

# Creative Reading Charter

## Does reading have a future?

**by Alan Gibbons, an award-winning children's author and organiser of the Campaign for the Book**

A better question might be: do you have a future if you don't read? Young people who fail to access the possibilities of education find themselves excluded as never before from the job market and wider achievement in society. The modern world demands from its employees the ability to innovate and challenge and that means using language at a high level of flexibility and sophistication. Now hold on there, say some, as did a co-panellist recently on Radio Five Live as he characterized me as a book dinosaur, shouldn't we be talking about the new digital and ICT platforms instead? Aren't we all Googling these days? Isn't a proponent of books just a latter day King Canute wailing impotently at the oncoming tide?

Well, my touch-typing friend, publishing remains a multi-billion pound industry worldwide. The book, that ubiquitous piece of technological kit, is everywhere. It is read at home, on the bus, on the tube and at the airport. Witness the Harry Potter phenomenon. Many authors undertake school and library visits. Invariably, youngsters snap up our books. I sold 118 at one 'gig' recently. They do more than just buy books, however. They read about us on our websites and blogs. They write to us before and after the visit. They send us their stories. They even make their own You Tube trailers about our books. In other words, the most successful of our young people do it all. They browse the internet. They play games. They go on Facebook. They watch TV. They read books. They create their own multi-media responses to what they read. They are not passive recipients of information technology. They engage with it directly and confidently.

These readers don't see a fundamental dichotomy between ICT and books. They understand instinctively that they are all forms of technology. The book superseded the scroll and the clay tablet. Is it about to be superseded itself by the computer? Only time will tell but I suspect watching the way intelligent young people behave gives us a clue. I know one school student who is selling his new e-book because it just doesn't live up to the reading experience offered by that clever configuration of laminated cardboard, paper and print, the paperback. Teenagers' reading tends to tail off because of the pressure of examinations or because the places offering books fail to live up to expectations. My answer? Simple. First, do fewer formal exams. Finland doesn't put its youngsters through high-stakes national testing until 17 and regularly tops the UNESCO rankings. Secondly, bring our poorer public and school libraries up to the level of the best.



This will mean reversing years of neglect. Book spend in UK public libraries has declined for the third year running, according to the latest statistics. What's more, total reported staff numbers have fallen by 1.2 per cent, with professional staff hit particularly hard, down 6.2 per cent. A disturbing minority of Head teachers is seriously considering closing libraries and sacking librarians and replacing them with the Virtual Learning Environment. Yet I have seen the future and it works. I am one of the authors in residence at the National Gallery. Young people come along, view a great painting, then write a fictional response to it with my help. It is a model of how to reinvigorate our schools and libraries. Follow me on a journey of artistic and literary rebirth.

Key Stage Three SATs have been abolished. What do we do in its place? Well, what about an integrated language and literature strategy which brings writers and artists into schools? To do this effectively, we need the teachers on board. OK, let's get authors, illustrators, librarians and publishers much more widely involved in initial teacher training. Let's launch our students into their teaching career with a conviction that a reading child is a successful child. Let's put children's literature modules right at the heart of English teaching. It would involve three steps:

\*Step one - reading the right books. What is available? Can their authors come into school and inspire the pupils? Can they show how they reinterpret great books from the past in their own work?

\*Step two - write the right stories. Can we get authors to lead writing workshops, in partnership with the teachers, to make young readers into writers?

\*Step three - present the resulting reading and writing on the new ICT platforms. Could we have school blogs to showcase work? Could students make trailers of their favourite books and post on-line reviews? Could they create on-line writing magazines? Could they integrate the end-product with drama, art and music, film the results and post it on line?

The good news is that the green shoots of all this work are appearing in numerous initiatives across the UK. All we need is some coordination to turn it into something special. There should be reading and writing road shows at the Imperial War Museum, the National Maritime Museum, the Natural History Museum, the London Dungeon and at sport stadia. Most of all, they should take place in those cultural centrepieces of our communities, the school and public libraries. To consolidate this new literary and artistic commitment, student teachers should return, once in place as Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) with their head of department and librarian to review progress now they are in post and build on the experience.

There is a clear choice. We can blunder on incoherently, reducing our schools to test factories, allowing many of our school and public libraries to become tired and irrelevant, or we can generalize from the many localised powerhouses of good practice that exist and create something new and vital in our cultural life. Let's shake things up with a new battle cry: all power to the imagination!

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