FOURTH EDITION

Exploring Children's Literature

Reading for Knowledge, Understanding and Pleasure

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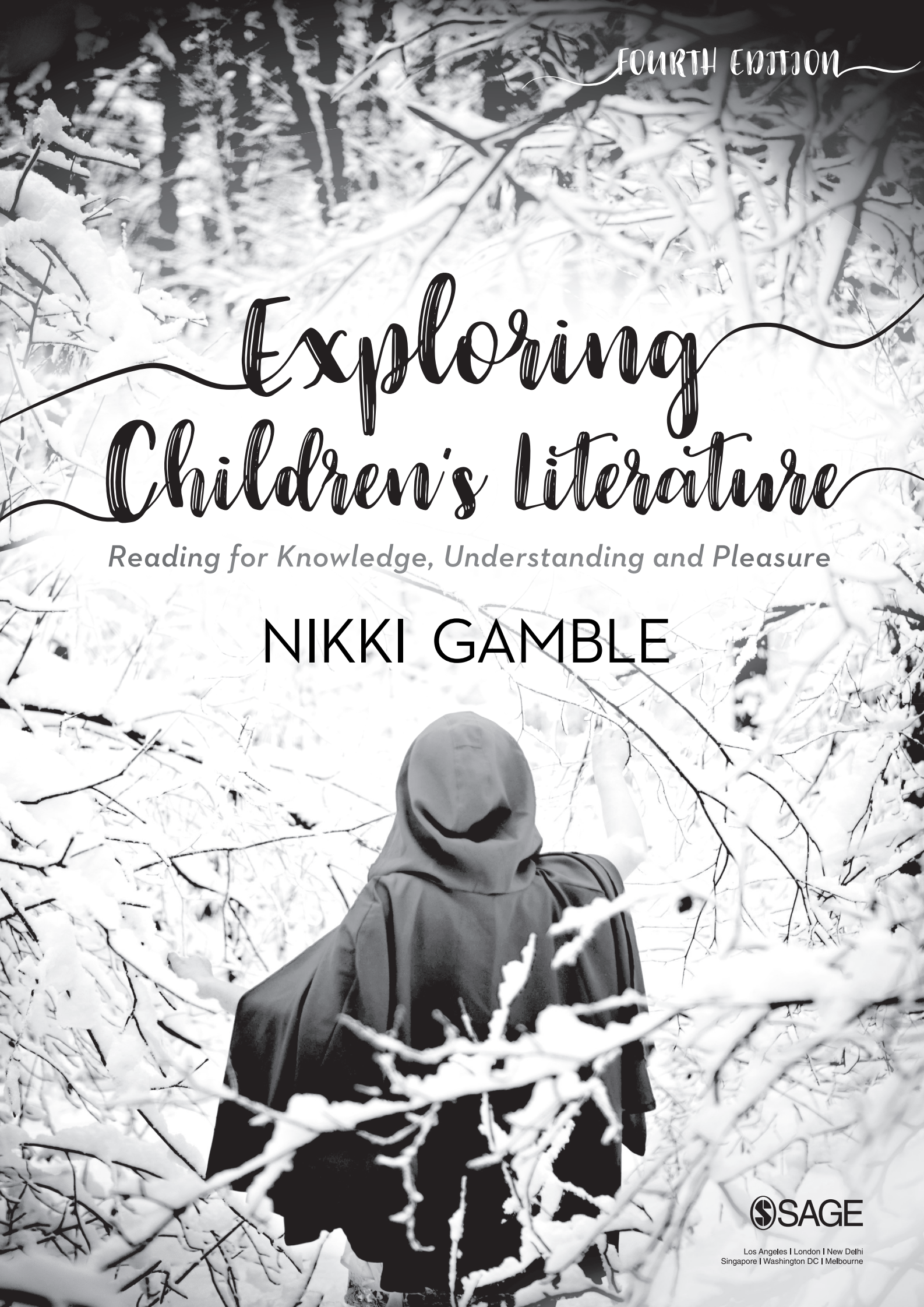

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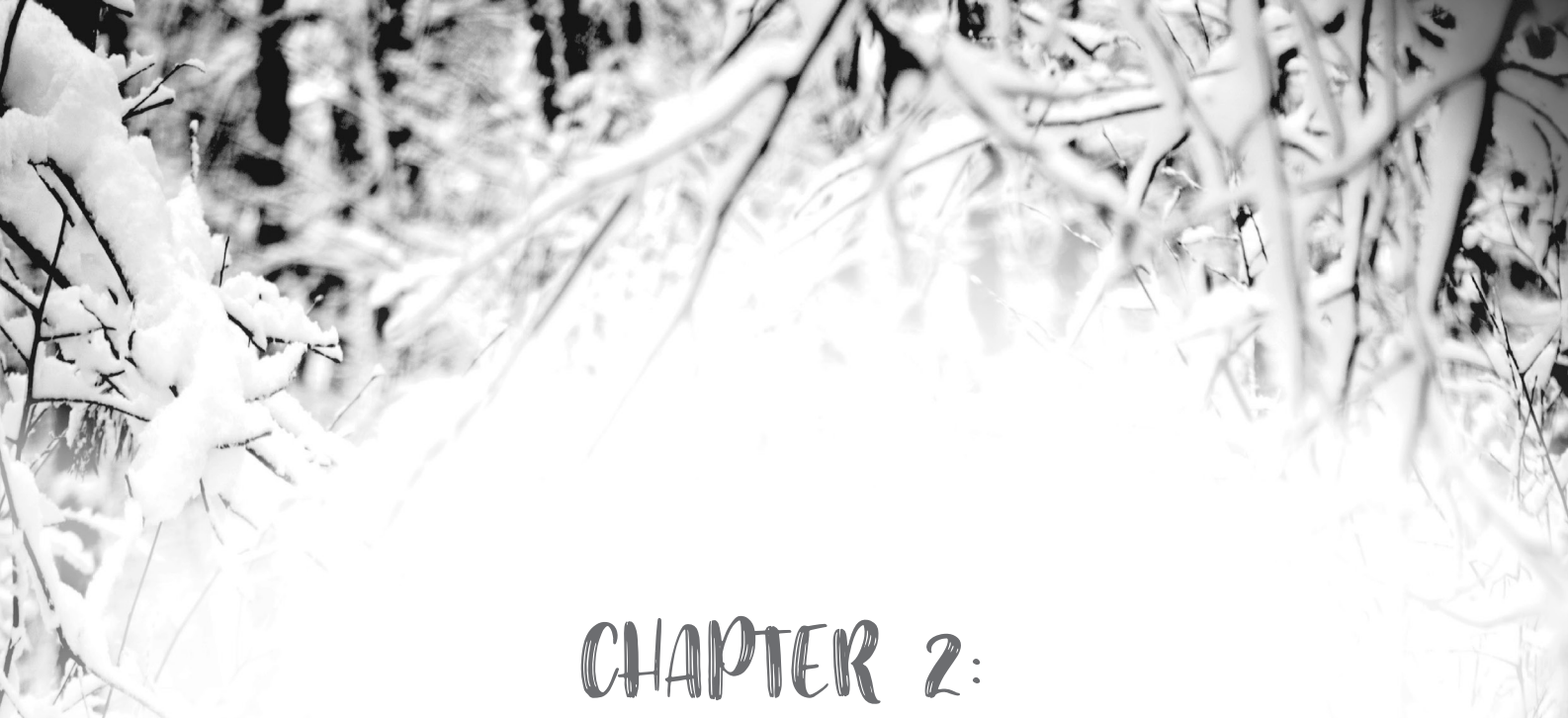

CHAPTER 2:

Reading Teachers

In this chapter you will

- construct and consider your personal reading history
- reflect upon the social and cultural influences on reading
- review the scope of your own knowledge about literature for children
- learn about the connection between teachers' personal reading and book knowledge, and pupils' engagement with reading
- think about ways of auditing and recording your reading and setting a personal agenda for further reading.

Effective teaching of reading and writing is contingent upon teachers' deep subject knowledge of texts and approaches to working with them in the classroom. Eve Bearne writes:

> Not only must children be able to read their own and others' representations of the world sharply and analytically, but so must teachers. Not only must children's implicit knowledge of a range of texts and contexts be brought out into the open, but, crucially, teachers' own understandings need to be made explicit in order to help forge clear views of how best to tackle the classroom demands involved in helping children to energize their experience of an increasingly complex range of texts. (1996: 318)

This chapter focuses on you as a reader. You are invited to reflect on how your reading experiences, both positive and negative, have shaped the reader you are today, and to consider the implications for your own professional practice.

ACTIVITY 2.1

Starting a professional reading journal

To make the most of the activities and reflections in this book, I suggest that you set up a reading journal to record your responses to the activities.

The journal will help you to track your growing knowledge and understanding of children's literature, literary theory and pedagogy. It should provide a good source of ideas and inspiration for your work in schools with young people.

At various points in this book suggestions will be made for entries you might make in your journal. Use your journal as a tool to support critical reflection.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON READING

If you are reading this book, you are likely to be a good reader. But what does that mean? You may be an avid reader, someone who always has a novel in your bag, ready to read whenever the opportunity presents itself. But you can be a good reader without conforming to this

romanticized image. You might have a more pragmatic approach, preferring to read about things that inform your practical interests such as baking or motorcycle maintenance. You might enjoy a daily newspaper or a weekly magazine.

Before we think about children as readers, we are going to start with our own recollections. In the day-to-day of teaching it can be easy to forget what it felt like to become a reader. Reflecting on our memories and experiences will provide useful insights to inform practice. As you delve into the past you will think about what made you the reader you are today. Perhaps you were reading before you started school and have no recollection of the process of learning to read. Was reading a struggle and how did that affect the image of yourself as a reader? Perhaps despite the struggle to read you still enjoyed books and stories. I have known children who have been fortunate to have positive experiences, even though the mechanics of reading were problematic for them, because they have had access to books that have engaged them and have been read to by supportive adults. Positive memories of early reading are often connected with significant adults as Levy et al. point out in their report, *Attitudes to Reading and Writing and Their Links with Social Mobility*: 'The memories are multisensory, describing attributes of people as well as the stories themselves, focusing on the act of reading as a way of being together and enjoying together' (2014: 21). It is possible that you recall the first book that you read independently – it may still be sitting on your bookshelf.

Here is a case study of my own reading history with an accompanying commentary.

COMMENTARY

Childhood reading history

Books have been part of my life for as long as I can remember. The first book I owned was Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Mrs Tittlemouse*. It was read to me many times until I knew it by heart and could read aloud to myself. My copy was in the original Frederick Warne small format that Beatrix Potter herself had insisted upon (made for little hands). I used to scrutinize the endpapers, which depicted characters from other Potter tales, checking to see which of the books I already knew, and which were still to be discovered. Then came *Where the Wild Things Are*. I was about 3 years old at the time it was published. I remember my dad, a graphic artist, getting really excited about it; his enthusiasm was infectious. Dad started reading aloud to me when I was very young. Frequently he would choose poetry. A. A. Milne's *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six* came first and then we progressed to Walter de la Mare's *Peacock Pie*, Edward Lear's *A Book of Nonsense* and Louis Untermeyer's *Golden Treasury of Poetry*. I developed a repertoire of favourites that I would ask for every night and I knew many poems by heart. From *Struwelpeter* I could recite 'Shockheaded Peter', 'Harriet and the Matches', and 'Little Johnny Head in Air'. The untimely deaths of the disobedient children were not in the least off-putting, and neither did I believe that I would meet a similar end if I sucked my thumb or refused to eat my soup. But there was one poem in the collection that unsettled me, 'The Story of the Inky Boys'. I would turn the pages quickly so that I wouldn't have to see the illustrations.

Fiction was also on the bedtime reading menu. Oscar Wilde's collection, *The Happy Prince and Other Stories*, was well thumbed. His stories made me cry; they were devastating, but I

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thought them beautiful as well. When I was about 7, Dad read John Masefield's *The Midnight Folk*; scary – but thrilling. This was followed by Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and then *The Lord of the Rings*. It was always a bittersweet experience when we got to the final chapter of a good book and I often re-read them independently afterwards.

Books were usually given as birthday and Christmas presents from friends and relatives. Each year I had a copy of the Rupert Annual and was disappointed one Christmas when I discovered my younger brother was the new recipient of Rupert and I had to make do with the Mandy Annual. A cousin, who was a teacher, always bought prize-winning books: Elizabeth Goudge's *The Little White Horse* and Alan Garner's *Elidor* became personal favourites that were read more than once.

I have been told that I was reading before I started school and perhaps this is the reason that I don't recall the process of learning to read, but I do have clear memories of story time. In the infants we were treated to Ursula Moray Williams's *Adventures of the Little Wooden Horse*, then Mary Norton's *The Borrowers*. Story time ceased in the junior school. We were supposed to select something to read from a shelf of tatty books at the back of the classroom. I recall that the books were mainly non-fiction with titles such as *My Life as a Roman Centurion*, covered in inkblots with dog-eared pages. I spent more time changing books than reading them.

Once I started junior school I was allowed to visit the library on Saturday morning while Mum and Dad did the weekly grocery shopping. I worked my way through Andrew Lang's colour fairy books and Roger Lancelyn Green's retellings of Greek myths and Arthurian legend. And on Sunday mornings I cycled to the newsagent to collect a *Bunty* comic. At around the age of 11 I abandoned *Bunty* for *Jackie* – everyone I knew read *Jackie* – the problem page was read aloud on the way to school. But secretly I preferred my brother's Marvel comics.

At home the radio was another rich source of stories. *The Hobbit* was dramatized for the radio on Sunday afternoon and children's books were serialized at teatime. Later when we acquired our first black-and-white television set (I was about 10 years old) I would rush home to watch *Jackanory*. I also enjoyed serialized drama: Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* and Nina Bawden's *The Witch's Daughter* were particularly memorable.

Despite these positive reading memories, I vividly recall being put into the 'remedial' reading group when I was in the first year of junior school. The mortification was intense. So much so that when I was told to go to the reading hut where the remedial group met, I absconded to the girls' toilets for the entire lesson. Of course, my absenteeism was discovered and the next time I was accompanied to the reading hut and I remember the enforced misery of having to read what I considered the very dull story of *Roderick the Red Pirate*. I was puzzled and unsettled by the decision to assign me to this group as I was an avid and fluent reader at home and was reading far more complex books before starting school. To this day I am unsure why it was considered that I needed extra help, but I can make some educated guesses. I was certainly a dreamer and frequently failed to pay full attention in class. I also changed schools around this time and the daily routines and the pedagogy in the new school were very alien to me. Perhaps the teacher had been unable to make a proper assessment, or perhaps I was being punished for being a less than ideal student. I was a very stubborn child and refused to take part in the 'remedial' lessons. I recall being made to attend on a few occasions before the judgement was reversed.

Commentary

Reviewing my reading history allows me to think about the significance of these experiences and to generalize from the personal. I was a voracious reader from early childhood and encouraged to both own and borrow books from the public library. Book talk was a feature of family life. Sharing books with others in my family, including my younger brother, was encouraged. As a child of the 1960s I benefited from the development of the paperback book market and the genesis of the Puffin, which introduced new writers' work to complement the classics that my parents knew. Having a brother close in age and a father who read to me gave me access to a wider range of genres than I might otherwise have been exposed to. The fact that the memory of being sent to the 'remedial' group is such a vivid one that still fills me with indignation shows the impact that even fleeting decisions made in school may have on a child's perception of themselves. Though equally important here is the fact I had already developed a positive image of myself as a reader, which was reinforced by adults a home, and the pre-existent benefit of a breadth and depth of book experience meant that I was able to overcome this temporary glitch. But how might the same experience have impacted on a child who did not have the same reassurance?

The relationship of books and reading to other media is also significant. Some books were animated by television and radio and, in turn, knowledge about a particular book would lead me back to the television to tune in to the adaptation of a well-known story.

My overriding insight is that the social and cultural contexts in which reading is situated shape us both as readers and as human beings.

ACTIVITY 2.2

Personal reading history

This section invites you to review and analyse your own reading history and reflect on how your reading practices have contributed to your acquisition of cultural literacy and your formation of a reading identity.

Make notes about your own personal childhood reading history. Here are some prompts to help you, but don't feel constrained by them:

- What are your earliest memories of reading?
- Do you recall being read to by others at home and/or at school?
- Do you have favourite books from different stages of childhood?
- Do your memories include times and places where you read?
- Did you read comics and other material?
- What was the source of your books (e.g. library, gifts, buying, borrowing)?
- Did you read with siblings and friends, or share their books?
- What was the attitude of the adults around you to your reading? Did they encourage you? Did they approve of your reading?
- Were there particular genres, authors or series you liked?

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- How did you find out about which books to read?
- Was reading a pleasurable experience for you?
- Were there differences between reading at home and at school?
- Were there some books that you re-read?
- Which of the books you read would you consider to be 'good literature' and which 'popular fiction'?
- What is your pattern of reading now, as an adult?

When you have completed your history, share it with others and consider what factors have contributed to your current reading patterns and attitudes to reading. What social and cultural influences have made you the reader that you are today? All experiences are equally valid. There are no good or bad experiences; the power in this activity comes from honest reflection as that is the route to understanding ourselves so that we can be better placed to understand the young readers in our classes.

HOME INFLUENCES ON PATTERNS OF READING

Reflecting on your reading history, you may have observed patterns in childhood reading that have gone on to play a part in determining your attitudes to reading and your reading preferences. You may have found that the bridge between home and school was an easy one to cross, but you may have found the expectations at school discordant with your experience. Your teachers might have invited you to share your cultural knowledge and they might have been able to build on it successfully to help create a smooth transition, or sadly you may have found that there was little common ground between home and school, which left you wondering how you were supposed to navigate the divide. Perhaps you found reading at school a sterile and meaningless occupation in comparison to the vibrant literacy environment at home. And maybe you discovered differences in the way reading was framed as either a social or solitary activity.

From Margaret Clark's seminal work *Young Fluent Readers* (1976) onwards, there has been a large body of research investigating home influences on children's reading attainment, behaviours and attitudes. The National Literacy Trust's (NLT) literature review of the importance of families and the home environment (McCoy and Cole, 2011: 6) summarizes the main insights into the impact of parents reading to young children:

> Parents reading to babies and young children has a strong impact on children's language and literacy development. Parents reading to their children in the pre-school years is regarded as an important predictor of literacy achievement (Weinberger, 1996). This parental activity is associated with strong evidence of benefits for children such as language growth, reading achievement and writing (Brooks, 2000), the enhancement of children's language comprehension and expressive language skills, listening and speaking skills, later enjoyment of books and reading, understanding narrative and story (Wells, 1987; Crain-Thoreson and Dale, 1992; Weinberger, 1996):
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> - Parental involvement in their child's reading has been found to be the most important determinant of language and emergent literacy (Bus et al., 1995).

- Children who are read to at an early age tend to display greater interest in reading at a later age (Arnold and Whitehurst, 1994).
- Story reading at home enhances children's language comprehension and expressive language skills (Crain-Thoreson and Dale, 1992).
- Oral language developed from parent/child reading predicts later writing development (Crain-Thoreson et al., 1999).
- Parents who introduce their babies to books give them a head start in school and an advantage over their peers throughout primary school (Wade and Moore, 1996).

Book ownership varies dramatically and is often used as a measure for those looking at literacy practices in the home. The National Literacy Trust report into book ownership and reading outcomes (2017) found that 9.4 per cent of children do not have a book of their own at home with the figures rising to 13.1 per cent for children from disadvantaged families. Figures were most discouraging for children receiving free school meals, boys and teenagers. The significance of this finding becomes evident when set alongside children's reading attainment. Those children owning a book were 15 times more likely to read above the expected level for their age.

More recently, Rachel Levy at the University of Sheffield has studied literacy practices in the home. Speaking at a BERA/UKLA conference (2018), Levy cautioned against making deficit judgements about families whose literacy practices are different from those valued by schools.

Looking in depth at literacy in specific communities shows that it is situated in daily literacy practices and reflects cultural values. Shirley Brice Heath's ethnographic study of three contrasting communities (1983) revealed differences in the perceptions of the place of reading and literature for children. Roadville and Trackton were two communities in the USA where the mill is the centre of the economy. Roadville was a white working-class community, stable in having several generations who had worked at the mill. Trackton was a black working-class community where traditional farm workers had moved in to work in the mill. In both communities, literacy events were embedded in social and cultural practices. In Trackton literacy was functional, related to getting on with life or to the church and religion. No special texts were produced for children, but they were encouraged to read the print in the environment around them and given tasks to do such as shopping, which required them to develop their reading skills. Reading for adults was a public, social event where newspapers or letters would be read aloud to a group and comment invited and expected. In church, the written words of the prayers and readings were interpreted and embellished by reader and congregation according to commonly agreed patterns: beyond the written text, the spoken word had a status and richness uniquely created and understood by the community. Children learnt about language and literacy by being apprenticed into these adult literacy events.

In Roadville, reading was valued, and it was believed that children 'should' read. Adults acquired reading material – newspapers, magazines, brochures – but did not spend much time reading themselves. Children were provided with books for enjoyment and learning, and these were read to them, particularly at bedtime and for soothing. Early books were labelled pictures, alphabets and nursery rhymes, and typical adult behaviour when reading to the children was to ask questions and invite 'labelling' of the text and pictures. Environmental print was valued, and children were encouraged to read whatever they could. Television-related books were also bought as part of the range read by children as they grew older. There was a belief that 'behind the written word is an authority' and texts chosen and read were those which reflected and confirmed the values and rules of the community. Texts open to interpretation with meanings beyond those which were commonly understood as realities and meanings within the community sat uneasily here as reading was for learning how to become a member of that society.

These two communities were contrasted with the townspeople, both black and white; the 'mainstreamers'. The townspeople used literacy and language in every part of their lives and were very 'school oriented':

> As the children of the townspeople learn the distinction between contextualized first-hand experiences and decontextualized representations of experience, they come to act like literates before they can read. (Heath, 1983: 262)

Not only were these communities in contrast to each other, they also contrasted with the demands and expectations of school cultures of literacy. School demands very specific literacy behaviours, and dissonance between experience at home and at school can make tremendous demands on the child. The concept of 'story' was different in each community and the teachers' expectations of the children in creating fantasies in school posed challenges for the children in conceptualizing the parameters of the activity. Shirley Brice Heath worked with teachers to consider ways of exploring, understanding and working with the literacies practised and valued by the communities. Her aim was to enable teachers and pupils to bridge language and culture differences and 'to recognize and use language as power' (1983: 266). Understanding the concepts of literacy in the communities with which you work can make this bridge building more effective.

A detailed study of households in Tucson, Arizona similarly revealed that families had broad 'funds of knowledge'. Children were observed to be active participants in the cultural practices of home and community. The majority of the subjects were literate, being able to read and write well in Spanish. However, teachers rarely drew on this knowledge and as school required literacy in English rather than Spanish, literacy was fractured. The research team spent time working with teachers to explore ways in which bridges could be built between community and school practices (Moll et al., 1992; Gonzalez et al., 2005).

In her work with young bilingual learners, Helen Bromley (1996) provides examples of such bridging behaviour. She describes the behaviour of Momahl, a young girl fluent in Urdu, sharing books within the reception class. Initially, Momahl was inducted into sharing picturebooks by a more confident and experienced reader. Momahl demonstrated her awareness of nursery rhymes through her responses to Janet and Allan Ahlbergs's *Each Peach Pear Plum*, singing the rhymes related to characters as they appeared. Although not yet speaking English fluently, she had learnt the songs with her family and recognized the characters. In this behaviour she, in turn, supported Katy, a child who had clearly no such familiarity with the rhymes and who learnt them from Momahl. Each child in Helen's class was recognized as bringing different previous experience and cultural expectations into school, and she saw her role not merely as inducting them into the culture of school, but as drawing on what she learnt about them to create shared and valid experience and opportunities for learning.

TEACHERS AS READERS

Having thought about our early experiences and the formation of our reading identities, we turn our attention to the role of reading in our adult lives, both personal and professional. In 2000 the International Literacy Association (ILA) published a position statement, 'Excellent reading teachers' (Minnick et al., 2000), which detailed the characteristics of good teachers of literacy. After reading that paper, Michelle Commeyras, professor at the University of Georgia, observed that it was strange that the paper made no mention of teachers' reading lives beyond the professional requirement to read with their students and to keep up-to-date with children's literature.

This was the catalyst for a 15-week seminar programme. Over this period, 19 female teachers met to talk about the relationship between reading and teaching. In a subsequent book

published in 2003, Commeyras documented the process and the insights that had emerged. The mood of the meetings is captured in Commeyras's description: 'And we laughed often as we explored how our personal reading mattered to our teaching and how our teaching mattered to our reading lives' (2003: 9). Despite the light-hearted mood it is evident that the sessions were not frivolous but led to some deep thinking about the connections between the reading lives of teachers and those of their students. Teachers talked honestly about putting books down without finishing them, about skipping past descriptive passages, or reading to the end of a book to find out what happened. They discussed the importance of reading companionship, the joy of sharing books with like-minded readers: 'There's something really special about a friend of yours giving you a book and telling you they can't wait for you to read it so you can talk about it' (2003: 14). They discussed challenges too – reading books at the wrong time could make them seem more difficult or emotions might be too raw to face reading a particular book but at other times the emotional experience was cathartic or reminded teachers and children of their shared humanity.

In the UK, the work of Commeyras et al. was picked up by the Teachers as Readers (TaRs) project (Cremin et al., 2009). The research examined the extent of teachers' personal knowledge about children's books. The researchers collected responses from 1,200 primary teachers. Findings indicated that while most teachers read for pleasure, professional reading of children's books covered a limited range of authors; Roald Dahl was by far the most recognized author, with Michael Morpurgo, Jacqueline Wilson, J.K. Rowling and Anne Fine following behind. There were few mentions of new or up-and-coming authors. The range of children's poets referred to was even more limited. About a third of the teachers mentioned Michael Rosen, with mentions also for Allan Ahlberg, Roger McGough, Roald Dahl and Spike Milligan. Cremin writes: 'Placed alongside the documented decline in reading for pleasure and the reduction in primary phase book spending, this research suggested a need for increased professional support to extend teachers' knowledge and use of texts' (Cremin et al., 2008).

This led to a second phase project, Building Communities of Readers. Undertaken in five local authorities, the project aims were to 'improve teachers' knowledge and use of literature in order to help them increase children's motivation and enthusiasm for reading, especially those less successful in literacy' (Cremin et al., 2008).

One of the outcomes of this project was the setting up of an interactive website built around the core principles of the TaR research (Open University, 2018):

- teachers' knowledge of children's literature
- teachers' knowledge of children's reading practices
- reading for pleasure pedagogy
- reading teachers
- reading communities.

This growing, rich resource documents many practical case studies submitted by teachers to illustrate the way in which reading for pleasure is implemented in their own settings. At the same time the establishment of over 40 Open University Reading for Pleasure teacher reading groups across the UK continues to grow a network of 'teachers who read and readers who teach'.

What do some of these reading teachers say about their own experiences?

> We should pre-read the texts we read and teach to our class, and we should read to help us make decisions on book selections, but we should also read for our own enjoyment, at our own level. Why? Because it makes us into readers and it is the only thing that will give us deep insight into the books we like – the varying ways they are narrated, the different plot types. The similarities between two texts, the complexities of older texts, the devices

> used by authors. Having a continually growing understanding of what books are like is essential if we want to learn how to gain meaningful understanding of a variety of texts. (Aidan Severs, Deputy Headteacher; That Boy Can Teach, 2016)
>
> Passionate about fostering children's love of reading, I am committed to my development as a Reading Teacher. Since qualifying, I have striven to keep my repertoire of children's literature as broad and contemporary as possible, which has enabled me to talk about texts and make recommendations tailored to individual children's interests. However, after engaging with research around Reading Teachers, I realised that I was not really opening myself up as a reader to the children. I began to share more of my reading life. The children in my class have always viewed me as an avid reader but this development led to a change in their understanding. They now know that I read for the intrinsic value of reading rather than just in my role as their teacher. They view me as a reader who teaches as well as a teacher who reads. As I result I model more authentic reading behaviour and my reader-to-reader relationships have become more personal and reciprocal, which in turn has helped me to foster their love of reading. (Claire Williams, Reading Lead, personal communication)

What we see here is a deepening awareness of the connection between teachers' and children's reading lives and the impact on children's motivation and learning.

In the next chapter we look at patterns in children's reading and your knowledge of current children's books.

FURTHER READING

Shirley Brice Heath (1983) *Ways With Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

A seminal ethnographic study into the situated literacy practices in three communities. A key observation in this study is the extent to which home literacy practices either converge or diverge from the expectations of what counts as important in school.

Commeyras, M., Bisplinghoff, B. S. and Olson, J. (2003) *Teachers as Readers: Perspectives on the Importance of Reading in Teachers' Classrooms and Lives*. Newark, Delaware: International Literacy Association.

An important study looking at the importance of the teachers' engagement with reading and the impact on children's reading lives.