

**LIBRARIES AND THE YOUTH OFFER –  
THE WOW FACTOR**

I want to begin by just saying that the title of this talk – the Wow Factor wasn't my idea – I don't think I've ever apart from this talk, actually used the word "wow". And I fear that for most teenagers saying "wow" is a bit like saying "big deal". The kind of thing they'd say when a well meaning parent buys them exactly the wrong games console, or perhaps an Anthony McGowan novel rather than a Bloc Party cd.

But, whatever the title, I was delighted to be asked to speak about libraries and young people.

It's a subject very close to my heart.

I'm going to be coming at it from two directions, which may or may not meet in the middle. To begin with I'm going to talk about my various experiences of libraries, firstly back in the days when I was a young person myself, and later as a writer visiting school and local libraries to work with teenagers. I'll try to draw some lessons from those various experiences, and make a few suggestions, none of which involve two of my pet hates, the false gods of "cool" and "respect".

After that, with my authorial hat on, I'm going to try to show how I go about the job of writing for teenagers, stressing that mine is only one of a number of possible strategies for engaging with young minds.

**Libraries and Me**

In some ways I was a good candidate for library indoctrination – a willing victim, if you will. My parents were quite intellectual, but also rather poor, so there were always books in my house, just never enough of them, and never the right ones. So, books were neither strange nor over-familiar to me.

As a youngster I was interested in facts. I had that little boy thing, of wanting to amass information as a way of ordering and understanding the world. And the facts I really wanted were facts about warfare and facts about the world of nature – they were the only categories of information that really existed for me, back then.

The village school didn't really have a library – just what was called the Quiet Corner, with three deeply stained bean bags, and a row of Janet and Johns so battered and abused if they'd have been human they'd have been taken into care long since.

And so, eventually, I found my way to the local library. As I remember it I went originally to find books that would help me to get the camouflage scheme right for my Airfix Spitfire, and to provide pictures I could copy of Roman siege artillery such as that extremely cool enormous crossbow, called the ballista.

Whenever I go back to visit my parents, I can now only see the library building as an unprepossessing bungalow, in typical sixties brutalist style, with a tang of Barrett Homes

cheapness to it. But back then the lino gleamed with almost unbearable excitement and promise.

I know you've heard today about some of the very welcome innovations and new approaches to library design, new ways of making young people feel welcomed and comfortable, by creating that familiar hybrid Starbucks-cum-Waterstone's experience.

But back then what I loved was how different it was from everything else I knew, particularly my own, chaotic home. The neat shelves, the smell of polish, lovely clicking sound of heels on the hard floor. For a long time my vision of heaven was a bit like that.

But most crucial to me was the presence of the person I can only ever think of the Library Lady. Perhaps this kind of librarian doesn't exist anymore – that would be a shame. My Library Lady had big silver hair, rinsed sometimes blue, sometimes purple. She wore her elaborate, pearl-inlaid glasses on a chain around her neck. Her blouses were full and memorable. And she would hush persistent whisperers in a voice so penetrating you could use it to bore through titanium.

She sounds like a monster, but she was, in fact, simply wonderful. She recognised me as a neophyte, found out what I was looking for, and pointed me to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for help with my ballista, and then on to the *Guinness Book of Animal Facts and Feats*, which has remained ever since a sort of bible for me. It was there that I found the picture of a forty-foot long tapeworm, which haunts my imagination to this day

After several months of this sort of thing, my Library Lady, thinking I was ready for something new, beckoned me over and pressed upon me a copy of the *Fellowship of the Ring* – the first part of Tolkein's the *Lord of the Rings*. I didn't know what to make of it – I was eight years old and had never read a novel of any kind. Didn't, in fact, no what a novel was. Well, over the next year – which is how long it took me to read it – I found out.

All the way through that year the Library Lady encouraged me not to give up. By the end of it I was a different kind of boy – the sort of boy that read novels, the sort that, one day, might go on to write them.

For the next ten years my Library Lady carried on recommending books, gently nudging me in certain directions. The last book she ever recommended to me was *Catch 22* – another book I have whole chunks of off by heart.

I want to stress that there weren't any teenage – or any age – reading groups at my local library, just one outstanding librarian, with enough interest to talk to one little boy, and carry on talking to him, transmitting her love of books to me.

At university, the library was mainly an arena for flirtation, or rather, endless frustrated longing. Later still, working on a PhD thesis, libraries became a workplace, and lost much of their pleasure and magic. And in the 1990s, like many people, bookshops began to take the place of libraries for me, and I was overtaken by that oddly perverted longing to own books as physical objects, rather than to possess them as things of the mind.

And I remember having persuaded my wife that we should get our thrillers from the local library, and joking that the pages these days are hardly ever stuck together with bogies – it

had certainly been years since I'd done that. Reading one in bed, she found that two pages were strangely reluctant to be parted. A final pull resulted in a dried green projectile pinging out with a sound like a rifle shot and the velocity of a bolt fired, naturally, by a ballista.

I next fully re-engaged with Libraries when I was a harried and stressed primary carer for my eldest child, Gabriel. There are three libraries close to where I live in North London, and I soon learnt when each had their toddler groups; and what a life saver they were. And I think we all know that, however important it is to involve teenagers, the real groundwork has to be done with the younger children – and their parents.

There are many high level skills that librarians need to acquire in dealing with pre-school kids – the ability to sing all the verses 'Wheels on the bus go round and round', and 'Five little ducks went swimming one day' without that look of crazed boredom coming into their eyes; being able to speak above the high pitched keening of a child deserted while its Ukrainian nanny pops outside to call her boyfriend; the art of not becoming riveted by the efforts of a three year old to scratch the inside of her skull by sticking her finger up her nose. Perhaps most important, the ability to shut out the warm stink of nappies slowly filling all around them.

Yes, these are special skills, and I don't know what I'd have done without the librarians who ran the sessions, but the simple truth is that the skills you need in working with teenagers are of a different order altogether, rarer, and more challenging.

### **Visiting Author**

Not that I knew much about that until, as an author, I began to visit schools and teenage reading groups in local libraries on a regular basis.

And I have to say up front that I've found the experience of working with teenagers incredibly exhilarating, stimulating, and exhausting. Without doubt the most difficult and rewarding thing I've ever done.

I run two sorts of session – a straight author talk about my life and work, and, more interestingly, creative writing sessions, at which I'm never less than astounded at the quality of work the kids produce.

Compared to those of you who do it day in day out, my job is relatively easy – I have an hour or two to keep the kids interested, and I can usually get through on an adrenalin high, augmented by a couple of cans of Red Bull, and almost never helped by alcohol.

One of the things that has most struck me – the main lesson I've learnt, in fact, is how important a vibrant school library is. It was something entirely lacking in the two secondary schools I went to. The first had a pleasant room, but there was no full-time, or even part time librarian, and very little in the way of books to interest a teenager – the usual row of Dickens, some Shakespeare, spineless dictionaries and encyclopaedias. Oh, and a copy of Wilfred Owen's poems that I found, with some dismay, in my bedroom last time I went home. The second school had a much better library, and a live – just about – librarian, but it also had that

old-fashioned, pervasive gloom. The librarian had a wooden leg, and we'd listen to the creaking of the leather straps on it as he patrolled the room, making sure we read in silence.

Good school libraries these days are completely different – often the beating heart of the school. My fear was that libraries might have become an extension of ICT suits, and, of course, most do have their banks of PCs. But in the schools I visited, I genuinely got the impression that they existed for the books. But they also had a different function – as a refuge for the shy and quiet kids, the emos and the misfits, a place of sanctuary. And that seemed exactly right.

What they all had, the good ones, I mean, were dedicated staff, the librarians and their assistants. As a former civil servant, I'm all in favour of plans and schemes and structures, but the fact is that all of those things remain empty shells without the right people.

Of course, you're all here because you're not at all like this, but the truth is that Librarians aren't always, shall we say, natural communicators. I'm sure we've all come across Librarians who give the impressions of really not wanting to lend out their books. Especially not to the loud teenagers, almost certainly off their heads on glue and alcopop cocktails, with who knows what pierced appendages under their death metal t-shirts.

And yet, it's having people that can work effectively with teenagers that really counts.

That point was hammered home even more for me by the teenage reading groups I've visited. School libraries have, in some ways, a captive audience. But to get teenagers to come out in their own time on cold nights to talk about books – books they're reading, or, as in the case of my friends from the Sheffield group, books they're writing, takes a very special kind of person.

### **Don't be cool**

Well, what kind of person? More widely, what kind of environment do I think we should be providing?

There are two things I'd like to say.

1. Don't try to be cool;
- and
2. Don't get hung up on the all pervasive concept of respect.

I'm going to talk about respect in relation to my work as a writer, but for now, you're probably asking what's so wrong with being cool? Isn't that how we draw the kids away from their Playstations, and text-a-thons? Shouldn't we all try to be cool, too?

Well, frankly, no. You're not, and you never will be. Books aren't cool, libraries aren't cool, librarians aren't cool. Authors, on the whole, aren't cool, either.

Thank god. I think we're all more important.

Cool signifies exclusivity. Coolness only exists as a minority standing apart from the uncool majority. Coolness says *me*, perhaps even *us*, but not you. It is also, by its nature, protean, amorphous, fugitive. Frankly, any attempt by a library to be cool will miss the target, possibly by years. You are doomed to be a dad at the disco, hopelessly pogging in your v-

neck sweater and Farah slacks while the kids wet themselves, in mirth or embarrassment, behind your back.

I believe that we shouldn't even try to operate on the cool/uncool axis, but a completely different one – the fun/boring axis. I don't know about you, but the cool people I've known have always been the most boring.

There are other ways of selling Libraries to the young, other qualities that step into the hollow space left by cool. Libraries are one of the last refuges of the social virtues. We don't own library books we share them with the community, and there's an important lesson in there for young people constantly bombarded with the propaganda of consumption.

Linked to that is the green aspect – and I'm not talking about the pages stuck together here. Young people are often highly aware of environmental issues. Books are made out of trees, and using the library is a way of saving the planet, as well as your pocket money.

So my advice is, don't be a hep cat, be an eager puppy. Don't be cool, be friendly, open welcoming. Share your fervour; infect the young with your eccentric enthusiasms. In fact those you should be particularly welcoming to are the uncool, the outcasts the lonely, the helpless. And give them a copy of the Guinness Book of Animal Facts and Feats! That tapeworm is really something.

### **My Books**

Okay, so that's enough of me telling you your business. How do I try to get those notoriously reluctant readers to open my books?

Well, not, as you can see, by being cool!

Nor is it by either giving, or trying to earn respect. –Despite the government's much vaunted Respect Agenda. And what I'm saying here pertains, I think, both to my job of writing for teenagers, and your job, of getting them into libraries.

For me, respect is the tribute you pay to your enemies. It's that tough guy nod that accepts that your opponent can do you as much damage as you can do him. Respect's natural environments are Cold War politics, street thuggery, boardroom takeovers. Not literature, not the library. At best it's a purely negative value – don't mess with me and I won't mess with you. Or, in the terms of the Respect Agenda, don't litter or vomit or urinate in the street. All highly commendable, of course.

Respect exists as an alternative to friendship. Friends don't respect each other – they like each other. Watch real friends walk down the street after school. They'll trip each other up, relentlessly take the piss, laugh, joke, shove, goad, support, enjoy themselves. No respect there at all.

So I'd like to replace it with a different set of virtues. Don't respect teenagers, like them. Be amused by them and, in turn, make it your job to make them laugh.

So, as a writer, respect doesn't do it for me. Nor – and this may surprise you – in my novels, do I try too hard to enter completely into the world of young people, speaking their language, addressing their everyday concerns. Which isn't to say that that isn't a perfectly legitimate way of writing for teenagers.

At almost every school I've visited I had the misfortune to be preceded by a very fine writer called Bali Rai, whose work you may be familiar with. He obviously does speak directly to young people, in their own voice. He writes simple, direct prose, and his plots seem woven out of real lives. And in that he's a brilliant antidote to vacuous books about dragons and wizards, or those pernicious teeny chic lit books I see everywhere, crazed with consumerism and full of advice about what to do with your chewing gum when you're necking your boyfriend. Along with other writers like Melvin Burgess he's done a brilliant job of making ordinary kids feel that books are for them and about them.

It's a good way, but it's not my way.

My novels are not written in simple direct prose.

I try to supercharge my language, ramming it full of metaphors, jokes, parodies, paradoxes, and great winding digressions on whatever happens to come into my head. My writing isn't restrained or well mannered – I'm trying to dazzle and astound. My goal is to have my readers engage in a violent debate with my books. I want them to be appalled, amused, disgusted, irritated, but never, I hope bored. I want a reader of my book to throw it across the room, and then, a little while later, go back and pick it up and start laughing again.

What I most want them to do is to engage with the language, to come to see that words aren't simply a utilitarian way of transmitting simple thoughts, but entities that work on multiple levels, to beguile and entwine and seduce the reader.

As well as trying to entertain, I have, I'm afraid, designs on my readers. I spent rather a long time over my education, and I'm reluctant to waste what I've learnt; so I try pretty hard to squeeze in as much as I can from the world of ideas. If you read one of my books you're going to be made to grapple with serious moral questions, using some of the reasoning tools that philosophers employ. And I think that's something that young people welcome. If you think back to when you were teenagers, wasn't that the time when you felt most passionate about serious issue, about truth and beauty, about right and wrong, about good and evil? Well, I'm afraid, with me you'll get all that in spades.

You'll, also if I'm being honest, get a lot of fart jokes.

### **Bad language**

There's something I must touch on here. When I won the Booktrust Teenage award the Daily Telegraph responded with an article headlined 'Filthy book wins teenage prize'. Other reviewers have picked up on the 'controversial' nature of the language and subject matter in my books, and I know quite a few librarians have serious qualms.

I had one discouraging conversation with a school librarian in the Midlands. She was helping to look after me for the day and we were getting on very well, and she told me how much she enjoyed my books. She then said that of course she wouldn't have them in *her* library, because the language was unsuitable for under 16s.

In my books I use language which is often ripe – in particular I go in for what one might call the comedy of the human body, the noises it makes, the embarrassing things that it does. It's a sort of glorified postcard comedy. But there's relatively little effing and blinding. In fact I

stress in the books that casual swearing is lazy language. I'm an advocate of creative foul language, language that pushes itself to the limit.

In my first book for young people, *Hellbent*, I quote a lengthy passage from the Thomas Urquhart translation of Francois Rabelais, which is essentially a list of complex and arcane cussing, which I put forward as alternatives to the usual playground insults, although I suppose it's not very likely that many kids have actually deployed slabberdegullian druggel, blockish grutnol, or even shiteabed scoundrel in anger.

However, in my books, I do occasionally, resort to the common or garden swearwords, and I suppose that it's this that offends those who have a mind to be offended.

I'd justify this in two ways. The first is that I tend only to employ swearing at times of heightened emotion. In *Henry Tumour* my hero emits a stream of f-words on finding out that not only does he have a brain tumour, but that he has a brain tumour that talks to him. My defence is that if you can't swear when you find out that you've got a talking brain tumour, then, when can you swear?

Linked to this is the fact that although my novels aren't meant to be slices of social realism, I do want to make that connection with my readers, that feeling that we're operating in the same universe. And, frankly, a novel in which the worst thing a fifteen year old boy says is 'Oh flip' is simply not going to be credible to my readers.

I suppose the argument against any kind of strong language in a novel aimed at young people is that they are going to think this legitimises their own bad language. Or perhaps that they'll simply copy it.

This seems to me a ludicrously narrow way to assess the impact of a literary novel on the behaviour of young people. I just don't see how any teenager could read my books and come away with the idea that it makes it easier for them to swear in the playground.

Perhaps more importantly, if we're going to censor books because of strong language or, say, sexual content – then it isn't going to leave much – I suppose you'd probably still have Jane Austen and Enid Blyton, but out would go Shakespeare, every Jacobean dramatist, the entire output of the Restoration period, all the major eighteenth century novelists, and most of the important 20<sup>th</sup> century writers. No James Joyce, no William Faulkner.

It's perhaps here that I should set out more fully my own vision for the novel.

Clearly there are plenty of rivals for the time of teenagers. Multichannel TV, the cinema – both of which seem largely to have abandoned adult audiences in hot pursuit of teenage thrill seekers. Video games offer amazing bangs per buck in simple adrenaline pumping entertainment. What chance a novel, something which requires a real investment of time and intellect? To put this more generally, what is the point of novels? What can they uniquely supply?

### **The Point of Novels**

It can't just be entertainment. As I've said, films and video games can match novels for fun in the widest (or, perhaps, narrowest) sense. And nor is it the conveyance of factual knowledge, although I certainly see that as one of my duties, and I hope that anyone who

reads one of my books will learn things they didn't know before. But Wikipedia will tell you pretty well whatever you want to find out about almost any subject under the sun.

But what novels *can* do, in a way that no other human construction can, is to give the reader access to another human heart. Only a novel, I mean the great novels, can break through that shell of ego that surrounds each person, and show us, each to each, in all our vulnerability and grace as brothers and sisters.

It's been said that it's impossible to hate someone when you've seen them sleeping. I'd say that novels do a similar service for all humankind. And I have a test for this hypothesis – has anyone who's read *War and Peace*, or, I suppose more relevantly, *Crime and Punishment*, ever mugged another kid for their mobile phone?

And if you can do that, create plausible characters for whom the reader cares, and then fashion a believable world for them to inhabit, and do all this in a language that beguiles and bewitches, then you'll have something genuinely worthwhile, something that will tempt young people away from the rival, cheaper pleasures in which our culture is so rich.

And if I ever manage to pull it off, don't worry, I'll let you know!

I'm sure that we can all agree that there is nothing quite like the feeling of mingled pleasure and regret that comes in that silent moment after we finish a novel we've loved. And to deprive young people of those emotions just because someone says fuck on page 26 seems to me, a betrayal of what we should be about.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, what is it that we say about our favourite books? Do we say that we respect them? Do we say we think that they're cool? Can you imagine saying that you really respect *Jayne Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights* or *Great Expectations* or *Lucky Jim* or *Catch 22*? 'Respect' doesn't occur anywhere in our spectrum of praise for novels – the words that do, are words such as *like*. And, of course, the word we all use to sum up our feelings for our favourite books, *love*.

And so, returning again to the subject of libraries, don't try to be cool; don't try to get the respect of young people. Be open, be friendly, enthuse, bubble, make that connection. Lead them with geeky enthusiasm to the great, books they'll come to love. And they'll love you, honest they will, just as I still, after all these years, look back with love in my heart towards my Library Lady.