

# Creative Reading Charter

## Background briefing to the provocation papers

To kick start our work on the Creative Reading Charter we asked six people to challenge us with thoughts on the future of reading as a cultural pursuit and libraries' role in spreading it. This briefing document pulls out some of their thinking. You can find the full texts at [www.readingagency.org.uk](http://www.readingagency.org.uk). The provocateurs are:

- Victoria Barnsley, chief executive officer, Harper Collins
- Tony Durcan, president, Society of Chief Librarians with Miranda McKearney, director, The Reading Agency
- Jonathan Drori, director, Changing Media Ltd
- Ekow Eshun, director, ICA
- Alan Gibbons, author and organiser of Campaign for the Book
- Kate Mosse, author and co-founder of the Orange Prize for Fiction

### Key themes

#### Is reading important as a cultural activity?

- I think there is a lurking sense that not enjoying books is wrong. Now it's true that not reading is an opportunity lost, but it is not a moral matter or a matter of cultural policy. If you call reading a 'cultural activity' it suggests there's a problem to be solved. Let's worry less, celebrate more. Reading is not under attack, only our attitudes to it. **Kate Mosse**
- Why is it that cinema, theatre and other audience events count as cultural activity, but reading does not? Doesn't reading require more creativity to create for oneself the atmosphere and environment from bald text rather than to hear or see it through a 'director's' orchestration? Isn't reading a more raw, almost primeval cultural activity? Isn't reading for pleasure also a core creative skill...leading to a fluency of reading which in itself is a core life skill? And what about reading in groups, and engaging in common experience/analysis and discussion. Isn't that a shared cultural activity? **Tony Durcan**
- 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. **Ekow Eshun**
- The ability to concentrate and read deeply is very precious. To use our imaginations in tandem with an author's requires time and space, and also practice to achieve. **Jonathan Drori**



### **Does it matter if, what and how people read?**

- 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. Teenagers' reading tends to fall off because of the pressure of examinations or because the places offering books fail to live up to expectations. **Alan Gibbons**
- Our electronic world increasingly leads us to expect instant and continual highs. I worry that it's easier for a young person to become a participant in the digital world, than it is to become a participant in a world that requires focus. We need to ensure that citizens have the ability and the desire to concentrate and stick at something. I wonder whether the digital divide is as important as the attention divide. **Jonathan Drori**

### **What will the future of reading look like?**

- Until the invention of the Worldwide Web, reading tended to be a private, solitary activity. The internet has turned readers from passive consumers of the text into active participants in an interactive conversation. This blurring of the acts of reading and writing makes even more nonsense of attempts to elevate certain forms of narrative, by giving them more cultural status. **Victoria Barnsley**
- The debate about the 'future' of reading is actually not to do with reading at all but more a fear that the physical object of the book is threatened. This misses the point. The narrative is what matters, the fact of storytelling, not the method or tool. The telephone did not destroy conversation – it found a new way to promote it. I am not worried that the book is about to disappear. Whatever the format, whatever the subject matter or apparent significance, text is king. **Kate Mosse**
- Technology progresses quickly. Where e-paper is black and white and a little fuzzier than we'd like, it will become pin sharp, and colourful. Batteries will last longer between charges. Sound, moving pictures, interactive graphics, touch screens and network connections enabling downloading of books anytime and anywhere will be standard features. New technologies give people wonderful ways to collaborate and participate, to discover and create. **Jonathan Drori**
- They will continue to read the way they do now, through serendipity, through friends and media recommendations, through chance. They will read today's future equivalent. But future readers will also read more graphic novels, more feature material, shorter fiction, will quickly embrace new formats like talking books via ipod, and of course the electronic book. And they will also read the blog, the wiki, and their successors. **Tony Durcan**

## **The way forward: how can we spread reading, and what role should libraries and other distributors of reading be playing?**

- As publishers move into the digital future we must redefine our role. The publishers that will prosper in decades to come will be those that contribute to the experience of readers, that facilitate the interaction of readers, with writers, and with each other. For publishers the new activity will be largely virtual through online communities and platforms. For libraries, there's surely an opportunity to mirror this kind of socialisation of reading and writing in a bricks and mortar world.

**Victoria Barnsley**

- In the last ten years, people have been starting to use libraries differently. They are leaping at the chance to join a library reading group or share reading experiences through the library website. Last year 690,000 children did libraries' Summer Reading Challenge. One hundred thousand people now belong to library led reading groups. Two million people joined the library during the National Year of Reading. Authors like Alexander McCall Smith are getting bigger audiences in libraries than other venues. The national conversation about libraries is so one sided - it's astonishingly hard to get an airing in the media of these cheering trends. Whilst fighting cuts, we must create a vision for a stunning new 21<sup>st</sup> century library service. One that brings reading alive in communities, and draws us together to share it. We need a re-invention of libraries' radical, equalising role and it's linked inextricably to reading. Which is not the same as simply providing access to rows of books on a shelf – the future of libraries' reading work needs to be much more multi-media and much more dynamic than that.

**Miranda McKearney**

- 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 is hardly a good thing
- There's been a substantial improvement in entrepreneurial attitudes in the past five years in libraries. There are excellent partnerships between local booksellers and libraries which, fifteen years ago 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.

**Ekow Eshun**

**Kate Mosse**

## **The way forward**

- In our new digital world, publishers and librarians should no longer see themselves as gatekeepers, or providers of culture, but as the guides or facilitators to the experience of consuming and interacting with that culture - and its creation. The modern library could become a real social networking site for reading. Libraries should aspire to becoming the ultimate book clubs.
- There is a clear choice. We can blunder on incoherently, reducing our schools to test factories, allowing our school and public libraries to become tired and irrelevant, or we can generalise 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 battle cry: all power to the imagination!

**Victoria Barnsley**

**Alan Gibbons**

- If libraries concentrate they could exploit some powerful opportunities and future trends. They need to get ahead of the curve, fast. In the face of globalisation libraries offer a precious sense of community. Their green recycling approach suddenly seems very modern as we angst about climate change. And what better moment than the credit crunch to be reaching out to new people with a 'free reading' message? **Miranda McKearney**
- Perhaps libraries have the opportunity to become temples to focus and concentration, quiet havens in a sea of media that compete for our attention, where we can choose to be alone yet part of a like-minded community. **Jonathan Drori**
- Should we look squarely at the changing role of the library service 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, the fact remains that people read alone and they read at home. The library is a library, not a coffee shop. **Kate Mosse**
- What are the 'reading challenges' for the modern public library? Focusing on reading rather than being enslaved to lending, and the number of books borrowed; exploiting the less well known writing as well as promoting the bestseller; providing easy routes in for those new to reading, and at the same time more challenge and opportunity for the comfortable reader; balancing reading with learning, digital, knowledge, study and information. **Tony Durcan**
- Dreams for the future? A serious capital investment in library buildings – if schools can be tackled through Building Schools for the Future, why not libraries? A reshaping of the relevant local authority performance indicators; further development of big, shared national reading programmes and partnerships that help libraries develop a convincing offer to new audiences. For the time poor, a digital/postal way of borrowing library books, along the lines of the Love Film model. And a recognition by cultural funders and planners that reading is our biggest cultural pursuit, and libraries one of our finest achievements. **Miranda McKearney**