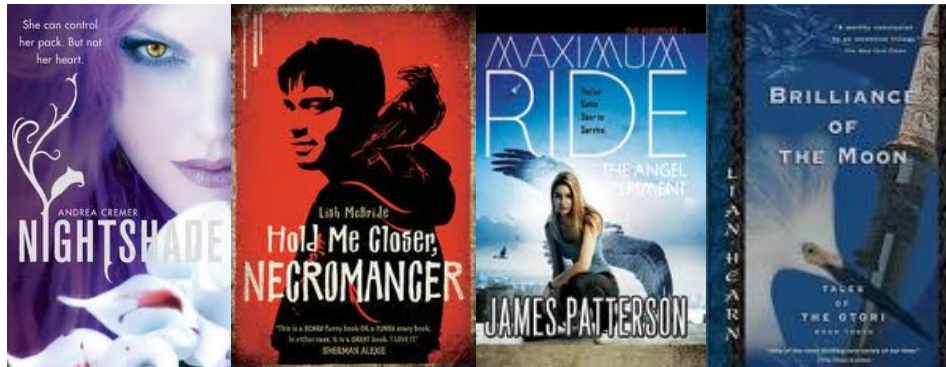


In Praise of Reading for Pleasure: A Vignette of Teenagers' Reading Lives¹

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The days are long past when a teacher could seriously say, without fear of mockery, that one of her intentions in the classroom, after Wordsworth, is to enable pupils 'to lose themselves' in learning – to feel a sense of imaginative abandonment as they become caught up in the process of engaging with new ideas, notions and experiences. Today, school curricula are not constructed to facilitate such wonderfully distracted states, and teachers are rarely publicly invited to encourage them. (Halpin, 2008, p. 380)

Reading for pleasure still matters

One hundred years ago, the first NSW secondary English syllabus espoused an approach to learning that placed notable emphasis on the personal experience, creativity and “self-activity” of the student. (Hughes & Brock, 2008, p. 20) Literary texts were “chosen not merely for their value as a means of information, but as a source of higher pleasure, as a means of knowing life, and for their ethical or their literary value.” (NSW Department of Public Instruction, 1911-1912, p. 18)

Today our English syllabuses are considerably more detailed and prescriptive. Nevertheless they retain a philosophical and theoretical commitment to the significance of students' engagement with

¹ Some material in this paper is based on research and scholarship presented in my other publications, principally *Teenagers and Reading: Literary heritages, cultural contexts and contemporary reading practices*, South Australia: Wakefield Press/AATE, edited with Sue Brindley, 2012.

and enjoyment of a now vastly more diverse and fluid range of texts. And a century on from the 1911-1912 English course of study, our contemporary syllabuses mirror an abiding aspiration that we share as English teachers. We aspire for our students to become accomplished and confident language users, receptive to the kinds of satisfactions, pleasures, and intrinsic and interpersonal rewards that can flow from an immersion in purposeful and meaningful language experiences. When it comes to reading, there is a great deal we know about teenagers' attitudes, their reading practices and preferences and the accrued benefits of regular reading for pleasure.

My purpose here is to draw attention to those aspects of research and scholarship that have direct bearing on our understanding of students' experience of reading in and beyond the English classroom. In one sense, this vignette of teenagers' reading is intended to further validate the often held intuitive belief in the nexus between reading for pleasure and student achievement within and across the personal, educational, social and cultural dimensions of their lives. As the Report from the Centre for Youth Literature (2009) states, reading for pleasure matters because:

- Reading for pleasure supports literacy and learning in school.
- It enables young people to develop their own, better informed perspective on life.
- It is a safe, inexpensive, pleasurable way to spend time.
- It allows young readers to understand and empathise with the lives of those in different situations, times and cultures; to walk in the shoes of others.
- It improves educational outcomes and employment prospects. (p. 11)

With this in mind, the following discussion identifies the key findings of selected recent Australian research studies and concludes with a summary of the implications of these findings for teaching and learning in English.

What we know about Australian teenagers' reading practices and preferences: a snapshot from recent reports

From the Centre for Youth Literature Report, 2009

In 2009, the State Library of Victoria's, Centre for Youth Literature (CYL) published a report on the reading "landscape" for young Australians (p. 2). *Keeping Young Australians Reading* presents a rich amalgam of qualitative and quantitative research findings for educators and others involved in providing "inspiration, guidance and encouragement to children and young people." (p. 2) Of note are the findings that:

- 74 percent of all 10-18 year olds claim to like reading to some extent;
- 76 percent of primary and 46 percent of secondary students read 'every few days';
- 64 percent would like to read more;
- 56 percent of primary and 78 percent of secondary students found required reading at school 'boring'; and
- girls are more likely to say they enjoy reading than boys (86 percent vs 70 percent)(CYL, 2009)

The report identifies the principal barriers to reading for pleasure as:

- a crowded school curriculum;
- young people's busy lives beyond school, including screen time, sports, leisure activities, music and work commitments;
- a lack of focus on reading for pleasure in secondary school; and
- the increased demands of academic tasks as students move into the senior years. (p. 5).

The report recognises these barriers do “not affect keen readers, who will always make the time for books, but [they do] deter reluctant or uncommitted readers.” (p. 5) These observations reaffirm the findings of earlier research studies that reading for pleasure declines as students move through adolescence. The challenge for teachers is to redress this trend through systematic attention to the ways in which reading and reading for pleasure can occupy a more prominent and valid place in the formal curriculum.

From the Australian Teenagers' Reading Choices Project

A study undertaken gathered data on the reading practices, preferences and attitudes of 2117 Australian students, aged between 12 and 16 years, from diverse geographical and socio-economic backgrounds. The study mapped various dimensions of teenagers' reading lives within and beyond the classroom (Manuel, 2012). The key findings are presented here in précis:

- 83.5 percent of the sample (91 percent of females and 76 percent of males) could name a favourite book.
- 42 percent of boys had read their favourite book more than once, with a remarkable 18 percent having read their favourite book 3 or more times.
- For girls, 42 percent had read their favourite book only once, 40 percent had read their favourite book 2 or more times, and 16 percent had read their favourite book 3 or more times.

- More than a third of boys chose what ended up being their ‘favourite’ book because of the influence of family, friends or a movie.
- Only 12 percent of boys said that their ‘favourite’ book had been recommended by a teacher or emerged from compulsory school reading.
- Girls’ responses showed that in more than half of all cases, a ‘favourite’ book was recommended to them by family, friends, television advertising and movies.
- Slightly more girls (18.5 percent) than boys (12 percent) said that their ‘favourite’ book had been discovered through a teacher or through compulsory school reading.

A Sample of ‘favourite’ fiction titles

Female favourites	Male favourites
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pierce, <i>Wild Magic</i> • Andrews, <i>Magic series</i> • Sachar, <i>Holes</i> • Marsden, <i>Tomorrow series; The Ellie Chronicles</i> • Klein, <i>Came Back to Show You I Could Fly; Polly Pollard’s Scrapbook; Hating Alison Ashley</i> • Carmody, <i>The Gathering</i> • Winton, <i>Lockie Leonard</i> • Jennings, <i>Round the Twist; The Gizmo</i> • Gleitzman, <i>Once, Now</i> • French, <i>Hitler’s Daughter</i> • Rodda, <i>Deltora Quest series</i> • Clark, <i>Mango Street series</i> • Meyer, <i>Twilight series</i> • Cabot, <i>The Princess Diaries series</i> • Rowling, <i>Harry Potter series</i> • Jacques, <i>Redwall series</i> • Brashares, <i>Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants series</i> • Boyne, <i>The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas</i> • Mead, <i>Vampire Academy series</i> • Tolkien, <i>Lord of the Rings</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jennings, <i>Goosebumps Series, Deadly, ‘Un’ Series</i> • Gleitzman, <i>The Gizmo, Once, Now, Boy Overboard</i> • Reilly, <i>Scarecrow, Contest</i> • Marsden, <i>Tomorrow Series</i> • Rodda, <i>Rowan of Rin Series</i> • Paulsen, <i>Hatchet</i> • Rodda, <i>Deltora Quest series</i> • Colfer, <i>Artemis Fowl series</i> • Sachar, <i>Holes</i> • Tolkien, <i>Lord of the Rings</i> • Rowling, <i>Harry Potter series</i> • Pratchett, <i>Nation</i> • Muchamore, <i>Cherub series, Maximum security</i> • Boyne, <i>The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas</i> • Snicket, <i>A Series of Unfortunate Events</i>

- For both male and female participants in this study, the required reading in English yielded less than one fifth of all ‘favourite’ book experiences compared with the influence of friends, family and other sources.

- When asked how they came to read what they considered to be their worst book, 71 percent of girls compared with 82 percent of boys said it was compulsory reading in English.
- A total of 43 percent students persisted with the worst book they had ever read and reported completing it. This reasonably high figure may be partially accounted for because the book was compulsory reading in an English class.
- When asked why they did not like their 'worst book', responses included:
 - It was boring
 - It was irrelevant to me
 - It had no storyline
 - It had no meaning
 - It was slow and not very exciting
 - There was no excitement in it
 - It didn't make much sense
 - I didn't like the way it was written
 - I didn't understand it
 - I didn't get it
 - It was uninteresting
 - It was for babies
 - It took too long to get to the point
 - It was not my style
 - It was fake
- Half of all students in the sample preferred reading fiction to reading other kinds of texts.
- Reading school-based materials ranked last in terms of preferred reading.
- Reading poetry was poorly ranked as a preferred kind of reading, along with newspapers and school-based materials.
- Girls showed a stronger preference for reading magazines, in comparison to boys.
- Only 10 percent of respondents spent no time at all on a typical day reading self-selected material.
- Around half of all respondents reported spending up to one hour on a typical day reading self-selected material.
- Almost 30 percent of respondents spent two or more hours on a typical day reading self-selected material.
- Of these respondents, more than 10 percent indicated that on a typical day they spent three or more hours reading self-selected material.
- Almost half all respondents reported spending two or more hours on a typical day using the computer. Almost a quarter of the sample indicated computer usage on a typical day of three or more hours. This finding represents a marked increase in computer usage in this age group compared to earlier studies reported in the research literature (cf. Manuel and Robinson, 2002).

- Computer (and internet) usage ranked as a preferred leisure activity for more than 60 percent of the sample.
- Reading books was a leisure activity for around one-fifth of respondents, while 32 percent preferred not to or never read in their spare time.
- Females in this sample preferred Fantasy, Mystery, nonfiction, Detective and Action and adventure. Auto/biography, Travel, Romance and Science fiction were the least preferred.
- Action and Adventure, Fantasy, Detective, Mystery, nonfiction and Science fiction figured as the most popular genres for males. The least preferred genres for males were Romance, Auto/Biography, Travel and 'Classics'.
- Action and Adventure, Fantasy and Mystery were the overwhelming favourites for *both* males and females.
- More than one third of students identified the activity of reading self-selected material as their most preferred experience of reading in English.
- The teacher reading out aloud, silent reading of self-selected materials and acting out plays or scenes were favoured by a significant percentage of the sample, reinforcing the importance of enjoyment, choice and student ownership of reading experiences.
- There was strong antipathy to 'reading around the class'. This finding is supported by other research that refers to many students' fear of being forced to read aloud in class (Cope, 1997, p. 21) where their deficiencies might be displayed for all to observe.
- When asked how they could improve their reading, typical responses from students included:
 - Read more in class
 - Read when I come home from school
 - Ask more friends about good and boring books and try to read the good books
 - I think I don't really have to improve that much but to improve a little I think I'd have to challenge myself a bit more
 - Read more books instead of magazines
 - Go to the library
 - Read out aloud more so I know if I'm pronouncing the words right
 - Choose books that I'm interested in and read them
 - Spend more time reading
 (Manuel, 2012)

From The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (ACER, 2010)

In 2000 and 2006, the OECD administered a reading assessment (initially in 32 countries with a further 11 countries added in 2001) to gather information about the reading skills of 15 year olds. The key findings presented in the performance report included the following:

- Australia has the “highest difference in reading achievement of any country between students who never read for enjoyment and those who read for one or two hours a day.” (Broughton, 2009, p. 35)
- Those students who indicated that they read widely and diversely had higher mean scores in PISA than those students who indicated a negative attitude to reading and a lack of breadth and diversity in their reading choices.
- 33 percent of Australian students reported that they never read for pleasure and enjoyment, and more than half of these were ranked at or below Level 1 out of the 5 levels of achievement in the PISA combined literacy reading scale.
- The differences in reading achievement attributable to the degree of reading engagement and a propensity for reading for pleasure were greater than differences in gender and socio-economic status.
- Regardless of background and parental occupational status, those students who were highly engaged in reading achieved reading scores that were significantly above the OECD average. (ACER, 2010)

From the Nieuwenhuizen Report (Woolcott Research, 2001)

Nieuwenhuizen’s research (2001) sought to gather data on young people’s reading behaviours and habits, relative to their use of technology. The findings of the study with 801 students, aged 10 to 18 years, correlate with studies completed in the 1990s, and earlier: that is,

- adolescents identified reading for pleasure as an activity they “really liked” (30 percent), with this activity ranked 5th after “hanging out with friends” (87 percent); playing sport (68 percent); watching television (38 percent); and using the computer (31 percent).
- When asked what they “quite liked” as a leisure activity, reading for pleasure was ranked 3rd (74 percent) after watching television (94 percent) and using the computer (81 percent).

- There is a dramatic drop-off in reading for pleasure as a “really liked” activity between primary and early secondary school students (45 percent to 24 percent, respectively), yet no other preferred leisure activities registered such a significant decline in the transition from primary to secondary school: “clearly something happens to the reading experience of young people to make it seem a lot less enjoyable when they reach secondary school than it was in primary school.” (Woolcott Research, 2001, p. 19)

A synthesis of key findings

There are illuminating trends and points of symmetry to be found in these selected research findings that can offer teachers, parents and others involved with young people worthwhile insights into their reading practices and preferences. These, in turn, can contribute to planning and programming decisions in English and other curriculum areas, and continue to inform reading pedagogy.

1. Reading fiction (sustained imaginative texts) is maintaining a place as a leisure activity in the lives of teenagers, although television viewing and computer usage rank higher as preferred leisure activities for the majority of secondary school students.

Overwhelmingly, the most popular forms of reading for those teenagers who engage in reading for pleasure are magazines and fiction, particularly adventure, action, fantasy and mystery stories and series. Reading preferences are usually well-established by the time students reach secondary school, with personal taste and the influence of friends and family guiding their reading choices.

2. The impact of text selection and pedagogy on reading practices and preferences

Of particular relevance to teachers is the evidence that the selection of reading material and reading pedagogy can and does have a determinate effect on the ‘best’ and ‘worst’ reading experiences for adolescents. Selection of inappropriate texts for compulsory reading can have serious deleterious effects on the longer-term reading choices and practices of teenagers, just as appropriate texts can enliven and nourish these choices and practices.

The Australian Teenagers’ Reading Choices Project identified the powerful negative effect of forcing students to read and persist with material that they do not like, and it reinforces what other

research has shown: perhaps the most significant and the most widely mentioned counterproductive aspect of the English classroom was the detrimental impact of inappropriate assigned reading material (Cope, 1997; Bushman, 1997). Cope suggests that for many students the problem is not reading *per se*, but what they are forced to read at school: “even the most exciting pieces of literature lose some of their lustre when they are forced upon readers” (Cope, 1997, p. 22).

This is not to suggest, however, that teacher-selected reading material will not be appreciated and highly valued by students: the findings of these studies underscore the strong positive impact of teacher choice. Part of the art and responsibility of teaching is to introduce students to texts they may not otherwise encounter, but in ways that seek to engage students in imaginative and critical ways. In other words, effective reading pedagogy is just as vital as appropriate selection of reading material, as is the *time* devoted to nurturing reading in secondary school.

3. The correlation between motivation and satisfactions: the role of student choice and dedicated time for reading for pleasure

These research studies propose clear correlations between teenagers’ motivation to read and the extent of their personal input into the texts chosen for classroom study: there is a significant link between levels of student motivation, the amount of time spent reading, both for leisure and because they are required to by a teacher, and students’ reading achievement. Other studies report decreased motivation for reading, both voluntary and forced, as students grow older (Thomson, 1987).

Interestingly, other studies have noted that there is a decline in class time allocated to reading for pleasure and enjoyment as students move through secondary school (Bintz, 1993, p. 602). Apart from taking turns at reading in class from a common text, Bintz, for example, found that 3 percent of class time was spent on reading in junior high school, a figure that had dropped to just 2 percent by senior high (Goodlad, 1984 in Bintz, 1993, p. 606). According to Bintz’s study, teenagers have little opportunity to read in class: if these students are not motivated to read in their own time, it would seem that they are not reading very much at all. Baker reinforces the vital need for validating reading and reading for pleasure since

[t]ime spent reading is necessary for reading success. Class time for conferences, discussion, response, and recommendation facilitates the synchronous growth of reading and writing ... The value of reading, writing

and responding is evident in the allocation of class time to do so. (2002, p. 367)

Implications for Classroom Practice

What do these insights from research offer us for our daily work in English classrooms – daily work that is increasingly shaped by the demands of external testing and assessment programs and content-heavy curricula? The suggestions that follow are both conceptual and practical.

As teachers we can:

- Learn more about students' reading practices and preferences. Validate their perspectives and proclivities by building in class time for exploring and sharing attitudes to reading (not only reading imaginative texts, but reading in its broadest sense) and strategies for enhancing enjoyment and rewards derived from reading. Ask students to share these ideas through a survey or other means of collecting information. (The Australian Teenagers' Reading Choices Project survey is a simple, user-friendly online tool that can provide you with valuable information about your students' reading lives:
http://www-faculty.edfac.usyd.edu.au/projects/aarcp/te_ols.html)
- Program unhurried *time* for immersion in reading for enjoyment, pleasure and satisfaction, in and for itself, where students can potentially "lose themselves...to feel a sense of imaginative abandonment" (Halpin, 2008, p. 380).
- Create the space to read where reading offers pathways for students to explore, linger, reflect, speculate, wonder, imagine, awaken possibilities, contemplate, be receptive to the new, have fun, be invited into another's world, discover connections, generate confidence and autonomy, daydream, think and act creatively and critically, and feel – without such learning (and all of these experiences *do* constitute learning) *always and inevitably* being associated with assessment, testing, formal written responses, and examinations, or the means to an end apart from personal satisfaction.
- 'Lighten up' the experience of reading whenever possible.
- Encourage the development of a community of learners where reading becomes a demystified, non-threatening, shared and gratifying experience; and each individual's reading choices, tastes, discoveries and expectations are valued, respected and considered fundamental to their motivation, reading development and reading achievement. Individual reading is modelled and experienced as social practice.
- Offer a wide range and diversity of reading material to students as part of a wide reading program.

- Recognise and manifest in practice the fundamental role of student choice as motivating factor in continuing to read for enjoyment and pleasure.
- Incorporate opportunities for students to read in a range of ways: for example, with a balance between teacher and student selected materials, silent and shared reading experiences, and reading out aloud by the teacher. The latter is a powerful means of modelling enjoyment, reading strategies, and reading as a ‘normalised’ part of the continuum of learning and experience in school and beyond.
- Expose students to and engage them in a variety of ‘continuous’ sustained texts, as distinct from ‘non-continuous’ texts or pieces of texts. This is particularly crucial in light of many teenagers’ daily immersion in a world that tends to require and reward immediacy, transience and fragmentation.
- Select appropriate texts for classroom use to meet students’ needs, engage their interests, and challenge their capacities. Readers’ self-confidence can be enriched by appropriate selection of texts or, conversely, seriously undermined by inappropriate selection of texts. Young adult fiction may be more fully utilised in the classroom in wide reading programs; such literature is valuable in and for itself as an aesthetic literary experience, and as a stepping-stone to more challenging adult fiction.

Making time

Certainly schools need to prescribe and pressurise less; and they need to become happier places in which pupils are regularly encouraged positively to ‘waste time’ on and ‘lose themselves’ in their interests and projects, and not to work mostly at what their teachers determine, which is a version of what the Government wants. (Halpin, 2008, p. 380)

I want to conclude this vignette of teenagers’ reading lives by emphasising the need for us as English teachers to maintain our belief in the enduring and durable gift of reading for pleasure. The research in the field affirms what we intuitively know about the potential for “imaginative abandonment” (Halpin, 2008, p. 380) in fictive worlds to extend and deepen our students’ capacities and realms of experience. We are with them for a brief window of time as they move through secondary school English classes. The impact of our teaching when it comes to reading, however, can and does shape an entire lifetime:

It is evident from research and numerous international reading initiatives, that becoming and being a confident, committed reader has wide-ranging positive effects on the personal, intellectual, social and educational

wellbeing of people from early childhood to old age. This much broader view of the place and value of reading has significant implications for the classroom and requires a radically new approach to the role of reading in schools. This should include time and opportunity for much more reading – at least five books each term! (Agnes Nieuwenhuizen, Founder of the Centre for Youth Literature, CYL, 2009, p. 11)

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