

Understanding Reading Development

Colin Harrison



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For Mary

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Note: Every effort has been made to contact the publishers of Figure 1.1 for permission to use the photograph. We apologise for any inconvenience or offence caused by the use of this image.

The author

Colin Harrison is Professor of Literacy in Education at the University of Nottingham.

After teaching English at secondary level he worked on the Schools Council project 'The Effective Use of Reading', during which time he chaired the Schools Council's Evaluator's Group. His books include *Readability in the Classroom*, *Interactive Learning and New Technologies* and *The Reading for Real Handbook*. He was a founding editor of the *Journal of Research in Reading* and is past president of the United Kingdom Reading Association, representing UKRA and other European reading associations on the International Reading Association's Family Literacy Commission. He has directed thirty funded research projects, including nine in the field of new technology.

Chapter 1

Reading reading

‘What?’, ‘how?’ and ‘why?’

This book is for teachers, and its central focus is on the question of how we understand, and how we bring about, reading development. This first chapter also includes a discussion of the nature of reading and of why we read. I would want to argue that such a discussion is a necessary prelude to the later chapters in the book, but also that for understandable reasons, within the teaching profession, such a discussion is overdue. The reasons for this are not due to professional negligence, but rather, I would suggest, to the increasingly pervasive influence of governments of English-speaking countries in determining the curriculum and research agendas for literacy, and while this has been done with the best of intentions, it has had the effect of marginalising discussion of some of these wider issues.

In England, for example, throughout the 1980s and for most of the 1990s under successive Conservative governments, important discussions about what should determine the content of the literacy curriculum – about what should be taught and why – took place, often behind closed doors, in committees whose membership excluded nominees from the professional subject associations such as the National Association for the Teaching of English and the United Kingdom Reading Association.

In the late 1990s and early part of the new millennium, under successive ‘New Labour’ governments, a new spirit of openness, collegiality and cooperation has come into education in the UK, particularly in England. Ministers, and the advisers close to them, declared themselves to be keen to work in partnership with teachers, headteachers, teacher unions and researchers to advance policy and to enhance good practice, and the appointment of senior academics to positions of responsibility within the (then) Department of Education and Employment and the pronouncements of government advisers on the importance of ‘evidence-driven policy’ seemed to augur well for the future. But, while it was certainly the case that the government wanted evidence-driven policy and that this was broadly speaking good news for academics who wanted research funding, it also became clear that government was not only setting the research

agenda, it had very clear expectations about the role of research. As Geoff Mulgan, the then Head of the Performance and Innovation Unit in the Cabinet Office, put it:

Scientific knowledge in all its forms is now much more explicitly part of the governing process and there's a very important reason for that. We have seen a reducing role for ideology; the conviction politics of both the 70's and the 80's has gone into decline and ... knowledge about what works has, to some extent, filled that space ...

(Mulgan, 2001)

Understandably, a government that values research is likely to have a clear agenda in relation to the key questions that it feels need to be answered and clear notions about the findings that are anticipated. 'What works?' is the generic form of the question currently being put by government to academics on both sides of the Atlantic, and this form of question can lead to distortion and polarisation. As the recent furore about the place of phonics in the US makes plain, when it comes to the teaching of reading, when governments turn to science, science turns to rhetoric.

The point I wish to make here is that under neither Conservatives during the 1980s and 1990s, nor under 'New Labour' in more recent years, has there been an atmosphere such as that which prevailed during the time of the Bullock Report (1975), when government (through the inspectorate of schools), academics and teachers came together to thrash out both the principles that should underpin the curriculum for literacy and literature, and to set out not only an agenda for change in teaching but also a set of principles that might act as theoretical and moral scaffolding for those changes. Under the Conservatives, the 'what' of the curriculum was appropriated by government in the name of freedom from academic cosiness. Under New Labour, the 'how' of the curriculum, which, to be fair, was held under the Conservatives to be sacrosanct, was appropriated by government in the name of standards, and under both governments the 'why' of reading has been seen as either an implicitly irrelevant or implicitly utilitarian question. In this book, I want not only to discuss the 'what' and the 'how' of reading development, but also the 'why?'

In this extended chapter I therefore have three goals, each of which relates to my superordinate goal of not only contributing to our understanding of evidence-based practice, but also of paying some attention to the assumptions and to the theoretical and moral scaffolding that underpin that evidence. First, I want to consider the issue of exactly why it is so important to develop reading. My reasoning here is that we pay little enough attention to such issues even within a literary perspective on why we read, and even less within a psychological or developmental perspective. Second, I want to

make some attempt to achieve a synthesis of historical, psychological and literary perspectives on reading development: experts from each of these fields have contributed enormously to our understanding of reading, but it is difficult to find the time to attend to more than one of these perspectives, and even more difficult to identify the correspondences and congruence that might extend and deepen that understanding. Third, I want to suggest some ways in which research in reading, in its many forms, can inform and extend good practice: through identifying findings that already underpin our current practice, through identifying findings that suggest where we might change our current practice, and finally through identifying where we need more evidence than is currently available.

Why is reading so important?

Why is reading so important, and why should teachers devote so much time to supporting children in becoming confident and fluent readers? My starting point in answering this question is not taken from government statements identifying national goals or national strategies in reading; it is a quotation from a letter written by Gustave Flaubert in 1857:

Do not read, as children do, to amuse yourself, or like the ambitious, for the purpose of instruction. No, read in order to live.

(Flaubert, 1857)

I shall revisit this quotation, but at the very beginning of this book I want to emphasise the importance of reading in relation to human development. Teachers can be forgiven for forgetting sometimes the joy and delight that most young children experience as they discover what words can do. Much of this book will be about reading for information, but I want to make no distinction between reading stories and reading for information in relation to the question of what we gain from reading. I want us to remind ourselves that reading not only increases our life skills and extends our knowledge, it goes much deeper – I want to argue that in many respects reading determines how we are able to think, that it has a fundamental effect on the development of the imagination, and thus exerts a powerful influence on the development of emotional and moral as well as verbal intelligence and therefore on the kind of person we are capable of becoming.

Narrative

Many teachers of my generation were influenced by Barbara Hardy's essay on 'Narrative as a primary act of mind', taken from the book *The Cool Web*

(Hardy, 1977), in which she argued that ‘inner and outer storytelling’ plays a major role in our sleeping and waking lives. She wrote:

... For we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future.

(Hardy, 1977, p. 13)

The importance of narrative, she argues, is not simply about enjoyment of stories, or even about understanding ourselves. Narrative is a fundamental tool in the construction of intersubjectivity – the ability to recognise mental states in ourselves, and through imagination and projection to recognise the potential reciprocity of mental states in others – their beliefs, intentions, desires and the like – and it is this (and not simply the existence of language) that makes us distinctive as human beings. Jerome Bruner put this point very powerfully:

I want to propose that this deep, primitive form of human cognition [i.e. intersubjectivity] is captured linguistically in the form of narrative.

(Bruner, 2000, p. 33)

Bruner was arguing here that intersubjectivity, our very ability to relate to other people in characteristically human ways, is fundamentally related to our use of the linguistic form of narrative. This is a profoundly important point, so let’s take a moment to reflect on what it looks like in practice.

Many parents take delight in recognising moments of developing intersubjectivity in their children, and fondly wish they had recorded more of them when their children have grown up. One parent who took the trouble to record many such moments was Shelby Anne Wolf, who in collaboration with Shirley Brice Heath wrote a book chronicling the ways in which her two daughters’ development as people, not simply in terms of their reading ability or vocabulary, was fundamentally changed and enriched by their interaction with books. As a four-year-old, Shelby’s daughter Ashley was with her mother, dropping off the older sister at gym class, when they emerged from the building to be greeted by a brilliantly blue evening sky. The mother exclaimed, ‘Look at that sky. It’s beautiful.’ The following exchange then took place:

Ashley gazed up into the darkening sky. 'Yes, it's a blue and nightingale sky.' I grasped her hand and praised her metaphor, 'What a beautiful thing to say!' We continued walking in silence, watching the sky. But when we reached the car, Ashley turned to me and asked, 'What's a nightingale?'

Shelby Wolf goes on to say that Ashley had read some months before *The Nightingale* by Hans Christian Andersen, which they had borrowed from a library. Ashley had forgotten the definition of 'nightingale', but she remembered the sense of beauty associated with that word.

We aren't born knowing that there is beauty in the world. We learn (or don't learn) about beauty from those around us, and from the cultural discourses within which we live. But the spontaneous, only partly understood, but nevertheless very powerful metaphor that Ashley uses tells us more – that she has already internalised an awareness that a fragment of an association from a story can, in a single word, evoke a complex world of associations, and that these can be shared, and can evoke a different but related set of associations in the mind of another. It is this implicit awareness of other possible worlds, both those held and instantiated in the narrative and those that can be shared with another person, that make up intersubjectivity.

I share her mother's belief that Ashley's capacity for recognising beauty in a brilliantly blue evening sky was intimately related to the exploration of possible worlds through narrative with which she had been engaging almost from birth. We might also remind ourselves that what was so unusual about this moment is not so much that it happened, but rather that it was recorded, and that the mother was able to identify the connection with a story read many months before.

Bruner argued, convincingly in my view, that narrative is fundamental to human development. Reading, therefore, is about much more than gaining a skill: it is about learning to be. And it is precisely because this is such a difficult and sensitive subject to talk about that we avoid talking about it, and this leaves an enormous vacuum. Because reading is so important, that vacuum becomes filled by other discourses, and often these have an emphasis on skills, on employment, on the economy and on reading for practical purposes. In the pages that follow, we shall discuss many of these practical purposes, but I would nevertheless wish to emphasise that it is neither maudlin nor romantic to emphasise from the outset that when we are looking at reading development, although we rarely acknowledge it, we are talking about giving people tools to be human.

Moral purpose

One author who is not afraid to remind us of the strong sense of moral purpose in reading is Philip Pullman, who in an interview about the trilogy *His*

Dark Materials, said, 'I'm trying to write a book about what it means to be human, to grow up, to suffer and learn.' Later in this chapter, I shall argue that we have moral duty to read. After all, if learning to read opens significant additional possibilities in terms of understanding how we might live, then we can argue that we have a moral duty to read, and, therefore as teachers, a moral duty to teach reading.

There will not be a major emphasis on beginning reading in this book, but I want to argue that it is enormously valuable for all teachers to have some understanding of how children learn to read, and of the remarkable potential of early literacy experiences to influence children's development. In a nursery that I visit regularly I heard the following story from the mother of Henry, then a cheerful little boy of 22 months. His language was developing well, which is to say that he was beginning to talk confidently, even though he was sometimes frustrated because he did not yet have the words to explain everything he wanted to say. But the remarkable incident which followed his being bitten by another child showed that Henry could use a book to communicate his feelings, even before he had learned the words to utter them.

One afternoon, when Henry's mum arrived to pick him up from nursery, Henry's key worker took her aside and asked her to sign her section of an accident form. 'Everything's alright,' said the key worker, 'but I have to tell you that I'm afraid Henry was bitten this afternoon by another child. I have had a conversation with the other child and explained how serious it is to bite someone, and have asked him not to do it again.' Naturally, this being a modern nursery, there was no mention of the name of the biter. When Henry's mum went to pick up Henry, there was no sign of anguish, anger or upset, but Henry proudly rolled up his sleeve and revealed a fine set of teeth marks on his forearm. He then became increasingly agitated and clenched his little fists with frustration as he realised he could not tell his mum what had happened. Suddenly, he rushed over to the book corner and fetched a book, ran back to his mum and opened it. The book had a number of pictures of reptiles, and Henry turned the pages determinedly until he found the picture he wanted. It was a photograph of a very large crocodile with its jaws wide open revealing a full set of sharp teeth. Henry pointed to the photograph, then he pointed to the bite on his arm. Then he pointed to his best friend, another little boy, who was sitting across the room, working with great concentration on a drawing. 'Snap! Snap!' said Henry as he pointed to his pal. His mum understood.

What is intriguing about this anecdote are the connections between the infant's intentionality, his communication strategies and his emergent literacy. Henry understood, even before his speech was anything like fully developed, that books, as well as people, can communicate, and he used this understanding to make an announcement that was richer and far more dramatic than would have been possible without access to the book. What

exactly was happening here? First, Henry was initiating a literacy event: a child who was not yet two was demonstrating an awareness that a book could be used as a bridge – a third possible world that might be used to link his own mental world to the mental world of his mum. Second, he already understood the potential of metaphor – that one event or object which had a partial set of correspondences with another event or object could be used to stand proxy for that event or object, and could evoke a set of associations in the mind of another. Third, he implicitly understood how powerful a metaphor could be: his little pal, the biter, had not sprung from a jungle river and torn off his arm, but Henry used the evocative image of the crocodile to striking effect and to call up in his mother's mind associations with the atavistic fear of being attacked by a giant reptile. And these things did not just happen: they occurred because Henry inhabited a world surrounded by books – in the kitchen of his home, in his bedroom, at his grandparents' house and in the nursery that he had attended daily since he had been six months old. They happened because since before he had been just a few months old, adults had been sharing books with him, and initiating him into the awareness of possible worlds that are accessed through books, and into the visual and linguistic representations that made up those worlds.

I want to suggest that it is interesting that this example of developing intersubjectivity used an information book: I want to argue that narrative and story are important in distinctive ways in human development, but I also want to assert that information books are important, too. Historians tell us that the first written texts were not stories or poetry but information texts – facts about ownership, law, the permanent recording of important details and events. Stories offer us models of how to live, but information books – even word books, such as the wonderful books of Richard Scarry – give us the power to store, to name, to retrieve, to share, to explore, to wonder at and to bring order to our representations of the world. For information is always about order, and information books are inevitably attempts (often relatively unsuccessful attempts) to represent one set of relationships, located in the real world of objects and events, by another set of relationships, expressed by sets of propositions and images, located and ordered within the framework of a more or less explicitly signalled text structure.

Texts are forever. Their whole *raison d'être* is about permanence, about representing what cannot be truly captured, about the construction of a representation, which, although flawed, has the virtue of immortality. All texts are produced in order to communicate, and with all texts there exists a hermeneutic gap between text and reader, and an inevitably greater gap between writer and reader. And as electronic texts proliferate, and the shared or common elements of different cultures are spread ever more thinly across the planet, these hermeneutic differences between writer and reader may become greater rather than smaller. All the more reason, therefore, for us to

explore as fully as we are able the nature of the relationship between author and text, and between text and reader, and the ways in which as teachers or mentors we can guide children towards a more complete and more profound experience understanding of texts and how they might be used.

The need for historical, psychological and literary perspectives on reading

Let us begin by considering an image of reading. Please try to create the following image in your head. The scene is a library. Three people, each of whom seems to be unaware of the existence of the others, are standing, looking at books. One person is holding a book and reading, one person is frozen in the act of taking a book from a shelf, and the third is standing, hands in pockets, looking at the books above him on a shelf (see Figure 1.1).

But when you look at this picture, what I have described so far does not touch upon what is most striking about it, for the scene is one of desolation. This picture was taken in London in 1940, after an air raid, by an unidentified photographer, and what is most astonishing about the picture is the image it presents of readers caught in a state of obliviousness to their surroundings, looking at books as if they were in an antiquarian bookshop or a public library rather than on a bombsite, and lost to the world while they are doing so; we might describe them as *in flagrante lectio*. Of course this photograph is a very gendered image, and only one of hundreds of possible images I might have selected to present the act of reading, but I feel that it is a helpful one to use to represent some aspects of what I want to say about reading and reading processes in this chapter, not least because it poses in a powerful and evocative manner the central questions ‘Why do we read, and why is reading so important?’

As teachers, we perhaps take the importance of reading for granted, but in the main part of this chapter, I want to share a personal attempt to problematise and address the assumptions that we make about reading. I want to argue that it is valuable to consider reading from three perspectives – historical, psychological and literary – and that to do so can provide insights that are revealing in the contrasts they yield, but also in some of the parallels and correspondences they display. In reflecting upon and linking together the three perspectives, I also want to suggest some ways in which they lead us towards insights related to the teaching of reading.

I want to describe how these three perspectives lead to the following propositions concerning reading:

- 1** Writing began because of the need to read for information.
- 2** We have a moral duty to read.
- 3** All books are hypertexts.



Figure 1.1 Bombed library: London 1940

- 4** We need to rethink reading comprehension and reading assessment.
- 5** All import restrictions aimed at reducing the risk of 'Bovarysme' should be permanently lifted.

Proposition 1: Writing began because of the need to read for information

A study of the history of reading is very rewarding for teachers who are interested in what we call reading for information, an area which is sometimes perceived in schools (and perhaps universities too) as unfashionable, utilitarian and a rather poor relation of the reading of literature. This is because it turns out that reading for information is the oldest form of reading.

The beginning of the history of reading is coterminous with the beginning of writing, which was approximately six thousand years ago, the point at which Sumerian scribes first made written signs on tablets of clay. Some scholars have gone so far as to argue that history itself, at least as a discipline, began at this time, since a society without writing is unable to move beyond a linear sense of time and space, and cannot move beyond myth in its descriptions of itself.

The first uses of reading and writing were essentially legal and commercial. There is evidence that narrative and poetry were flourishing at the time writing began, but since these could be shared and preserved through an oral tradition, there was less of an imperative to record them in written form. There was, however, a need in the worlds of business and law for a permanent record of what was otherwise ephemeral information, in order to assert a law, record a transaction or provide evidence of a debt.

Among the earliest examples of a written text are the Syrian clay tablets shown in Figure 1.2. The tablet on the left has two indentations, and archaeologists tell us that one indentation represents a goat, and the other the number ten. The illustration is taken from Alberto Manguel's fascinating book *A History of Reading* (Manguel, 1996).

In a rare moment of unanimity, scholars have agreed that this text might have meant 'ten goats'. We could have fun with this two-word text today, celebrating its Hemingwayan terseness and immediacy, discussing its animalistic Jungian theme, noting the author's playful invitation to the reader to penetrate the text in order to supply a verb, and so on, but such games should not deflect us from recognising the essential point that the whole reason for the existence of this written text was that its meaning should be fixed and unequivocal, even after the death of its author.

But of course ambiguity is inescapable: the fundamental purposes of writing – to eliminate ambiguity, to overcome the limitations of memory and to fix meaning – in clay, stone, ink, iron oxide or the polymer dye layer of a CD – are ultimately doomed. The first Sumerian and Syrian authors are dead, and we are unable to be sure whether this tablet's meaning was:

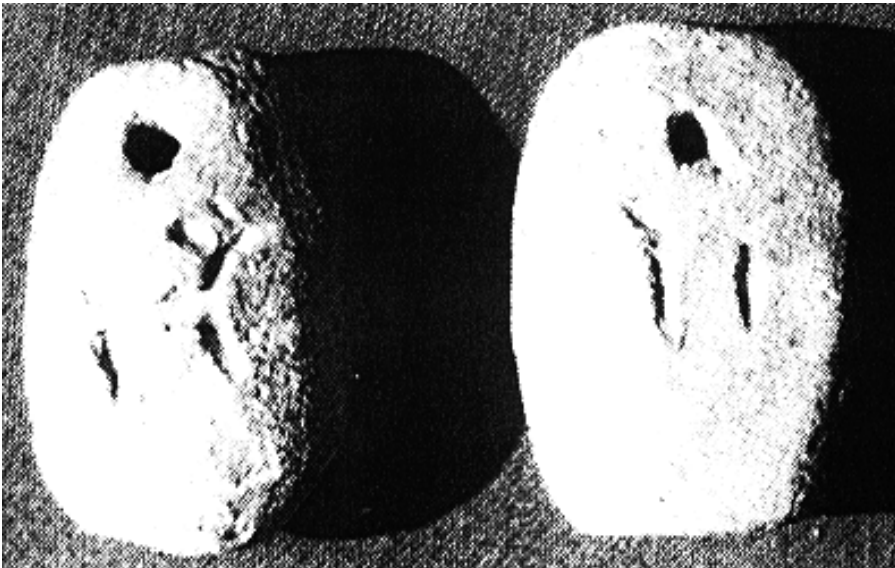


Figure 1.2 Syrian clay tablets
(Source: Manguel, 1996.)

Here are ten goats.
Here were ten goats.
I owe you ten goats.
You have paid me ten goats.
Pay the bearer on demand the sum of ten goats.

And the possibilities of ambiguity are inexhaustible. Archaeologists are not even completely certain whether the animals on the Syrian tablet were really sheep or goats (a problem of classification which has proved to be a recurring one in the academic world). Of course, to argue that ambiguity is inevitable is not to assert that meaning is a matter of personal whim; if it were, reading and writing could not have developed as they have. The point I would emphasise, however, is that uniformity of agreement about a text's meaning is by no means inevitable, and it is certainly no more inevitable in what we might loosely call 'information texts' than it is in stories or poetry.

The first uses of writing, then, were instrumental, and this means that what our American colleagues call 'content area reading', or reading for information of the kind which is important at school, far from being a minor tributary of reading, represents a main source for the whole river.

But if the first uses of writing were instrumental, there were some importantly different ways in which that instrumentality operated. Writing may have begun simply as an extension of memory, but what began as an extension of an individual's memory soon became a tool for administration and regulation at a societal level, and what started as a personal tool for representing the world became a political tool for regulating the world. One corollary of this is that reading has to be recognised as constituting a social or even a socio-political activity, in which the reader's role is not limited to comprehension but extends to social action. Gaining access to the texts which regulate a society, understanding and using them, and also, when necessary, calling into question their clarity, adequacy and appropriateness, is to engage in political action, and teachers, who develop the skills of literacy, are feared in oppressive and coercive societies, just as they are praised and valued in humane and benevolent societies. The teacher of reading does not have to boycott government tests in order to become a political agent; an act of political agency has already occurred as soon as the teacher shares a book with a student.

I want to touch on two further aspects of the history of reading, and their place in our understanding of what it is to read; these are the alphabet and silent reading. So far as we know, the alphabet developed only once, and all alphabetic languages on earth have evolved from the late cuneiform script of Mesopotamia, which changed from pictographic to phonetic during the period up to 2000 BC. The significance of our language's being alphabetic has been written about extensively, but suffice it to say here that

the significance is enormous, since it gives the power of creating a new word to everyone who can write, and the power of being able to read a newly created word to everyone who can read.

This emancipatory power of the alphabet was also important in relation to such technologies as glossaries, indexes, dictionaries and subject lists in books such as encyclopaedias. To be able to make use of tools such as an index or a glossary is not normally taken to be of earthshaking significance, but Ivan Illich (1988) argued that the development of these tools in the Middle Ages was as important as the development of the alphabet two thousand years earlier, since they provided a means of accessing knowledge for non-specialists, something which was hitherto unavailable and which has since become indispensable in an open society. In the next part of the chapter, therefore, I want to look more closely at reading in the Middle Ages.

Proposition 2: We have a moral duty to read

The development of alphabetic writing was of enormous importance, but interestingly, Illich (1993) has recently suggested that the flowering of what we are pleased to call western civilisation came about, not because of the alphabetic nature of post-Sumerian languages, nor from the invention of moveable type, but rather from the growth of silent reading. Illich's arguments tend to resemble Gothic cathedrals, soaring into the stratosphere, buttressed by delicate traceries of logic which lead us upward, wondering how we ever got so far from where we began, unwilling to share the author's confidence that we are safe in our precipitous location, but unable find any other route back to terra firma. *In the Vineyard of the Text* is a wonderful book though. It is a commentary on what Illich argues is the first book on the art of reading, St Hugh's *Didascalion*, which was written about 1128.

Illich suggests that St Hugh brought about a revolution in reading, since the *Didascalion* distinguishes for the first time two main types of reading: oral reading which was a liturgical act related to prayer and spiritual development, and silent reading which was a search for knowledge. Illich calls the first monastic reading and the second scholastic reading, and he charts the beginnings of western thought from the beginnings of scholastic reading. In terms of chronology, this argument seems to be a strong one: within a hundred years of the appearance of the *Didascalion*, the alphabetised tools of scholarship (such as the glossary and index) came to be widely used, scholarship in Europe began to become secularised and to be accessible in languages other than Latin, and the universities of Bologna, Paris, Oxford and Cambridge had been established.

There are other respects in which St Hugh's book not only has relevance for us as teachers of reading, but also seems remarkably modern. Hugh proposed one of the first accounts of the reading process; he offered an

interesting model of comprehension and memory; finally, he offered an account of motivation and intentionality, discussing why we should read. In the course of the book he proposed what we would today regard as the very modern argument that the art of reading can only be understood if it is linked to an understanding of memory.

Hugh's model of the reading process explained how understanding came from reading, and had a sort of reverse optics: the central purpose of monastic reading was the search for wisdom, or more specifically for light. But light was not external to the reader: the act of reading brought light back into the world from which sin had banned it. The reader made a metaphorical pilgrimage through the text, bringing to the text and to the world the light of understanding. I'm happy to leave to our colleagues in the Department of Psychology the challenge of getting a doctoral student to establish conditions of falsifiability for this model of the reading process.

In Hugh's account, study skills and memory work were very much a part of the spiritual discipline of reading: a central aim of reading was to construct a treasure chest (*arca*) in the reader's heart in which knowledge was to be stored, and a number of accounts have survived describing how monks were instructed to train their memories to store and retrieve facts by visualising whole galleries or cathedrals in which knowledge was stored in a three-dimensional array, with one fact or sentence stored at each location. Augustine wrote that his friend Simplicius had memorised the whole of Virgil using this technique and could recite any part of it – forwards or backwards. (One might add that history does not report that Simplicius had more than the one friend.) At this point, however, and before we unjustly suggest that St Hugh's methods may account for the origins of dyslexia, we should remind ourselves that these topological approaches to memorisation were necessary because other techniques had not been invented, and that although the Latin language was phonetic, it took hundreds of years for its alphabetisation to be made use of for study purposes.

Nevertheless, the point remains that the first book on the art of reading focused both on reading aloud for liturgical purposes and on silent reading for study. It is also important to note that it did so in a way that was not divorced from the affective and spiritual part of the reader's response. For Hugh, both monastic and scholastic reading represented a moral rather than a technical activity, and he stated clearly that monks had a moral duty to read, and he argued that everyone, be they powerful or weak, more or less able, became blameworthy if they refused to advance in learning. Hugh also emphasised that the monk had a duty beyond the cloister walls: the old Benedictine tradition had emphasised personal humility and virtue; Hugh's call was for the reader to be a teacher, one who teaches through their life, through their wisdom and by example. And through the methods of reading and study that he

proposed, monks were for the first time encouraged to engage in scholarship which took their study skills and their wisdom into the community. St Hugh did not go so far as to propose universal education, but it was his outward-facing approach to the dissemination of knowledge and wisdom that enabled the idea to gain currency in the century which followed.

Proposition 3: All books are hypertexts

How does the reading process operate? I would want to argue that there is currently much less disagreement on this point among scholars than is commonly thought. This is because it is widely accepted that, since the early 1980s, better eye-movement monitoring equipment and faster computers have enabled us to answer many of the pressing questions about what the eye tells the brain. So I share the view of those who suggest that there is now broad unanimity in descriptions of how we read.

What is less clear, however, is whether we need new accounts of the reading process in relation to computer texts. Dozens of commentators, though perhaps none more eloquent than Rand Spiro (1992, 1994), have noted that reading habits seem to be changing as we face a future that will be dominated by computer screens and data storage devices that appear to redefine the reading process and to demand new skills. The reading skills and study skills that have developed over the past eight hundred years, runs the argument, are already passé; new skills are needed to deal with the demands of flickering type fonts and unknown or unfamiliar data structures. Hypertexts are replacing books, and a new generation of readers, whose minds have been rotted by what our American colleagues call ‘eye candy’, will be doubly disabled: having not been brought up to read, they will be illiterate; having too little understanding of how to cope with electronic texts, they will be unable to handle the twenty-first-century demand of becoming e-literate – electronically literate.

Well, that’s how the argument runs, and I want to oppose it. I want to suggest that while the term ‘hypertext’ is new, and while it is unquestionably the case that new methods of storing data in electronic form have been developed and will continue to develop, there is no case for sustaining the apocalyptic view that young readers are having their cognitive teeth rotted by ‘eye candy’, nor is it the case that new types of reading skill are going to be needed in order to cope with electronic texts. And the point is not simply a socio-cultural one; these issues are fundamental to our understanding of what it is to develop reading, and to develop reading comprehension, and I want to build my case on two research studies carried out in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham.

First, on the matter of whether or not a new generation of readers is growing up unable to read and unable to concentrate on a visual stimulus

(unless it is a computer graphic which mutates, kills, explodes or scores a goal), many teachers will by now be aware of the recent national replication, by Martin Coles, Val Fraser and Chris Hall, of Frank Whitehead's 1970s survey of children's reading interests (Hall and Coles, 1999). The project reported clear evidence that children's reading habits have remained remarkably stable over the past 20 years. There are of course plenty of children today who read few or no books and who watch a great deal of television. The main difference in the two populations, however, is not that there are more non-readers today, but rather that 20 years ago, non-readers watched less television. Today, plenty of non-readers choose to play computer games, but Hall and Coles made the point that they found no causal relationship between higher levels of computer usage and lower levels of book reading. This view of stable reading standards has been confirmed by Greg Brooks's recent review of national reading survey data in the UK over the past 50 years, which argues that there is no evidence of any decline in reading standards since the 1950s.

Second, we should note that, again in the 1970s, the *Effective Use of Reading* project (Lunzer and Gardner, 1979) found that children's reading in school was already fragmentary, that many children found school textbooks too difficult and many teachers found school textbooks too expensive, with the result that there was something of an avoidance of print. The classroom observation data collected by the project team in 1974 and 1975 reported that most reading in secondary school took place in bursts of less than 15 seconds in a minute.

In other words, the need for children to develop the skill of learning effectively from brief bursts of reading is not new, nor is it a function of the television age or the CD-ROM; it is simply one way in which we use printed texts.

The third part of my argument relates to the nature of printed texts, particularly school texts. During the 1970s and early 1980s, many research groups, including those of Richard Anderson at the University of Illinois and the Schools Council teams at the University of Nottingham, studied how children learned from schools texts. What we found, and what our US colleagues found, was that school texts were often 'inconsiderate' in that they were unhelpful to readers, either because they did not give the reader signposts to the structure of the argument of the text or because they did not have a clear or coherent structure in the first place.

The Nottingham teams developed and evaluated classroom strategies for helping children to explore and identify the macrostructures which lay under the surface of texts, the rationale being that to do this would enable readers to learn much more effectively from texts than would otherwise be the case. These strategies were called DARTs – Directed Activities Related to Texts – and there were about thirty of them, of which deletion, sequencing and prediction were three, all of which were developed in collaboration

with teachers in classrooms (Lunzer and Gardner, 1984). All the DARTs activities involved the reader in an active interrogation of the text, exploring its surface features, but going deeper and exploring the strata underneath. Small group work was a central part of the pedagogy of DARTs, since it was our belief that a reader could learn the processes and strategies of reading by seeing those processes modelled by one of his or her peers. But consider what was happening here: readers were taking texts apart, discovering that the deep structure of the text was not linear, deciding what that deep structure was and then working out how best to navigate around it. To do this is precisely what is required in exploring a hypertext.

A hypertext is an n -dimensional rather than a linear text. The term is generally applied to electronic texts, but it is also applied to certain types of printed text, for example a programmed novel, in which the reader makes strategic choices and follows a non-linear pathway through the book (Kill the king? – go to page 349. Watch a play? – go to page 85. Procrastinate? – stay on this page but watch your back, and so on). A hypertext on a computer is made up of two sorts of object: information (often this is text, but it could be graphics or a video clip) and links to other information. The challenge for the reader is therefore threefold: to construct meaning from the text, to navigate to another chunk of text, and finally to integrate information from what is found in the new location with what is already known.

What I would want to argue is that there is nothing fundamentally new in all this; it seems new because the medium is new and the surface features of the text are unfamiliar: new text fonts, unfamiliar text framing tools and new hardware devices. But in some respects, the task of the reader in front of a computer screen is easier than that of a person reading a book: at least a computer interface declares its novelty and offers socially acceptable permission to succeed or fail (if I succeed, it's because I'm good with technology; if I fail, then I remind myself that those who succeed with technology are nerds, and at least I'm not a nerd). By contrast, I'm suggesting that most information books are hypertexts, that their deep structure is n -dimensional and that the reader's role is to navigate within that non-linear space, but the reader's job is often very difficult because the signposting of that structure is poor or the structure is weak.

Of course there are some aspects of electronic texts which are new and different: the potential speed of access to information over the World Wide Web, for example, is new: a web browser conducts a free-text Boolean search of 3,000 million websites in under a second. But I would still argue that these challenges are essentially quantitatively rather than qualitatively different; they don't require a new model of the reading process. I would go further and suggest that if we can support children to use DARTs or similar approaches successfully, they will be well equipped not only to read books, but also to make effective use of the power of electronic media.

Proposition 4: We need to rethink reading comprehension and reading assessment

Let us turn now to consider some parallels between what has happened over the past twenty years in the psychology of reading and within the field of English literature. I want to note that there are interesting parallels between the emphasis on active approaches to the processing of text which come from psychology, and accounts of reading and the role of the reader which come from contemporary literary theory, and that the DARTs activities which I mentioned above, which were derived from a psychological perspective on reading development, could have equally been derived from literary theory.

In a chapter in my book on reading assessment, Mary Bailey, Alan Dewar and I (Harrison, Bailey and Dewar, 1998) quoted Terry Eagleton's comment that in recent years there has been a marked shift of attention in literary theory away from the author (the focus of nineteenth-century criticism) and the text (the focus of structuralist criticism in the early and middle years of the twentieth century), towards the most underprivileged of the trio, the reader. Wolfgang Iser, in developing his reception theory, argued that the text is unfinished without the reader's contribution to making meaning: it is the reader who, in partnership with the author, brings to it his or her own experience and understanding, and resolves the conflicts and indeterminacies which the author leaves unresolved. This is exactly what happens in DARTs activities: the reader, in collaboration with his or her peers, is engaged in the process of constructing meaning, and is encouraged to adopt a constructively critical disposition towards the author.

This reassessment of the concept of meaning, of the role of the reader and of the authority in text, raises profound questions about the nature of reading assessment, particularly in its traditional forms, and it is these questions which have led me to the bold formulation that there is no such thing as reading comprehension, at least not as we have often been inclined to understand it – as a steady state of knowledge formed in the reader's mind following the reading of a text. Like other teachers, I have given children reading comprehension exercises, tried to develop their reading comprehension, and have used the phrase to refer to what readers understand from what they have read, but I think that it is important, too, to remind ourselves that reading comprehension processes are elusive, evanescent, and in many respects inaccessible.

I would go further, and suggest that a sort of uncertainty principle operates, such that it is not possible to investigate someone's reading comprehension without affecting the nature of their response. It is in this sense that I want to suggest that there is no such 'thing' as reading comprehension. Certainly readers comprehend, but the product of reading comprehension is not stable, and if you ask someone a question about

their understanding, the answer you get will be the product of a new interaction between the text, the reader's response to it and your question. As Walter Kintsch put it, 'asking questions as a method for the assessment of knowledge is fraught with problems' (Kintsch, 1998, p. 296). He went further, suggesting that it is 'an unnatural act when a teacher asks a student for something that the teacher knows better than the student.'

I want to suggest that, most of the time at least, we haven't yet dared to or haven't had the imagination to consider the implications for assessing response to reading, or measuring reading comprehension, of the postmodern positions we adopt as teachers. There's a chasm between the liberal positions of our pedagogy and the coercive positions of our assessment mechanisms and the assumptions which underpin them, and at the very least it is important to recognise this, and to set ourselves the agenda of bridging the chasm.

Later on in this book I shall argue that we can derive some principles for reading assessment based on an analysis of postmodernism and literary theory. Here is a summary of those principles which I have called principles of Responsive Assessment:

- assessment should be potentially useful for both teacher and student;
- the subjectivity of both teacher and student should be valued, not regarded as a problem;
- the content of what is regarded as evidence of reading achievement should be negotiated;
- the reading activity under discussion should be based on an authentic task;
- evidence of the reader's response should be sought and given status;
- the reader's role as a maker of meaning should be given status.

I have suggested elsewhere (Harrison, 1996) that the National Curriculum in England and Wales currently presents an ultimately damaging model of assessment, and that if teachers were permitted to move towards a portfolio assessment system within which evidence of reading activity was collected according to these principles of Responsive Assessment, then most of the problems associated with National Curriculum assessment would evaporate. I have worked with a group of primary and secondary teachers in Nottinghamshire over the past six years who have been talking about and trying out in the classroom some new approaches to reading assessment. We have also been in touch electronically with some teachers in Michigan who have been investigating new approaches in their classrooms, and we set up an e-mail network to share ideas. Some of this work will be discussed later in this book. I shall not suggest that

our tentative steps provide a full model for future national assessment, but I do believe that unless approaches that link curriculum and assessment are developed and piloted by teachers in classrooms our national assessment practices in England will remain coercive and damaging.

Proposition 5: All import restrictions aimed at reducing the risk of 'Bovarysme' should be permanently lifted

St Hugh's approach to reading was to emphasise two roles of the reader, the first predicated on the reader's duty to God and the second on the call to scholarship. I have suggested that these roles approximate to our contemporary notions of reading for personal or spiritual development and reading for research or information. The emphasis of many literary critics has been on a third area, focusing on what has been called the joy of text, and I am going to suggest that this third purpose for reading, which we might call reading for enjoyment, is worthy of separate consideration.

Psychologists have studied motivation and interest level as important variables of reader response since the 1920s, but contemporary literary critics have also given close attention to the matter of how readers enjoy texts, and have done so in ways that put an interesting emphasis on the discourse of pleasure. Some literary critics have so embraced metaphors of eroticism in relation to the act of reading that desire, textual foreplay and ultimately jouissance are so important that a reader who does not feel passionate about reading begins to have anxieties about literary impotence.

For those undertheorised and possibly insecure individuals whose sheltered lives have led them to be unaware of precisely what jouissance entails, I am happy to say that I have worked out my own definition: jouissance is that delectable feeling of release from unbearable physical tension that occurs when after what seems an eternity of expectation, and with lungs bursting and mind in turmoil, one finally encounters a main clause in one of Proust's three-page sentences. Lest I be accused here of both wandering off the point and of taking this chapter into an unacceptably tasteless cul-de-sac, let me say at once in my defence that my irreverent humour is entirely in harmony with the spirit of playfulness which suffuses contemporary literary theory, in which eroticism has become a branch of philosophy.

One delightful book which builds the most amusing and elegant bridge between contemporary critical theory and the teaching of reading in school and which deals brilliantly with the issue of the joy of reading is Daniel Pennac's *Reads Like a Novel* (1992). I want to spend a moment talking about this book, because I think it says much that captures precisely why many people who love books choose to become teachers. Pennac was a literature

teacher at a *lycée* in Paris, but in his book he presents an instantly and internationally recognisable set of students, who are not the sort who are going to go on to the top universities, who have changed from being children who drank up stories as naturally and thirstily as they once drank milk into adolescents who can't bear to read, and who now believe that they do not like reading.

So what does the teacher do? (And here we recall St Hugh's imperative that the monk has not only a moral duty to read, but to read aloud.) He reads to his students. He reads aloud, fending off their scepticism and their injured protestations that they are too old to be read to with an offer of a vote on the matter after ten minutes. And it works – not only do the students enjoy listening to their teacher reading, they can't wait the interminable time it would take for him to read the whole thing to them and they ask to borrow the book so that they can take it home to read.

Pennac makes three points about why this method works. The first is that the teacher was not so much teaching as playing the role of a guide whose job is to start people off on a pilgrimage. The second is that it was vital that the teacher did not present himself as an interpreter, analyst or critic, but simply as a reader. The third is that the teacher did not require the reader to demonstrate that he or she had understood the book, and it was this emancipation that permitted the act of reading to become pleasurable.

Towards the end of the book, Pennac issues what one reviewer called 'a magnificent call to the barricades', a list of ten rights of readers, which he feels should be inviolable:

The Reader's Rights

- 1** The right not to read
- 2** The right to skip pages
- 3** The right not to finish a book
- 4** The right to reread
- 5** The right to read anything
- 6** The right to 'Bovarysme' (a textually transmissible disease)
- 7** The right to read anywhere
- 8** The right to browse
- 9** The right to read out loud
- 10** The right to remain silent.

I agree with Pennac about all ten, but I want to comment on numbers 5 and 6 – 'The right to read anything' and 'The right to 'Bovarysme' (a textually transmissible disease)'. From within an elitist institution, the *lycée*, Pennac produces an eminently calm and sane defence of reading for enjoyment, for

what he terms ‘the instant satisfaction of our feelings in literature’. The argument here is that the teacher cannot ultimately be successful in attempting to put over a connoisseurship model of reading; instead, all he or she can do is to present opportunities to read, and support the reader in coming to make their own choices. Readers need to decide for themselves how to view a character, for example the overwrought and desperate Madame Bovary. The teacher can try, but he or she cannot do the job for the reader. But equally, the reader can and must be trusted. To quote Pennac:

... Another way of putting this is to say that just because some girl collects Mills and Boon romances, it doesn't mean that she is going to end up swallowing ladlefuls of arsenic.

Pennac's point is illustrated in an English school context in a reading interview reported in a chapter written by Mary Bailey, Chris Foster and me in another book on reading assessment (Harrison, Bailey and Foster, 1998). In that chapter we argue that a reading interview can be a much more useful source of information about a reader's achievement than any test result. A student, anonymised in the chapter as ‘Emma’, was a voracious 13-year-old reader, and in our chapter we try to make the point that her wide and eclectic reading, which includes twenty books a month, has not rotted her brain. Instead, Emma gives plenty of evidence that she has enjoyed projecting herself into the fantasy of the romances, but also has an ironic distance on the texts she reads:

Teacher: ... would you say that ... reading books helps you to think about your life in any way?

Emma: Yes and no, because sometimes it, in a book, if, like the Sweet Valley High books, there's one person in the Sweet Valley High that I'd like to be like. But the thing is, if I was like her then my school work would go down and I wouldn't really be very good at home. You know, I'd be always making excuses, but like, it does help me some ways 'cause like it's like if she does something in one situation it makes me think about what I'd do in that situation ...

Teacher: So does that mean that you don't have to do it because you can just imagine it?

Emma: You don't have to; the thing is it like puts ideas into your head.

Teacher: Mm.

Emma: Some of the books, um, they're very unrealistic. You know, it's things that wouldn't happen.

It may be difficult to connect Emma's remarks with National Curriculum levels of attainment, but there is certainly evidence of her personal

response, a clear sense that she is able to distance herself from the text and is aware that the text offers not only an area of imaginative projection into other worlds, but also one which helps her to place herself in the real world.

I want to make one final point about Bovarysme. Pennac's use of the term slightly collapses two issues: the reader's right to read anything, and the reader's right to Bovarysme, and to be trusted to form their own judgments. I share Pennac's view that it is good to encourage readers to read what they want to read, on the principle that their taste will improve over time. But Bovarysme is not simply about the right to read for enjoyment; it is about the reader's right not to be preached at. When *Madame Bovary* was published, it led to a court case and caused as much of a furore as *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* all put together. This was not because Flaubert had written a book which spoke frankly about adultery (the Parisian book trade would have collapsed had this been a problem), but because the book did not present a moral: the author refused to editorialise, and presented Emma Bovary's emotional immaturity and desperate search for love and selfhood without comment.

Pennac's plea for Bovarysme is a thus very profound one for teachers, because it is so difficult for us not to editorialise – we regard it as part of the job, and part of our moral responsibility.

More on moral purpose

I began this chapter by putting emphasis on the importance of reading for information, but this is not where I want to end: in moving towards a conclusion, I want to dwell a little further on the moral responsibilities of teachers of reading, and I want to suggest that introducing children to stories and poetry ranks first among those responsibilities. Teachers have many responsibilities: to their students, to parents, to their employers, and ultimately, in a democracy, to the government. Since the Second World War, governments in the UK have put a great emphasis on improving literacy levels, and have tended to argue, or at least assert, that it is important for teachers to raise literacy levels because greater literacy will lead to higher employment, high economic and industrial output and wealth creation. This view has been challenged, however, by commentators such as Michael Apple, who argue that transnational industrial and financial forces, over which governments have little influence, are much more powerful determinants of a nation's economic well-being. Governments of the right and of the left have also asserted that improved literacy will lead to a reduction in crime. The rationale for this is again economic: people with poor literacy levels find it difficult to get jobs, and those without jobs turn to crime; if their literacy levels improved, runs the argument, potential criminals would find employment and the economy would improve.

My own view is that this argument too is specious, but I do want to suggest, not that literacy reduces crime, but that reading has the potential to reduce crime, though not because improved literacy aids the economy. The author Michelle Morgan, who works with adults in prisons, helping them to learn to read and write, reports that many violent criminals and murderers have a close to total inability to empathise, to imagine themselves into the head and world of another person and to construct a sense of the feelings of another. As a result, they seem hardly able to think of those whom they have injured or killed as real people. She points out, very compellingly in my view, that while it would be facile to suggest that books can rectify any amount of psychological damage, it is nevertheless the case that what we get from stories and poetry, namely an engagement on a deep and personal level with the lives and feelings of others, can be nothing less than vital – that is, necessary to living.

Flaubert wrote the letter from which I quoted earlier to Mademoiselle Leroyer de Chantepie, about three years after *Madame Bovary* was published. He said to her:

Do not read, as children do, to amuse yourself, or like the ambitious, for the purpose of instruction. No, read in order to live.

(Letters; June 1857)

Flaubert's correspondent was a person whom he never met, a minor author twenty years his senior who suffered from a similarly disabling depressive illness to his own. They corresponded for ten years, initially with long letters about the relationship between life and art and the unhappiness in their own lives. The letter from which this quotation is taken is encouraging and uplifting; its tone gave way, over a decade, to one of stiff politeness and thinly disguised irritation, as Flaubert came to realise that his words had not been effectual. In many respects, one feels that the real addressee of these letters was Flaubert himself, and that the lengthy accounts of how to deal with misery through immersing oneself in literature were part of the process every reader must go through to locate the text of their own lives in relation to the world of the book.

So I would argue that Flaubert's injunction is, at the deepest level, appropriate, and that reading is about far more than enjoyment or information; it is about learning how to live, and I want to go on to suggest that books have the potential to engage us in a deeper exploration of alternative worlds than is possible with other media such as film or TV, for the simple reason that reading a book takes up all of our attention, and engages with all of our faculties, and does so for a sustained period. The depth and permanence of this experience are perhaps related to the way in which books

require that the reader construct, word by word and sentence by sentence, the meanings, images, associations, sensations, characters, plot and indeed the world which the author presents. Literary accounts of the death of the author emphasise how great is the reader's responsibility here, but contemporary psychological accounts of the reading process are also instructive in suggesting, for example, that readers fixate and process a far higher proportion of words than used to be the case, and that up to four times a second the reader not only decodes a word but also updates his or her comprehension monitoring processes, integrating the new word into an updated model of the emerging text. We know that there is a direct relationship between depth of processing and the amount of time something is remembered. Little wonder, then, that the images, phrases and associations which bounce around in our brain after we have been reading a book sometimes echo in our heads for decades.

Proust talked in a very lyrical and incisive way about these feelings in his wonderful essay *On Reading*. He described, for example, the feeling of resentment towards the author and personal loss that we feel when we come to the end of a book. He wrote:

Was there no more to the book than this, then? These beings to whom one had given more of one's attention and affection than those in real life, not always daring to admit to what extent one loved them ...

One would have so much wanted the book to continue, or, if that was impossible, to learn other facts about all these characters, to learn something of their lives now, to employ our own life on things not altogether alien to the love they had inspired in us.

(Marcel Proust, *On Reading*, 1905)

It seems pretentious to suggest that the job of a teacher of reading is to help people to learn how to live. So we rarely admit it and tolerate the more socially acceptable formulations of governments and curriculum agencies. But I would suggest that it is the possibility of this kind of learning that we have in mind when we read, or when we recommend or lend a book to our students. We are offering them the opportunity to imagine what we have been led to imagine, hopeful, and on a good day confident, that their lives will be the richer for it.

Why do we read, and why is reading so important?

Let us now return to the image of reading from earlier in this chapter, the three men in the bombed library, and the questions 'Why do we read, and

why is reading so important?' I want to suggest that we can reconsider, or reread, this image, in the light of my discussion of the three central purposes for reading. Let me share with you what I have come to see in this photograph as I thought about how we read reading.

Look again at the three readers: one immersed in a book, one selecting a volume and one engaged in contemplation. Might we not interpret them as representing the three purposes of reading? The young man, with the open book, carried away on the wings of imagination, representing the answer 'joy' (or delight, or enjoyment); the second, seeking out a tome to research, representing the quest for information or knowledge; the third, engaged in an act of contemplation, representing the attempt through reflection on reading to learn how to live.

And from this point it is only a small step to bring together historical, literary and psychological perspectives, and to read the photograph as a picture of every reader's mind: a cathedral-library organised and filled with representations of knowledge and ideas, with the three readers representing the mind's desire for pleasure, the quest for knowledge and the hope of understanding, and with the mess, the rubble in the centre, representing the emotions, the partial knowledge and the incomplete understandings of our inner and outer lives, over which we strive to gain control, using our reading selves as our agents and allies.

Read in this way, the photograph of the bombed library can provide us with an image of reading which is one of optimism rather than desolation, representing at least the possibility of the triumph of order over chaos, of realism over romanticism, and of hope over despair.

It is my hope that this image, and the three interlinked perspectives on reading – historical, psychological and literary – that it encompasses, will carry us forward into a deeper consideration of reading development than would otherwise be possible.

Chapter 2

What does research tell us about the reading process and the early stages of reading development?

In Chapter 1 I argued that learning to read is pointless unless a reader comes to value, enjoy and in some sense possess the books and stories that they read. In a book I edited with Martin Coles (Harrison and Coles, 1992/2002), I quoted the work of Margaret Meek (1988) and Liz Waterland (1985), who believe that it is crucial to help children to encounter ‘real books’, since such children, in Meek’s words, ‘learn many lessons that are hidden for ever from those who move directly from the reading scheme to the worksheet.’ I tried to suggest that it is important to place meaning, enjoyment and the stimulation of the imagination at the heart of reading. This book is about reading development, and I want to suggest that as well as stressing the importance of enjoying good books, it is also important for us to understand the nature of reading development, and therefore to give some serious attention to research – both because it is valuable for all teachers to have an understanding of reading processes and because research has much to tell us about how to teach reading. However, interpreting reading research can itself be a challenge.

Understanding why are there so many battles over reading research

Psychologists are in broad agreement about how adults read, but there have continued to be fierce debates about how best to teach reading, and these debates seem to become especially acrimonious if there is any likelihood of influencing government policy in the literacy field.

Research into reading no longer exists (if it ever did) only in the laboratory. It has become public property, aided by anxious governments and a media machine that becomes particularly active when it sniffs the possibility of internecine strife. Professor Usha Goswami, one of the most significant researchers into early reading in the UK, and currently leading

the Centre for Neuroscience in Education at the University of Cambridge, went off on maternity leave from University College London in 1998 with her career on a high. Her work on the importance of rhyme and analogy in early reading (Goswami and Bryant, 1990) had caught the wave of interest in phonological development, and she was regarded as one of the most able and sought-after authors and speakers on the subject of how children's phonological skills develop and mature.

She returned from maternity leave after two years to a painful new reality: she was being vilified as not only misguided but also as directly responsible for children failing to learn to read. The reason? Her work was being interpreted as a call for 'analytic phonics' (a term Goswami had never used to describe her own position), and this was attacked as implying a 'work it out for yourself' approach, as opposed to what was held to be the more direct instruction of 'synthetic phonics', an approach described by one commentator as the 'Holy Grail' of early reading instruction (Burkard, 1999).

Burkard's paper had been published by the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS), a right-wing think tank set up in the 1970s by Margaret Thatcher. The CPS has the goal of influencing public policy through its publications, and through 'a range of informal contacts with politicians, civil servants and the press, in Britain and abroad' (CPS, 2002). The Centre's core principles include 'the value of free markets, the importance of individual choice and responsibility, and the concepts of duty, family, respect for the law, national independence, individualism and liberty' (CPS, 2002). These concerns have a remarkable commonality of purpose with similar groups in the USA, and Burkard's pamphlet was given a good deal of publicity, since it argued that:

- one in three children couldn't read properly;
- the national literacy strategy (in England) wouldn't work;
- there was an urgent need to curb the influence of the 'wrong kind of phonics' ('analytic phonics'), which was responsible for poor reading standards, and to introduce the right kind of phonics ('synthetic phonics').

My point here is not to review the evidence related to Burkard's claim (Goswami did this very successfully herself, in an article cited below and published in the *Journal of Research in Reading*: Goswami, 1999), but rather to discuss the issue of how reading research comes to find itself so controversial. And the answer is a somewhat frustrating one for teachers (or indeed for government officials and other policy makers). The answer is that – unfortunately – the concepts of 'truth', 'knowledge', 'evidence' and even 'science' itself are problematic, in the sense that they are all contested, and when it comes to research into reading pedagogy, the discourse tools of rhetoric sometimes seem to be more dominant than the language of science.

Since around the year 2000, peace has broken out in the UK in relation to the ‘reading wars’ and the place of phonics in early reading instruction. Perhaps the main reason for this is that the teaching of phonics is now pretty-well mandatory in English state schools, and the issues for debate are mostly around classroom implementation rather than grand theory. But at the time of writing, this is far from the case in the USA, where the phrase ‘scientifically based research’ is being enshrined in legislation related to the pedagogy of reading. The term is used no fewer than 111 times in the ‘No Child Left Behind Act of 2001’, according to a US government information service (EDinfo, 2002). This repetition is a clear example of a point I made in Chapter 1: when governments turn to science, science turns to rhetoric. The phenomenon was amply illustrated in a seminar run in February 2002 by the US government to publicise the Act, at which ‘leading experts in the fields of education and science’ addressed the issue of how taking a ‘scientific’ approach leads inexorably towards clarity in reading pedagogy. Valerie Reyna, representing the US Office of Education, was given the unenviable task of explaining to the American public the inescapable logic of the government’s position. This distinguished researcher was given the title ‘What Is Scientifically Based Evidence? What Is Its Logic?’, and had 20 minutes in which to encapsulate four hundred years of scientific method, and to explain why a positivist position was the only ‘logical’ one (Reyna, 2002a). With characteristically democratic generosity of intent, the US government put the transcript of the whole seminar up on the web (US Department of Education, 2002), and if you read this transcript, two things immediately become clear: first, the argument that logic leads us inexorably to a positivist methodological position turns out to be a fragile one; second, for a researcher who is telling us that ‘logic’ should lead us to accept her argument, Reyna leans very strongly on the tools of rhetoric and persuasion.

We shall pass over the early part of Reyna’s argument, which is weak mainly because of the shortage of time and the somewhat incoherent nature of some of what she said (most of us would squirm if we had to endure being held to account for the grammatical and propositional coherence of our spoken discourse in a lecture), and concentrate on her main tenet – which was to do with the importance of making educational decisions based on strong evidence, particularly evidence based on control groups and clinical trials of approaches and materials. Reyna stated:

Clinical trials in fact are the only way to really be sure about what works in medicine ... This is the only design that allows you to do that, to make a causal inference. Everything else is subject to a whole bunch of other possible interpretations.

(Reyna, 2002a)

This is indeed a very strong positivist position. Reyna is arguing that only with the level of rigour of a medical model of methodology can we make confident assumptions about causality in research. And she goes on to suggest that ‘logic’ leads us to apply the same set of principles to educational research in general and reading research in particular.

But even if one is broadly sympathetic to her methodological position (and in fact I am), to the questions ‘does this argument work?’ and ‘does this argument work independently of the bolstering effects of rhetoric?’ my answer has to be ‘no’. To begin with, the argument that scientific knowledge and confident attribution of causality can proceed only from the methodology of clinical trials and randomised control groups is suspect. Reyna argues that ‘scientific research’ is ‘the only defensible foundation for educational practice’, and that the alternatives are ‘tradition’, ‘superstition’ and ‘anecdote’ (Reyna, 2002b). But on her own admission, clinical trials were only introduced in the 1940s, and it would be astonishing to suggest that no causal links had been confidently established in medicine before that time. As she develops her argument, Reyna also makes some interesting rhetorical moves.

Reyna argues that only by using clinical trials and a randomised control group can you ‘make inferences about what works’, and that the rules for making inferences ‘... are exactly the same for educational practice as they are would be for medical practice. Same rules, exactly the same logic, whether you are talking about a treatment for cancer or whether you’re talking about an intervention to help children learn’.

She puts up an overhead slide containing the phrase *brain surgery*, then continues:

The reason I have the word ‘brain surgery’ up there is that I think, you know, when we talk about medicine and things like brain surgery and cancer, it is very, very important to get it right ... when we teach students, we really are engaging in a kind of brain surgery. We are effecting them [sic] one way or the other. Sometimes what we do helps, sometimes what we do, in fact, inadvertently, harms.

(Reyna, 2002a)

This is a very powerful argument, but it is not so much about logic as about rhetoric. The alternative to ‘scientific research’, according to Reyna, is not professional wisdom based on decades of skilled practice but ‘tradition’, ‘superstition’ and ‘anecdote’, and she has already reminded us that it was practising these principles that killed the first president of the USA: ‘The ... example, of course, is the classic one of when they used to bleed people. People would get sick. You know, I think it was when George Washington

was bled that contributed to his death.’ So the rhetorical part of Reyna’s argument is rather more powerful than the scientific part: she is suggesting that those who deny the appropriateness of the ‘scientific research’ approach are declaring an allegiance to the same dangerous principles that killed a president. Furthermore, they are advocating a laissez-faire approach to brain surgery and cures for cancer. There is even a strong suggestion that these non-‘scientific’ teachers are taking the scalpel in their own hands and carving chunks out of children’s brains. No wonder she is worried.

But hang on a minute. How easy is it to test the adequacy of a reading scheme using a randomised clinical trial design? It costs millions of dollars to write and publish a reading scheme, and while it is certainly possible to give identical-looking drug capsules, one of which is a placebo, to two patients, it is not quite so easy to give two children in adjacent desks one version each of two different reading schemes, one of which is the new improved scheme and the other of which is the nasty dangerous product written by those non-‘scientific’ monsters with whom we have all been interacting at reading conferences for the past twenty years. We must not forget that it is important too that the teacher needs to be unaware which child is receiving which programme, otherwise the teacher’s intervention could interact with the programme to produce unintended consequences.

It must be clear by now that I would wish to suggest that there are a number of major problems in Reyna’s argument, problems that make it unsustainable. Most of these relate to the generalisability of clinical models of research methodology to classroom contexts. I am completely happy to give cognitive scientists the respect they deserve, but we need also to consider the difference between the lab and the classroom, and the difference between evaluating the effects of a literacy development programme compared with isolating the effects on the human body of a targeted drug. Research methods need to be appropriate for a research context, and most researchers acknowledge this. Towards the end of her paper, Reyna noted with dismay that in the year 2000, out of 84 programme evaluations and studies planned by the Department of Education for the fiscal year 2000, just one involved a randomised field trial. She implied that this situation would be likely to change, as the Department sought to implement more ‘evidence-based education’. Well, on the basis of what was presented at the ‘scientific research’ seminar, I’m afraid my prediction is that even with more ‘scientific’ research being funded, controversy over reading pedagogy will not diminish.

So where does this leave us? Am I saying that there is no truth in research? Well the answer is yes – and no. As both a teacher and as a researcher I do have many strongly held beliefs about how reading works and how good teaching helps to produce good readers, but I would still