Learning through literature: the case of The Arabian Nights

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In the last twenty years, the teaching of reading in Britain has moved away from an interest in how children take delight in, and make meaning of, their literature to a preoccupation with a mechanistic approach to literacy which breaks down texts into bite-sized chunks and fragments reading into a series of isolated skills. Although an expensive, comprehensive system for literacy has been put in place with its plethora of related materials for teachers and pupils, it has not been particularly successful in raising literacy standards, and it has turned some children away from reading. Using The Arabian Nights as a case study (the book most often mentioned as favourite childhood reading of dozens of famous writers from the eighteenth century to the present day, worldwide), I have examined its influence on certain famous writers living in the nineteenth century with particular reference to how it may have shaped their approach to writing fiction. Using a cross-disciplinary approach, I have tried to combine the skills and insights of the literary critic and the literary historian: the former showing how literary texts work and how writers construct them to provoke a range of responses in their readers; the latter exploring the biographical and social context of the emergent writer, identifying and evaluating the factors that contributed to developing their particular creative identity. A further strand is that of the educator seeking to glean insights from tantalisingly fragmentary historical data which may cast light on some contemporary concerns about children’s learning, including debates about the teaching of reading. By bringing these different approaches together, my specific intention is to further the understanding of one aspect of learning in the modern world—that of children’s reading. The message that my tentative findings suggest is that whatever policy initiatives are taken in literacy, encouraging children to take pleasure in reading whole books of their own choosing should be a priority.

Introduction

Babies do not want to hear about babies; they like to be told of giants and castles, and of somewhat which can stretch and stimulate their minds. Remember always that the parents buy the books, and that the children never read them … (Dr Johnson, quoted in Page, 1987, p. 7)

There are countless entries for The Arabian Nights (also known as The Thousand and One Nights or Entertainments, from now on Nights) in the British Library catalogue.

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Wily Sheherazade’s spectacular tales, exemplifying the art of procrastination, feature Aladdin, Ali Baba, Sinbad the Sailor and other unforgettable and initially unfortunate characters gaining unimaginable riches by doing battle with wicked genies trapped in bottles and other exotic villains, experiencing vivid adventures along the way with the aid of quick wit and magic in the forms of special words to open cave doors, flying carpets and lamps that when rubbed the right way, grant wishes. As well as numerous editions, some illustrated, some abridged, some scholarly, some for children, translated into many languages, there are also films, operas, stage productions and pantomimes. To say that this text, which claimed a hold on the popular imagination in Europe in the eighteenth century, is still part of popular culture for young and old alike, is to state the obvious. In this article, I want to ask why, and in what ways, did it capture the imaginations of children who were to become notable writers?

This article is based on many years of professional research into childhood, children’s reading and the texts that engage the young. One focus has been on the literature, both canonical and popular; another has been empirical research which examines how children respond to and interpret texts; a further strand has been pedagogies of teaching reading. A fuller understanding of children learning through literature, with all its conditions, constraints and opportunities, required closer attention to longer historical perspectives, tracing continuities and contrasts through surviving evidence. Another research focus has been the unique nursery library created by an obscure Englishwoman for her children in the 1740s. This investigation into domestic literacy involved working on the Jane Johnson archive at the University of Indiana and collaborating with the cultural anthropologist and linguist, Shirley Brice Heath. Among several important discoveries of this research project, the most significant was a text produced by Jane Johnson for domestic consumption in 1744, *A very pretty story* (now in the Bodleian Library). Our research revealed new data on domestic literacy and how reading was taught in the past, as well as offering tentative insights for literacy today.

The purpose of this autobiographical opening is to contextualise the present paper within my wider research interests and to emphasise the cross-disciplinary character of my enquiry. In this very preliminary study, I have sought to combine the skills, analyses and insights of the literary critic and literary historian with those of the social historian, to examine a few selected instances of the childhood reading of certain famous writers, their reading choices, the contexts in which they read, and how this may have shaped their motivation and aptitude to write. Having an educator’s interest in contemporary debates about the teaching of reading, this preliminary study of the texts read in childhood by a small number of ‘classic’ authors from the past has raised intriguing questions that may be relevant to children’s reading in the twenty-first century.

**Reading the past**

My initial questions were as follows. What sources from their own childhood reading may have inspired well-known authors to pick up their pens and write for others? To what extent is there a sharing of certain staples of childhood reading among writers
living at different times, in different places, and with contrasting class and gender backgrounds? Were there overlaps between these texts and those that yielded such satisfaction to the young working class readers keen for self improvement—as documented in studies by social historians such as Rose (2002), Vincent (1982), Altick (1957) and others? Finally, might such historical evidence illuminate certain aspects of schooled literacy and the experience of young readers today?

By focusing on an admittedly limited sample of exceptional individuals, and drawing on developing scholarship in the field, I will argue that it is possible to piece together at least a sketchy picture of children’s experiences of texts in previous centuries. As Arizpe and Styles have suggested, historical reconstructions of young readers allow glimpses into the everyday lives of children and open up certain silences in the history of childhood (2006, p. 2). Research on the topic internationally suggests that there may be more commonalities in the reading experiences of children living at different times from different social classes than might initially be expected.

Historical reconstruction which involves treating memory as evidence is, of course, full of pitfalls. Furthermore, Roy Porter reminds us of the dangers of reading the past through our current preconceptions: ‘nothing could be sillier than to tightlace the dead into today’s conceptual corsets. The most we can hope is to understand them …’ (2001, p. xxiii). Gary McCulloch notes that, ‘the very act of selecting some, and also of excluding the majority, serves to reify the field and to define it in a particular way for the future’ (2005, p. 1). Sharpe and Zwicker add that reading has a history of highlighting forms and practices from a past that is ‘neither universal nor natural but culturally specific and culturally constructed’ (2003, p. 1). They call for richly textured case studies of readers from the past in order to better understand the history of reading, building on Robert Darnton’s suggestion that it should be possible:

... to discover the social dimensions of thought and to tease meaning from documents by relating them to the surrounding world of significance, passing from text to context and back again until a way has cleared through a foreign mental world. (1985, p. 14)

Reconstructing historical reading practices is even more problematic in relation to children, a group of readers whose voices have only recently been considered important enough to be taken into account—and for whom documentary sources are few and fragmentary. Moreover, the category of childhood is itself contested and unstable. Not only do we read texts meant for children from previous centuries through the lens of twenty-first-century Western academic traditions and preoccupations, but this enterprise also involves dealing with second order ‘evidence’—diaries, letters, autobiographies, memoirs—with all the fallibilities of selective recollection that ensue.

**Readers and writers in nineteenth-century England**

Rose et al. provide fascinating information about the reading lives of the ‘common people’, including some moving first-hand accounts of engagement with books that opened windows onto a wider world. I share many of the same interests but the constituency I have studied includes those living in privileged circumstances.
I have concentrated on certain imaginative texts beloved by many children who grew up to be famous authors in adulthood. If we are to trust their own accounts, these texts were read again and again, *Nights* being the most prominent example. My aim is to examine (as far as the evidence allows) how such childhood reading may have shaped the creative writing of published authors and to consider whether their reflections offer any insights which might illuminate certain aspects of the reading practices of children today. Published authors are, after all, among those rare groups of people who often keep detailed and revealing records of their reading and writing histories, who reflect on the significance of childhood reading, and who sometimes reveal their recollected early literary experiences. This approach then seeks to reverse ‘the traditional perspective of intellectual history’ by concentrating on readers and texts rather than what teachers taught or what published authors intended (Rose, 2002, p. 3).

Reader-response theory is useful here as it poses questions such as, ‘How do actual child readers respond during the process of reading?’ (Benton, 2004, p. 112). Drawing on the seminal work of Wolfgang Iser (1978), Benton argues that it is, ‘readers who make meaning by the activities they perform on texts’. Similarly, Robert Darnton suggests that ‘a book’s meaning is not fixed on its pages; it is construed by its readers’. Darnton also points out that ‘documents rarely show readers at work, fashioning meaning from texts’ (1990, p. 179). What follows is an exploratory attempt to do just that.

Examples of the reading histories of famous authors are, of course, abundant; however, few critics, commentators or biographers have taken a major interest in their childhood reading. It would have been possible to choose among dozens of writers of world literature from the eighteenth century to the present day who, despite huge diversity in what they produced, seem to have had remarkably similar preoccupations in terms of the reading that captivated their imaginations as children and that may well have inspired them to become authors themselves.

For the purposes of a short article, I have confined myself to just four famous writers living in nineteenth century Britain. Besides their acknowledged distinction, all four took a keen interest in childhood and all of them revered the text I have chosen as the focus of this article. Charles Dickens (1812–1876) is best known as a prolific novelist whose work normally appeared first in instalments in magazines and was part of the popular literature of his day. He also had a passionate interest in revealing social injustice, excoriating hypocrisy and promoting social reform, particularly where it concerned children and education. He was also a great publicist and performer of his own writing. By contrast, Charlotte (1816–1855) and Emily Brontë (1818–1848) were shy, retiring young women, part of a talented family living in a remote part of Yorkshire, writing under pseudonyms, preferring to maintain their obscurity rather than chase the trappings of fame. As children, they penned lively stories with their siblings, creating the renowned tiny books full of tales, dramas, poems, romances and plays, the perfect apprenticeship for novelists and poets. Charlotte also produced one of the earliest and most enduring accounts of a child in English literature, *Jane Eyre*. Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894), sometimes described as a dilettante because
of the diversity of his work, wrote memorable novels, short stories and poetry for children and adults, travel memoirs, essays on many topics including childhood and, indeed, two volumes of *New Arabian Nights* itself.

**The Arabian Nights as a case study**

My wider researches into the texts beloved by certain children living between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries who became famous authors included, inevitably, the Bible, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Homer’s great epics, Scott’s fiction and *Gulliver’s Travels*, among others. Perhaps surprisingly, however, the overwhelming favourite proved to be one that had its origins in the Middle East, was written in Arabic and read in translation. *Nights* is a highly unstable text with confusing origins which go back to the ninth century and have a geographical reach stretching at least as far as Iraq, Egypt, Syria and India. The collection as we know it today has no single authoritative version and mixes stories of Indian, Persian, Arabic and even European sources. ‘If you want to settle what exactly those stories were you will need the help of the slave of the lamp and the lifetime of a Sage’, as Brian Alderson put it (1992, p. 185).

I came upon the popularity of *Nights* by chance after reading dozens of memoirs, reminiscences, collections of letters, biographies and autobiographies of many different writers living at different times and in different places. Coming to the end of Robert Irwin’s fine Companion to *Nights*, it was somewhat disconcerting to find a chapter on all the writers who had been influenced by this text. Irwin even goes so far as to say: ‘Not all those who read the Nights as children were inspired to become novelists or poets’ (my emphasis) (1994, p. 270), but ‘it might have been an easier, shorter chapter if I had discussed those writers who were not influenced’ by it (pp. 290–291). Although *Nights* did not start life as intended for children, they came to be both intimately connected with childhood and an influential early element of children’s literature.

What is the evidence about literary adults’ recollected childhood experience of *Nights*? There is overwhelming proof that a numerous and diverse group—it includes some of the best known British authors from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries—read, loved and admired it. The list includes those best known for: fiction (Jonathan Swift, Sir Walter Scott, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Andrew Lang, Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, William Thackery, James Joyce and Graham Greene); poetry (Alexander Pope, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Walter De La Mare); drama (George Bernard Shaw); illustration (Walter Crane); essays, history and criticism (Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Horace Walpole, Edward Gibbon, William Hazlitt and William Morris). In our own time, Salman Rushdie chose it as the book he could not live without on BBC Radio 4’s *Desert Island Discs*. (Indeed, his *Haroun and The Sea of Stories* (1990) is evidently indebted to it.) C.S. Lewis apparently loathed *The Nights* but, like Dr Johnson, Edith Nesbit, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot and a host of others, he drew on it extensively in his writing.5

Let us briefly take the case of the English Romantic poets. Richard Holmes tells us that, ‘in his forties Samuel Taylor Coleridge was still recalling the impact of *The
Arabian Nights in his essays’ (Holmes, 1989, p. 11); the tales clearly influenced The Ancient Mariner and Xanadu.

... it made so deep an impression on me (I had read it in the evening when my mother was mending stockings) that I was haunted by spectres, whenever I was in the dark—and I distinctly remember the anxious and fearful eagerness, with which I used to watch the window, in which the books lay. (Coleridge, 1989, p. 11)

William Wordsworth was similarly enthralled, collecting editions as an adult and making reference to a particular volume he owned in the fifth book of The Prelude:

'I had a precious treasure at that time,/ A little, yellow canvas-cover’d book,/ A slender abstract of Arabian Tales’ (Irwin, 1994, p. 269). Keats ‘fell on’ the tales as a boy at Clarke’s School (Motion, 1997, p. 37) and made many Eastern allusions in his poetry. Percy and Mary Shelley and John Clare adored the stories while Byron escaped ‘into desert tents and palace harems’ through Knoll’s Turkish History and The Nights, which offered sustenance ‘during Aberdeen’s freezing, wind-lashed winters ...’ At the end of his life he remembered it as:

... one of the first books that gave me pleasure as a child; and I believe it had much influence on my subsequent wishes to visit the Levant, and gave, perhaps, the oriental colouring which is observed in my poetry. (Byron, quoted in Eisler, 1999, p. 26)

Imagination, escapism and the exotic still feature prominently in children’s literature today, and modern children seem to respond as positively as ever to this particular kind of fantasy. There are at least a dozen versions of Nights currently available in the UK, most of them beautifully illustrated and mediated by knowledgeable editors. What is the secret of this text that over three centuries has charmed so many readers and inspired certain children to become professional writers? Perhaps the most obvious reason is that it offers storytelling at its purest and most vivid, a sort of eastern fairyland. The frame story is both bewitching and terrifying as the resourceful Sheherazade spins out, ‘a succession of nocturnal tales to save not only her own life but the lives of the young women of her country who are in danger of the vengeance of the Sultan’ (Caracciolo, 1988, p. 1). Harvey Darton talks of how ‘this delicious lore endured and crept into English nurseries in all manner of ways’ (1982, p. 28), describing it as spreading all over Europe in the eighteenth century ‘like an epidemic’ (p. 91). In France, hundreds of romances in the oriental tradition were published during the eighteenth century. Antoine Galland’s translation into French of several volumes of the tales began being published in 1704 (completed in 1715) and is regarded as the first major edition of Nights, although it did not include some of the stories, such as Aladdin, that later became most popular. When Robert Heron’s translation appeared in 1792, it was available in every major British city. Henry Weber, who produced the highly regarded Tales of the East in 1812, declared that, ‘there are few who do not recollect with pleasure the emotions they felt when The Nights were first put into their hands’ (Caracciolo, 1988, p. 1). Edward Lane’s popular version (1838–1841) was for family reading. Indeed, Nights is also one of the earliest texts foreshadowing a distinctive ‘children’s’ literature, popular for nearly four decades before the advent of A little
pretty pocket book (1744), which scholars widely agree to be the first genuine item of children’s literature. The explorer and sex adventurer, Richard Burton, exploited the more earthy side of Nights in his bawdy, yet scholarly edition of 1885, written in archaic language and full of erotica.

**Writers as young readers**

Henry James describes Nights as those ‘old familiars of our childhood’ (Caracciolo, 1988, p. 36). Peter Caracciolo’s book about its reception into British culture cites sets of circumstances whereby an author recaptures memories of childhood by discovering a new perspective on these Arabian tales, such as coming across new commentaries, new tales, new illustrated versions, new translations or even travelling to Islamic cultures (1988, p. 18). Since none of the authors I have investigated experienced travel to the Orient, nor is there much detailed information about which versions they read as children, I will let them (and their biographers) speak for themselves about how these tales entered their lives and encouraged them to become writers themselves.

Peter Rowland writes of Dickens as the ‘universal home entertainer’ of his era (1988, p. 10). As a child, however, he suffered torments when his father was put in the Marshalsea Prison for debt and he was forced to leave school and work in a blacking factory. The desire to publicise to the world the ‘great wrong [that he felt] had been done to him, a child of exceptional talents’ (Langton, 1891, p. 16) became overwhelming and he began to write an account of his boyhood. Elements of his own life also appear in many of the novels, none more so than *David Copperfield*. The line between lived reality and fiction is hard to draw.

> My father had left a small collection of books in a little room upstairs, to which I had access. From that blessed little room [...] Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones [...] Don Quixote [...] and Robinson Crusoe, came out, a glorious host, to keep alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time—they, and The Arabian Nights ...
> (Dickens, 1966, pp. 105–106)

In *My Early Times*, which was written in a style available to children, Dickens provides an enthusiastic account of his first encounter with Nights.

> Oh, now all common things become uncommon and enchanted to me. All lamps are wonderful; all rings are talismans. Common flowerpots are full of treasure, with a little earth scattered on the top; trees are for Ali Baba to hide in … [it’s] all about scimitars and slippers and turbans and dwarfs and giants and fairies. (Caracciolo, 1988, p. 56)

One of Dickens’ earliest biographers, Robert Langton, noted how Nights became fundamental to his imaginative world, ‘as is clearly attested by the innumerable quotations from, and allusions to, them in all his writings’ (Langton, 1891, pp. 4–6). (For example, Dickens often addressed his friend, the writer Mrs Gaskell, in letters as ‘My Dear Sheherazade’.) Caracciolo suggests that after reading Lane & Scott’s version of *The Nights* it enabled Dickens to: ‘move away from the methods of literary construction evident in Pickwick and Oliver Twist towards the rich integration of autobiography, fiction, social concern, psychological insight, literary and popular lore
that is achieved in his mature art’ (1988, p. 24). Dickens provides, therefore, a good example of a talented youngster who found *Nights* so potent in his childhood that they consoled him, fed his imagination and enabled him to develop as a mature writer.

For the Brontë siblings, *The Nights* were ‘so early acquired and assimilated as to be almost coeval with memory’ (1988, p. 24). Branwell’s famous wooden soldiers, for example, were acquired at a time when the children’s passion for *Nights* was at its height, so they were ‘incorporated into a magical background […] imbued with the Arab imagery’ (Gerin, 1967, p. 26).

They moved in deserts of undulating sands, slept under palm trees, drank from fountains, were intoxicated with the scent of the lotus and lilies […] So intense was their immersion in a book that they had only to read to identify themselves with the characters: from this to acting the parts in dramatised reconstructions of the stories was but a step … (Gerin, 1967, p. 26)

A bit of healthy parental neglect also seems to have been beneficial as Charlotte Brontë and her gifted siblings spent much of their lives largely left to their own devices, isolated from wider society, living at the Howarth manse on the edge of the Yorkshire moors. In their book on the Brontës, Tom Winnifrith and Edward Chitham argue that the greatest gift Mr Brontë, ‘gave to the young Brontës was the thirst for education and the freedom, within limited means, to find it where they could’ (1989, p. 42). Elizabeth Gaskell, friend and first biographer of Charlotte, suspected that, ‘they had no children’s books and that their eager minds browsed undisturbed among the wholesome pasturage of English literature’ (1975, p. 93). Frances Beer also noted that the Brontë children enjoyed, ‘free access to their father’s libraries, in an age when popular literature was commonly considered dangerous to the susceptible minds of young ladies’ (1986, p. 8).

The originality and creativity evident in the childhoods of these young girls were nurtured in the home rather than at school. One only has to think of the apparently rather accurate description of the boarding school Charlotte actually attended (at which two of her sisters died of illness), the infamous Lowood Institution fictionalised in *Jane Eyre*, to know that she, like Dickens, used her own childhood experience in her adult work and abhorred most of her formal education. The opening of *Jane Eyre* may have been more than a little autobiographical and it is worth noting the Turkish reference and the fact that the storyteller is a woman.

A small breakfast-room adjoined the drawing-room, I slipped in there. It contained a book-case; I soon possessed myself of a volume, taking care that it should be one stored with pictures. I mounted into the window-seat: gathering up my feet, I sat cross-legged, like a Turk; and, having drawn the red moreen curtain nearly close, I was shrined in a double retirement […] Each picture told a story […] as interesting as the tales Bessie sometimes narrated on winter evenings, when she chanced to be in a good humour. (Brontë, 1991, pp. 5–7)

Furthermore, elements of *Nights* invade Lucy Snowe’s feverish dreams in *Villette* and Moorish motifs steal into *Jane Eyre*. In Emily’s *Wuthering Heights*, another fiction featuring nights of female storytelling, she employed ‘the narrative methods of *The Nights* with a subtlety that is rare among novelists of the period’ (1988, p. 24).
Caricciolo suggests that Charlotte and Emily ‘naturalise’ *The Nights* in their fictions. For Charlotte, as well as using the stories as the starting point for some of her own writing, she integrated them, ‘into her dreams, investing England of the early nineteenth century with all the magic of an *Arabian Nights* entertainment’ (1988, p. 30). Once again the magic of these stories seems woven into the children’s lives and retained in adulthood.

Writing to his mother in 1872, Robert Louis Stevenson told her that: ‘an opera is far more real than real life to me […] I wish that life was an opera. I should like to live in one …’ (Hampden, 1950, p. 127). He grew up in Edinburgh, the only child of a well-to-do couple, often lonely and in pain from the tubercular illness he suffered all his life. Writing as an adult of ‘the sorrow and burden of the night’, he pointed out in the essay, *Child’s Play* (1878), ‘Alas! pain has its own way, with all of us; it breaks in a rude visitant, upon the fairy garden where the child wanders in a dream’ (1918, p. 154). In the dedication (to his nurse, Cummy) of his seminal poetry collection, *A child’s garden of verses*, Stevenson describes his childhood as an ‘uneven land’, by which he might have been making reference to Cummy’s zealous care as well as his illness.

When he was still an impressionable infant she read the entire Bible to him three or four times […] and Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* and from *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Worst of all, she told stories […] in which hell-fire and the noonday demon [came] seeking all whom he could devour. (McLynn, 1993, pp. 14–15)

Neither did formal learning interest Stevenson, as Jenni Calder confirms: ‘He had never excelled during his rather sporadic school career, and he was not to do so at university…’ (1990, p. 3). Interestingly, although he was a conventional enough man (a bank manager by profession), Stevenson’s father held progressive ideas on education, employing tutors who allowed the boy to spend his time writing stories or go off on trips whenever he wished to do so. Indeed, his biographer Frank McLynn describes his education as:

… scrappy and perfunctory. He did not learn to read until he was seven, out of laziness he sometimes alleged, but really because he wanted to prolong the delights of the oral tradition—both hearing and telling stories. […] [His father] always had an insouciant attitude to formal education—he used to stop schoolboys in the street, examine their piles of books, then smilingly say it was all nonsense and they should read only what interested them … (1993, pp. 24–26)

In *A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured*, Stevenson remembers the moment he acquired *Nights* in a, ‘fat, old, double-columned volume. I was well into the story of the Hunchback […] when my clergyman-grandfather (a man we counted pretty stiff) came in behind me. I grew blind with terror. But instead of ordering the book away, he said he envied me. Ah, well he might!’ (1887, p. 152). Describing *Nights* as ‘airy day-dreams’, Stevenson argued in *Child’s Play* that children should have time to dream (1881, p. 165). He admits in *An Apology for Idlers* that, ‘all through my boyhood and youth, I was known and pointed out as the pattern of an idler; and yet I was always busy on my own private end, *which was to learn to write*’ (my emphasis).‘Whenever I read a book or passage that particularly pleased
me [...] I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality’ (Hampden, 1950, pp. 4–5). The potent influence of *Nights* is confirmed by the fact that Stevenson went on to write his own versions.

Stevenson was perceptive on the role of play and performance in children’s lives, writing essays on both subjects. Jenni Calder tells us that his own writing ‘went hand-in-hand with [his] addiction to stories and dramatising’ (1990, p. 8). Talking of a stationer’s shop in Leith Walk (Edinburgh) selling Skelt’s play theatres with books to paint and figures, such as Aladdin, to cut out, Stevenson remembered how he, ‘handled and lingered and doted on these bundles of delight. There was a physical pleasure in the sight and touch of them’ (Stevenson, 1992, p. 64), which he would jealously prolong. ‘Every sheet we fingered was another lightning glance into obscure, delicious story; it was like wallowing in the raw stuff of story-books’ (p. 63).

Indeed, out of this cut-and-dry, dull, swagging, obtrusive and infantile art, I seemed to have learned the very spirit of my life’s enjoyment; met there the shadows of the characters I was to read about and love [...] acquired a gallery of scenes and characters with which, in the silent theatre of the brain, I might enact all novels and romances. (Stevenson, 1992, pp. 128–129)

**Learning through literature: the value of indiscriminate reading**

What can contemporary educationalists learn from these ‘snapshots’ of writers’ early reading and experiences? First of all, none of our four protagonists experienced much formal schooling and three out of the four were highly critical of the formal education they did receive. They were, in fact, autodidacts of sorts, educating themselves and learning their ‘trade’ through encounters with imaginative literature.

While each of these children grew up in relatively privileged settings (though the experiences of Dickens and the Brontë sisters were famously uneven), the evidence from writers who grew up in poverty—such as Robert Burns and John Clare—tells a similar story, as does the work on working class readers by Rose et al. The benefits of allowing children to read indiscriminately texts of their own choosing are manifest. Indeed, it could be argued that the best educators were the books themselves giving our incipient authors the liberty to develop their own literary taste and go on to find their own voices.

Another clear outcome was the powerful link between text, theatre, play and imagination—their involvement with *Nights* went up several notches when combined with amateur dramatising by the children themselves or theatrical experiences linked to the stories.

Unfortunately, opportunities for playful, undirected exploration of whole texts are the very opposite of what has been happening in the last twenty years in British schools, even when considering children as young as five to seven. Indeed, the trend has been in the opposite direction by prioritising the teaching of phonics as the main driver with this age group. The National Curriculum (1988) mapped out the territory of what teachers ought to include in the reading and writing curriculum in terms of content, skills and expected outcomes. This involved prescription but still left
teachers some licence in determining what was taught and how to approach children’s learning. Though not enshrined in law, the advent of the National Literacy Strategy ten years later (DfEE, 1998) prescribed in great detail not just what teachers were to teach but when and how to teach it. Skills related to reading and writing were broken down minutely as a list of discrete targets to be tackled. One of the many things that have been lost in most primary classrooms is the time (or sometimes even inclination among young teachers trained in this system) to read whole books purely for pleasure. The power of literature to perform its good offices in ways not easy to test has fallen victim to a mechanistic politically-driven desire to improve literacy standards.

The decline in reading whole books means that small extracts from texts are regularly filleted for focused instruction. This has had ramifications for the publishing industry, which has noted the decline of sales of children’s literature since 1998 and the parallel rise of mechanistic titles promoting specific literacy skills such as phonics, grammar or punctuation. Teresa Cremin points out that concerns are increasingly being voiced about the ‘practice of relying upon extracts’ in the teaching of literature and that writers themselves are uneasy—

that their works are being subjected to inappropriate levels of analysis and that, as comprehension and assessment are seen to dominate over reading and response, this may lead to reduced pleasure in the text and adversely influence children’s desire to read. (2009, p. 201)

This worrying trend is borne out in a comparative study carried out by Sainsbury and Schagen (2004) who found that children’s attitudes to reading were more positive before the onset of the Literacy Strategy than five years later, when the percentage of children saying that they enjoyed reading had fallen markedly. The Cambridge Primary Review also noted that any gains ‘in reading skills may have come at the expense of enjoyment’ (Alexander, 2009, p. 32). Furthermore, the initial findings of an on-going study by Cremin and colleagues suggest that worrying numbers of primary and English teachers have little knowledge of children’s literature; nor do they take pleasure in reading it themselves (2009). This is not encouraging news for those of us who believe in the central importance of reading for children’s educational success, life chances and, of course, personal satisfaction.

Yet reading, perhaps especially where it is allowed to be ‘indiscriminate’, offers unique roads to learning—about ourselves and other people, about all the subjects on the school curriculum, about the big issues of life and the wider world. And, as Margaret Meek put it, those who are good at something ‘achieve mastery by practice, pleasure and persistence’ (my emphasis) (1988, pp. 3–4). Reading and writing are closely connected, not least by the fact that in many cases you learn to write by reading. Perhaps history has shown us that educators should put more of their faith in nurturing the reading habit in children and understanding that the books they love to read may be the true motivators of all kinds of learning.

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Notes


2. One such outcome was *From the garden to the street: 300 years of poetry for children* (1998), the first historical attempt to map out the territory of children’s poetry. Some of this material was on display in the British Library earlier this year in an exhibition curated by the author.

3. Together we curated an exhibition on this material with Elizabeth Johnson of the Lilly Library at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge and hosted an international symposium leading to the volume, *Opening the nursery door: reading, writing and childhood 1600–1900* (1997).


5. Evidence of all these authors’ interest in *Nights* is available in Robert Irwin’s *The Arabian Nights: a companion* (1994).

6. The original publication dates of some translations of *Nights* are difficult to pin down. I have not, therefore, included these in the bibliography but given the dates during which they first appeared. For further information, see Irwin, 1994.

Notes on contributor

Morag Styles is a Reader in Children’s Literature and Education at Cambridge University and a Fellow of Homerton College. She lectures internationally on children’s literature, poetry, the history of reading and visual literacy. She is the author of numerous books and articles including, *From the garden to the street: 300 years of poetry for children* (1998); co-author (with Evelyn Arizpe) of *Children reading pictures: interpreting visual texts* (2003) and *Reading lessons from the eighteenth century: mothers, children & texts* (2006); and co-editor of *Acts of reading: teachers, texts and childhood* (2009). She organised a large international conference on Poetry and Childhood (soon to be published) and curated a recent exhibition for the British Library, *Twinkle twinkle little bat! 400 years of poetry for children* in 2009.

References

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