



# Editorial 231

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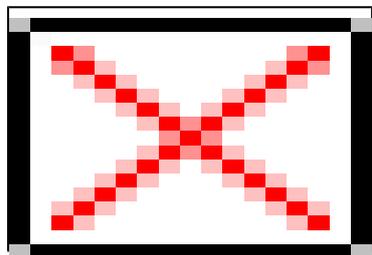
Article Category:

Editorial

Byline:

Carnegie medal winner **Geraldine McCaughrean** praises words

In Praise of Delicious Words by Geraldine McCaughrean



My first recollections of a library are dark and forbidding: a dim Labyrinth of shelving, and no toilet. The up side was the iced buns Mother bought us on the way home. But later there was the junior library, where there were friendly librarians, sunlight, horses, cowboys and knights.... And, of course, words.

At home, Mother quoted from Bible, Shakespeare and poetry. My sister brought home *Obstipui!* in place of *Wow!* My brother spliced radio sound tracks into new plays. Words were fun; we collected them, like cigarette cards or stamps. Everything entered the family lexicon, alongside *Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon*. We formed a writing club one summer, a poetry club another. As for reading... Tiny house. Tiny bookcase. No money. But there was always the library. How different would our childhoods have been without the local library and those sunny librarians with their stable of horse books?

I visited recently two state-of-the-art schools with extensive libraries. Both were dispensing with their librarians for lack of funds. But shelves and shelves of books can be intimidating, bewildering. How do you find the book that ~~will~~ speak to you, open up to you, stay with you, sing to you? School librarians are how. They are satnav in the Labyrinth.

We float on an ocean of language. Toddlers pick words up like mud, to delight in letting them spill out again from their mouths. The young brain has a phenomenal facility for acquiring language - which tails off the older we grow.

So how did the thought ever surface that we mustn't overface young children with too rich a diet of words; that vocabulary must be kept simple?

Naturally, the internet and messaging were bound to reduce communication to a convenient shorthand. But children need more than that particular word-pool to equip them for life. It's certainly not a reason to make the vocabulary in their books match the terse cyberworld.

All processing of information, all deep thought, all good conversation needs more than basic vocabulary. Strong emotions need more of an outlet than a punch, a snog or a swearword. Eloquent villains lie in wait, ready to seduce, scam or belittle us: we need to be able to call their bluff.

It's disconcerting, isn't it, to be in a country whose language we don't know. Young children are obliged to live in just

such a place until they have enough vocabulary to feel confident, competent, not lost, not second-rate, not full of feelings they can't adequately expel.

Readerly children appear to me to think for themselves? more than non-readers. They express original opinions. Herd beasts tend to think corporately; readers break away from the herd every time they open a book of their own choosing. They can travel to Past and Future, faraway shores, meet interesting strangers... and words.

But beyond all the delight of Story and Knowledge, there is the sheer delight of words themselves! The way they can clump like rusty nails or slot together into a silver suspension bridge: the way some settle softly on the inner ear, or please by their mere shape. Similes and metaphors join things up like dot-to-dot puzzles in our heads. We are the only animals in creation who can gain mastery of such things. Over the centuries, every generation has added to the treasure horde, bequeathing it to the next. Who'd dispossess their child of that kind of birthright for a mess of potted phrases and emojis when we can shower them with words they can claim or ignore, as they care to?

That's my argument for gradually and painlessly enriching language in *young* children's books so that they can progress, rather than tread water amid simple words they already know. They deserve a springboard to propel them over the gap between functional language and sumptuous, entertaining language. That's my argument for (later on) offering the 'literary' novel. Giving a book by Pullman, Peet, Mark, Fforde is neither overly optimistic nor child cruelty. It's a gift: 'Take it or leave it, friend.' And it might *just* be a ladder over the wall separating childhood from emerging adulthood.

The term 'literary novel' is a confusing one. We associate it with the adult market, where it tends to mean 'books written by really clever people?'. This may well describe some 'literary' writers for the young, but that's entirely beside the point. 'Literary novels' for children simply delight in words and style. As for me, I'm still basically a tongue-tied kid playing in the button box of words and making up stories using the shiny ones. But if there's one thing age has taught me, it's that if I enjoy something, plenty other kids out there do, too.

Congratulations to Geraldine McCaughrean, winner of the **2018 CILIP Carnegie Medal** for [Where the World Ends](#). [3]

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