

Hope for the Future

Francesca Dow, Managing Director, Penguin Random House Children's

Books open our eyes and our minds, they open our world. As we know, where better to find empathy – where better to learn love, courage, friendship, than in the pages of a book?

As lonely young Matilda finds where she discovers the library:

“the books transported her into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived interesting lives. She travelled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village. The books gave Matilda a hopeful and comforting message. You are not alone.”

There is, in my opinion, a huge amount of hope, positivity and comfort to be found in what is already happening, across the industry, to improve children and young people's reading for pleasure and wellbeing.

Firstly – the big initiatives which can create great change: ones which will, across the course of next year, create national conversations, give even more children access to books and which will find new ways to innovate and connect children with stories.

- **The National Year of Reading**, inviting us to GO ALL IN in 2026. This is a brilliant opportunity for us all, an invitation to all consumers to follow our tastes and curiosity, whether it's sport or music or gaming, or watching Peppa Pig or playing with Hot Wheels, laughing at comics or doing puzzles and quizzes, beautiful illustrations, or curling up with a new adventure, there will be a book for you – that you can listen to or share or read aloud. Something for us all to engage with and to help us grow, creating excitement and curiosity about books and reading in all its forms.
- **Libraries for Primaries** where, this year we have reached a major milestone – 1500 libraries created in primary schools since the campaign, that we co-founded with the NLT, and a pledge from the Government to put a library in every primary school in England by the end of this parliament. That's a win. For the kids who don't have books at home, and for the kids who do. Children often have very little choice in their lives but we can let them choose their books. And that's why Libraries for Primaries matters and will help – offering critical choice and a welcoming space and time for stories in school.
- **The Children's Booker Prize**: An exciting new prize with the weight of the Booker brand behind it. The winner and shortlisted books and authors will create attention and conversation about children's books. And with children on the judging panel, and graphic novels included in the submission criteria, this promises to be a prize that will recognise what kids like to read, not just what adults believe they should.

Secondly, an industry that continues to widen choice for children:

- **We are aiming for greater choice of books.** Publishers are diversifying their portfolios – we certainly are at Penguin Random House Children's! – from graphic novels to illustrated fiction, wonderful new authors as well as the much-loved classics. Choice is being offered – from non-fiction on all subjects, to licensing to attract the kids who want to find their favourite licensed characters in books, or football fans, or kids who love gaming. There are picture books to reach the youngest of readers and brilliant audio for the kids who love to be read to and listen to their stories. There is a dazzling choice available, for readers of all ages and tastes and abilities.
- **And we know that we must continue to ensure representation in our books.** Research from the NLT tells us that children and young people who see themselves in books are more likely to enjoy reading, read more often and with greater confidence, particularly children from ethnic minority and low-income backgrounds. It's encouraging to see the data in this year's *Reflecting Realities* report from CLPE report progress in the diversity of publishers' new books in 2024 on 2023 and overall progress since the report's launch eight years ago. It's good to see representation increase after last year's drop but this requires – from all publishers – sustained energy and commitment. The report is a reminder of how important it is for children to have access to a diverse choice of stories and books, ones that are relevant and relatable to their lives.

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Thirdly I am optimistic about the future of children's reading for pleasure in the commitment of so many people to support this renewed emphasis on children's reading:

- **Parents, Teachers and Carers** who already recognise how brilliant books are for children, and who believe a child's prospects are improved by reading.
- **Children's authors and illustrators** who believe in the power of bringing their books alive for children. Nothing can compare to the way they are able to do this, connecting to classrooms of kids and championing the power of stories. It is extraordinary and magical to see in action.
- **A healthy and broad retail environment** - this is good for reading, from the choice on the high street to supermarkets and online, and the brilliant indies - there are many different ways for consumers to find books for the family. Retailers understand the importance commercially of the kids sections to their business. Kids books sell. That's important, to support new investment in children's talent.
- **MPs launching an inquiry into how the joy of reading can be kept alive.** It is positive that our politicians are focused on addressing the decline in the number of children reading for pleasure and recognising the huge benefits of reading for pleasure. Penguin will be submitting evidence to this, drawing on all we have learned about growing reading for pleasure.

This mix of industry-wide initiatives, consumer-facing campaign, political focus and engaged individuals are a source and reason for great optimism.

But the greatest source of hope of all is that children still love stories, once we connect them with the right one. We have to use all our powers to help make this magic happen. Many kids may be reluctant to stop what they are doing and pick up a book. They may need encouragement and a welcoming space and the quiet time to be carved out for reading, and help finding the book that will speak to them. But every child loves a great story.

And so we have to put children and young people at the heart of our ideas and thinking. How do we help them find the book that will excite them? How do we help them move from a book they love to another one? How do we entice them? How do we bring books alive for them? In the Libraries for Primaries schools there is a brilliant model of the Year 6 Pupil Librarians who run the new library. They encourage the other kids in the school to find the right book for them. Nothing is more persuasive than kid to kid recommendation.

What should we do to harness this industry-power. What else must be done?

We must support teachers. Champion community librarians. Encourage parents reading to their babies. And we have to continue to help as many children as we can to create a moment every day for storytelling, whether this is in schools, at home, on the bus, or listening to an audiobook. This moment of 'down time' is fundamental. We have to encourage reading of all kinds: let children follow their interests and curiosity and make their own choices, not just of what they read but also how they choose to read. Because we know that nothing could be more powerful for a young person than the freedom to choose; and that freedom encourages enjoyment; and enjoyment of reading is a superpower.

Like Matilda in her library, we are not alone. We are in this together. There is hope and there is determination and there is a plan to champion reading, in all its forms, across the industry.

Next year is a chance to seize these opportunities and make them count. With this shared focus on books as a way to improve children and young people's reading for pleasure and wellbeing there is plenty to be optimistic about.

Above all, we share a belief in the power of books to change the world. We know that books matter, that stories matter.

Children are our future and what could be more important and exciting than inspiring the next generation?

MAJOR RESEARCH & PRACTICE CONFERENCE

Raising Generation Empathy

the power of reading in social and emotional development

