

The Reader

Issue 71

March 2020



The magazine of the Reading Revolution

I^r **The Reader**

The Reader magazine is the voice of The Reader, a national charity bringing about a Reading Revolution so that everyone can experience and enjoy great literature, which we believe is a tool for helping humans survive and live well. Through our global Shared Reading movement, powered by 1,000 volunteers and many partnerships, we bring thousands of people together every month through weekly reading aloud groups. We use literature to connect people to themselves and others, develop a shared language for our inner lives, and spark the social and personal change needed in the world.

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Printer: Buxton Press

Distributed by Central Books
www.centralbooks.com
Tel: 020 8525 8800
Email: contactus@centralbooks.com

Address: The Reader, Calderstones
Mansion House, Calderstones Park,
Liverpool, L18 3JB

Registered charity number: 1126806
(SCO43054 Scotland)

Email: magazine@thereader.org.uk

We are not currently accepting unsolicited
submissions of new fiction and poetry.

By reading this magazine, you are helping to bring about
the Reading Revolution, which is kindly supported by Arts
Council England, National Lottery Community Fund and
the players of People's Postcode Lottery.



Supported using public funding by
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**For information
about subscriptions
or ordering copies of
The Reader magazine,
please turn to page 59.**

Editorial

Welcome to *The Reader* magazine.
Or I should say, welcome back. This
magazine started life in 1997, founded
by three colleagues from the Continuing
Education Department at the University
of Liverpool with the aim of forging a
deeper connection between literature
and life. The editors took their cue from
this page in Saul Bellow's novel *Herzog*:

*'The people who come to evening classes
are only ostensibly after culture. Their
great need, their hunger, is for good
sense, clarity, truth – even an atom of it.
People are dying – it is no metaphor –
for lack of something real to carry home
when day is done.'*

Over the next twenty-one years, *The
Reader* magazine published seventy
issues, finding and writing about the
great books and poetry that can best
express, and help with, the messy,
difficult stuff of ordinary human life.
The original aim of its founding editors
– to feed that hunger and provide
something 'real' to those in need of it –
became an organisation at work in
the world, and a national movement.
The story of how that happened can
be found on pages 44–57 of this issue.

The magazine paused production in 2018
to undergo a redesign, and relaunches
as a biannual publication with this March
2020 issue. The new-look magazine will

endeavour to continue the work of the
previous version in providing personal,
passionate discussion and recommen-
dations of books and authors. Though
we will no longer publish brand new
fiction and poetry in the magazine, in the
regular section called 'A Little, Aloud' we
will showcase the stories and poems that
are being used in Shared Reading groups
around the country. In another regular
section, 'The Reader Interviews', we'll
meet and talk with well-known public
figures who draw stimulus and suste-
nance from an adventurous reading life.

Everyone who works or volunteers for
The Reader loves it and believes it can
be a force for good in the world. We
want Shared Reading to be available
for everyone, to reach more readers and
explain what we do and why it matters,
and to link up with other organisations
doing brilliant and inspiring work in the
fields of reading promotion, personal
development and mental health.

**If you want quick answers about the
work of *The Reader*, turn to page 41.**
If you're a reader in search of inspiration,
nourishment, something real to carry
home – the whole magazine is for you.



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The Reader Interviews...



Danny Boyle

Danny Boyle is the director of award-winning films such as *Trainspotting*, *28 Days Later* and *Slumdog Millionaire*. Writer, screenwriter and patron of *The Reader*, **Frank Cottrell-Boyce** is his friend and collaborator. We listen in to one of their regular book-swapping conversations.

Danny Boyle is a voracious and adventurous reader. One of the first things he does when setting up a production office for a new film is to make a kind of library corner where he can place the books, images and movies that he's been absorbing during the long slog leading up to that first day of principal photography. The cast and crew are welcome to browse or add to the shelves. I first saw this when he was filming my book *Millions*. A rare old copy of *The Six O'Clock Saints* by Joan Windham (it belonged to the Catholic production designer) sat between a gorgeous Taschen album of the works of El Greco and Jane Jacobs' *Death and Life of the American City* (this because part of the aim of the project was to celebrate the utopianism of a well-designed housing estate). A film shoot normally lasts between six and ten weeks. By contrast, the 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony, on which we worked together again, took two years to prepare, so the bookshelves in the little office in Three Mills in East London were groaning and extensive.

There was a lot of poetry, especially William Blake; picture books about festivals throughout the world; books about athletics; about London. A photographic history of the Windrush generation sat next to an elegant Folio edition of Eric de Maré's book about the Great Exhibition. Crucially there were a few treasured copies of Humphrey Jennings' long-out-of-print masterpiece, *Pandæmonium: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*, which became so central to Danny's vision that he named the opening section of the ceremony after it. We talked that book up so much that it was finally reissued. A character in Jonathan Coe's recent book, *Middle England*, spots the link and kicks off a chapter celebrating and reflecting on the ceremony.



Danny and Frank in Berlin © Frank Cottrell-Boyce

We haven't made a film together since then, though we came close to shooting one a couple of years ago about another voracious reader, David Bowie. I missed our book-swapping conversations. This one began as he was leaving my very noisy birthday party. Danny was saying goodbye to my wife, who asked him if he'd read a book that she'd just sent him called *War Doctor*. It's an account by the surgeon David Nott of his experiences performing life-saving operations under life-threatening conditions. Denise thought Danny would love it for many reasons, but mostly for Nott himself, who is unfailingly courageous, generous and inventive, an odd combination of cool (nothing seems to frighten him) and warm (he's very emotional). What we might call a 'castable' character. The most arresting thing about the book is the detached and meticulous way Nott describes the operations. After reading it you feel you could do a bit of brain surgery yourself.

Denise asked Danny what he thought of it.

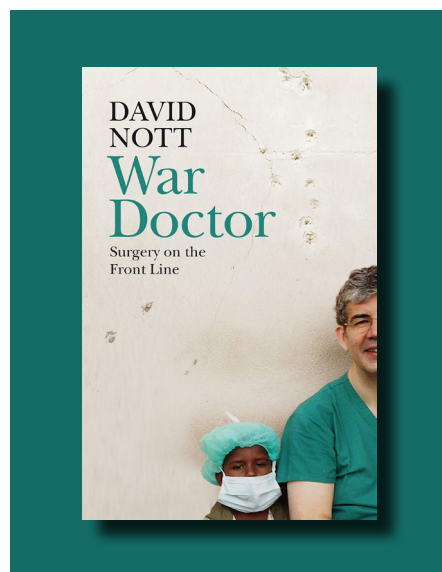
Danny: I haven't read it yet.

Denise: What?! I posted that book. And you haven't read it.

Danny: I've been reading all about robots.

Me: No! You can't be doing a film about robots without me. I'm the person who knows the most about robots.

Danny: It's not a film. It's a lecture. For the School of Digital Arts. It's called 'Will Robots Love Jesus?'



At that point I thought we probably needed somewhere much quieter to continue the conversation.

When we got on the phone a few days later, Danny asked me if Mrs Cottrell-Boyce had read the book he had sent her in return for the Nott book, Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*. Shalamov was an activist who was sentenced to three years hard labour in the Gulag's Kolyma camp. I said, 'I hid it before she started reading it,' explaining that Denise reads with an intensity unknown to those of us who skim through books looking for ideas to steal. Reading for her is an immersive experience. She becomes the characters she is reading about. I was not ready to spend a couple of weeks with someone who was mentally living out a Gulag sentence.

FCB: We are beginning to sound like a group of friends who give each other books not to read.

DB: You read Ted Chiang.

FCB: Oh gosh, yes.

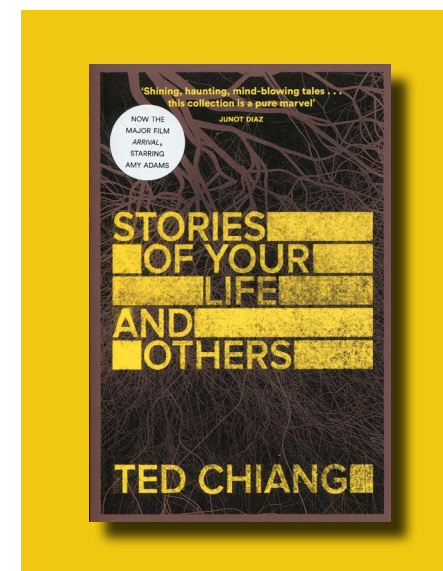
Danny had put me onto Ted Chiang a few months before when he was shooting his film *Yesterday* in Liverpool. Chiang is a Chinese-American science-fiction writer who had at that point only published one collection of short stories, called *Stories of Your Life and Others*. But what a collection! The title story – which was turned into the eerily beautiful film *Arrival* – is about trying to learn the language of some invading aliens. Another of the stories, 'Tower of Babylon', describes the building of the Tower of Babel in intense, realistic detail, as though

it was a real construction project. It reminded me of the sixteenth-century Dutch artist Pieter Bruegel's painting on the same subject, which goes equally heavy on the scaffolding. In 'Hell is the Absence of God', Chiang brings the same realism to portrayals of interventions by angels, who come to earth to save individuals but in doing so create a chaos of collateral damage. Danny and I are both hungry to get into Chiang's second collection, *Exhalation*, which has just been published.

DB: Don't get excited, Frank. I think various people have bought the rights to every story in both collections. They'll all be filmed. Without you.

FCB: Shopping for intellectual properties is not the only reason for reading. Where are you up to with the reading prep for your robot talk?

DB: *Novacene* by James Lovelock. Lovelock's the guy who put forward the Gaia Hypothesis, which is mad, obviously, but also kind of brilliant. This is the idea that we should approach the Earth as a single, living organism, self-regulating and dedicated to preserving its own existence. 'Novacene' is his name for the next era in life. He's predicting that artificial intelligence will take over, but it won't destroy us – there won't be a war of the robots. The robots will want to preserve humans, like pets. I know, I know. Far-fetched but you know, it's a great thought experiment. And what's interesting about Lovelock is that he's an engineer, not a scientist, so he comes at it from a more engaged, less theoretical point of view.



'I am pretty sure that only Earth has incubated a creature capable of knowing the cosmos. But I am equally sure that the existence of that creature is imperilled. We are unique, privileged beings and, for that reason, we should cherish every moment of our awareness.'

From *Novacene* by James Lovelock

He was the first to spot that CFCs were punching a hole in the ozone layer. And he's very pro-nuclear of course. Which is quite hard in our culture now that everyone's watching *Chernobyl*! The thing is... Lovelock is a hundred years old. Amazing that he should be publishing at all, but what I notice is that the world he's describing is so much more current than the one kids are watching in Marvel films. For all the digital effects and so on, the Marvel world is basically good and evil, and it's a world dominated by powerful individuals. Whereas it's striking that in the real world, no one seems to be in charge. Stuff – Wikipedia and so on – just seems to happen. Lovelock thinks the internet is a living creature with a will of its own, and to me that's a less preposterous idea than the existence of a super-being like Magneto. And even the film *Ad Astra*, which is supposed to be set somewhere closer to reality than a comic-book universe, is really silly. I mean you'd never send a human to the end of the solar system. You'd send an artificial intelligence. Lovelock is the only one who seems to get that.

FCB: Stanislaus Lem.

DB: Yes. He was onto that years ago with *Solaris*.

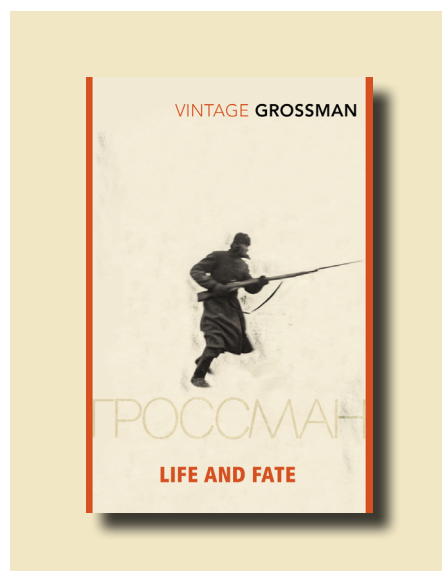
FCB: We're back to Gulags.

DB: I'm always drawn to those stories about extremism, especially about Russia.

Danny mentions Martin Amis' 2014 novel, *The Zone of Interest*. I've never really understood the appeal of Martin Amis. I can't get past the show-off sentences and when he writes about concentration camps, or about Russia, I think of Kit De Waal's commandment: 'Don't dip your pen in other people's blood.' I switch the subject to another author who writes about Russia.

FCB: Have you read *Life and Fate* by Vasily Grossman? He was a war reporter for *Krasnaya Zvezda*, the official Soviet newspaper. He was in Stalingrad and he was at the liberation of Treblinka; he saw this stuff first-hand. I think *Life and Fate* is up there with *War and Peace* for me. If I send you a copy will that mean you won't read it?

DB: No. Because I've already got a copy. It's on my shelves. I'm looking at it now. I'll read it. We were talking about *Chernobyl*. I read *Chernobyl Prayer* by Svetlana Alexievich. She won the Nobel Prize for Literature a few years ago. *Chernobyl Prayer* is a set of interviews with the



people from Pripjat – that's the town nearest to the power station. She's like Grossman, you know. She was – she is – a journalist, really. But she has an extraordinary voice. Well, she channels all these other voices.

FCB: So, is it all robots? Have you read *To Be A Machine* by Mark O'Connell? It's about people who want to kind of blend themselves with tech and become part human, part machine...

DB: Which we already are, most of us, because we've started outsourcing our memory to our phone and our sense of direction to our satnavs.

FCB: What about Hannah Fry's book *Hello World*? About how to be a human in the digital age?

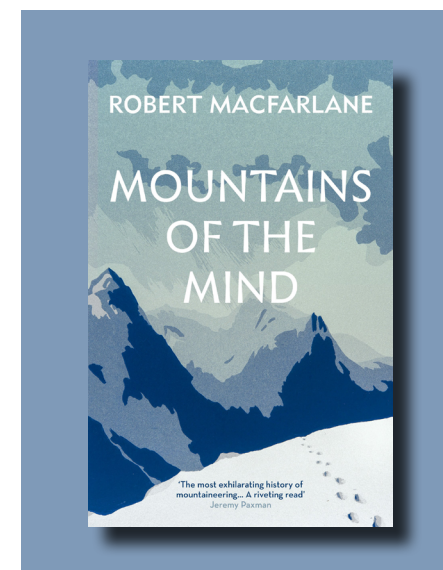
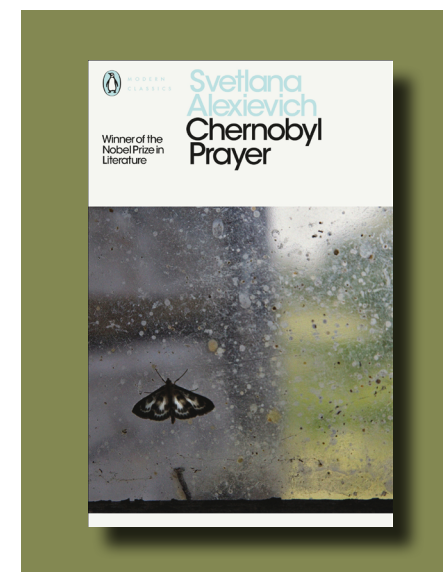
I'm clearly not going to catch him out. He's definitely read everything, and this lecture is going to be a masterclass in robo-erudition.

FCB: Is all your reading as focused as this? Is it all always building up to a movie or a speech or whatever? Do you ever read for fun?

DB: I'm reading *Mountains of the Mind* by Robert Macfarlane.

FCB: Oh, I love that book.

Robert Macfarlane – in case you don't know, and you really should – is the very best of the new nature writers. A few years ago, he heard that the shorter Oxford English Dictionary had removed the names of many common plants to make room for new words related to social media; blackberries had given way to The Blackberry, as he put it. So, Macfarlane got together with the illustrator Jackie Morris to produce a book of spells and riddles called *The Lost Words*, celebrating common wildlife. It shouldn't have worked: it was an outsize, extravagant book about nature in which animals were not cute or anthropomorphised. But it became a huge hit. *Mountains of the Mind* is his examination of our urge to risk everything in order to climb mountains.



**'O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there.'**

From 'No worst, there is none' by Gerard Manley Hopkins

FCB: I read it this summer because Xavier [Frank's youngest son] has started to do a bit of Munro-bagging.

DB: It's a beautiful book. A great account of Mallory's mad attempt to climb Everest in brogues and tweeds.

FCB: He takes against Mallory, doesn't he, because he took that risk when he had a family he should have been looking after. I think it's sweet that Macfarlane took that stance because – I met him at the Hay Festival – he has his own young family.

DB: Every holiday I end up with books about mountains or about the Tour de France.

FCB: I forgot about your bicycle obsession.

DB: I've read the biographies or the autobiographies of all of the Tour de France riders. Every holiday I read another one. Eddie Merckx, Fausto Coppi and oh, *Racing Through the Dark* by David Millar. That one is shattering. Millar was caught up in the big doping scandal. He says that everyone knew that the first twenty riders were [doping]. The guy who always came twenty-first was a Mormon, so he wouldn't even have coffee, never mind all the stuff that the other guys were on. So, that rider, the Mormon, was consistently twenty-first. Because he was clean. Twenty-first every time. Funny. But terrible too. Millar's book is about trying to restore your reputation by just grinding it out.

FCB: By burning 7,000 calories a day.

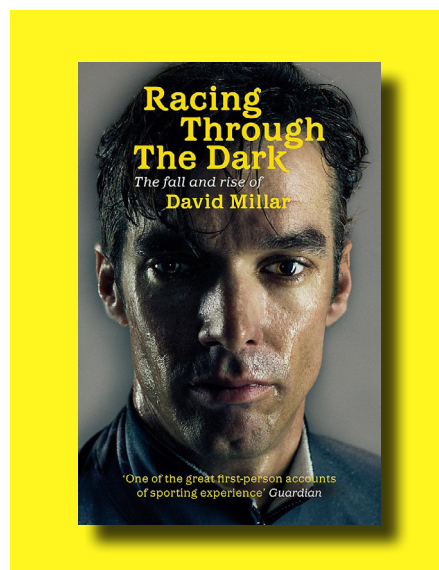
DB: Eating caffeine jellies while you're riding. Horrible and heroic.

FCB: They end up blending with the machine, don't they? Like centaurs. Like in *The Third Policeman* [a mid-century surrealist novel by Flann O'Brien]. We're back to your cyborgs. Part man, part machine.

DB: Steve Jobs said the computer is to the mind what the bicycle is to the body.

FCB: Did he say that? That is amazing. 'Mountains of the Mind' – that's a line from a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem, isn't it?

DB: That's right. 'Cliffs of fall...'



FCB: I can always count on you to feed me poetry, Danny. It was you who put me onto Paul Farley and Alice Oswald.

DB: A friend took me to the Poetry Society recently to see a New Zealand poet. The friend was a Kiwi too. I know that sounds like an unlikely night out.

FCB: It sounds grim.

DB: It didn't sound like it was for me, but I went along, and it was a poet called Hera Lindsay Bird performing a very long poem about Leonardo Da Vinci called 'The Da Vinci Code'.

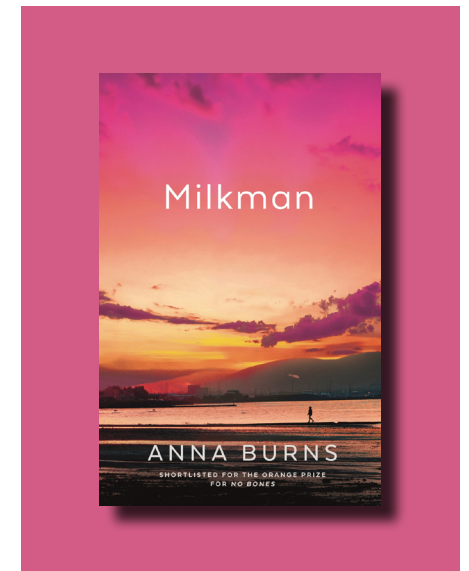
FCB: Oh no.

DB: It blew me away. Honestly. She is amazing. Like the Beat poets maybe. Then there's Ocean Vuong. *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*. He's Vietnamese-American. Just lovely, lovely things, those poems. They're like Lovelock. They force you to confront the possibility of thinking differently, you know. And I still think Carol Ann Duffy is a great poet.

FCB: Talking about listening to live readings – when you're trying to get through books, for instance for your talk on robots, do you use Audible?

DB: No, I can't concentrate like that. I have to sit down with the book.

FCB: Sometimes I use audiobooks if I think I'm not giving a book a chance. I remember reading *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders and saying it was too slow. My son said, yes, it's slow if you're just reading three pages a night



before falling asleep! So now I'm going to use Audible to help me get into it. Read a chapter at night. Listen to a chapter in the gym. Stay with the book for a bit more of the day. I read *Milkman* on audiobook and it was a brilliant experience. When I talked to anyone about that book, they said it was difficult and I would reply, 'It's really funny and I read it in a week.' Then I remembered I had Brid Brennan reading it to me!

DB: Ha!

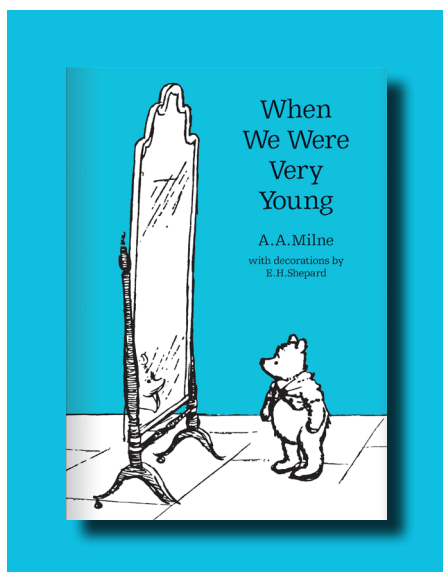
FCB: So, Kindle or book?

DB: Book. I read scripts and newspaper articles on screens. I like a book to hold.

FCB: What about your childhood reading? I know you love Winnie-the-Pooh.

**'...the chief of police
facedown in a pool of Coca-Cola.
A palm-sized photo of his father soaking
beside his left ear.'**

From 'Aubade with Burning City' by Ocean Vuong



**‘The King asked
The Queen, and
The Queen asked
The Dairymaid:
“Could we have some butter for
The Royal slice of bread?”’**

from ‘The King’s Breakfast’ by A.A. Milne

DB: Well, I wasn’t reading that as a child. I was reading Franklin W. Dixon.

FCB: The Hardy Boys?

DB: Exactly. And from that you go to Ian Fleming and James Bond, and from there you go to Graham Greene.

FCB: Especially if you’re Catholic.

DB: Greene and G.K. Chesterton. But when we had kids, Gail – who is from a different background than me – was reading them A. A. Milne, and not so much Winnie-the-Pooh as the poems. ‘The King’s Breakfast’.

FCB: He was a brilliant poet, I think. Most kids’ poetry is tumpetty tump but his have so many different rhythms, unexpected rhymes. They cry out to be memorised.

DB: ‘James James Morrison Morrison....’

FCB: That one, ‘Disobedience’, is such a dark poem but it skims along. You don’t even really notice the moment when the disaster happens.

DB: ‘King John put up a notice...’

FCB: “Lost or stolen or strayed, James James Morrison’s mother seems to have been mislaid”. I tried to get that poem into my film about Milne but we couldn’t get the rights. Disney own the rights to more or less everything Milne wrote. Winnie-the-Pooh was their most lucrative property until *Frozen*.

DB: But that’s the thing. He could write directly to children without condescending, and please adults as well. Very few writers can do that. You can. And Milne.

FCB: You’re too kind.

DB: But there’s a direct line, isn’t there, from Milne to Pixar? From Winnie-the-Pooh to...

FCB: *Toy Story*. I hadn’t even noticed that. Of course! The kids’ toys are alive just like in *House at Pooh Corner*.

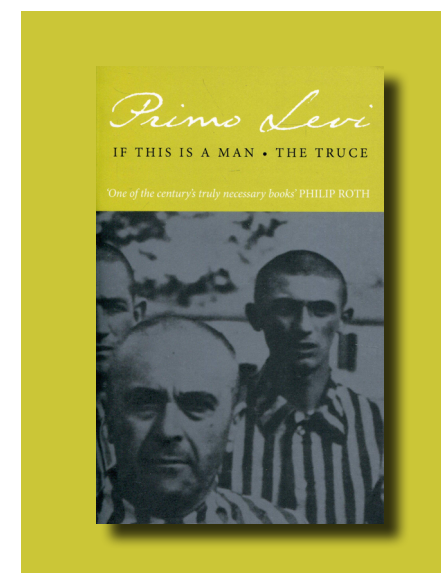
DB: You didn’t clock that? It was when I heard Gail reading them to the kids that I thought, There it is. That’s the vein. The mother lode.

FCB: I’m reeling from that revelation. How did I not notice that? Maybe I’m a man of

very little brain. So, we’ve done poetry and childhood reading. I should probably ask you: favourite book of all time? I know it’s a stupid question but...

DB: Primo Levi’s trilogy on Auschwitz, but particularly *If This Is a Man*.

We talk about this for a while and then get distracted and start talking about what our children are up to. But later that night, I look up at my copy of *If This Is a Man* and the title seems to tie up everything we’ve been talking about – about robots and memory and what makes a human being. I thumb through my old copy and find I’ve marked a passage which could not be more relevant:



‘Auschwitz is outside of us, but it is all around us, in the air. The plague has died away, but the infection still lingers and it would be foolish to deny it. Rejection of human solidarity, obtuse and cynical indifference to the suffering of others, abdication of the intellect and of moral sense to the principle of authority, and above all, at the root of everything, a sweeping tide of cowardice, a colossal cowardice which masks itself as warring virtue, love of country and faith in an idea.’



Photo © Joe Magee

A Little, Aloud Anthologies

We know that being read to makes us healthier and happier, it enriches our hearts and minds. The Reader's trio of unique anthologies offer selections of poetry and prose, favourites and new discoveries, all especially chosen to be shared.

Published by Penguin Random House, who donate all royalties in full to The Reader.

Available in all good bookshops and libraries.

A Little, Aloud
ISBN: 9780701185633
A Little, Aloud with Love
ISBN: 9781784740078
A Little, Aloud for Children
ISBN: 9780857534170

'If we all read aloud every day, the world would be a better place.'

Philip Pullman

Meet The Reader

The Reader is a charity bringing thousands of people together every week, all over the UK, in order to experience and enjoy great literature through Shared Reading.



500+
Groups around
the UK



10,000+
Readers
a year



84%
Made new
friends



94%
Felt better
after a session

What is Shared Reading?

- A Shared Reading group consists of a Reader Leader, who brings something along to read every week, and any number of group members.
- We choose great poems and novels, read them aloud, and talk in ordinary language about what we're reading.
- There's no pressure to read aloud or join in the conversation – some people prefer to listen, and that's fine.
- Shared Reading groups are free, open to all, and you don't have to attend every week.
- Shared Reading is for people who can't read, people who don't read, and for the most avid or adventurous of readers.
- Shared Reading improves wellbeing, reduces isolation and strengthens communities. It helps people build meaningful connections with each other, and themselves.

Where can I find a group?

- Shared Reading groups are happening in local community spaces all around the country. Visit www.thereader.org.uk/joinagroup or call 0151 729 2200.

'Shared Reading makes me feel connected, improves my mood drastically and gives me a chance to stretch intellectually.'

Shared Reading group member

‘You think your pain and
your heartbreak are
unprecedented in the history
of the world, but then you
read. It was books that
taught me that the things
that tormented me most
were the very things that
connected me with all the
people who were alive, who
had ever been alive.’

James Baldwin,
LIFE magazine, 1963

The

Founder and Director of The Reader, **Jane Davis**, thinks back to a 2008 *Guardian* article by writer **Blake Morrison** which kick-started the growth of the organisation from a small local idea into an international movement.

Essay



Shared Reading

Becoming a movement

On Saturday 5th January 2008, author Blake Morrison wrote a leading article, 'The Reading Cure', for the *Guardian*. The piece featured the work of The Reader, a small organisation based on Merseyside. As the Director of that organisation, I was in no way prepared for the public response 'The Reading Cure' would generate. Our tiny, home-made website crashed under the weight of interest, and that weekend I received more than 600 emails from people around the country and beyond. And the responses continued to arrive, in a long, slow wave as the article was later featured in *The Week* and syndicated around the world. 'We need this here,' the editor of an Australian daily newspaper wrote me, and she duly started raising money. 'I want to come and learn this method,' said a German psychotherapist, 'I can see why it is valuable.' And closer to home, 'I have been reading to my sister, who is bipolar, for the past 28 years. I know this works,' a woman in East London told me. Blake, too, received a big postbag.

Ten years later, in 2018, I met with Blake at the Liverpool Literary Festival to have a public conversation about what had happened in the intervening years. The Reader had grown into a national organisation, with 1,000 volunteers, and we were running over 550 Shared Reading groups across the UK, including a contract taking Shared Reading to 38 criminal justice settings. Overseas there were dedicated individuals developing the work in 15 countries, and at home we were in the thick of a £5m capital build at our Liverpool base, Calderstones Mansion, where we have created the International Centre for Shared Reading. In those intervening ten years, we had grown from a small local idea to an international movement.

Did it all go back to that article? 'It was partly the timing,' Blake suggested. 'Early January – people are serious, getting over Christmas.'

True, lots of us look to reform our habits at that time of year. But it wasn't just timing. The article struck a chord: the vast majority of people who wrote to me were simply saying, 'I know this is true.'

What was the 'this' they recognised?

It was that books, stories, poems – great literature – can help with inner life, mental health, soul troubles.

In 'The Reading Cure' Blake retold one of the most profound literary recovery stories. At the age of 20, in the autumn of 1826, the philosopher John Stuart Mill suffered a crisis, experiencing what we'd now call a major depression; 'the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down [and] I seemed to have nothing left to live for'. In his *Autobiography*, Mill writes, 'Then one day a small ray of light broke in upon my gloom. I was reading, accidentally, Marmontel's *Mémoires* [the memoirs of an 18th-century French historian], and came to the passage which relates his father's death ... A vivid conception of the scene and its feelings came over me, and I was moved to tears. From this moment my being grew lighter. The oppression of the thought that all feeling was dead within me was gone. I was no longer hopeless: I was not a stock or a stone.' Books can help connect us to others, yes, but perhaps more importantly when we are stuck, they can help connect us to feeling, to ourselves.

But this is not new information, is it? The great library at Thebes bore the inscription, 'the medicine chest of the soul', and in his article, Blake traced the origins of reading for soul-cure back to the Old Testament (the Psalms) and then to the ancient classical world.

The article struck a chord: the vast majority of people who wrote to me were simply saying, 'I know this is true.'

It's not new, but for some time, decades, it seems we have generally forgotten this truth. We don't like reading very much, and we don't understand its potential value.

Most people learning to read, doing GCSE English, studying literature at A level or taking a course in literature at a University, never think of books as a medicine chest. We have developed, initially from the best of intentions, a self-fulfilling circle of disengagement. Of course, a few children start school loving books and hoping to be read to because their book-filled home life has luckily set them up like that. But many, probably most,

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children aren't read to at home or at school and don't know that books are wonderful compendiums of amazing worlds and experiences. 'Learning to read' can seem only the dogged mastery of a skill, a boring process involving Biff and Chip, who don't do much except make the right phonic sounds. Many children are turned off before they've even learned. Some survive and become readers – a diminishing number each year – and a tiny percentage of those survivors become students of literature at A level and then at university. There's a widespread perception now that the astronomical fees for higher education should not be squandered on the study of literature; that the sciences are more 'useful' because they could be more straightforwardly translated into paid employment. A university English course is likely the only place you might bump into *The Mill on The Floss* or John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*. And if you do come across these texts, while it's possible you'll have a profound private experience when reading them alone, it's likely that your shared experience at university will be very different. During our 2018 public talk, Blake read his poem, 'Academe':

This poem is you, sitting in a seminar.
You would like to join in but know nothing about
hermeneutics, zones of contestation, problematised binaries,
performativity, generative rupturing
or the ideology of transgressive epistemes.

Luckily others in the seminar do know,
Or talk as if they do, or anyway talk.
So you can join the starlings on the telegraph wire,
Ride that pushchair with the sleeping toddler,
Hide in the blouse of the woman at the bus stop.

Just make sure to be awake, before the end –
nod, applaud, rap your knuckles on the table,
as if you've been enlightened and inspired
and when you leave the room will see the world afresh,
no longer baffled by its semiotics.

In your university seminar, no one will be saying, as a woman in a Merseyside Shared Reading group did: 'Could we read *Jane Eyre*? I heard it's about a girl who has mental health problems and overcomes them...' That's a terrific, jolting description of *Jane Eyre*, from a woman struggling with her own identity and mental survival. You'll not find anything like that on an English Literature course but you probably will find 'hermeneutics, zones of contestation, problematised binaries,/performativity, generative rupturing/or the ideology of transgressive epistemes.'

Of course, *Jane Eyre* is more than the tale of a girl who has mental health problems. Another reader might think it is about something completely different, might see his or her own life experience reflected back in Jane's story. Whatever the subject matter of the story, books can take us to places, times, experiences we haven't had, introducing us to people we haven't met and might not otherwise have imagined. But this idea has become separated at every stage from the study of reading and literature, just at the time when all of us, surviving in an increasingly polarised and isolating society, need it the most. That leap of imagination – to feel the feelings of someone else – matters more than ever in an age where algorithms decide, on the basis of our clicks, who we are and what we will like, feeding us opinions that confirm our prejudices. A book, a poem, doesn't know us in advance, and doesn't necessarily offer us what we like. All the same, what it does offer might be what we need. 'You need it,' as one of the members of the first Shared Reading group said to me, 'but you don't know you need it.'

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But the 2008 *Guardian* article also suggested that beyond the intrinsic value of books, the act of reading them together as a live activity, rather than in solitary-reader-isolation, could multiply their power and value. Like the woman from London reading with her bipolar sibling, there were plenty of people who had realised reading with others did something, something beyond and bigger than the book.



The Reader's International Centre
for Reading at The Mansion House
in Calderstones Park, Liverpool.

During the 2018 Festival conversation with Blake, I recalled the origins of the Shared Reading model, long ago, during my time as a Continuing Education teacher at Liverpool University. I remembered an evening class that I taught; it was Christmas and the students wanted an end of term party. They said, we'll each bring a poem and read it out and then we'll have our mince pies. But then a woman – I'll call her Joan – a middle-aged, middle-class woman who had appeared to be a straightforwardly competent professional person, stood up to read this poem, written by John Clare in an asylum in 1845:

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 oblivious host,
Like shadows in love's 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;
Even the dearest that I loved the best
Are strange—nay, rather, stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man hath 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 there was an appreciative, or was it worried, silence. The poem is full of trouble and that did not sit easy among the wine and mince pies. Joan said, '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... I 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 she went on, 'During that time, kicking around the streets of Melbourne, I had this poem. I kept it 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.'

'I had this poem... I used to take it out sometimes and read it, and think, yes: I am. I am.'

What a strange and under-appreciated magic this is: a man in a Northampton lunatic asylum writes out his feelings, and more than a hundred years later, on another continent, a woman in a gutter reads his words and finds something useful. Courage, is it? Recognition? In my university classroom I felt Joan's personal story chiming with my family history and made the connection: a poem helped this woman stay alive and have a second chance at life. I grew to understand, starting from this moment, that there were many people, perhaps most of that community of regular readers attending, teaching and learning in these university classes, who were to a greater or lesser degree using literature as a tool for survival. At the same time, I was also wondering about all the people who would never sign up for a course at the University – what about people who didn't know a poem could give them courage or hope or recognition, or help them stay alive?

What about people who didn't know a poem could give them courage or hope or recognition, or help them stay alive?

Things crystallised one day when I was driving into the University to teach Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality'. It was spring and there were daffodils lining the path to the door of an ex-council house opposite the traffic lights where I had stopped in North Birkenhead. A woman, a grandmother perhaps, was knocking on the door of the house, the daffodils were dancing, and door was opened by a young woman in her pyjamas with a year-old baby on her arm. He seemed to leap up with joy at the sight of the older woman and I thought of the line from Wordsworth's poem: 'the babe leaps up on his mother's arm'. At exactly the same moment the line came into my mind, the thought also exploded: that child will never read Wordsworth. He'll never think 'the babe leaps up'. He can't have this stuff which has made a life for me. He will get an education that doesn't include any of the joy and usefulness of poetry, and

perhaps he'll end up in the gutter or a dead-end job and be hurt by life. The lights changed, I drove off, determined to get great books out of the University and into North Birkenhead.

Coincidentally, a funding call came, asking for projects to help widen access to university, and it seemed to match my nascent idea. Within months, I'd set up a five-week summer outreach project called 'Get Into Reading'. The first session took place in a community education centre on the other side of that set of traffic lights.

Among the seven or eight recruits who'd come along to try getting into reading were two young mothers who were not literate. In twenty years as a university teacher of literature I had not thought about literacy and I had no idea that vast swathes of the population – about 25% across all populations, and over 50% in prisons – are not fully literate. I read the story aloud, thinking, I'll just read it all, and we'll stop every now and then and talk.

That became the model for Shared Reading: someone reads aloud, we stop to talk about what is read and then read on.

As I read 'Crossing the Bar', one of the women in the group began to cry.

I brought a short story, 'Schwartz', by Russell Hoban, and Tennyson's poem 'Crossing The Bar' to that first group. The story worked well, and we began, strangers that we were, to be able to talk to each other a little about work, and stuck-ness and drug-use and guilt – all things that come up in Hoban's story. But it was the poem that proved the real shocker. As I read 'Crossing the Bar', one of the women in the group began to cry. In my 20-year career at the University, I had never seen anyone moved to tears by a poem, but here we were, in a room in a community centre in Birkenhead, and a woman was crying.

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.

In two other such groups, people cried when I read this poem. Why? My dad died last year and it reminds me of him, said one woman. My daughter died six weeks ago, said another. It reminds me of my dad, he died when I was 14, another told me, and that line about the tide, 'but such a tide as moving seems asleep', reminds me of when we would walk together along the prom and the Mersey would be high and full...

The connections between people who are reading together... are like neural networks, unseen charges of energy.

Read that poem alone, as we mostly do, and you have your own experience and imagination to touch the poem into life. Read it with six other people and you have six lives and six imaginations with which to inhabit this flexible human-shaped space. Read it with someone telling you what it means to them personally and you have the profoundly moving experience of intimate understanding with someone you barely know.

The connections between people who are reading together, with the words live and aloud in the room between them, are like neural networks, unseen charges of energy firing in ways which aren't always predictable. I went home that night and told my family, 'I have found what I am going to do.'

I had no idea how to grow or spread this idea – I still didn't know how to put it into words. But I recruited people, we learned about funding, we forged a partnership with Wirral libraries. A model or structure for the groups became clearer. After two years we won a big grant from Paul Hamlyn Foundation, £89,000, and I will forever thank the grants manager there, Susan Blishen, who told me to think bigger: 'We're looking for things which will change the way society works.' The Reading Revolution was born.

By the time Blake's article appeared in the *Guardian*, we had been going for about six years and had 50 groups across Merseyside. We had something, we knew it was working – and then 'The Reading Cure' was published and we began to grow like crazy.

As we approach nearly 20 years of Shared Reading I look back on a thrilling and often difficult process of quantifying the work, putting it into words, trying to get people to believe in it, and find money and partners. But The Reader is now an organisation with a clear plan for growth, immense ambition, and a beautiful open building which acts as a centre and shop window for reading.

Blake and I first met in 2007, at The Wellcome Institute, to debate the question, 'Do Books Make Us Better?'. Blake recalled his thoughts at that time: 'Do books make us morally better, does reading books make us behave better? And I was against this proposition.'

In his 2008 article Blake notes that since the Holocaust, when cultured men who had read Schiller and Goethe participated in genocide, the idea that books or culture in general might make us morally better has been lost: many people thought concentration camps proved literature to be useless. I think that is a mistake. You might as well say parenting is useless – after all, those people had parents. Education is useless, for those people had broad and sometimes deep educations. Love is useless, for they had families and spouses,

and that did not help them see their victims nor their victims' children as fellow humans. They had become a warring, bloodletting, narrowly defined group, unable to feel for others. Psychopathy and sociopathy never value the experience of the other: it is only and ever self-centred. We need human tools that can prevent the development of such psychopathy. Those tools are family, education, reading, love. Of course all of these things, like all things human, can go bad. It's our job to hold them true. We must build our faith in ourselves, work harder at making our

We need human tools that can prevent the development of such psychopathy. Those tools are family, education, reading, love.

parenting good, our education useful to the development of civilisation, our literature deeply, personally affecting. We should use the verb 'love' in public plans and policies, especially those involving children or those in trouble. We need more culture, more books, more reading, feeling, thinking and crucially more free and open conversation. And we need it now, when all kinds of good but frightened people are feeling increasingly threatened by others who are not like them. Our addiction to digital life is making us ever more solitary, ever more aware of the specifics of our own condition.

Sharing that learning experience in a group of people not necessarily like you is the deeply connective social leap of faith we need to make. That's what I saw in that university Christmas party and in the community centre in Birkenhead. It's what our dedicated volunteers, more than a thousand of them across the country, will recognise happening in their groups. It is what Blake Morrison saw in 2008, and everyone involved in The Reader thanks him for that terrific article which documented the social value of reading just as we had begun to demonstrate it. 'The Reading Cure' kick-started the Reading Revolution by suggesting that we, as a society and as individuals, needed what shared reading can give. We need it even more now. The Reader has covered a lot of ground between 2008 and 2018. Who can say what will have happened in another decade?

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**'Reading brings us
unknown friends.'**

Honoré de Balzac