

Creative Reading Charter

Why don't people burn more books?

by Ekun Eshow, director, ICA

Why don't people burn more books? Admittedly book burning is a practice that acquired something of a bad reputation during the course of the 20th century. But it's about as sensible as our current approach to the books we own, which normally involves reading them once, sticking them on a shelf to gather dust and occasionally purging the least favoured items via a trip to the charity shop. It's a classic dysfunctional relationship. We take them for granted when they're around but we can't bear to let them go because we're reminded of the good times we once had.

But treating them like this is to lose sight of the fact that the only true purpose of a book is to be read. If we can't love them the right way we might as well let them burn. Surely better that than the long slow waning of ardour into neglect that's the fate of so many of the forgotten books on Britain's living room shelves.

This is where libraries are supposed to come into their own, of course: as a place where no tome goes unread, no volume of prose or poetry untreasured. That's the theory anyway. But public library closures are on the increase – 38 in the year to March 2008, up from 35 in the previous year. And increasingly, they are being defined as information centres or online resource points as if they were no different to any other branch of local services like refuse collection or road mending. Earlier this year the 759-pupil Meadows Community School in Chesterfield announced they were closing down their library in a "move towards the relocation and redistribution of non-fiction and fiction resources in the light of the new developments in a virtual learning environment and interactive learning."

It's easy to condemn such a decision – and the deathless language deployed in its defence – as the work of vulgarians. For all I know, Meadows School might have come up with a vastly more stimulating and imaginative environment for its kids than the old-fashioned library. But it strikes me as telling, and not a little heart-rending, that the protest against its closure – which has now attracted authors like Philip Pullman and Michael Rosen, the Children's Laureate – was begun by the school's pupils when they learned their librarian was losing her job.



And the decision feels of a piece with a larger national trend to reduce spending on books (down one per cent in the year to March 2008) in proportion to expenditure on interactive and audio-visual materials like DVDs (up 4.2 per cent in the same period).

Doubtless there's a sober economic rationale for all this to do with how best to allocate spending in support of local needs. But that's only to miss a glaring point.

Libraries aren't simply information centres that exist to meet functional requirements. They are places of culture. Gateways into the unknown. Every book demands of its reader that they take a leap into the dark in return for the promise of adventure or enlightenment, pleasure or sorrow. In this respect, the closest comparison to a library is an art gallery, a theatre or any other space where artistic experimentation and risk-taking is housed and supported.

In 2003, the BBC conducted a poll to find Britain's favourite books. At number one was *Lord of the Rings*, followed by *Pride and Prejudice*, the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. As well as revealing a relish for high fantasy among the British public and a predictable correlation with movie or TV tie-ins, I suspect there's another factor governing these choices. My theory is that we discover our best-loved books at the time when we are discovering life itself. I have vivid memories of visiting Queensbury Library in north-west London as a kid and opening the pages of Tolkein's epic for the first time. How many other people on the BBC's poll also found their way to those top five books as children or young people at their local library? I'd guess at a good number.

By the time I'd laboured through the whole *LOTR* trilogy Tolkein's charms had faded for me. But there were numerous other authors that I first encountered then that I still love today: James Baldwin, Richard Wright, F Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemmingway, Stanislaw Lem, Jorge Luis Borges, Flann O'Brien, Kurt Vonnegut. Their books helped me make sense of the world. They helped shape who I am today. But I doubt if I'd have come across a number of them if I hadn't felt free to take risks on unknown names within the setting of the library. I'm sure this is a familiar story for anyone who loves the written word. And that shared awareness of the virtue of artistic endeavour is ultimately one of the cornerstones of a civil society

How strange and how wrong then that an argument to the contrary can be levelled because the means with which we share knowledge have shifted. Books and libraries do not become less valuable in a digital age. Sure access to the internet brings with it unprecedented opportunities for the dissemination of knowledge. But to decrease spending on library books or to close libraries altogether in response is hardly good thinking. That would suggest that all words, all texts, have equal value – as if what we might trawl for on the Net, wonderful or useless as it may be, has the same inherent

worth as, say the Wasteland or Moby Dick. The truth runs counter to this. It speaks for itself each time we open a good book.