



The Red Thread of Reading for Pleasure: Looking Back to Learn

Article Author:

[Teresa Cremin](#) [1]

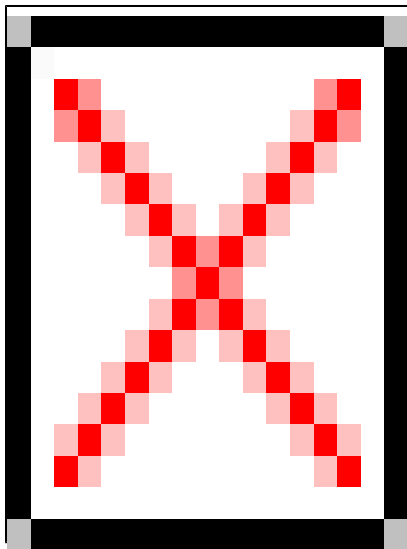
244 [2]

Article Category:

Opinion

Byline:

Teresa Cremin looks back to her early reading



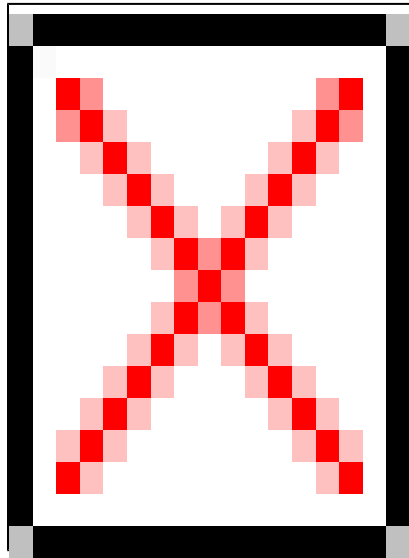
For readers of **Books for Keeps**, the affective power of reading has probably been experienced since childhood. No doubt you recall particular texts and contexts which supported you on our early journey as a reader. The red thread of reading for pleasure - choosing to read for recreational purposes- weaves its way from the past to the present, connecting us both to ourselves and others.

In this first of a trio of articles on the red thread, I invite you to join me as I revisit my early journey as a reader. By travelling alongside me, I hope that connections and resonances with your own reading life will surface. Others? personal narratives can prompt reflection, rekindle satisfactions and help us make sense of experience. In reflecting on our reading histories, individually and collaboratively, let's see what we can remember and what we might learn about supporting younger readers too.

Reading at home

My first memories are rather limited; my parents didn't read to us, yet books were always around, particularly fiction. I do recall reading and re-reading the relatively sparse collection we had at home, including my beloved **Mr and Mrs Bears? Visit** (Sendak), **Everything is Somewhere** (Vasiliu) and **The Family from One End Street** (Garnett). I also recollect trips to Banstead library and devouring **Jackie**, **Tammy** and **Mandy** magazines. My mother frowned upon such texts, but I delighted in them, exchanging them eagerly with friends and chatting about the black and white photo-stories, with titles such as 'Dear Diary' and 'If Dreams come true?'. Returning from the corner shop with dad on Saturday mornings, I'd rush to my bedroom with the latest 5p issue, shut the door and speed read the next instalment in

the hope of relationship advice and that longed for teenage kiss!



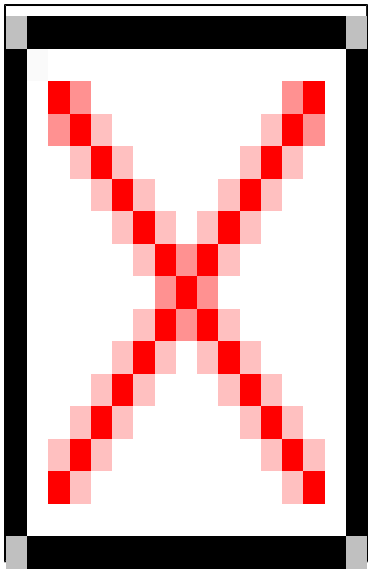
Years later I happened upon some reprinted copies of these (free with the **Observer**) and literally felt a visceral sense of joy and re-connection. I re-read them several times, thrilled by the pin-ups of Slade and a doe-eyed David Essex. The flowing floral midi-dresses reminded me of discos in Kingswood community hall with us girls dancing around a lone handbag and re-doing our make-up in the freezing toilets! Encountering these magazines as an adult, my past came back to meet me with a wry smile and a deep sense of adolescent angst. Needless to say, I have kept these jewels of yesteryear, and wasn't surprised recently when, during our OU book blether series (#OURfPBookBlether), we witnessed an emotional outpouring from teachers sharing their favourites childhood magazines and comics. Memories flooded Twitter and unsurprisingly we trended. These vignettes reveal the powerful 'affective traces' (Waller, 2019) that childhood texts retain for readers, and remind us of the value of creating secure affinity spaces in school. Such spaces enable readers to connect personally and affectively and are evoked by an ethos and culture of informal and unassessed book talk - reader to reader, regardless of age. They are also enriched by the togetherness of reading aloud, although much depends upon the text and context.

Reading on holiday

As we all know, reading is both a social and a solitary practice. The latter was particularly evident on our annual family holidays in a croft in the Scottish Highlands where my dad fished with my brother, while my mother and sister went bird watching. Personally, I read. Alone in the bracken (with a meat pie or sausage roll and the promise not to move until they returned), I'd go on adventures far more exciting to me than my siblings' literal realities. I loved the alone-ness, the peace, privacy, and time to immerse myself completely. The nearest town, Ulapool, was an hour away, so whilst I always took new books, I was obliged to re-read those which remained there. Characters from books by Babbitt, Byars, Cooper, Garner, le Guin, and many more became my constant companions. Maybe I drew comfort from the steadfastness of these texts, the predictability of the cast of characters to whose worlds I returned each year. Perhaps this normalised re-reading for me and showed me that as readers we bring fresh memories, thoughts and feelings to each encounter. Reading there was not only an affective experience, but a physical and highly situated one - reading in the bracken or by the fire with a cocoa as the rain battered the windows contributed significantly to the experience.

Looking back, do you recall any particularly salient places as a young reader? Context counts in our early text encounters and shapes our experience of reading, as memoirs of childhood reading often show (e.g. [Mangan](#) [3], 2018). In school therefore, creating 'comfy' reading spaces where readers can become engrossed in the text is not an additional extra, but each reader's right. It may involve developing child-made dens, book nooks or outdoor crannies. What matters most though is not the aesthetics of the space, but the comfort and concentration enabled, alongside opportunities for conversation and connection.

Reading at school and university

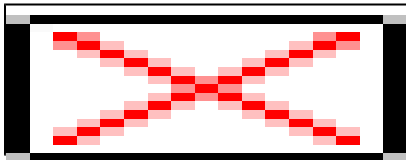


My memory of being a reader at school is not that strong. Were we read to? I know not. Did we have reading time? I know not. I do remember in secondary school reading Joan Lingard's **Kevin and Sadie** stories about love during the Irish troubles which were being played out at the time. As Mackey highlights, 'we read our own worlds into the words of our books, and these worlds will not be subtracted from the understanding we develop from the texts' (2016, p. 263). I found pleasure in poetry too, in part fed by the rhythms of church psalms and hymns, Gang show songs and 70's lyrics, many of which were re-read and re-sung. But as A levels came to dominate my world, I stepped back from choosing to read in order to study. No one from my family had ever attended university, I wanted to break the mould. My leisure reading was sacrificed.

At Bristol, I read psychology and papered my room with the verses of Plath, McGough, Heaney, Mitchell and others whose voices I wanted to possess, but made no time for fiction, even on holidays. The habit had gone, dusted down perhaps as a passing childhood passion. I think I saw myself back then as an apparently 'learned' student reader of social anthropology and child development. Did studying distance you too from your former reading self or did you power through? If so, what helped I wonder. Friends 'a reading network - your ingrained habit - a penchant for a particular genre? In school this autumn, with the pressure to ensure academic 'catch up' and the persistent backwash of assessment, supporting students as volitional readers may prove challenging, but it is essential and potentially transformative.

Reading in teacher education

Fortunately for me, Morag Styles, my PGCE English tutor at Cambridge was inspirational. A passionate reader herself, she read to us and introduced us to stunning texts and authors, many of whom we met. It was like coming home, with new friends to meet and new places to adventure in. That year rekindled my love of literature and reshaped my whole career as a teacher, teacher educator and researcher, but that's another story?



This autumn over 30,000 students started initial teacher education courses. Some of them will never have experienced the affective power of reading, still others may, like me, have drifted away from recreational reading. It is critical therefore that ways are found to encourage them as readers and as Reading Teachers (teachers who read and readers who teach and who explore the synergies therein). Teacher trainers do an ace job, but it's tough with just 9 months on a PGCE for example. Teachers' repertoires of children's texts represent the cornerstone on which effective reading for pleasure pedagogy is built (Cremin et al., 2014), and their identities as readers influence the identity positions they make available to children (Kucirkova and Cremin, 2020). That's why I'm delighted the Reading Agency partnered with the

Open University to develop the [Teachers? Reading Challenge](#) [4]. This involves setting your own reading target, rich recommendations, curated reviews, space to blether and much more! The take-up has been phenomenal and it's open until October 31st so do join us. Perhaps like me, you'll choose to re-read a text from your childhood, and go back to learn about being a reader through revisiting your own reading history and let the red thread of reading for pleasure guide your way.

Professor Teresa Cremin is a Professor of Education (Literacy) at The Open University in the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies.

References:

Cremin, T. Mottram, M. Powell, S, Collins R and Safford K. (2014) **Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for pleasure** London and NY: Routledge

Kucirkova, N. and Cremin, T. (2020) **Children reading for pleasure in the digital age: Mapping Readers? Engagement**, London: Sage

Mackey, M. (2016) **One Child Reading: My Auto-bibliography** Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press.

Mangan, L. (2018) [BookWorm: A memoir of childhood reading](#) [3] London: Square Peg.

Alberta Press.

Waller, A. (2019) **Rereading Childhood Books: A Poetics: Perspectives on children's literature**, London, Bloomsbury.

Page Number:

12

Source URL (retrieved on Oct '20): <http://wvjxyve.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/244/childrens-books/articles/opinion/the-red-thread-of-reading-for-pleasure-looking-back-to-le>

Links:

[1] <http://wvjxyve.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/teresa-cremin>

[2] <http://wvjxyve.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/244>

[3] <http://wvjxyve.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/229/childrens-books/reviews/bookworm-a-memoir-of-childhood-reading>

[4] <https://teachersreadingchallenge.org.uk/>