

## How we lost the plot

Agnes Nieuwenhuizen  
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*You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture.  
Just get people to stop reading them.*

— **Ray Bradbury**

**WHY**, in Australia, are so many trying to stop young people reading widely and for pleasure? And who in Australia is committed to ensuring that young people become lifelong readers? Politicians, educators and parents are constantly fretting about levels of literacy. But learning to read, to decode, does not create literate people. Reading does. This is how that great promoter of the love of language and reading, Dr Seuss put it:

*The more that you read,  
the more things you will know.  
The more that you learn,  
the more places you'll go.*

Last year there was a history summit. This year a roundtable to look at "how to get more Australian contemporary and classic writing onto high school and university curricula". The roundtable, of "20 experts", was convened by the Australia Council in consultation with federal Education Minister Julie Bishop. Dr Peter Holbrook, of the Australia Council's Literature Board, expressed concern that students were being turned off studying Australian literature because the way it was taught was too prescriptive. Holbrook said: "The focus is not so much on literary works as it is on language in society or the sociology of language".

Once again the focus was on texts, titles, testing and, of course, on "classics" (how does a book become a classic?) and on "literature in education" rather than on the key issue of reading and how to foster interest in reading and thus on the real education of young people.

Sadly much of the focus of the literacy debate, if it can be called that, is not about whether we are creating willing, enthusiastic, capable readers but rather about what some "experts" believe teenagers ought to be reading and, of course, what they should not be reading and on how books should be taught. According to Kevin Donnelly, one of those participating in the roundtable, and an educational consultant and author of the recent book *Dumbing Down*, teenagers are reading either Shakespeare or text messages; either Jane Austen or YouTube. Like most simplistic, polarised arguments, this one doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

Most teenagers, as most adults, live their diverse and rich lives somewhere between these extremes. They also prefer to read between these extremes. And yes, some do choose to read Shakespeare sometimes and may also surf the web and look at, or contribute to, YouTube. They may also read graphic novels. Very sophisticated, many of these. One, *American Born Chinese*, just won a major US literary award and our own Shaun Tan's wordless wonder, *The Arrival*, is garnering praise all over the world, if also some grumbles because it won an adult book prize in NSW. A picture book? And no words? Is this even a book? It is important to note that many, especially boys, much prefer to read non-fiction or graphic novels.

Through its splendid State Library, Melbourne is now putting together a bid to become a UNESCO "City of Literature". In her 2007 Stephen Murray-Smith lecture publisher Louise Adler speculated about what it might mean "to be a real city of literature, beyond the tourist brochures and the UNESCO logo". For Adler, chief executive of Melbourne University Publishing, "a city of literature is a place that engages all its citizens in the pleasures of reading. It is a place where school children can discover the utterly private pleasure of entering the world of the novel, rather than feel short-changed by an education system watching its political back."

For the many who avoid reading, apart from the books that are force-fed to them at school — the dreaded set texts or class novels — the issue is that they have not been provided with any understanding of what reading is for, or of the doorways to ideas, worlds, images, language and experiences that books can open. Neither are they introduced to the immense pleasures that could be theirs. Some may be among the lucky ones who enjoyed being read to (Dr Seuss books?) when little. However, once they supposedly can read (decode), they are likely to lose that sense of being immersed in a story and wanting that experience to continue.

Appropriate books are not recommended to them by people whose judgement they trust, nor are they being matched with the right books or allowed some choice of reading matter. This situation generally moves inexorably towards the point in secondary school where books simply become texts to digest and master so that the "right" answers can be produced for assignments, essays, book reports, tests and, of course, those final year exams.

"Schools everywhere have always confined themselves to making students learn techniques and write essays, while proscribing reading for pleasure. It seems to be established in perpetuity, in every part of the world, that enjoyment has no part to play in the curriculum, and that knowledge can only be the fruit of suffering."

This quote comes from *The Rights of the Reader*, a bold new translation by Sarah Adams of a French bestseller originally published in 1992. It has snappy cartoonish illustrations by the famous Quentin Blake. The author, Daniel Pennac, may be better known to readers as the creator of the edgy, witty and often very funny, very adult crime novels (*The Fairy Gunmother*, *The Scapegoat*, *Write to Kill*).

But Pennac is also a teacher dedicated to restoring the pleasure of reading to those legions of young people who have so effectively been turned off reading by education systems and teaching methods. Pennac's stated aim is to create "long-term readers".

Why would a book about the pleasures of reading sell more than a million copies in France alone? Perhaps because with his direct, easy, non-prescriptive style, Pennac taps into the understanding and regret that a simple but significant pleasure has been so corrupted during the school years. Most young people know how important it is to read well. They know that not only their educational but also their working and personal lives will be deeply affected if they don't.

Here's how one bright young woman of 18, who had just finished reading a book for the first time, put it to me some years ago: "When friends said, 'I'm reading a great book,' I didn't know what they were on about. I never had any idea what you could get out of a book. It's a scary thing to sit on the train and see 10 people deep in books while I am reading *TV Week*. I feel dumb but I know I'm not."

It is worth noting that the young woman, Deborah Fryers, passed her final year exams, without ever finishing a book. She had found other ways to work the system. As Pennac found: "The most sensible of 'non-readers' will learn, like us, to talk around a book. They'll perfect the inflationary art of commentary (read 10 lines, produce 10 pages), the head-shrinking practice of writing book reports (skim 400 pages, reduce them to five). They'll fish for choice quotes from one of those idiot's guides to deep-freeze culture, 'available at all good bookshops'." Yes, all this in France too!

Pennac shows how he turns things around in a classroom of even the most reluctant readers. He reads aloud to them and keeps reading (and often he reads demanding, sophisticated adult books) until the students become so engrossed they start asking questions about the author, the book and the context and then they head off to get the books for themselves and to read. They have started to "get" what books can offer. Pennac's book revolves around his 10 "Rights of the Reader". These, available in poster form, should be on the wall of every classroom and library. Pennac's approach works. In my 25 years of secondary teaching I read aloud all the time and yes, even the tuned-out students started listening and liking what they heard. Mostly.

As in Britain, the US, Canada and most European countries, in Australia we are fortunate. We have many talented, sophisticated writers, who write specifically for young people. Often their works are more challenging and literary than those of some of the adult writers who appear on the curriculum. We also have brave, bold and creative publishers. And the writers and publishers produce their books despite many, such as Kevin Donnelly and critic Peter Craven, maintaining that these are not "real books", while at the same time arguing that an outstanding, multi-award-winning author such as Sonya Hartnett — who also writes for adults and whom Craven admires deeply — is much too good to be considered a writer for young people.

What does this say about our regard and respect for young people? That they cannot possibly deserve, or are not "up to" reading the best writing? Our own Markus Zusak's brilliant and innovative Holocaust novel, *The Book Thief*, is much more celebrated in the US and Britain than at home, as are Margo Lanagan's dazzling speculative fiction stories, which have won a swag of international awards. Craven recently wrote an extended, glowing review of Joyce Carol Oates' latest novel, *The Gravedigger's Daughter*. The brilliant, prolific American author, academic and essayist Oates has recently been writing wonderful, edgy young adult fiction. Why would she do this if she doesn't think this an audience worth speaking to and writing for?

Perhaps the Australian names McCarthy, Marsden, Marchetta, Masson, Metzenthén, Moloney, Moriarty, Murray and Murphy ring some bells. And I've only glanced at the Ms on my shelf! John Marsden has turned many non-readers onto reading (also in Sweden and Germany) because they could not put his books down. And Maureen McCarthy's *Cross My Heart* was that first book Deborah Fryers ever finished. Despite diminishing budgets and disappearing librarians (how many schools still have them?), schools do buy these books and some committed teachers and librarians do their best to promote them and to try to match books and readers. Author Doris Lessing said: "You have to read a book at the right time for you, and I am sure this cannot be insisted on too often, for it is the key to the enjoyment of literature."

The need to refocus on reading for pleasure and on reminding young people what they can get from books and reading is now being recognised in Britain through the wide-reaching work of Booktrust, "an independent national charity that encourages people of all ages and cultures to discover and

enjoy reading". Booktrust attracts large amounts of funding from Government (the new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, is a great champion of reading), from businesses and philanthropic trusts. Its latest venture is to provide books free of charge to all 11-year-olds. Remember how Mark Latham was lampooned for suggesting similar programs?

Where are our national government initiatives to promote reading? Why aren't our librarians' organisations actively engaged in promoting reading or presenting literary awards as they are in the US, Canada, Europe and in Britain? Why don't book awards gain more media attention? Why are there so few reviews of books for young people in the mainstream media? Why are young people who enjoy reading or want to read more considered "nerds" and often compelled to hide this interest, which is obviously considered shameful and for boys "unmasculine".

The state-run Premier's Reading Challenges are a good start but don't come with any significant funding or major promotion. They are also mostly focused on primary-school students.

Noted English author, critic and reading advocate Aidan Chambers once said the quality of a school could be gauged by how much time was allocated to reading and how well this time was protected. In many senior secondary English classes only one or two "texts" need to be studied, probably including a Shakespeare and a movie. All this is short-changing our young people. In fact we should be ensuring that children and teenagers read much more — how about at least 10 books each term!

It's time to re-educate our educators, politicians and public about the purposes and pleasures of reading. It's time to foster a book and reading culture in Australia. Let's treat our best authors as stars. There are huge celebrations and many literary events in Holland this year to mark the 80th birthday of the major writer for adults Harry Mullisch. And in Sweden there is an annual public holiday to celebrate Astrid Lindgren, the creator of Pippi Longstocking. Can we even begin to imagine such respect or acknowledgement accorded an author here? News reports, ticker-tape parades and TV specials are only for triumphant sports heroes or so-called celebrities. Let's change all this.

Let's put young people and the many wonderful and varied books available to them at the heart of the debate on literacy. Let's celebrate readers and writers. Let's have national programs to promote reading. Let's not agonise about how much Shakespeare is read, or think about books in terms of fodder for explorations of issues or ideology. Let's not destroy our culture.

Agnes Nieuwenhuizen is the author of *Right Book, Right Time — 500 great reads for teenagers* (Allen & Unwin 2007). She is a guest at *The Age* Melbourne Writers' Festival.

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