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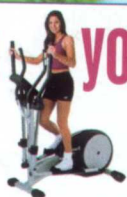
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To celebrate the National Year of Reading we are dedicating the next four pages of the magazine to books, reading and the enjoyment of storytelling.

2008

NATIONAL Year
OF Reading

I have always had an affinity with libraries and reading. My parents met whilst they were both working in a library. And my youngest daughter was nearly born in one! I was an avid reader as a child, but recognise that for some people, reading may not be their favourite pastime. Some recent research has shown that one factor that influences a child's reading habits is the extent to which they see themselves as a reader. For example, if a child does not perceive him/herself as a reader then they may well have a low reading achievement. The research, carried out by the National Literacy Trust, showed that many children who saw themselves as non-readers were actually readers.

So what makes a reader? The research showed that many believed that being a good reader means reading long books and words, reading often, reading different materials and being good at reading aloud. But is a child who comes back from school, picks up the latest Jacqueline Wilson book and doesn't put it down until it's finished more of a reader than a child who reads comics, web sites, games instructions and the back of cereal packets? In my mind, it doesn't matter what your child is reading, as long as they are enjoying themselves.

Encouraging your child to read does not necessarily mean insisting that they read age-appropriate books, but instead find the genre that they enjoy. My daughter, an able reader, loves the Guinness Book of Records, delighting in telling us useless facts and information about large vegetables and ugly dogs. She also loves the Horrible History books and again will tell us gruesome facts about historical characters.

Encouraging children to engage with books in whatever form is fun and rewarding. Why not obtain audio CDs of books to draw your child into a story. My son enjoys Anthony Horowitz's Alex Rider books, but struggles with the reading. However, we have borrowed the audio CD from the library for him to listen to which helps him get a feel for the story, thus making the book more accessible. In addition to this, the series of books are available as Manga-style comic books which are much more appropriate to his reading level.

Overall, reading and storytelling should be fun. Encourage your children to enjoy books in whatever form and they are sure to engage with books in a positive way.

'Nothing fuels the
imagination like a good book'

Ian Hills, author

Telephone 023 9278 2726

Storytelling: open up your imagination

by Mike O'Leary, Storyteller

When I was a small boy on a farm in Scotland, the shepherd told me stories. They weren't complete stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end – but he animated the landscape. Finn McCool sleeps under that hill, that stone is there because the devil hurled it from Ireland.

When, at the age of ten, I found myself living in the middle of Bristol, those stories stayed with me – a childhood magic that connected stories with landscape, that had nothing to do with books and school, and which I thought I'd lost.

Fast-forward to when, late in life, I became a primary school teacher in Southampton. In class we had our 'news times' – and I thought I wouldn't just listen to the kids, I'd contribute some of my own. I'd just come back from a brief excursion to Wayland's Smithy, a Neolithic tomb in Oxfordshire. Up on the hill, beside a camp fire, I'd been reading stories collected by a folklorist called Ruth Tongue. One of these had been about Tom Tinker and how he'd outwitted the terrible monsters who beset him in Rat's Castle. This was a story simply and naively told, like the stories rattling around in my memory – not something self-consciously crafted for a children's book. I heard myself adding this story to our news time, as if it had happened to me at Wayland's Smithy. I didn't feel that I was lying, but I did feel my nose growing longer!

I told the story rather surreptitiously, as if it didn't really belong in school – it was as if it was the real me sitting in a boozier somewhere, not this impostor pretending to be a teacher. But the story developed a life of its own, the children added to it, pictures of three headed monsters appeared, children who had previously had no interest in writing started to put illustrated versions of it on paper – and I was propelled into full time storytelling.



People often have no pride in their own area, particularly if their own area is looked down on, and when children have low self-esteem for a variety of reasons, this added factor certainly doesn't help. So I like to give pride to the local. However some of the best storytellers I have come across have been in Portsmouth! Is that because of Portsdown Hill? Children in Paulsgrove have told me of the headless horse that gallops around Portsdown Hill on wild and windy nights. And so the urban landscape and the sea-scape of old Pompey has become animated by stories – and I love to tell them.

There is great satisfaction in being a professional storyteller, which is a bit like the satisfaction of being a musician; except that there's one major difference. You see, when people hear a musician play, they may afterwards feel satisfied or inspired, but they don't go away feeling that they can play the instrument. I feel that storytelling should have the same effect as music – the emotional journey, the response, but also that afterwards the listeners should be able to think, 'I could tell a story', 'I have a story worth telling'.

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