

STOP WHAT YOU'RE DOING AND READ THIS!

We've included an article by our Founder and Director, Jane Davis, published in *Stop WYADART*, published by Vintage, to bring attention of the value and power of reading. We've included it in the pack because it gives an account of the genesis of *The Reader's* mission to make Shared Reading part of the fabric of life.

JANE DAVIS

THE READING REVOLUTION

Literature and Time Travel, I had called it, in hope of getting some younger, some different people.

I was thirty-two, with my recent PhD tucked into my belt, relatively new to teaching, and my students in the Extra-Mural Department at the University of Liverpool seemed to me very old. Most of them were surely over fifty, but on the plus side they were interested in the literature, and I came to see them as brave voyagers. Time travelling, we visited the farms and pastures of thirteenth-century England with *Piers Plowman*, walked with Wordsworth and demobbed vagrant soldiers in rural Cumberland, and in Charlotte Bronte's *Villette*, with our poor French, battled against loneliness and paranoia in a foreign nineteenth-century town. In other words, I could have been done under the Trade Description Act, for despite the title, this was a course of reading in canonical English Literature.

The real USP, though I didn't advertise it, was that I knew *nothing*, almost literally nothing at all, about most of the texts that were to occupy our attention. This was literature for beginners with an ignoramus sitting at the lecturer's desk. The only things I was confident about were my ability to read the text (and not even that, in the case of *Piers Plowman*), to engage people in conversation and to bring an applied personality to whatever was up for discussion.

I taught in this way in that Extra-Mural Department for fifteen years. During that time, working alongside a couple of like-minded colleagues, I built up a large, loyal following of people who were willing to read in this inexpert, exploratory way. Often, what was being read was as new to me as it was to my students. Usually we read large portions of the text aloud in the class, to make it lively and present in our minds while we talked about it. That concentration on actually reading the book – here, now, in the room, together – was to become the cornerstone of *Get Into Reading*, the shared-reading model I developed when I founded the Reader Organisation in 2002.

Devoted individual readers, solitary and private, look away now. I'm going to suggest changing – or at least adding a new model to – the way you read.

The Reader Organisation's *Get Into Reading* programme develops read-aloud groups that meet once a week, with children as young as three and with people over ninety, taking place in youth clubs, high-security psychiatric settings, work places, dementia care homes, drug rehabs, schools, day-centres, libraries, corporate boardrooms, prisons, supermarket cafes. It's a reading group, but not as you perhaps know it.

STOP WHAT YOU'RE DOING AND READ THIS!

In shared reading the text, poem, novel, short story, play or whatever is read aloud, in its entirety, by one or more members of the group. The group talks about the book as it is read, freely interrupting the flow of the reading with personal responses ranging from 'My grandad had a dog like that' to 'I didn't know anyone could explain how it feels to go into battle as he's doing here- it was like this when I ...' (both responses to *War and Peace*). Read in this way, a short poem might take half an hour, a short story two hours, *War and Peace* eighteen months.

The model has profound implications in the realms of the personal and social, in terms of education and health: much of The Reader Organisation's work has been paid for from NHS and social-inclusion budgets. It would be a mistake, though, to see shared reading as something only for sick or unhappy or economically deprived people. It has simply been easier for us to develop projects in those areas where the need is most obvious. But *the need*, in our fractured society, is everywhere. It is time that shared reading reached the mainstream.

As you are reading this book, it naturally follows that you are an accomplished and dedicated reader. You think of reading as an individual, even a solitary activity, one that you would want to defend as such, because usually, for devoted readers, the act of reading is deeply private. I'm going to argue, though, that even highly proficient readers might want to try shared reading, which is in equal measure about books *and* people. It isn't just about getting non-readers into reading (though it does do that remarkably well); it is about building relationships out of communal meanings. Sharing a book is a multiplier, as anyone who has ever read, night after night, to a story-besotted child will know. It is about mutual recognitions, the sharing of selves. Let me give an example.

We had a good first term in that time-travel class, and celebrated with a Christmas party to which all the travellers brought food and favourite poems to read aloud. Pat, a university administrator; an imposing lady who reminded me of a jolly headmistress – capable, but good fun, and utterly *together* – read 'I Am' by John Clare. Written in a lunatic asylum, where Clare was incarcerated, the poem is very moving:

I am – yet what I am, none cares or knows;

My friends forsake me like a memory lost:

I am the self-consumer of my woes –

They rise and vanish in oblivion's host

Like shadows in love-frenzied stifled throes

And yet I am, and live – like vapours tossed

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,

Into the living sea of waking dreams,

Where there is neither sense of life or joys,

But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;

STOP WHAT YOU'RE DOING AND READ THIS!

*Even the dearest that I loved the best
Are strange – nay, rather, stranger than the rest.
I long for scenes where man has never trod
A place where woman never smiled or wept
There to abide with my Creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,
Untroubling, and untroubled where I lie
The grass below – above, the vaulted sky.*

When she had finished reading there was an appreciative silence, followed by people making some remarks about the poem, but then Pat said (I paraphrase from a probably faulty memory), 'This poem means a lot to me because I used to live on a farm in Australia and I became an alcoholic. I became so much of an alcoholic that I lost my marriage and my children....lost everything.'

She described, in brief and with a cool, resolute lack of self-pity, her life as an alcoholic who had lost everything. And then went on, 'And during that time, which lasted some years, I had this poem. I kept it all that time on a scrap of paper in my pocket, and I used to take it out sometimes and read it, and think, yes: I am. I am.'

This was time-travel indeed, this strange shared process that took feelings and thoughts in and out of individuals, in and out of time and place, and connected it and us all up: John Clare, Pat, the other students, me; Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, the streets of Melbourne, this Liverpool University seminar room, 1845,1975,1990. The room was charged with a powerful energy, the poem electrifying as we listened to Pat read it. It was the most moving thing that had happened to me in my career as a reader and a teacher of literature and it happened at a Christmas party, not in class: we were there as people and fellow readers, off-curriculum.

Look at the life-saving equipment John Clare packed into this poem of human wreckage: 'I am' it begins. A great stone slab of assertion. How powerful those opening words are when I imagine being in a state – 'the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems' – where who and what I am seems utterly insecure. Giving voice to the unbearably true, and *knowing it* in full consciousness, is like having proof of reality: 'yet what I am none cares or knows', most helpful, however painful, when you feel unreal, ungrounded. Clare is not afraid of going deep into his trouble in the second stanza or of imagining an alternative reality – an impossible, damage, but beautiful vision of a fresh start or even the relief of death – in the beautiful and saddened third.

I wonder now, how had John Clare's poem worked for Pat all that time she was in thrall to her addiction? Did reading it do her good in the pain of it? How could a poem help your life? Keeping hold of stuff when you are down and out is hard, people tell me: you are always on the move, you have to carry what you've got, and you often have to leave places sharpish.

STOP WHAT YOU'RE DOING AND READ THIS!

But she had the poem (first read in an anthology she'd won as a prize at school), and she'd kept or refound it and held onto it because it was valuable. The poem's very existence, on its scrap of paper in your pocket, tells of other worlds, worlds you might once have inhabited, worlds you may one day wish to find or refind. Read the poem alone and you have your own experience and imagination to touch the poem into life. Read it with six others and you have six lives and six imaginations with which to inhabit this flexible human-shaped space. You also have something non-literary: the growing connections between and among those six people.

Though I knew something powerful was happening at the Christmas party, I 'had the experience but missed the meaning', as T.S. Eliot puts it, for the significance of the moment didn't become clear to me until many years later, when I began to recognise it as part of a phenomenon that occurs when people are reading aloud and together, in a particular way. It is to do with three-sided connection between the text, the personality (which may be more or less explicit) of the person who is reading, and the people sharing the listening, in a kind of personal amplification. The reverberation of Pat's story has remained part of the poem for me, always there in the background, and I find the poem the more powerful because of the recollection and imaging of Pat's alcoholic (and recovered-alcoholic) setting. That anyone might have lived those three very different lives (the farmer's wife, rolling-stone alcoholic and university administrator) and that they might all be held together by John Clare's verses changed the poem for me, for ever.

I think of this story when anxious people challenge me about reading 'serious' literature in our shared-reading groups. Why not, they will often say, read *lighter* stuff – surely easier for people who aren't feeling too happy, or who have different social norms?

The plea for lightness may be a natural and entirely understandable fear of getting serious: lots of us spend a great deal of time not thinking, for fear of being brought down. Often, too, the person who imagines the 'lighter stuff' as being more appropriate – and in my experience this has included the GP, the prison governor, the librarian, the HR manager, even the literacy tutor – that person, often in authority, is still simply afraid of the word 'literature' and especially afraid of 'poetry'. I'm not sure that anyone *in* the world of literature knows how far *out* of the world of literature most people are. It's perfectly likely that, if they didn't do English at A-level (and most people don't), a senior NHS manager, a child-protection officer, a forensic psychiatrist, a clinical psychologist or police chief will never have read a classic novel or any poetry whatsoever. It says something about the way we see literature that no one finds this either surprising or alarming. At the other end of the literature-experience spectrum is the professional scholar, for whom reading is impersonal and abstract, and almost always deliberately cut off from life as we live it. It is easy to see why, when dealing with literature or life stuff, people think it better if we stick to the surface of things and splash around up there, lightly pretending there are no depths, when the depths seem either unplumbed and terrifying or, on the other hand, intimidatingly aesthetic, to do with a specialist, professionalised and narrow form of education.

In this cleft stick, buying stuff is one way of getting by, but Wordsworth put even that impulse into poetry in 1806:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:

STOP WHAT YOU'RE DOING AND READ THIS!

Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

That natural desire for pleasure is why addictions can get such a strong hold on us: getting all sorts of stuff, from alcohol to new trainers, can make you feel momentarily happier. But try as we will, we cannot ignore or shout down what Wordsworth calls 'our hearts', and consistently ignoring the inner life has put depression and anxiety high among the world's most serious epidemics. Depressive disorders are the fourth highest cause of disability worldwide. In people aged eighteen to forty-four depression is the leading cause of disability and premature death. (1)

Wordsworth argues in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* that human creatures live primarily in and by feelings – and that's why we need poetry. Thoughts, he says, are what happen when feelings settle down in us through repetition: as coal is to forest, so thought is to feeling. Positive psychology is opening up new areas of thinking in these fields, and I am impressed by the thinking of Professors Layard and Seligman, of the happiness and well-being movements (2). But readers of poetry already know that such ideas have often been the subject of explicit *literary* thinking, in the sort of deeper language, the language seeking depth, to be found in Matthew Arnold's 'The Buried Life' (1852):

Fate, which foresaw
How frivolous a baby man would be –
By what distractions he would be
possess'd

Bade through the deep recesses of our breast
The unregarded river of our life
Pursue with indiscernible flow its way...
But often, in the world's most crowded
streets,
But often, in the din of strife,
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life....

Despite our (perhaps also natural) desire to amass, consume and be mindless, the 'unspeakable desire' to know 'our buried life' is ancient and implacable. If we ignore it, or have no means of knowing it, that desire will come back and hurt us, as do all unmet primal needs. For Matthew Arnold, as for many people, the way to the buried life is through connection with another human being, an experience that animates powerful feeling:

Only – but this is rare –
When a beloved hand is laid in ours,
When, jaded with the rush and glare
Of the interminable hours,
Our eyes can in another's eyes read clear,
When our world-deafen'd ear

STOP WHAT YOU'RE DOING AND READ THIS!

Is by the tones of a loved voice caress'd –
A bold is shot back somewhere in our breast,
And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again.

But this is rare indeed. And ours is what sociologists call 'a low-affect society', interested in excitement, but wary of expressed feeling. Literature offers an alternative place to recover such lost feelings; and a shared-reading groups offers the community in which to do that together. Since Pat's reading of John Clare's poem, over the past twenty-five years, I have often seen or felt the bold 'shot back in the breast' when part of a group of people is reading together.

Another example: I went to pitch the idea of a Reader in Residence to a group of managers at an NHS specialist mental-health Trust. A man sitting at the table was introduced to me as John, a service-user rather than a manager.

John said to me, 'I've brought a poem with me and I'd like you to read it at some point'. I uncharitably assumed that John had brought me a poem of his own, and I agreed in a half-hearted way, and hoped we would run out of time before the moment came up. (You'll think this is cruel, perhaps, but I have been the editor of a literary magazine for ten years and have read more execrably bad poetry than most people have read newspapers.) The meeting proceeded, a meeting in an NHS meeting room: institutional furnishings, institutional carpet, even some institutional art on the wall. I spoke about what the Reader in Residence would do: the value of reading, the depth of poetry. It is hard to convey in abstract what we really do at The Reader Organisation, but I have to try to do so. Some of the managers asked practical questions, outcomes, logistics, budgets. The meeting wore on.

'Would you read the poem now?' said John, and pushed a piece of paper towards me. It was a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem, one of the so-called 'terrible sonnets'. John told us he had been an English teacher, but that life in a failing comprehensive school had brought on a nervous breakdown. He said, 'I'll never get over it. I'll never be able to ... go back to it'. This was a man of perhaps fifty. His sense of being unutterably broken looked very real. He told us that the poem helped him hold himself together when things were very bad. He showed us that he had a copy of the poem taped to the back of his diary. He said, 'Sometimes, if things are very hard, I can take it out and read it.' And he added, 'I can see that Hopkins managed to get it down, what I feel, in the lines. He got it all in an order: it's not the chaos. And that helps. Could you read it out?'

I read:

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief
Woe, wórl-d-sorrow; on an áge-old anvil wince and sing —
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked 'No ling-
ering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief.'"

STOP WHAT YOU'RE DOING AND READ THIS!

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

I read the poem with seven pairs of eyes on me, and felt my voice crack as if I would cry at the lines 'O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed'. Such powerful, revealing language to be using at a meeting table in this NHS building; such true, painful thoughts to be putting to senior mental-health practitioners and managers: 'Hold them cheap may who ne'er hung there'. And to be reading it to John, whose eyes were locked onto my face as I read, the eyes of a man awaiting, what...? The public exposure of some customarily unadmitted truth. As when Pat read 'I Am', it seemed almost dangerous, as if the air again were cracking with human electricity, or John had handed me some sad powerful magic, and I'd set it off by reading it aloud, a sort of spell. Despite the institutional furniture, we are primitive creatures in a cave. We have the magic of language. It's frightening and good. When I look up again some people around the table have tears in their eyes.

I don't expect many NHS meetings go like that. But we got the contract, and still work in that innovative NHS Trust, where many clinicians, nurses, service users, occupational therapists and NHS administrators now run weekly shared-reading groups – thirty-eight reading groups every week, at the last count. Should we keep it light? John would say we should keep it truthful.

Over the last 100 or so years the loss of the religious as a reputable discourse in common life has led to a poverty of language, and thus to a poverty of contemplative thought and feeling about what we are, and what we need. We need some inner stuff, scaffolding to help us get around our inside space, something to help us map, explore and even settle those places where we are still primitive. Beliefs help in the so-called well-being indices: people who are members of faith-groups are more likely to flourish than those who are not. For the rest of us, what are we to do with that unnamed place, space, sense? What is that part of being human which is touched by silence, which recognises an intense atmosphere when people are moved, which gets scared or exhilarated when alone in a big space, or when faced with a newborn baby? Science may gradually work this out: that is our mainstream model these days for accredited seriousness, for what we can be confident in believing. But literature – too often now dismissed or misplaced – has always known that buried part, and in thousands of ways.

It is not the medics or the psychologists who refuse to see this – on the contrary, the problem is that the best literature has been for too long (affluently) ghettoised on courses and in high culture, with too little human meaning actually acknowledged. One example: a well-known broadcaster can say this, of all things, in the *Observer*:

Being brutally honest, the only thing reading literary fiction qualifies you for is dinner-party conversation. Despite this, children who read early are seen as mini-geniuses. We're told that once we digest the classics we unlock the secrets of the

STOP WHAT YOU'RE DOING AND READ THIS!

universe, but there are days when I wish I'd learned to fix a boiler or basic electrics. Literature may be revered in high places, but most writers I've met are pretty useless at anything else. So we should be grateful there are intelligent children and adults out there for whom books don't appeal and whose skills lie elsewhere.

It may be honest, but it is brutal, even when trying to sound cute. In the face of this rather representative treason, I conclude, unashamedly, on behalf of a reading revolution.

We must reposition literature in settings – such as workplaces, mental-health services, dementia care homes, looked-after children services – where its profound worth will be seen for what it really is: the holder of human value human meaning, and, yes, even the secrets of the universe. The growth of materialism over the past 200 years, and the development of a sense of entitlement to happiness has created the misapprehension that if you are not happy there must be something – medically, physically – wrong with you. Many ordinary people who don't go to the GP for a diagnosis of depression are unhappy, ill at ease, at a loss, sad. This is what we used to call the human condition. But what people instinctively know and science is beginning to understand, (3) is that what makes people happy, above all, is a network of supportive fellow creatures, a sense of purpose, challenge and meaningful occupation. Shared Reading can provide all this. Get a few people together, pick up a good book and try it.

<http://bestpractice.bmj.com>

- (1) *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, Richard Layard (Penguin); *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*; Martin Seligman (Nicholas Brealey)
- (2) Seligman argues that well-being is a construct with five measurable elements: positive emotion; engagement; relationships; meaning; and achievement.