



Reading in the Middle Years (9-11): What do digikids read? Seeing the books for the texts

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Reading in the Middle Years (9-11)

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Prue Goodwin on the role of visual texts.

How has the reading world available to Middle age range readers in the 21st century changed? What is the role for them of visual texts in books and on screen? Is there a new type of literacy? **Prue Goodwin** explores.

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Getting children reading is one thing but keeping them reading is another. As Alison Kelly mentioned in the last issue of **BfK** (No. 165), research into children's attitudes to reading shows that they take a dip in interest at about the age of eleven ? boys particularly. There is also anecdotal evidence to suggest that many children, who have read with enthusiasm until the age of nine, begin to treat books as ?uncool? and that personal reading satisfaction dwindles. Enabling children to discover the power and pleasure of being a reader and helping them develop personal relationships with books are essential elements in the teaching of reading. Research indicates that sustaining pupils' earlier reading commitment is a challenge for teachers.

However, I suspect that, although pupils' attitudes to books may change as they get older, they will be reading more widely than we did at their age. Recreational reading in the ?middle years? is not solely related to enjoying books. Being literate nowadays involves engaging with a more diverse range of texts than was available even a decade ago. The word ?text? refers to more than a short extract selected as the basis for reading instruction. A text is any representation of meaning and now includes (in addition to traditionally published materials) pictures, films, posters, websites and digitally presented information ? all recognisable forms of expression for the younger generation. Youngsters are confident users of all media forms and some adults, unfamiliar with current technology, may find such youthful proficiency intimidating. Retreating behind opinions about the ?dumbing down? of the reading curriculum is easier than recognising the opportunities opened up by new media.

Continuing to focus on readers in the 9 to 11 age group, this article will explore the reading world of the average ten-year-old. It will suggest that many of us need to review our ideas about what it means to be a reader in the 21st century.

Reading on screen

Recent directives on teaching literacy in primary schools reflect the revolution in reading by stating that children should learn to read ?for a range of purposes on paper and on screen? (DfES, 2006). The National Curriculum has always included media education but ?reading on screen? has far wider implications than simply appreciating the delivery of news or the skills of film makers. Electronic texts come in a variety of forms and present, through word and image, both fact and fiction. Daily, most ten-year-olds view screens in the form of:

* computers

* television

- * cinema film and DVDs
- * the Internet
- * interactive whiteboards
- * playstations

Children think nothing of communicating with people across the globe by writing and reading messages which require neither pens nor paper. The emails, ?satnavs? and text messages that school children have used all their lives were the stuff of science fiction only a few years ago. E-communication and the increase in moving image texts have created a new type of literacy which has had a profound effect on what happens in school. Teachers and librarians want to help children become enthusiastic readers who are discerning and discriminating about what they read. They need to be able to distinguish between, and appreciate, both the treasure and the trash. It is important to help youngsters to become similarly critical with screen texts for if we want young people to avoid the sorts of negative influences attributed to some media materials, we must teach them how to ?interrogate? the quality and authority of what they read on screen. Children need help in order to become ?good? readers of multimodal texts and schools must therefore mediate between the creators and receivers of these materials. The question is not whether we should include visual and digital literacies in the school curriculum, but how best to do so. Acquiring visual literacy is a crucial skill needed for the interpretation of screen texts. One fundamental way that will extend children?s literary experience and develop vital visual skills is through encounters with outstanding picture books.

Outstanding picture books

In the best classrooms and libraries, youngsters are being offered age-appropriate picture books and graphic texts that excite and challenge them. Such texts are sophisticated productions which require readers to combine meanings revealed in word and image. Of course, there are light-hearted titles that provide an entertaining, undemanding read but many picture books and graphic novels are challenging narratives that require concentrated analysis and reward the reader with a satisfying literary experience. It takes time to unravel the complex plots and subtexts in books such as:

- **Going West** by Martin Waddell and Philippe Dupasquier, which tackles themes of endurance, grief and altruism and calls on a reader?s knowledge of film to follow the visual text from page to page;
- **Archie?s War** by Marcia Williams which is non-fiction couched in a scrapbook of personal memories alongside the intimate writings of a ten-year-old boy;
- **The Arrival** by Shaun Tan: a book which, by placing readers in an alien environment, enables close identification with the experiences of immigrants across the globe.

In addition to frequently mentioned titles ?for older readers? such as Roberto Innocenti?s **Rose Blanche** and Anthony Browne?s **Zoo**, other, less familiar, books like Quentin Blake?s **The Story of the Dancing Frog** also deserve close reading. Such picture books not only refine the visual literacy skills of readers but prepare them for complex adult graphic texts, such as, Art Spiegelman?s **In the Shadow of No Towers** or Chris Ware?s **Jimmy Corrigan**.

Besides becoming sophisticated readers of static image, children are engaging with moving images on television and at the cinema. Primary schools are incorporating film based materials such as **Story Shorts** from BFI Education and the website **Film Street** into literacy learning. There is evidence that both reading and writing skills can be considerably enhanced by judicious use of film (UKLA/PNS, 2004). The potential for exploring other multimodal texts as an extension of literary experience has yet to be fully exploited in schools since use of the Internet has tended, until now, to be limited to research use. However, children, as we know, are often ahead of the game and seek out websites linked to their leisure time activities. Consider, for example, the impact of the second coming of **Dr Who**.

Dr Who and the readers of tomorrow>

In 1963, I watched William Hartnell when he first stepped out of his police box. The cardboard spaceships and monsters constructed from tin cans were enjoyably scary then. Today?s generation of viewers knows that the monsters are computer generated images. In fact, by watching **Dr Who Confidential** or by visiting the website, all the mysteries of

television programme making are made transparent. Being 'in' on the production techniques does not detract from the fascination of a riveting, well-written narrative. Any young reader entering the BBC's official **Dr Who** website is offered a multiplicity of reading experiences. They may choose to read:

- * narratives, reports, lists, scripts, news items, publicity materials and reviews
- * competitions, quizzes, puzzles and games
- * still images of shows from over forty years ago to the present
- * moving image clips from the current and past series

Encouraged to be active participators, they are invited to email comments or questions, create their own comic, enter a competition or join a reading group.

And, of course, they could buy books.

Teaching reading and time travel

I have always thought that a book is like the Tardis. It is only when you get inside that you realise how vast it is – its impact on you is often unpredictable and can transport you to another world. Virtual 'time travel' seems quite normal to those of us engaged in literacy education. Thirty years ago Elaine Moss (teacher, librarian and winner of the 1977 Eleanor Farjeon Award) wrote that picture books 'should be widely available at the top of the junior school and indeed in all comprehensives'. After all this time, some people still need convincing. Adult opinions – usually based on a lack of knowledge about picture books – can create negative attitudes causing children at the upper end of the junior school to be reluctant to select picture books for fear of appearing immature. This was the case when I spent time with a group of Year 6 pupils. They were great readers, committed to certain authors and aware of the power and pleasure reading offered. However, the notion of anything beyond the printed page being considered 'reading' was strange to them. We listed the different sorts of visual texts they 'read' regularly; the list included – picture books, comics, film and DVD, websites and mobile phones. We also talked about books. One girl mentioned reading **Eragon** saying: 'I've got the film but I think the book's a lot better. They've messed about with it a lot in the film.' Two boys pored over the picture book **The Mystery of Eilean Mor**. Totally absorbed they commented aloud on each page: 'That looks like a wing – it does. Oh look! He doesn't have legs. He's a ghost? look, you see, you can't see his legs. Maybe it's fog – or he's just like been turned into a ghost. So he's like a mutation – cool. That was really spooky.'

I asked them how old they thought a reader should be to read this book.

'Er – to understand it really, probably about fifteen' was the reply – an acknowledgement that they now saw picture narratives as something to grow towards rather than leave behind.

Where are books in this multiplicity of multimodal texts?

So is 'reading' solely about books any more? Screen and paper literacies have formed a symbiotic relationship. Popular books are made into block-buster movies, and as a result more books are bought and read. Children's stories have been transformed into films, television series, computer games and intricate websites. All these exciting, cutting-edge texts have one thing in common: they started out as books.

So the answer is, yes, books have everything to do with today's young, digitally proficient readers. Those who are already hooked on literature increase their pleasure via the new dimensions their favourite stories acquire on celluloid or in cyberspace. Many ten-year-olds are committed readers who derive pleasure and enlightenment from all forms of text including – perhaps more now than ever – books.

Prue Goodwin is a Lecturer in Literacy and Children's Books.

Moss, E. (1986) **Part of the Pattern** London: The Bodley Head

UKLA/PNS (2004) **Raising Boys? Achievement in Writing** London: DfES

Children's books

Blake, Q. (1996) **The Story of the Dancing Frog** London: Red Fox

Browne, A. (1994) **Zoo** London: Red Fox

Crew, G. & Geddes, J. (2005) **The Mystery of Eilean Mor** Melbourne, Aus: Lothian Books

Innocenti, R. & McEwan, I. (2004) **Rose Blanche** London: Red Fox

Spiegelman, A. (2004) **In the Shadow of No Towers** London: Viking

Tan, S. (2006) **The Arrival** Melbourne, Aus: Lothian Books

Waddell, M. & Dupasquier, P. (1985) **Going West** London: Puffin Books

Ware, C. (2001) **Jimmy Corrigan** Jonathan Cape

Williams, M. (2007) **Archie's War** London: Walker Books

Websites

DfES (2006) www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primaryframeworks [3]

BFI Education DVD or video resources **Story Shorts** and **Story Shorts 2** available from www.bfi.org.uk/education [4]

www.filmstreet.co.uk [5]

www.bbc.co.uk/doctorwho/ [6]

In the next instalment of 'Reading in the Middle Years' in **BfK** No. 167, **Fiona Collins** will explore the role of novels in children's reading, both in and out of school.



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