

## **OU Reading for Pleasure Conference - Review by Mary-Rose Grieve**

St Matthews CofE Primary School, Birmingham

Reading for Pleasure: The Thread that Connects

In her wonderful essay, *Why You Should Read Children's Books, Even Though You Are So Old and Wise*, Katherine Rundell wrote, "In a world which prizes a pose of exhausted knowingness, children's fiction allows itself the unsophisticated stance of awe." As we arrived at St Matthews C of E Primary School on Saturday, in the grey, blustery, wet morning, there was a palpable sense of awe – at the warm and welcoming school hall, the piles of books waiting to be bought, and the sheer number of passionate, committed people who all – sophisticated as they were – brought with them an atmosphere of excitement and anticipation.

Teresa Cremin talked in her introduction about the thread that connects us, or as Hilary McKay put it later, the 'bookish gravity' which holds us all together, and throughout the day, the speakers and presenters wove this idea through their talks and workshops. Sadie Phillips gave an accomplished and personal account of her Reading for Pleasure journey, and how she created a rich reading culture which began with her own reading habits, which spread from her to her class, to her school, and then to us in the room. She talked of the importance creating both a physical and ideological space within which reading can flourish and inspired us to hold a mirror up to our own practices to examine what this space really looks like.

The idea of the ideological space to read was one which was examined by Farrah Serroukh of the CLPE in her thought-provoking talk about the role of literature in reflecting the realities of the reader. She talked of the reader being the power within the space created by stories, and how it is crucial in both multi- and monocultural contexts for narratives to be centred in different realities, for experiences to be normalised and not highlighted for their differences. Her talk was as enlightening as it was sobering and I was left with a much deeper understanding of the importance of engaging with children in their own space, rather than one I construct for them, and how important it is to recommend books which allow them to define their space.

Teresa Cremin and Gemma Gascoine led a fascinating workshop called 'Reading Aloud Plus', and we were treated to Teresa reading us a story, this time 'Live Savings' by Janet and Allan Ahlberg, and in her reading, we were shown what it is to create a space to be shared by both listener and reader, a shared, social space in which both storyteller and audience are equal participants, in which the reader is not the performer, but the creator of a space in which the story takes shape. Gemma's inspiring stories of how she and her school built a culture of reading for pleasure were rooted in the research and gave a very clear idea of how to make meaningful and long lasting change throughout the community.

Tempting Teachers to Read, led by the dynamic Gen Fox and Vicky Waller, was a brilliant practical session full of brilliant research-based ideas on how to embed reading for pleasure amongst the teachers and staff, and the importance of creating and maintaining a shared space for all readers to develop and engage in their love of books and words. It was clear that in order for a RfP pedagogy to take hold, much of the work needs to be done with teachers first, and tempting them to read fantastic children's literature was not difficult when faced with the book laden tables that Marilyn Brocklehurst brought with her from Norfolk Children's Book Centre – lots of people left with their bags groaning with new books.

The day ended – so quickly, and far too soon – with Hilary McKay’s mesmerising talk about writing and her inspiration for her latest novel, *The Time of Green Magic*. She weaved a spell so powerful and enchanting that not a sound could be heard as she recounted her tale of the stolen character, of how this character transformed from an orphaned boy into a spirited and feisty girl, of an ivy clad house and of the transformative power of books.

The vibrant space inside St Matthews’ school hall, which was filled with people connected by their love of reading and teaching was one which perfectly demonstrated the importance of reading as a social, relational and informal participatory act, and I left having made new friends, thinking a great deal of new thoughts, and inspired by new ideas and extraordinary practitioners.