

Creative Reading Charter

The narrative's the thing

by Kate Mosse, author, co-founder and honorary director of the Orange Prize for Fiction

***"No entertainment is so cheap as reading, nor any pleasure so lasting"* Lady Mary Wortley Montague (1689 – 1762)**

How many years ago was it that Roland Barthes proclaimed the death of the author? The wheel turns – as it always must – and we are all authors now. Authoritative organisations like the BBC or Al Jazeera invite us – exhort us even – to tell them our views and have our say. Some bloggers write articles longer than any Sunday feature editor would commission. Often people are writing about subjects that barely get a mention in the established media.

Alongside that, even as recently as 20 years ago, there was a moment when climbing the career ladder meant not having to write your own letters anymore. The report could be delegated to the junior, the new graduate trainee, the assistant or secretary. Perhaps there was an oral briefing from the superior, or a session of dictation to be completed with extensive research by the junior. No more.

Because of the widespread use of computers, laptops, mobile phones, more people than ever before write on a daily basis. Today we craft our own emails and memos. Everyone is responsible for the way they 'come across' in print, in tiny fugitive phosphor letters on our transient screens. We write, we read – self-justification through texts we consume and produce.

It seems to me, that debate about the 'future' of reading is actually not to do with reading at all – or even writing – but more a fear that the physical object of the book is threatened. Much of the debate seems to focus around this. Certainly, the statistics released too frequently citing book borrowing from libraries is down, is predicated on this premise.

This misses the point. The narrative is what matters, the fact of story telling, not the method or tool by which that narrative is delivered. The telephone did not destroy conversation – it found a new way to promote it. An e-book will not change the need for the printed book. How often do you think to yourself: "I wish I had about 120 novels to choose from to read on the train this morning, instead of this fantastic new Anne Michaels?"



It is much more likely that the clever, slick new generation of e-readers will encourage just that – new readers, human ones this time. Those for whom the daily habit of reading for pleasure is not ingrained, for whom the digital medium is the gateway.

**"All books are either dreams or swords,
You can cut, or you can drug, with words."
Amy Lowell (1874 – 1925)**

I think there is a lurking sense that not enjoying books is wrong, a sign of intellectual immaturity. Now, it's true that not reading is an opportunity lost, but it is not a moral matter or a matter of cultural policy. The idea of a 'right' to engage in reading is well meaning, but daft. Certainly some children come from homes where books furnish the rooms. Others do not. But, any child in school will be given books to read, will see teachers with books in their hands. The provision of books in the general consumer market place – Asda, Tesco, Sainsbury, Waitrose, at the airport and bus station and train station, is extensive now. If, as might have been the case, some potential readers were intimidated by the prospect of Waterstone's, or Borders, or even W H Smiths, then that landscape has changed.

There is also a stifling argument about 'good' versus 'bad' reading. Many readers – a majority of them men and boys – regularly engage in story-telling and reading in fantasy genres in books, magazines and computer games. How many children, like my son, developed a love of history from the brilliant, detailed and arcane introduction provided by the text-rich *Age of Empires* real time strategy games?

There is also a problem of language. The questions posed by this policy discussion are shrouded in what the French call the *langue de bois*, the wooden tongue. If you call reading a 'cultural activity', it suggests there's a problem to be solved, whereas there's just the immemorial and invigorating ebb and flow of fashion and habit.

In one way and another, I've been involved in campaigning on behalf of libraries. As co-founder and honorary director of the Orange Prize for Fiction, I've worked with individual librarians who are dedicated to increasing reading opportunities and provision for all. The paperback tour for my latest novel, *SEPULCHRE*, was almost entirely structured around libraries rather than bookshops. (The events in Worthing October 2007 and the new central library in Barking in May 2008 were particularly inspiring in terms of audience and questions.) Most authors do not care whether a book is bought or borrowed, only that it is read. When you have a new book out, it's just as exciting to see 30 copies all waiting on the 'reserved' shelf of your local library. More significant, in a dynamic library, the audience is more varied, in terms of age and interest and background, than at a literary festival or even bookshop. As an author, you learn more in such surroundings.

'*Tout au monde existe pour aboutir à un livre.*'
(*'Everything in the world exists to end up in a book'.*)
Stéphane Mallarmé (1842 – 1898)

There's been a substantial improvement in entrepreneurial attitudes in the past five years in libraries. There are excellent partnerships between local independent booksellers and libraries which, 15 years ago when setting up the Orange Prize, would have been impossible to organise. But sometimes these events seem like an afterthought and do not benefit from rigorous professional standards seen elsewhere in the library service.

Because after-school and other children's clubs get so much attention, do we neglect, year on year, the 70 per cent of adult users? Should we look squarely at the changing role of a library service in a world where a brand new best-selling paperback costs less than one hour of the minimum wage? Although libraries have worked hard to transform themselves into meeting places for communities, even 'hubs', the fact remains that people read alone and they read at home. A library is a library, not a coffee shop.

"*After three days without reading, talk becomes flavourless.*"
Chinese Proverb

Special pleading for the importance of reading is nothing new. But neither, strangely enough, is suspicion of those who like to huddle in solitude and immerse themselves in fiction. Is that perhaps why so many people find libraries – at first sight at least – off-putting places? All those clever browsers, knowing what they are looking for and why. And, once they have found it, they will retreat back into their homes to enjoy it alone like a selfish treat.

Books are different. No doubt about it. They have a special place. They are perfectly portable, durable, annotatable and customisable, recyclable and lendable, intimate and loveable. '*Habent sua fata libelli*' wrote Terence in the 2nd century CE, 'books have their own destiny'. I am not worried that the book is about to disappear. So, let's worry less, celebrate more. Whatever the format, whatever the subject matter or apparent significance, text is king. Reading is not under attack, only our attitudes to it.