

Creative Reading Charter

Reading and libraries in the 21 century and in the future by Tony Durcan, Society of Chief Librarians, with Miranda McKearney, The Reading Agency

Part 1: Tony Durcan

Does reading still count as a cultural activity in this cultural world?

- So, the film, the play, the radio reading – were they better than the book and the story?
- Why is it that cinema, theatre and other spectator/audience events count as cultural activity, but reading, either alone or in a group, does not?
- Doesn't reading require more creativity to shape the key players; 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 (and the inevitable personal interpretation) 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?
- With a talking book the narrator's voice makes it one step removed from that first, intimate, personal experience of reading.

So, what are the 'cultural creativity' criteria reading does not meet?

- But why, once one can read fluently, is it so easy?
- How do we introduce the colours, sight, smell, taste and sound of what we read? Is it because we learned to read through pictures and traditional stories/fable where the expression was handed down to us?
- And what about reading in groups and engaging in common experience/analysis and discussion. Isn't that a shared cultural activity?
- And if it isn't...why isn't it?

Reading enables us to exercise our imagination.*

Why it matters to public libraries that reading is seen as a cultural activity

- Unless reading for pleasure is acknowledged as a cultural activity it won't be counted as one, or part of one of those 'good cultural things' like visiting a museum, engaging with the arts, or visiting a library. And that means that the decision makers and the funders won't see it as significant. And the contribution and importance of our greatest cultural activity to one of our most important skills will continue to be obscured.

* "The book is a tool that allows us to exercise the imagination" **Peter Conrad, Observer, 19 October 2008 (p21)**

How and what will future readers read?

- 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, the best seller, the backlist, the newspaper recommendation, light fiction, contemporary novels.
- But future readers will also read more graphic novels, more feature material, and shorter fiction.
- Future readers 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.

Are libraries the right place to support reading in the future?

- Public libraries are *a* right place, but not the only one.
- What other places are there? The bookshop (too often with only the contemporary/current/in print collection); web/TV/radio book broadcasts can encourage and stimulate reading, but don't provide the wherewithal.
- Contrary to what I unashamedly call the 'London or cosmopolitan view' many people do not have access to a large collection at home, or have the budget to buy what they want to read.
- But we have to remember that libraries are about reading rather than lending – the experience rather than the transaction.
- And public libraries are key entry points to the digital world, providing access (mediated if required) to the new reading and writing media such as blogs and other user generated content (and a fluency of reading is key to being able to engage with these formats).
- Apart from the library, where can you for example be sure of bringing together a collection of 'contemporary' sequence novels such as Proust, Powell, Raven and Stewart?
- Where else do you have the cocktail of serendipity, gentle guidance, clear direction and the unlimited back-list?
- What other organisation can stimulate and support creative book and reading based groups like these examples?

one: the graphic novels group

Bringing together a range of people, aged between 20 and 50, male and female, students, civil servants, a comics illustrator, web designer, local government officers, librarian, university lecturer. They discuss the stories as all book groups do, with the extra dimension of the illustration and what the author shows through the *mis en scene*, in the same way a film director works.

But just because more information is provided by the creators it doesn't mean that interpretation isn't required by the reader, or that the story can only be 'read' in one way. Motivation of the characters and their interaction is still central to the story, and dialogue – as in print-only books – can tell us as much or as little as possible.

two: the Starbucks reading group

We want to read, and we particularly want to talk about what we've read, and have a drink at the same time. And still have time to continue with the ordinary day. An after work / before evening meal / club / TV meeting is what's required. The Starbucks format fits the bill. And the library service suggests the books and provides them.

three: summer reading schemes

Reading schemes run during school holidays across the country result in wide ranging cultural programmes. At a celebration for just one inner city library in Newcastle, over 60 children and their families attended competitions, a celebration and prize giving. These children, of all backgrounds and cultures, had enthusiastically embraced stories about football, had explored sports journalism, and had achieved real reading and writing success. Reading was clearly an enthusiastically shared interest, and a great community leveller.

What are the 'reading challenges' for the modern public library?

- Focussing 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.

Part 2: Miranda McKearney

In the last ten years, people have been starting to use libraries differently. They are leaping at the chance to go to library author events, 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 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 21st century library service. One that brings reading alive in communities, and draws us together to share it. We need a reinvention 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.

If libraries concentrate they could exploit some powerful opportunities and future trends. They need to get ahead of the curve, fast and position themselves as leaders of reading. With the contraction of the book retailing market, there are new opportunities to relate to readers in new ways. The socialisation of reading through festivals, author events, reading groups and on line conversations gives libraries a huge role in connecting readers to each other. 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. What better place than libraries to support the growth of the online expert amateur movement? And what better moment than the credit crunch to be reaching out to new people with a 'free reading' message?

There are threats too. Sitting where they do in different parts of the local authority, libraries are struggling to make a strong case for their reading role, and are often pulled this way and that in response to a complex new performance regime. There's a real danger of it becoming unclear what libraries are there for, a danger that their

fundamental, radical purpose of giving us all access to the world's knowledge is diluted.

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. .

Tony's postscript - how times have changed

A view from 50 years ago:

"What proportions of the issues from public libraries are of worthless fiction, or of that kind of non fiction which is really only a sort of fiction with the added pleasure of a 'true-life story'. There is no virtue in the habit of reading for itself." **Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy 1957**

And more recent views:

"Reading is an experience; books have to be internalised by each of us, with effort by us in response to the degree of challenge from the book."

Richard Hoggart, First and last Things, Aurum Press 1999