

# The Year of Reading Children's Books

**Benjamin Harris**

@one\_to\_read



**For consideration within the Egmont RfP award: Experienced teacher**

## Context



I work at Dunmow St Mary's Primary School in Essex, where I am a Year 6 teacher and the Lead Teacher for English. I am also an OU/UKLA Teachers' Reading Group Leader.

The children across our school enjoy regular 'Independent Reading Time' and 'Story-time' as necessary parts of their 'reading package'.

## OU Research inspiration and rationale

*I am a passionate reader of children's literature but the sheer volume of books out there necessitates an enjoyable life-long commitment to discovering and exploring children's literature. With this in mind, I set myself the challenge from the first day of the summer holidays 2018 to the last day of the summer term 2019 to read and record my height in children's books exclusively.*

*The project addresses the OU Research strand:*

1. *Teachers' knowledge of children's literature and other texts* (Cremin et al., 2014)



**Figure 1: Nearly there! (June 2019)**

1. To act as a role model for my class' own reading by documenting my reading journey over one year.
2. To develop further the breadth and depth of my reading of children's books.

## Outline

Through Twitter, I had seen a great challenge (#readmyheight) where @Parky\_teaches aimed to read his height in books over one year (<https://www.teachwire.net/news/how-i-try-to-be-a-reading-role-model-in-primary>). Inspired by this idea, I wanted to see how it felt to drive myself as a reader;

what feelings I would experience – the highs and the lows – over my reading year; to share with my class these feelings as a model of some of the things it means to be a reader.

I marked out my height along with ‘target points’: knee, waist, elbow, shoulder, top of head on a piece of frieze-paper and displayed it in my classroom. The process was then simple: like @Parky\_teaches, I would read a book, photo and cut out the spine and layer these ‘books’ up in an enormous pile, one on top of the other. Sometimes children would remind me if the pile hadn’t grown for a while, asking what I had read, encouraging me to keep on track! The chart became a part of the classroom, an unobtrusive thing that developed from one end of the year to the next...perhaps, just as our reading is an on-going thing we sometimes forget to notice but that is there, somewhere in the corner of our lives.

I included every children’s book that I read. There were books I was required to read for book reviews; others were books that I read to the class; some we read as a class to support the curriculum; one was a book recommended to me by one of my class – *that* became the fitting final book! - but most were books I read for my own pleasure.

Over the course of one year, I read 84 children’s books and I completed the challenge: I managed to #readmyheight!

## Impact

### What did the children think of the project?

At the end of the year, once I had completed the challenge, I asked my class what it had meant to them. Here is a selection of the overwhelmingly positive responses:

#### Why do you think Mr Harris set himself this challenge?

- he loves books;
- he wanted to inspire us;
- he wanted to encourage himself to read more;
- to encourage children to read more and so maybe they will do it themselves.

#### Are reading challenges for teachers an important thing to do?

Every child who completed this survey said ‘YES’! In a good number of the responses, the children said the reason why was ‘to inspire the children’. The word ‘inspire’ is crucial: the challenge didn’t just ‘make’ or ‘help’ children want to read: it set a fire within to read themselves!

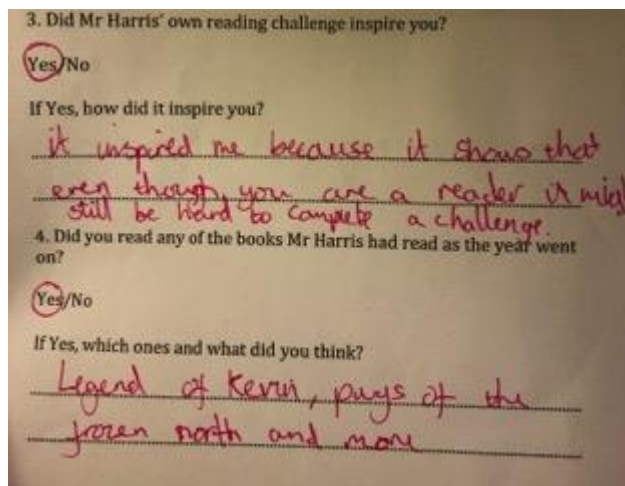


Figure 2: Comments from the surveys

## How did the project affect me?

Since I started teaching nearly twenty years ago, I have always read a lot of children's books, but never had I spent a whole year reading them exclusively. Over *'The Year of Reading Children's Books'*, did I ever crave reading a 'grown-up' book? No. Not once. This was for a few reasons:

- 1) I deliberately read a variety of books: novels, graphic novels, poetry, picture books...I did this because the children in my class each enjoyed all sorts of different text-types: I wanted to be able to know exactly what books I was passing on to them; to give them the best I could; to be able to talk to them about the books. The following graphs reflect my (Year 6) Reading Teacher 'profile' (60/84 books were for ages 9-11+). Looking back at the list and the following graphs, Fiction is the overwhelming majority, unsurprisingly as it is personally my favourite genre. Other categories are not so well represented and become a target for future years' reading.

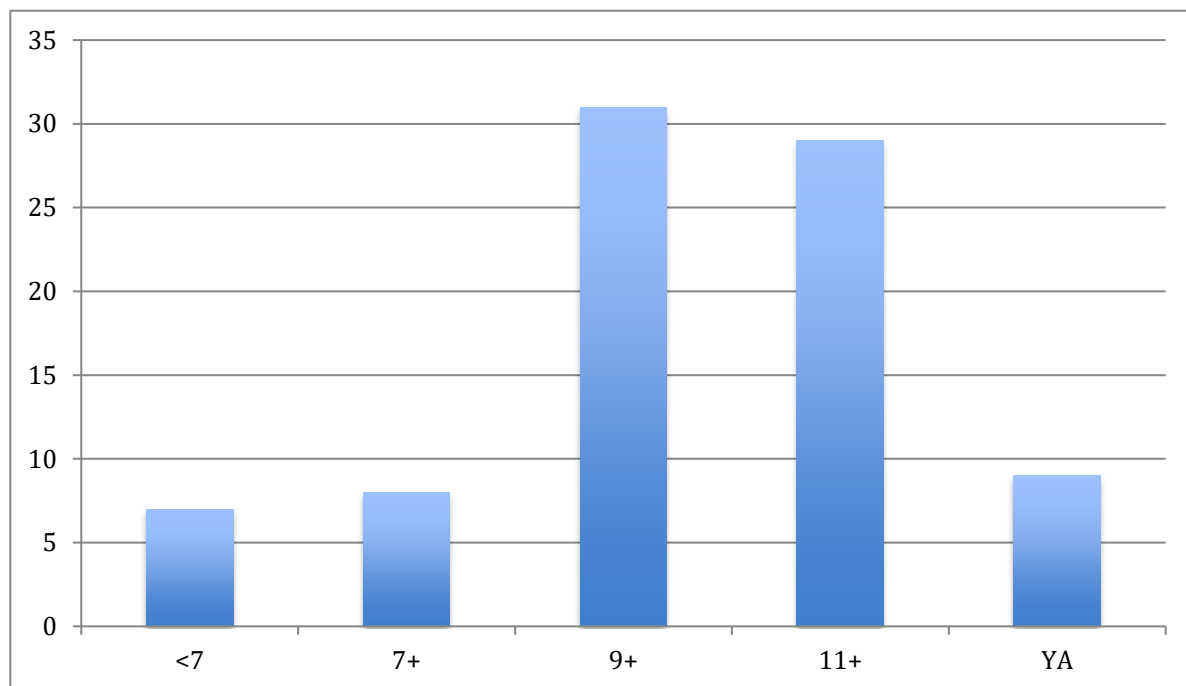


Figure 3: Number of books read (by approx. age category)

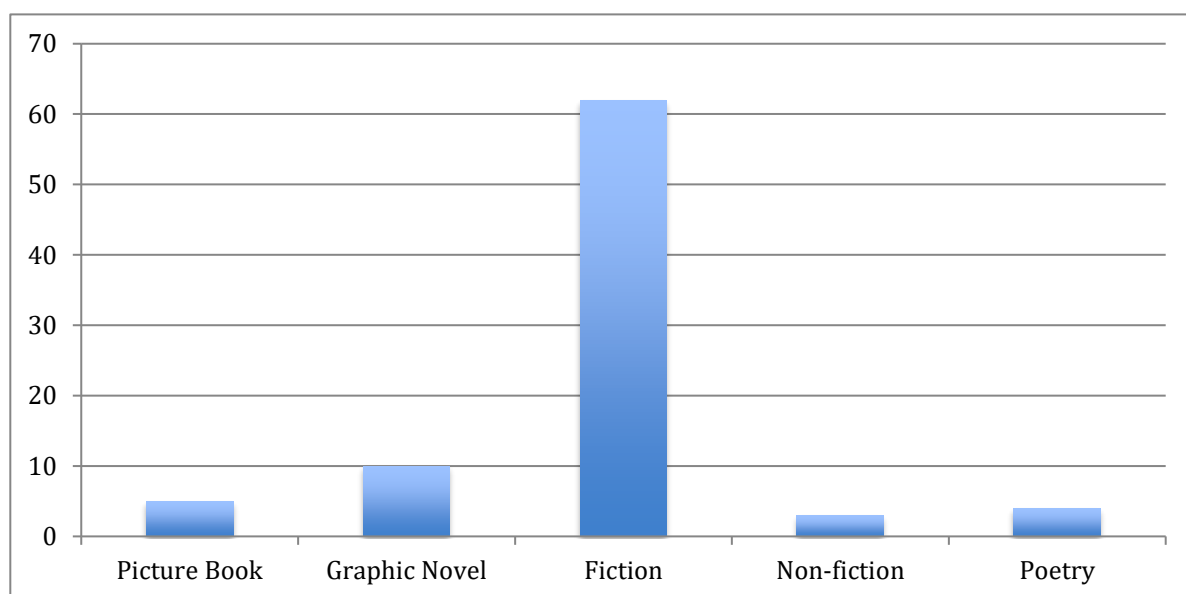


Figure 4: Number of books read (by genre)

- 2) I learned about the children in my class by reading books that matched their reading interests. This was in response to a good degree of book-talk that happened when we read the same books: we could talk about likes, dislikes, puzzles and connections (Aidan Chambers!). We 'had books in common' to paraphrase Teresa Cremin: "Independent Reading Time" in class became a time where we were all 'on a level'; the children had learned quickly to trust my recommendations too, as I openly demonstrated the interest in and practice of reading children's books.
- 3) The quality of the books I read was consistently good to excellent. Katherine Rundell's *Why You Should Read Children's Books, Even Though You Are So Old and Wise* is spot-on in its message: there's still a lot to learn about ourselves and each other when we read children's books as adults; we don't outgrow them. Books which particularly struck me as ones which ought to go straight onto the reading lists of adults suspicious of children's books having anything to say to them include: *Man in Motion* (Jan Mark), *Ms Bixby's Last Day* (John Anderson), *The Truth of Things* quartet (Anthony McGowan) and *The Whispers* (Greg Howard).

## Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

This Example of Practice has made me think very hard about what reading children's books exclusively for a year did for me as a reader and as a Reading Teacher, and how the effects made my class feel more strongly the *pleasure* of reading. Now I appreciate even more deeply that children need a role model for reading who must show that:

- reading for them is a constant, not occasional thing (...I showed the class that I read every day)
- they have favourite books (...there were many!)
- they don't particularly enjoy some books (...there were just a couple!)
- they stick at reading, even when it's hard (...it was hard to reach my height!)
- they have goals for reading (...such as the challenge described here!)
- they talk about books with others in a variety of ways and contexts (...the best bit of the challenge in my opinion!)
- they try different kinds of books (...but may have a favoured type!)
- they recommend and read books recommended to them (...my last read!)
- books they read become part of their inner lives and emotions (...see below!)

All of these things I mentioned, discussed or explained in detail at different points in the year, in the context of those books I was reading as part of the challenge. As a result, the children began or continued to develop these attributes: a role-model created role-models! Some openly talked about trying different kinds of books (and finding new favourite genres), reader-to-reader recommendations became a regular, vital part of each week, some children who were not 'into' reading became contributors in Story-time to 'books in common' – they felt part of the community...and grew in confidence.

For me, the Twitter community was a huge part of the success of the project. I connected with authors and experts in particular children's authors – who were always happy to answer questions about the books I had read – and, most of all, the other EduTwitter teachers who on a daily basis inspired me and engaged with the joy of reading children's books. It was a real driving force in wanting to read more and more: the community is now a group of reading role models for me.

In as far as books becoming part of oneself, the most memorable part of the year was when I told my class I had finished *The Whispers*:

*BH: I was on the train on Saturday and finished this book. I couldn't stop crying, even as I was reading the final pages."*

*Pupil 1: You mean you were actually crying?*

*Pupil 2: In public??!*

*BH: Yes. That's what reading does to you sometimes.*

**And finally...**

If this Example of Practice still doesn't encourage you to give children's books a bigger space in your reading diet, then please heed the words of this wise young person, which perfectly sums up my feelings after this year-long project:

6. Are reading challenges for teachers an important thing to do?

Yes  No

If Yes, why? If No, why not?

Because the more they read the  
better teachers they become.