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### Losing sight of the library child

**Anne Fine**

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It seems to me entirely suitable that, coming to speak to you now, towards the end of the conference, I should be concentrating on the very last part of our sub-theme: investing in the future.

And, this, of course, is because I am a writer of fiction for young people, and fiction writers for children have a special interest in the future of books. The American writer Philip Roth speaks openly of his dispirited view of the state of reading. He claims the evidence is everywhere that the literary era has come to an end. He's quoted as saying: "There's only so much time, so much room, and there are only so many habits of mind that can determine how people use the free time they have. ...Every year," he says, "seventy readers die and only two are replaced. That's a very easy way to visualize it." And he goes on to explain exactly what he means by 'readers'; and that is, if I understand him rightly, those people with the habit of mind that can lean towards "silence, some form of isolation, and sustained concentration in the presence of an enigmatic thing". "It is difficult", he goes on to say, "to come to grips with a mature, intelligent, adult novel."

Writers like me meet a lot of young people. We meet many who barely read at all, or only read when everyone else is reading, as may have happened with the craze of Harry Potter books. But always, to cheer us, somewhere we come across the child for whom books mean everything – the child who curls up with a book at the first opportunity and becomes deaf to all around. The library child, for whom books are more real than the life that surrounds them.

In his wonderful piece of work on the effect of childhood reading, [The Child That Books Built](#), Francis Spufford describes this brilliantly. He remembers, as an awkward, ill-at-ease fifteen year old, waiting in

the rain for the bus home after one of his regular visits to the library. He opened Ursula Le Guin's novel, The Left Hand of Darkness.

*"I read: 'Rainclouds over dark towers, rain falling in deep streets, a dark storm-beaten city of stone, through which one vein of gold wind slowly.'*

And he goes on to describe how 'the trials of my adolescent body went away, the literal drizzle falling on the real streets of Newcastle under Lyme receded, the passing streets of red-brick terraces were abolished. This was the lovely, sure, storytelling voice which can talk a world into existence, and have you crave a fictive life that seems clearer in its lines, and stronger in its colours, than your own, un-narrated, existence.

And many of us in this room know, both that feeling, and that, in childhood, we were of the lucky few that had that feeling. Sometimes it does seem there might be a "reading gene". We think ourselves fortunate. (Actually, we think ourselves blessed).

Listen to the New Zealander, Janet Frame, in her autobiography To The Island, writing about her childhood discovery of books:

*"There was the other world's arrival in mine – the literature streaming through it like an array of beautiful ribbons through the branches of a green growing tree, touching the leaves with unexpected light."*

But to find the books, you need the library. And so the passion for reading becomes a passion for the institution that furnishes this wonder.

Here are two lines from William McIlvanney:

*"In the library for the first time...  
Wonder for the taking, acres of promises."*

Here's Randall Jarrell, on the Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh, speaking of a

*"... country the child thought life  
And wished for, and crept to out of his own life."*

Here's Ray Bradbury:

*"The library deeps lay waiting for them.  
Out in the world, not much happened. But here in... a land bricked with paper and leather, anything might happen, always did. ... Up front was the desk where the nice old lady ... purple-stamped your books, but down off away were Tibet and Antarctica, the Congo..."*

Small wonder, then, that in order to get at the books, many of us were prepared to show the sort of courage usually manifested only by people with forged papers trying to get past military checkpoints. When I was five – and seven, and nine, and twelve – you were only allowed to take out two books at a time. I used a little branch library in Hampshire, run by a lady librarian psychopath. She hated books. She hated children. And she appeared to most particularly hate children reading the books under her roof.

Taking them out of the library was a terrifying experience. She'd stand there, glowering, as you tried to get past her desk. "Only two! Only two!"

But bringing them back to exchange them was a positive nightmare. She'd snatch the book from you and peer suspiciously at the date stamp.

"But you took this book out on Monday and it's only Wednesday now."

"But I've read it, Miss. Honestly."

She'd hand it back.

"Well you can't have read it properly, can you? So you take it home and read it again."

So we must all be glad that libraries develop. That libraries change. And there has probably been greater change in libraries over my lifetime than the sense of real welcome now extended to the child. But for this to be a meaningful welcome to every child, regardless of their background, there are things that must always be borne in mind, and the first of these of course, as usual, is money.

If we have any financial resources at all worth speaking of, should we ever take money from the child who wants to use the library? Making children pay for damage to, or loss of, books, it seems to me, must remain at the discretion of the librarian. One would hope that for first, and even second, mild offences, children would not be subject to financial penalties that would drive them away. I have, in my time, heard some sad stories about babies throwing books in the bath, dogs chewing out pages, or the library book being left in the holiday caravan, and Mum being so cross with having to pay the fines that she has told the child that he or she can no longer bring books home from the library.

But there will always be families who take advantage. And so, in order to protect library property from persistent theft of sheer careless damage, it seems to me that fines even for children may still have to stay (at least officially) even if only used, as one hopes, with discretion.

And I do have to say that here in Britain, at least, there does appear to have been a massive shift in the axis of thinking by librarians themselves on this matter of how much sheer respect the library should have as an institution, and therefore how much the individual user must tailor their behaviour to the general good. I have heard more than one children's librarian in the last fifteen years saying quite cheerfully, "Oh, we actually don't mind at all when our books "walk". We think it's rather nice that one of our readers cares so much for a certain novel that they go to the trouble of stealing it."

What a far cry this is from a tale told by Professor Richard Hoggart, describing his father-in-law refusing to lend him a library ticket to borrow a book Professor Hoggart needed for his academic research, pointing solemnly to the words 'not transferable' on the ticket.

So there's a whole spectrum of thinking on how, or even whether, to enforce respect for those library rules that were created for the greater good. But charging for requests is entirely a different matter. Libraries are supposed to care about people who want to read but have no money.

This is bad enough for some adults. I quote from a letter published in a national magazine in November last year:

"From this month, Bath Central Library has raised its reservation charge to 85 pence per book and added an extra 85 pence charge for national inter-loans, which are essential these days for most books of even mildly specialist interest. This is serious money for anyone living on income support of £52.50 per week. There seems little point in having access to vast bibliographic resources – (one may use this library's computers to search every catalogue and database on the Internet) - if one is deterred from borrowing by the size of the reservation fees for books that the local library chooses not to stock."

If this is true for an adult who wants to read, how much more true is it for a child. And I would like to call for free reservations for any child (as well as free reservations for anyone who can present the usual concession cards). This seems to me entirely in the spirit of the library as it was first conceived. And it makes readers. So often, what the child is looking for is yet another book by the same author whom they have just enjoyed reading. They have spotted this other title in a list of “other books by the same author” in the novel they’ve just brought back to the library. And we all know that it is very often one particular author who switches a child on to books. We writers hear it all the time. “He never read a book till he came across your Bill’s New Frock. Then he read every single one of yours, and he’s never stopped reading.” “I reckon it was Russell Hoban who taught my daughter how to read.” “She never bothered with reading till she discovered Helen Cresswell.”

But even if the reservation and inter-library loan systems are free, the child won’t use them if he or she either doesn’t know about them, or doesn’t know how to, or doesn’t dare to, use them. And all of us have stood at library desks and heard this conversation:

The child in front of us asks, “Have you got - ? and names a book.

The adult says, “Have you looked on the shelves?”  
It’s tantamount, really, isn’t it, to asking the child:

“Are you a halfwit?” Of course the child’s looked on the shelf! Most children don’t rush into asking help from adults whom they perceive as in authority, but whom they don’t know well. They’ve probably looked on the shelf a dozen times. And in the spinners. And on the returns trolley. If a child is brave enough to ask for a book they can’t find, then they need useful help.

The request card could so easily be designed to be child-friendly.

Suppose instead of all the mystifying things no child is likely to know, and which seems almost designed to intimidate them (Month of publication? Name of publisher? Price on publication? ISBN?) the request card was attractively designed, easily taken from a pile on top of one of the shelves, next to a box into which you could post it once you had filled it in.

Suppose it was simply written with blanks to be filled in. Suppose it said something like:

“I really want to read this book. I’ve looked for it in the library about (blank) times.

It’s called ....

The author is

(Try and get these as close as you can.)

Other things that I know about this book are:

And I can’t see most of you finding you have much of a problem, since the last librarian I spoke to claimed to have solved these three mysteries in the last week:

“It’s got Angus in the title, and my dad says it should never have won that prize because it sounds so rude.”

“I don’t know what it’s called, or who wrote it, but I do know it’s covered in lovely shiny rainbowy circles.”

“It’s ever such an old book, and on telly the boy wore a velvet jacket with frills round his shirt neck, and he was American and his grandpa was grumpy.”

The aims and intentions of libraries are always up for discussion. But with each change there always comes the opportunity to get things wrong. And since there seems to me to be nothing – nothing – more important than the future of libraries, I want to mention just a few of the changes that seem to me to have become common nowadays in areas where we must all think about whether there’s some danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

And on each issue, many of the people in this room may find themselves promptly thinking, “Well, this isn’t relevant to us. We wouldn’t even consider going far down this path.”

You might not. But, be assured, not too far in the future, someone who works with you surely will.

So let me touch on a few matter briefly. One is the honourable desire to improve matters for everyone, to tempt everyone – absolutely everyone – into the library. And many libraries all over the world are making huge efforts in this direction.

But there are pitfalls waiting if we ever forget that the experience of libraries, as described by all those I’ve just quoted, is at heart an individual response. We forget the nature of the reading experience for the library child at our peril.

It is a good thing, for example, that a librarian should be able to look round a library with a clear eye and be able to say, fearlessly, “This library looks drab. See how old and battered the books are, all crammed in on the shelves, with nothing attractive showing.”

But if you fill a library with brand new books in bright covers, and display them outwards, yes, you may attract five children who otherwise would not have read; but you must take very great care not to end up with five fewer books on the shelves for the passionate reader. And, be assured, a reader – a born reader – will have a different attitude to display than you will. I can recall going with a friend who had been a professional librarian for many years, and my own two young reading daughters, into the children’s library in the capital city of a Caribbean island. We spent a good ten minutes in there, looking round, and then we left. As soon as we were out of earshot, my librarian friend burst out about the old-fashioned state of the library, the way the books were crammed in on the shelves, the sheer tired look of the stock. But later my two reading daughters and I confessed to one another that we had stood there thinking nothing more than, “Gosh, how brilliant! Look how many books they’ve managed to cram into one small room”.

It’s so important to have a lot of books. The way a child comes at reading is so much a matter of chance – of serendipity. To have a book somewhere in the system is one thing. To have it catch your eye as you walk past is another. That, after all, is part of the magic of titles. You see the title The Wind on The Moon, and you think, “What?” Even as an adult, I recall sliding the book called The Man Who Loved Children off a shelf in Edinburgh City Library out of pure curiosity, and found myself embarked on the extraordinary novel by Christina Stead I still consider to be one of the most powerful novels of the twentieth century.

And to understand just how important this matter of catching the eye is – “Oh, that looks interesting. What’s that about?” – we need do no more than talk to people who work in schools for the blind and seriously visually impaired. Ask them. They’ll tell you how very difficult it is to keep a child reading when they can’t walk past a cover or a title and think, “That looks interesting!” When they can’t browse – pick a book off a table or a display unit or the shelf, and look to see the size of print, the denseness of the

prose, read the first paragraph, and see if they get gripped. All very well to have a list of available books on line. But how many of us in childhood begged for another book we'd heard about by our favourite author, only to be horribly disappointed to find that, this time, the author was aiming at readers much older, or much younger, than ourselves.

So, not too much obsession with a spacious, well-set-out artistic display of those books that are in the library. Far more important to have them at the library at all.

And not in the spare bedroom of the librarian, waiting, for weeks and months on end, to be looked at more thoroughly before being properly put into the system. If I had a pound for every brand new library book I've seen gathering dust in the homes of librarians I've visited, I'd be a richer woman than I am.

And not sold off for twopence in a library sale in the library foyer. This selling off of stock for peanuts annoys the taxpayers more than anything else that happens in libraries. As someone who depended utterly upon the library for my reading as a child, I felt disgusted when, exactly seven months after winning the Library Association Carnegie Medal for my novel Goggle-Eyes, a friend showed me the copy she'd bought that week from a library in quite a deprived area of the north east of England. For ten pence. Not a page missing. Perfectly good condition. Quite a few date stamps. So why?

It wasn't even exceptional. I've lost track of the novels I've seen being sold off, for the lack of which any library is very much the poorer. Who is making these decisions? What do they know about books? I recognise that libraries have finite space. That books don't last for ever. But only three weeks ago, I found myself ticking off a librarian because, on his sale trolley, was a perfectly fine copy of Beverley Naidoo's The Other Side of Truth, last year's Carnegie Medal winner.

Benedict King sighs as he tells the readers of a British journal that he has bought six volumes of Byron's collected letters and journals second hand and in excellent condition from a bookshop for an incredibly low price, only to find that they'd been thrown out of Lambeth Central Reference Library. Quite fitting that it's Byron, because it seems to library users that whoever is making these decisions is, as Lady Caroline Lamb once said of Lord Byron himself, "mad, bad, and dangerous to know".

Between 1989 and 1991 I wrote a trilogy of books for younger readers: A Sudden Puff of Glittering Smoke – with a genie in a ring; A Sudden Swirl of Icy Wind – with a genie in a bottle; and A Sudden Glow of Gold – with a genie in a lamp. Scattered throughout the texts are delicious, exotic proverbs I'd never read before I found them in book of Persian proverbs in Edinburgh City Reference Library. I was perhaps the first person for forty years to have opened that book. And it may never have been opened since. But gems from it are scattered through three books of mine that have been in print ever since, and found their way into practically every primary school in Great Britain.

Who is to say that book (no doubt a real front-runner in the eyes of any librarian wanting to clear a bit of space) had not, vicariously, more than paid its dues?

A week ago, I asked every single person I met in a week whether or not they used the library. I asked every single person, young and old, who said they didn't, why they didn't. A few openly admitted to not being readers. A few claimed the library wasn't open at times they could get to it. A few mentioned that they'd got out of the habit during the years of starved book funds in which there never seemed to be anything fresh to read.

But nobody, not one person, young or old, said anything at all about how the books were presented, how they were displayed.

In the children's section of a library, particularly, we have to cater to the individual reader, that passionate, sometimes introverted, strange child who has an inner life we may not even guess at until, twenty years on, he or she writes their first book. It was a vast and important change for the better that came about when it was finally accepted that many children thought of themselves as essentially non-readers, mostly because so many of the books in the libraries were – to use their own words – far too hard. Librarians quite rightly began to spend more of their book funds on reads that were easier, much more appealing and accessible. The sort of thing that will not frighten off the average child.

It's encouraging for them that they can find the latest series of formula books, being hastily tossed off by a host of separate authors, but all published under the same pseudonym. That they can pick up those easily marketable, two-exactly-the-same-every-year novels by our most popular authors who have hammered out a formula that works, and churn out books one by one for a audience whose devotion to their work mirrors mine, as a child growing up in the fifties, to every deliciously readable dropping from the pen of the prolific Enid Blyton.

But it is so important to have, amongst these books, even in libraries in which they are rarely checked out, those strange, hard-to-market, slightly off-beat novels that appeal to only a very few of your readers, but will expand their souls. Young people are dark horses. We never know what's in them. In J.M. Coetzee's Youth, the thirteen year old sits doing his boring exercises in an English class, thinking about:

“What he would write if he could ... would be something darker, something that, once it began to flow from his pen, would spread across the page out of control, like spilt ink. Like spilt ink, like shadows racing across the face of still water, like lightning crackling across the sky.”

These children, too, need all we can offer them. We seem to feel no discomfort recognising a gift for, and nurturing excellence in, say, something like kicking a football. And yet as a society we seem to have become so uneasy recognising that some children are born to be richer, deeper readers than others in that sense so well described by Philip Roth, “sustained concentration in the presence of an enigmatic thing”, and that our respective societies will be impoverished if we don't feed and sustain their gift. Great sportsmen of history, after all, leave only a reputation behind them for those who weren't there to watch them play. Writers offer a legacy that can be fully shared by anyone in the future who chooses. They can, in short, be immortal. They deserve at least our equal commitment and concern for their development.

So let us make sure we don't end up with our backs to the wall, defending books, especially the more demanding fiction, against enthusiasts in the library system for non-bookish activities, always rushing to meet what are so often rather short-sighted government aims. This is tiresome enough in the adult field. But, after all, rename a library an “Ideas Store”, and you simply make your loyal readers like myself shudder. Encourage footfall into your library by playing sports matches live, and, far from gaining committed new readers, you simply lose more of your old faithfuls. But we older readers know what we value already. Children aren't there yet. So it's important to keep reminding ourselves that above so many of the great public libraries of the world are words of aspiration: “Wisdom is the principal thing: therefore get wisdom”. Can wisdom really be encapsulated in science sections with endless books on pet care and make-up, but almost none on biology or anatomy? Books on motorcycle maintenance but none on engineering? Philosophy and religion sections that cover Unidentified Flying Objects, runes, astrology, Nostradamus and palmistry, but scarcely anything on Western philosophy or the great world religions?

And a library is supposed to be a resource, not for the few, but the many, and for as long as possible. It may, for example, be cheaper to buy paperbacks. I've heard more than my fair share of youth librarians talking up their virtues. “Children prefer them,” they say. But as we all know, the problem is that paperbacks can only be issued a few times, and by the time they need to be replaced, even if excellent novels, they are often out of print. So only the first few benefit. I'm not the only author to have returned

for a second visit to libraries in Britain which have openly prided themselves on sticking to paperbacks, and found almost none of my books. But I can step inside the main public library in Boston, or Tuscon, or Orange County and find hardback copies of my earliest novels, still in perfectly good condition, still going out regularly, and still on the shelves.

One of the principal problems for most of the libraries with which I have contact over the years, both as a writer and a reader, has been that of continually expanding expectations in the face of continually limited funding. The library must make shift for computers. But we all know computer hardware costs the earth, the software costs the earth, the software continually needs updating, and maintenance takes forever and costs even more. We cannot be Luddites and pretend that this is not the future. Manifestly it is. But before sitting quietly by as powers-that-be continue to starve the bookfunds to pay for it, we must be confident it's all worth while.

And yet the most recent study I know found that the link in schools between expenditure on books and success in standard aptitude tests at eleven years old was nearly twice as strong as the link between spending on Information and Communications Technology and on those same exam results. And some of us can't help but hear, chortling away hollowly in the background, the warnings of all those Cassandras who have been pointing out for years that there is simply no point in having brilliant new means of communication if there is little or nothing of true value to communicate.

And just how many of us have sat in children's libraries and been unable to suppress the thought that those who are sitting hunched at the machines are simply absorbed in what, in earlier times, we would call simply "a waste of time".

Dismal enough, when nothing but time is being wasted. But what about when what is wasted is not just the mouse-clickers' time, but the talent of others? When something else has to be sacrificed, either to make the space, or release the money. As has (Allan Bloom) been pointed out, "Culture is not a train. You can't get off and on again, as you choose." There is, to take an example, real bitterness in Eastbourne because the music library is gone. I recall my ex husband, who came from a very poor family but none the less went up to Oxford on a music scholarship, saying that every piece of music he ever played was borrowed free, from Cheltenham Music Library. Aren't we losing sight of the library child? How can a town be better off if a few adults, often only temporarily in the area, have free access to email and the web from 9.30 to 6.30, with all the extra costs that that entails, if those same townspeople, including any of their talented youth, no longer have access to a priceless resource of printed and recorded music?

We may say it is the library's job to provide what people want. But people are plural, and the library user is, as I think we must keep reminding ourselves, an individual. Hanging about in a library in the north east of England, waiting for a lock to be replaced on my car at a local garage, I watched a boy of twelve trying to do his homework with his fingers in his ears to block out the noise as the ladies at the desk laughed, and jokes, and chatted with those of the local community who, in this depressed area, full of shut down mines and unemployment, were clearly using the library as a cheerful social centre.

Looking up, he caught my eye and said, embarrassed: "The problem is, I can't find anywhere quiet to work."

He says that. In a library! And I recall, only a couple of years ago, visiting a library in Auckland, New Zealand, where at least a dozen teenagers were sitting quietly at large tables, studying. Surely this is a more important provision by a library than that of social cheer. A library is not the Citizen's Advice Bureau or the local nursery. It is not the Bingo Hall, or the coffee bar. It is the library, and it was conceived and endowed as something greater, so people who chose, could become something richer and deeper. And it is important that we do not ever lose sight of that goal through all the changes, especially



when so many of our children go to schools in which the watchword seems to be, not education in the sense that we were fortunate enough to be offered it, but – (using the new ghastly verb) “skilling” for life and employment. For them, the wide sweeps and the free range of the library has become pretty well the last bastion of possibility.

By now it should be clear my passion for the library vision is undimmed, so it may seem strange that I move on to something that, at first sight, may appear almost contradictory, my initiative as Children’s Laureate: The Home Library Scheme.

Those of you who’ve logged on to this already will know that the idea began at a Children’s Literature Conference in New York, when I was listening to an American writer – I’m almost 100 per cent sure it was Ashley Bryan – talking of his work in the most deprived school areas of New York. “I tell them all,” he said, “that every sort of library is important. National, state, town, street, school and class libraries. And it shouldn’t stop there. At home, you need your own Home Library. No one should be without books in the Home.”

A recent survey of a British secondary school turned up the quite horrifying statistic that 30 per cent of children claimed to have fewer than six books in the house. Not in the bedroom. In the house. When you consider that one of these books is likely to be the Highway Code, another How To Pass Your Driving Test, and a third the map of Liverpool, we suddenly see that we are down to three books.

Mercifully, we can at least try to console ourselves that the house without books is no new phenomenon. In an article in the New Yorker a while ago, Jeanette Winterson, now in her early forties, writes of her own childhood: “There were only six books in our house.” It seems her mother, a religious fundamentalist, had an argument against books that ran something like: “The trouble with a book is that you never know what’s in it until it’s too late.” So, says Winterson:

“I began to smuggle books in. Anyone who has a single bed, standard size, and a collection of paperbacks, standard size, will discover that seventy-seven can be accommodated, per layer, under the mattress. I began, “she goes on to tell us, “to worry that my mother might realize her daughter’s bed was rising visibly.”

Here was a young person who used the library. And it becomes more and more obvious to us all, that, where the opportunity exists, people will either borrow from libraries and buy books, or they’ll do neither.

And one of the things that had struck me most in twenty five years of visiting schools is how many children I met who reminded me of my own young book-loving self, (“Oh, I love reading”) until the moment the discussion turned to what they’d actually read. And so often it was only what was on the school’s (rarely overflowing) shelves. I’d ask the obvious question: “Why don’t you use the library?” And time and again I’d hear the same old answers:

“Mum hates me crossing that road.”

“They worry if I’m not back straight away after school.”

“We always mean to go on Saturdays. But Dad gets the shopping done first, and then he’s always in a rush to get home and unpack it before the frozen stuff melts.”

So changes in parental working patterns, traffic, and perceptions of danger have made the library a harder place to use for many children. But during this same period, one of the other things you couldn’t help noticing was how many more books there actually were about. New bookshops all over, obviously; but

also, sales of books in schools, charity shops all over, always with loads of first rate books in them, in excellent condition. During the last few decades, books have become comparatively cheaper and more attractive to look at, with the result that, firstly, they are more popular among adults as gifts, and secondly, that people can't hang on to them all in the way they used to. If they redecorate, and want a computer against that wall, out goes the bookcase and all the books end up in Help The Aged, or Oxfam.

Oxfam alone sold nine million pounds worth of second hand books in Britain last year. Four million pounds worth of those were children's books. At Oxfam prices, that is an awful lot of books. And what you realise, very quickly, once you begin to think about it, is that many of these charity shops are sited in the less rich areas, the places where big glossy bookshops just don't go.

So the basis of the scheme is bookplates. For nearly a year now, I have been asking leading children's illustrators to design for us free, bright, modern bookplates to appeal to all ages and temperaments. Every week, more are scanned up into our website for free downloading, for anyone who wants them. Look for them all on [www.myhomelibrary.org](http://www.myhomelibrary.org). We have over a 100 of them in black and white, and colour growing. They can be copied in as large quantities as anyone wants, free. The one thing they have in common is the words This Book Belongs in the Home Library of..... and even that can be replaced by any competent computer person by words in any language you might like. None of these bookplates or any part of them, may be used for any commercial purpose, but you – and everyone else – can copy them limitlessly. I've seen the colour ones downloaded and printed out, beautifully centred on self-sticking labels. I've seen the black and white ones printed onto plain paper, left as they are or coloured in by the child, or printed out on different coloured sheets of paper before being trimmed round the edges and glued into books.

This scheme is designed to appeal to the child's passion for choosing favourites, and their strange need, presented with anything that can be stuck, to find something to stick it in. Children have always enjoyed writing their names on possessions.

For three months now, this simple but expanding scheme has been encouraging children to choose and collect books – new or old – and make them, with the bookplates, new to them. It's an encouragement to the adults in their lives to think more in terms of giving them things to read than things to wear, or play with. "Here's something I thought you might like for your Home Library." That impassioned New York writer's vision that, in this respect, even the poorest child shouldn't be impoverished will, I hope, lead to everyone with an interest in children's reading catching on and distributing, not just our bookplates, but their own. Think of it. Schools, clubs, sports teams, grandparents, maternity wards, bookshops, - anyone who cares about children's enrichment – handing out bookplates that propagate the idea everywhere that it is natural, absolutely natural, to have your own books in your own home library.

As many of you already know, this simple scheme is already spreading world-wide like a benign virus. From countries all over the world we get emails. From schools, education advisors, literacy specialists, librarians.

"May we really use them too?"

"May our school system copy them in bulk, please?"

"Can we translate the This book belongs in the Home Library of into our own language, but use the same illustration?"

Yes, yes and yes.

And all to the purpose of more reading of books. Am I backward looking?" I would argue not. Admittedly, it's now fifteen years since I first heard a librarian say the words, "Oh, I'm not much of a

reader,” and realised that the move to bring technologies into our libraries had altered the library world for ever.

But in those fifteen years, to anyone who actually spends time with children, the disadvantages of too great a diversion of money and space and interests into this brand new side of things has become more than apparent. In a newspaper article, Simon Webb talks of his daughter typing the word ‘slow-worms’ into a search engine, and getting more than 400 references, which, at three screen pages or so per site, is 1200 pages to work through – roughly the length of War and Peace. And this for a child who does not yet have the skills to skim through a huge mass of information and extract those parts that might be of use.

Meanwhile, the librarian looks up ‘slowworms’ in a book, and instantly there is the information, clear as paint. And, as Simon Webb is by no means the first to point out, children simply don’t know enough to distinguish between the sensible, the outlandish and the frankly mad. One cannot but suspect that, offered only this sort of learning, most never will.

Ted Hughes once inveighed against “the new descending dark age of the computerised library and word-processed child. It’s an unthinking techno-chic madness he said. The consequences at the soft end – the child’s ability to do anything with all this mental substitute procedure – are ... catastrophic. It’s all part of a psychological blindness in our higher busybodies.”

One of the ministers in charge of libraries during the Thatcher years once notoriously posed the question: “We have to ask whether there is anything sufficiently distinctive about reading as a leisure activity that means it should be offered free of charge.”

The answer came back to him, many of you will recall, pretty sharpish. But the novelist Ford Madox Ford had offered him the answer years before. “Imaginative literature,” he had said, “is the most important thing in the world because it is the only thing that can make you think and feel simultaneously.” It is the best instrument we have for ethical enquiry. It is the easiest, and most comforting avenue to self-reflection, as well as the most powerful source of enchantment.

Only you and your libraries can provide enough reading for the children we shall all of us be looking to in the future. So, whatever the pressures on you, never let them down.

Thank you.

