

## Honor Wilson-Fletcher

As an effortless inventor of descriptive terms himself, Shakespeare would probably have loved the word 'muffintop', reckons **Honor Wilson-Fletcher**, Director of the National Year of Reading. She talks here about why we need to extend our ideas about what constitutes 'proper' reading.

**Why is the National Year of Reading promoting the idea of 'reading anything at all' in order to get people interested in reading? Can reading the *Metro*, or the labels on jars and supermarket products, joke books, junky magazines, the obituary columns, be put on the same footing as reading a well-written novel or short story, or a poem?**

Well, we're not suggesting there is an equivalency here – or comparing Shakespeare to *Grazia* – but if you want to engage the entire population with the benefits of reading, you have to start with what they already love and care about. If that is the newspaper and not Shakespeare, that's fine by me...

**According to a recent report, only one in four adults reads books, yet people in the UK buy huge numbers of books each year – thirteen per cent more than they did five years ago, apparently, according to a survey by Book Marketing Limited. Why are books still so important?**

Good question! Books are important because they contain ideas in a really convenient package, and those ideas can change the world. They empower people and they also express the ideas of the people who wanted to write them.

**Have you read a book that changed your life?**

Many. At 6, I thought the *How and why wonder book of dinosaurs* was the most extraordinary thing I'd ever read. I can just about recall every single page. At 16, I thought *Macbeth* was incredibly exciting – and the first play of Shakespeare's that I had a glimmer of understanding about... Rather predictably, I was also a Jane Austen fan. She is so funny – and she made me realise that you don't have to travel around the world to understand it.

**According to government statistics, young males between 16 and 24 are probably least likely to read books. What do you hope that the National Year of Reading will do for them?**

Actually, they do read. Many boys read a lot of magazines, for example, but wouldn't describe it as 'reading'. They might also read song lyrics, which are creative and life-changing experiences for a lot of people.

It's important that we validate and encourage what people are doing and identify it as reading. Recently, I've discovered some amazing websites – such as Drew's Scriptorama and others – where thousands of teenagers go to pick up song lyrics and film scripts. The evidence speaks for itself: teenagers love, understand and appreciate words – as long as the format works for them.

**With that in mind, what place do you think the wider opportunities programmes, which are part of extended services, can play in inspiring students to read?**

The first thing to do is digest the research and apply that to the students you work with. For example, the National Literacy Trust recently published a survey on self-perception among teenagers. The study discovered that boys who didn't see themselves as 'readers', viewed 'readers' as people who only read fiction and poetry, wore glasses and didn't play sport. Nerds, from their point of view. So the trick is to get boys to recognise the value of reading, but not to suggest they become 'readers'!

We also have to close the gap between what children read outside school and what is defined as acceptable reading. If the headline 'superCallygoballisticCelticareatrocious' from the *Liverpool Echo* is magic to your students' ears, because they're obsessed with football – then we have to find ways to allow that excitement into the classroom.

**And if a student seems more interested in a film script or comic than reading a proper 'novel' – examining such things could be worthwhile?**

Absolutely. I'm not an educational professional, but producing a graphic novel or comic script takes just as much creativity as writing a novel and I would have thought that pulling one apart would allow the reader to understand how it was constructed and what is going on behind the words – it could be a hugely worthwhile exercise. Also, according to recent research, children are still reading a lot of magazines. That presents a golden opportunity for the discussion of teenagers' niche interests – and how they read about them.

**So, the idea is: encourage people to think and talk about what they are reading, and they might find themselves picking up something else?**

Yes, we don't want to discount all the wonderful things about structure, language and history in conventional reading material. It's just that, by giving people the licence to actively enjoy the things they are drawn to, we can stimulate engagement and creativity. The phrase 'muffintop' (in the popular press) is an incredibly evocative image. Shakespeare would have loved it, and it points to the creative life exploding out of our language. By celebrating this, rather than frowning at it, we can point to a shared interest in reading and the joy of language, rather than a divided one.

*Honor Wilson-Fletcher was interviewed by Sarah Kinsman.*



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