of novels.

The point I want to make in telling this story is that I believe it is not until you find yourself like this in a book that you become a dedicated reader. I call such books 'The Literature of Recognition'. The problem is that no one can ever choose your epiphany book for you. You have to find it for yourself. Which brings me back to the fact that you need to be able to roam about among a lot of books if you are to become a committed serious reader and that schools have to make this possible for everyone, not only for the privileged.

#### *Act Four: 'Lessons from the classroom'*

I was a teacher in secondary schools for eleven years. During most of that time I taught English and drama and was the librarian in a school for five hundred boys and

girls aged eleven to sixteen who were not academically clever. Many of them rarely read a book. My job was to help them to read more and with more understanding. These are some of the important lessons I learned during those years, many of which repeated the lessons I'd learned as a child. Let me begin with a question.

Why wouldn't these young people, and many like them today, read books?

First, because most of them were from homes where there were very few if any books, where their parents or guardians never read for themselves, and where no one ever read aloud to them.

Second, they wouldn't read willingly until I surrounded them with what they already knew they liked – special-interest magazines about, for example, sport, and the popular teenage magazines – and with books that were short and easy to read, were about people like themselves and were in paperback.

Third, they would listen all day long, if I read to them. In this respect, they were like people who had been starved of food and drink and needed to compensate for what they had missed. I read to them every day: folk tales, and very short stories, and I serialised novels I thought would interest them but which they said were 'too difficult'.

Fourth, we made books of our own. For some of these they chose what they would write about – their hobbies and topics of special interest like motorcycles and animals, as well as stories they made up. They always wanted to illustrate them with their own drawings and photographs and pictures cut from magazines and catalogues. Other books were made by all of us together: for example, collections of poetry chosen from poems they liked that I had read to them, and anthologies of passages from stories we had read. Writing makes readers. Writing and reading are symbiotic, the one generating more of the other. By writing you take possession of what you read and make it your own.

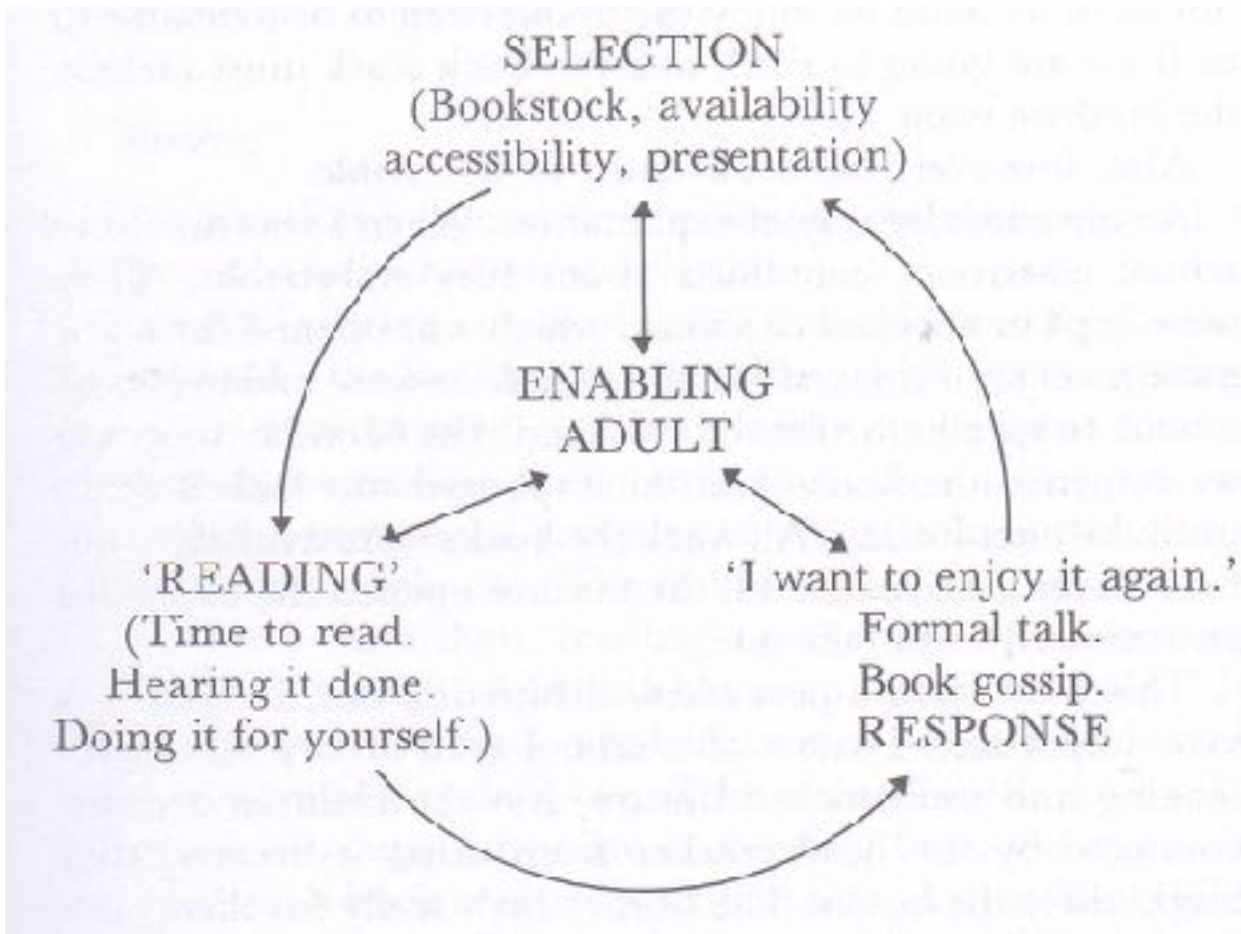
Fifth, we talked a lot about what they had read, about what they'd liked and didn't like and about anything they found difficult in the books we were reading together. The more I did this, the more I discovered how important talk is in the making of readers.

The sixth lesson is so obvious it seems ridiculous to mention it. You can only be a reader by doing it for yourself. It is equally obvious that if we want children to read for themselves they must be given time to do it. But the unhappy fact is that most children are not given time to read at home. The only place where they can do

this and be given the help they need is in school. Which means time must be set aside every day in schools at all stages of education for pupils to read for themselves.

Combined into a programme of teaching and learning, these activities can be presented as a map, which I call 'The Reading Circle'. I've described it at length in my short book, *Tell Me (Children, Reading and Talk) with The Reading Environment* [Thimble Press, 1991,1993, 2011].

Here is what the Reading Circle looks like:



With reading and books, everything begins with selection: selecting something to read, selecting when and where to read it, selecting to read rather than do something else, selecting who to talk to about what you've read, selecting what to talk about, which takes you back to the beginning again: selecting something to read.

There are inverted commas around the word 'Reading' in order to remind us that reading means more than merely passing your eyes over the printed words in order to decipher them. It also includes the time spent on reading the words, and thinking about them and imagining the characters and scenes and events the words describe. It also reminds us of the importance of hearing words read aloud, because we cannot easily read what we have not heard said.

Then the map shows us that when we have read something that excites us, stimulates us, means something important to us, we often want to talk about it to a friend or to someone else who has read the same book. And something else as well. When we have read a book that has given us great pleasure we often feel we want to ‘do it again’ – want to find another book that will give us as much pleasure. And so reading becomes part of our everyday lives, something we want to do.

Now let me sum up what I’m trying to say, even though this will mean repeating myself.

For learning readers of all ages, even at university, we must tell stories – stories about where we came from and how we came to be what we are – stories about ourselves, about our students, about our locality, about our nation, about the world.

For all ages we must read aloud from those books we want our students to read, so that they have heard said what they will then read for themselves.

We must surround our students with books of all kinds, which includes those they already know they like and will read willingly, as well as those we think they should know about and try to read. And we must make these books easily available. In any well-run school, the school’s library will be the most important place in the building.

We must give our students time to browse among these books, time to taste them and sniff out for themselves those they want to read.

We must give our students in-school time to read silently together so that they help each other build up the stamina and the concentration serious reading requires.

We must encourage our students to talk to us and to each other about what they have read. And we need to be skilled at helping them to do this, knowing what questions to ask and how to ask them, so that we do not scare off the students who feel least able to talk and are least sure of themselves. This means we must listen carefully to whatever they say, rather than wanting them only to say what we want to hear. I’ve written about this at length in *Tell Me (Children, Reading and Talk) with The Reading Environment*.

We must read for ourselves – readers are made by readers – and be seen to do so. The English poet William Wordsworth remarked that for children ‘their whole vocation is constant imitation’. They copy what adults do and show is valuable, especially adults they admire.



We must not forget that ‘acting the story out’ is instinctive to children, especially up to the age of nine or ten, and provide time and space for them to do this.

We must encourage our students to write and make their own books, by whatever means appeals most strongly to them, be that with pencil and paper or with computers.

And we must face this fact. There is no quick and easy way to make readers. There is no formula for the teaching of reading that works for everyone. It is achieved by steady unglamorous work day after day by teachers and librarians who love to read, who know what they are doing, know the books, and know their pupils.

### *Epilogue*

What is it that lies at the heart of our desire, our impulse, our *need* to read with passion and commitment rather than simply to pass the time? Forgive me if I answer that question by quoting from another of my books, this time my novel *Postcards from No Man’s Land*. An old Dutch lady is about to die. She writes a memoir about herself as a young woman for the main character of the story, seventeen-year-old Jacob, in which she says this about reading:

What a need we humans have for confession. To a priest, to a friend, to a psychoanalyst, to a relative, to an enemy, even to a torturer when there is no one else, it doesn’t matter so long as we speak out what moves within us. Even the most secretive of us do it, if no more than writing in a private diary. And I have often thought as I read stories and novels and poems, especially poems, that they are no more than the authors’ confessions transformed by their art into something that confesses for us all. Indeed, looking back on my lifelong passion for reading, the one activity that has kept me going and given me the only lasting pleasure, I think this is the reason that explains why it means so much to me. The books, the authors, that mean most to me are those who speak to me and speak for me all the things about life I most need to hear as the confession of myself. [p 271]

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