

# Wonder WOMEN

## The woman leading a quiet reading revolution

*Reading gave Jane Davis an escape from her own tough life, steering her towards a successful future. Now she's helping others find freedom through books*

By Carole Richardson

When Jane Davis describes her troubled working class upbringing in Liverpool, she doesn't mince her words.

"Think of the TV drama *Shameless*," urges the former university lecturer who's spent the past 15 years leading a quiet reading revolution across the country. "It is a bit of an

exaggeration but not much of one."

In the next breath, Jane (61) is talking about *Macbeth* in the same chatty manner. She's just crossed a huge cultural divide between gritty TV drama and Shakespeare and made it sound so natural. But she's had plenty of practice using her gift for communication, for since 2002 Jane's been on a mission to share great literature with people least likely to read it themselves

through her award-winning charity The Reader.

People who can barely read or write, as well as dementia patients, the homeless and mentally ill are just some of the thousands who have already benefited from her simple but clever idea to take the classics into the community to improve well-being for all.

On the street, in cafés, care homes and prisons, free from any academic pressure, stories and poems are read aloud initially by

just say 'come and have a laugh with six people,' " she says.

The scores of grateful comments she's heard highlight her success. One anonymous person in a rehabilitation centre, whose life had been completely wrecked by addiction, wrote: "For two hours a week I have meaning. Thank you."

Jane's own life story is probably the best example of all though for how literature, a subject she failed to pass at 'O' Level first time round, can be life changing.

As the eldest of four children, the responsibility of running the home fell on Jane's shoulders after her father left when she was nine and her pub landlady mum became an alcoholic.

At 12, she ran away for the first time. At 16, after passing just two 'O' Levels in English Language and Art, she hitchhiked to Brighton with a boyfriend. By 20, she was married, divorced and a single mum to Sian (now 42).

"Looking back, I think I didn't have any ambition for myself. I never imagined myself going to university. It just would not have crossed my mind but becoming a mum pulled me up sharp and

trained volunteers. The basic idea, Jane explains, is to bring small groups together to give them a language for their own emotions through literature such as Shakespeare. Interruptions are encouraged and opinions are freely expressed, shared and valued. The results of those connections often prove empowering and can be life changing.

"It is a live community experience that's therapeutic rather than being a direct therapy. I suppose we could

make me think about my life," she recalls.

She returned north, in her own words as "an angry young woman". Then things began to change. After joining a local Women's Lib group in the Seventies she crossed paths with several professional women who made her realise she could do more with her life. Enrolling at college she took 'O' and 'A' Levels and, in her early 20s, started an English degree.

But the course made her realise that university was still a shut-off world for many people. Despite the problems of her early home life, books were always plentiful and her mum encouraged reading.

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"I realised Mum would have loved the course I was on. I can still remember her playing witch scenes from *Macbeth* with us when I was seven or eight," she recalls.

After graduating with a first-class degree, Jane gained a Masters and a PhD, but found herself frustrated by the critical way literature was traditionally taught.

"The real value of reading seemed lost," she

says. Allowing students to read without analysing the texts, she was surprised by their emotional response, engaging more and sharing their own life stories and experiences.

Convinced by the impact, she started a literary magazine promoting shared reading in 1997. In 2002 she launched two weekly groups in a poor neighbourhood of Wirral, asking people to nominate participants who did not usually read. In the first week, group members had very strong personal reactions to the text and fellow participants stepped in to comfort one another.

Excited and encouraged, Jane started working full-time building The Reader Organisation, which to date has 350 groups in the UK and it's a model being looked at by other countries.

"I never imagined this when I started it," says Jane, who has been awarded an MBE for her work. "I just wanted to get people who were not into reading, into it. It's the small things that make me happy and I'm very moved by how much it has spread."

Married for 34 years to husband Phil, they have a son Ben (30) and four grandchildren, Jane is still as passionate as ever about the power of reading. "Reading changed my life. It gives you a bit of space; it's an escape into a place where you can imagine yourself different," she says.

■ For more details about The Reader Organisation, visit [www.thereader.org.uk/support](http://www.thereader.org.uk/support)

Jane is passing on a lifetime's love of classic literature