



50

books a year!

A recent article in the *TES* entreated us to encourage children to read 50 books a year. Well said, indeed, but how do you do it? **Anne Fine**, celebrated (but not celebrity) children's author, provides some ideas and expresses her views.

One year I happened to be visiting one of our most expensive and famous girls' boarding schools and was asked to award a prize to the child who had read the greatest number of books by the end of the three-week 'Readathon'.

I asked the winner, who was twelve, "So how many did you get through, then?"

"Seven," she said.

All round her, the gasps went up. "Seven?" "Flora read seven!" "Seven!" "That's amazing!"

Just what I thought. (The day before, in a state primary, I'd given a similar prize to someone who'd chomped her way through eighty in the same period.) But I kept quiet and simply asked, "So when do you get to read, then?"

"We have some free time in the dormitory between eight and eight forty-five each evening," she told me. "And I try to read then. But it's awfully difficult because somebody's always trying to plait your hair while you

do it, so you can't keep your eyes on the lines very easily."

Pity the reading child sent off to boarding school!

Or to the school whose defeated librarian showed up at the Hay on Wye Literary Festival and confided, "I asked our head if we could invite an author to beef up the interest in reading. Guess what she said? 'Oh, I don't think so, George. They're already doing one book this year and we don't want to confuse them'."

Philip Roth offered a dispirited view of the state of reading. "Every year, 70 readers die and only two are replaced.' He went on to explain exactly what he meant by readers: people with the habit of mind that can lean towards "silence, some form of isolation, and sustained concentration in the presence of an enigmatic thing. ... It is difficult to come to grips with a mature, intelligent adult novel." (Some explanation, perhaps, for the number of grown men and women still absorbed in Harry Potter.)

What are we going to do?

Fifty books a year was the recent rallying cry of the *Times Educational Supplement*. And that seems reasonable enough to me if we want a generation with minds furnished with more than just the trivia of celebrity idiocies, shopping and (other people's) sporting achievements.

How do we get there?

Firstly, of course, by getting our backs away from the wall on the money-chewing matter of computers and software. Of course, as you show them around, parents routinely ask, "How many computers do you have?" Do you seriously expect them to ask you the equivalent question: "How much is your annual book fund? Is it ring-fenced, and what are the principles on which you spend it?" They want you to like them, not run a mile from them and their children.

But more parents than you'd think already know the studies all show that the link between expenditure on books and success in examinations is nearly twice as strong as the link between spending on IT and those same results. (Simon Webb's daughter typed 'slow-worms' into a search engine. Result? Four hundred references at an average of three screen pages per site. That's *War and Peace* to work through, with no way to sift the sensible from the outlandish, or the inaccurate from the frankly mad. Meanwhile, he opened a book and there it all was, as clear as paint, and properly vetted.

So. First they need libraries, inside the school and out. Set them to find out which is their most convenient public branch and get themselves signed up. (I've met three children in the last month who didn't even know libraries are free. How sad is that?) Improve your own library. Don't wait for the famous refurb! I've seen brilliant school libraries along cold corridors and shamefully pitiful collections in custom-built areas. (Guess where the money went.)

Please don't be scared of hardbacks. At least they stick around. And don't just buy what pupils say they want: your shelves will end up groaning with nothing but *Unfortunate Adventures* and Jacqueline Wilson. Your real readers want to read much more widely than that, and even if you think you don't have any real readers, you have to bear in mind that every school has its dark horses and late bloomers. You might have a young Frances Spufford. Here he is opening a novel by Ursula LeGuin on the bus home: 'The trials of my adolescent body fell away ... This was the lovely, sure, storytelling voice which can talk a world into existence.' You might have a Randall Jarrell. Here he is writing of his own library:

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

Reading groups

So now the library's rich and full, how about a few reading groups? They tend to fill up quickly and, in a lot of schools, indoor supervision is a problem. But where there's a will, there's a way.

Put up a bare 'word tree' in the hall. Now, when a child finds a word 'hard', at least they get to write it on a coloured paper leaf, copy the definition onto the back (use of the dictionary!), then read both out to everyone and peg it on the tree. (If you're all reading enough, it should get quite leafy.)

Do a weekly four minute 'book buzz'. The child on the left speaks (uninterrupted) to whichever child happens to be on the right about the last book s/he read, loved or hated. After two minutes of the 'buzz', you clap your hands for silence. The listeners turn into talkers. Within four minutes, 60 books have been enthusiastically talked about. That can't be bad. Some schools do it in assemblies – even the staff – and that's even more impressive.

Please don't stint with the boys. We must never accept the endless variations on the tired and false 'Boys can't/don't/won't read' theme. All this has done is shift the goalposts until some boys are offered nothing but tacky non-fiction on tortures and toilet habits through the ages, cartoon books and football statistics. Feed a child nothing but emotional drivel and all you'll have at the end is an emotional illiterate. What is so wrong in making sure that, in your school, there is no casting call for who's to have your job? If you think someone might like a particular book, tell them to read it. What would be so amazing about that? You are the teacher, after all.

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Sure, there will be complaints. I had one from Charlie (aged 11): "There's no blood and gore in your books, so how come you've twice been given this Carnage [sic] Medal?" There have been accolades too. Here's Jamie (10): "I was forced to read your *Goggle-eyes* and I *loved* it. Reading about Kitty made me feel so much better." And William (14): "We don't usually read books with girls on the cover, but I know *exactly* how she feels."

Then there's all that time spent at home – huge swathes of it wasted. I knew a head who ran a survey of how much time her pupils spent in front of telly, computer and mobile phone screens, then shocked the parents with the stark results. Express four hours a night (that's not unusual) in terms of a 40 hour working week and, shown the result (a full 36 and a half working weeks!), even the most hassled parent will often be shocked into making more of an effort to bring child, book and time together, even if they have to be there too. (There will always be pupils with missing, feckless

or non-reading parents. What about 'paired reader' schemes for them, or even volunteers?)

Our children should, ideally, learn to read as easily as they breathe. For this, they must put in the hours. (Why are they so good at texting? Because they *do* it.) If the studies show schools that have turned to phonics do the job better and faster – and they do – then turn to phonics. Ideology has no place in education (I shall murder the next person I hear chirruping that old idiocy, 'They're only learning to bark at print'). If the recipe works, use it. After all, as Allan Bloom so chillingly pointed out, we are the first generation in history to teach the great majority of our children less than we know ourselves.

We're also the first deliberately to inculcate in them values we despise. We all know that, in itself, celebrity is worthless. We have no doubt that what's important in art is the actual writing, music or painting. So why are we encouraging our children to stand in lines for hours for autographs (not even reading!)? Child after child will claim to be 'your greatest fan!' yet only have read three of your books. They'll know the name of Dick King-Smith's pet, yet only have read one of his. I didn't even realise Richmal Crompton was a woman, but I'd read *all* her books. Why should I have cared whether Enid Blyton loved coconut or Henry Treece hated jazz? The only thing that mattered was whether or not they provided a good read. We still have children like I was. I once took a train seat opposite a child absorbed in *Bill's New Frock*. Her mother watched me

checking proofs and guessed who I was. "Will you sign Clara's book for her?"

She prompted Clara to hand the book over and I inscribed it. As I got off the train, the whole carriage must have heard the child's resentful wail. "Mu-um! Why did you let that woman scribble in my brand new book?" That is the spirit, Clara! We need more like you.

Books aren't improved by having their authors reeling around the country explaining how they do it. (Nor is the pupils' writing improved by listening. Art is a product, not a process. And even the best of us did it quite differently at their age. More damagingly, the curriculum gets warped to mirror our grown-up patterns and comes to suit their younger ones less and less. That's why creative writing in schools is getting *worse*.)

Authors go into every sort of school. One thing we know for sure is that, in some, 50 books a year won't seem that many. In others, it will seem an astonishing number. We've learned from long experience that, like so many other things in education, this has nothing to do with catchment area or parental backing.

It's all to do with expectation. High expectations will do it every time.

Fifty books a year? Come on! Once we set our minds to it, and it'll be a doddle! ●

PROFILE

Anne Fine is a distinguished writer for both children and adults. Her children's novel *Goggle-Eyes* won the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize and the Carnegie Medal. Other prize winners include *Flour babies*, *Bill's New Frock* and *The Tulip Touch*. In 2001 Anne became the Children's Laureate and she was awarded the OBE in 2003. She has two grown-up daughters and lives in County Durham.