

WHAT, IF ANYTHING, DISTINGUISHES 'A GOOD READ' FROM
'LITERATURE'? AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE ROLES OF 'QUALITY'
AND ENJOYMENT IN READING.

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ABIGAIL PHILLIPS

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Abstract

Much has been made in recent years of the subjectivity of reading with studies conducted into creative reading and investigations made into reading habits. There is, however, some opposition to the purely subjective approach to reading, to the abandonment of objective standards and the democratisation of expertise.

This study examines the roles played by enjoyment and quality in the reading process, assessing whether a ‘good read’ can be distinguished from works of ‘quality’. It sets these questions against a background of philosophical and literary theory and locates the results to the debates about quality and the role of public cultural institutions. These issues were also explored by utilising a wide range of literary sources, within which the main lines of the debate were delineated.

A series of focus groups enabled research to be carried out and additional research was conducted via an online discussion forum. Interviews were also conducted with carefully selected individuals involved with literacy, reading promotion and stock selection in various public library authorities and others involved in book groups and freelance literacy work.

The results of this research, together with the theoretical context of the literature review, are presented in five chapters thematically divided into; “A ‘Good Read’ – Reading and the Wider Context”, “Subjective and Objective Approaches to Reading”, “The Question of Quality”, “Expertise and the Canon” and “Public Libraries and Reader Development”.

The study identifies criteria by which a ‘good read’ and ‘quality literature’ can be identified and discovers limitations to them. It finds that the two can be separated though they can overlap and distinction can often be difficult.

Conclusions drawn from this are; 1) a ‘good read’ can be distinguished from ‘quality literature’, 2) these two types of read can be called ‘fiction’ and ‘literature’, 3) this separation requires some objective criteria for distinguishing quality, 4) expertise is

important but its impact is limited by the subjectivity of expertise and the contextual issues surrounding canon formation, and 5) in practical terms these ideas raise vital issues for public libraries in attitudes towards, and definitions of, 'fiction' and 'literature' in stock selection and reader development.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Chapter One: Introduction	1
1.1 The Research Context	1
1.2 Definitions and Clarifications	1
1.3 The Popularity of Books and Reading for Pleasure	2
1.4 Post-Structuralist Attitudes to Quality	3
1.5 The Culture Debate	4
1.6 Aims of Study	5
1.7 Presentation of Study	5
Chapter Two: Methodology	7
2.1 The Use of Qualitative Methods	7
2.2 Methods of Investigation	7
2.2.1 Triangulation	7
2.2.2 Generalisability	8
2.2.3 Observational Methods	8
2.3 Literature Review	9
2.4 Bookcrossing Forums	9
2.4.1 About Bookcrossing	9
2.4.2 Use of Forums as a Research Method	10
2.4.3 Limitations and Observations	10
2.5 Focus Groups	10
2.5.1 The Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups	11
2.5.2 Background to the Focus Groups	12
2.5.3 Reading Groups	12
2.5.4 Focus Group Structure and Activities	13
2.5.5 The Role of the Facilitator	14
2.5.6 Limitations	14

2.5.7 Observational Comments	15
2.6 Interviews	15
2.6.1 The Advantages and Disadvantages of Interviews	15
2.6.2 The Interviewees	16
2.6.3 The Role of the Interviewer	16
2.6.4 The Structure of the Interviews	16
2.6.5 Limitations	18
2.6.6 Observational Comments	19
2.7 Data Analysis	19
2.7.1 Recording and Transcribing	19
2.7.2 Template Approach	19
2.8 Ethical Issues	20
Chapter Three: A Good Read – Reading and the Wider Context	21
3.1 Defining a Good Read	21
3.1.1 Plot, Structure and Characterisation	21
3.1.2 Ideas and Themes	23
3.1.3 Familiarity and Stimulation	24
3.1.4 Humour and Happiness	26
3.2 The Need to Read	27
3.3 Conclusion	29
Chapter Four: Subjective and Objective Approaches to Reading	30
4.1 Subjectivity and Objectivity	30
4.2 ‘Equal but Different’ – The Age of Relativism	31
4.3 Creative Reading	32
4.4 Reading Needs and Reading Personalities	33
4.4.1 Van Riel’s Reader	34
4.4.2 Bloom’s Reader	36
4.5 The Reader and the Writer	37
4.6 Conclusion	38

Chapter Five: The Question of Quality	39
5.1 The Quality Debate	39
5.2 Aspects of Quality	40
5.2.1 Writing Quality	41
5.2.2 Theme, Character, Impact	42
5.2.3 Depth, Universality, and Innovation	43
5.3 A Good Read and Quality Literature – Are They the Same?	45
5.4 A Comparison of ‘Good Read’ and ‘Quality’ Criteria	48
5.5 Conclusion	49
Chapter Six: Expertise and the Canon	51
6.1 The Need for Expertise	51
6.2 The Philosophy of Expertise	52
6.3 The Canon	55
6.4 Objectivism, Aesthetics and the Canon	56
6.5 Criteria for Canonical Works	57
6.6 Conclusion	58
Chapter Seven: Public Libraries and Reader Development	59
7.1 The Role of the Public Library	59
7.2 Stock Selection	61
7.3 Promoting Reading	62
7.3.1 Reader Development	63
7.3.2 Media-Based Promotions	66
7.4 Conclusion	67
Chapter Eight: Conclusions and Recommendations	69
Areas for Further Study	72
Bibliography	I

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet	XI
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form	XII
Appendix C: Bookcrossing Forum Post	XIII
Appendix D: Focus Group Profiles	XIII
Appendix E: Focus Group Questions	XIV
Appendix F: Focus Group Exercise –Book Extracts	XV
Appendix G: Books Deemed a ‘Good Read’ by Participants	XXI
Appendix H: Interviewee Profiles	XXIII
Appendix I: Interview Questions	XXIII

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 The Research Context

Previous dissertations at the University of Sheffield have touched on the quality issue (Choules, 1994, Day, 1978, Glenn, 2004, Hemsley, 2003, Singleton, 1999, Twomey, 2003). However, most of these studies have been primarily concerned with other issues such as creative reading, popular fiction, genre fiction, and the role of the Booker Prize in stock selection.

The fact that all these dissertations have found it necessary to look into the issue of quality and enjoyment in reading as a peripheral aspect of their research has precipitated the need for a direct investigation of these issues. The most direct approaches have been by Day (1978) whose research clearly needs to be updated and Choules (1994) who focused on the status of quality in the attitudes and behaviour of library staff and library users. Some of the same ground will be covered here but the intention is to provide a more up-to-date assessment tied in with current debates about culture, education and the role of the public library.

1.2 Definitions and Clarifications

Due to restrictions in the size and scope of this study 'literature' will be used to mean primarily books and primarily fiction. While examples from the participants and the literature review often mentioned poetry, plays, biography and other non-fiction and the examples have been included where appropriate, the questions and activities were fiction-based.

Later in the study the term 'literature' is separated from 'fiction'. While this distinction is fully explained later it is necessary to clarify that these terms should be understood in the context of this study and not by the many other definitions which may be presented (Bertens, 2001, Culler, 1997).

Although the focus of this study is on works written in English some mention is made by participants of writers such as Cervantes and Gabriel Garcia Marquez and these examples have been included if considered relevant. Similarly, discussions of the canon focus on Western traditions, though not strictly on works written in English.

The researcher understands that to keep out writers such as Keats, Cervantes and Tolstoy from the debate on the grounds of language or form would be misleading and that a canon representative of humankind would not exclude other languages or cultures. What restrictions have been made are due to the small scale of this study and it is hoped that any future investigation of this issue would look into these aspects in more depth.

1.3 The Popularity of Books and Reading for Pleasure

Despite predictions of the death of the book (De Kerckhove, 1998) it appears to be alive and well (De Kerckhove, 1998, Shiflett, 2001). As Libraries Minister Andrew McIntosh observed, “reports of the death of the printed word are exaggerated” (DCMS, 2004).

If the role of the book is to communicate information, then this is a role which may be superseded in the technological age (Shiflett, 2001). However, as borne out by increasing book sales and the growing number of book groups, books and reading have many other roles (Dwyer, 2001, Shiflett, 2001).

Much has been made of the emotional and psychological benefit of reading (Elkin et al, 2003, Holden, 2004, Morrison, 2005, Purves, 2004). The status of reading has also been elevated by projects such as the BBC Big Read (BBC, 2003, Twomey, 2003) and ‘Women’s Hour’s’ ‘Watershed Fiction’ (Purves, 2004, Womens’ Hour, 2004,) and by Richard and Judy’s Book Club (Richard and Judy, 2005).

Despite this renaissance there has been criticism that books are becoming entertainment commodities, lead by market demands (Cypher, 2005, Hoggart, 1998,

Katz, 1991, Kean, 2004,). Subsequently, many new books lack depth and range (Cypher, 2005), and it can be very difficult for new authors of high quality literature to break through (Cypher, 2005, Kean, 2004).

Popular fiction has to compete with television, radio, and the Internet for the same audience and it is for this reason that some critics claim it is becoming too formulaic and simplified (Hoggart, 1998, Katz, 2001, Shiflett, 2001). However, there are also concerns over the lack of literacy in many people who are brought up on television and cinema and grow up in homes where there are no books (Cunningham, 1998, James, 1992). Many are therefore of the view that to combat this problem books have to compete, whatever implications this may have on standards (Goulding, 2002, James, 1992, Shiflett, 2001).

1.4 Post-Structuralist Attitudes to Quality

Post-structuralism, as espoused by Michel Foucault (1926-1984) criticises objective knowledge and questions the ability of a subject to fully know themselves (Bertens, 2001, Culler, 1997). Taking this further, deconstructionism as espoused by Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) examines hierarchical “oppositions” and claims them to be “not natural and inevitable but a construction” (Culler, 1997:126).

Applying this theory to reading leads to “reader-response criticism” (Culler, 1997:63) which means that “the meaning of the text is the experience of the reader...if a literary work is conceived as a succession of actions upon the understanding of a reader, then an interpretation of a work can be a story of that encounter” (Culler, 1997:63).

Such concepts underlie the notions of subjectivity, cultural relativism and creative reading explored later in this study.

1.5 The Culture Debate

The post-war years saw the rise of the Welfare State and with it the foundations of a meritocracy, of opportunity for all, and of art for all (Strong, 2000). Art was to be brought to the masses, but it was art of quality, chosen by a well-educated elite (Strong, 2000). With the disintegration of the Welfare State and the rise of Thatcherism the focus changed and art was considered right for popular consumption only when it could be justified by greater economic good and commercial sense (Strong, 2000, Warnock, 2000).

The arts in general face the modern problem of ‘accessibility’. All art must either pay for itself or justify itself and there is a fear amongst those in charge of cultural institutions of being considered ‘elitist’ if they defend or promote anything that might be deemed ‘high culture’ (Warnock, 2000).

This interpretation of the idea of accessibility rests on a concept of the ‘ordinary’ public who clearly want reality TV, quiz shows, catchy tunes, pretty paintings and undemanding literature because anything else would be too challenging or difficult (Furedi, 2004, Murray, 2000, Usherwood, 2005a).

There is also a strong argument that we are losing our points of reference, abandoning much of our culture to a tiny elite who will be the only ones left able to understand it. As observed by George Steiner, “The most elementary allusions to Greek mythology, to the Old and the New Testament, to the classics, to ancient and to European history, have become hermetic. Short bits of text now lead precarious lives on great stilts of footnotes” (Murray, 2000:60).

The other problem with accessibility is the loss of respect for expertise, the great democratic shift that has meant everyone has something worthwhile to say and no-one’s opinion should be given more weight than another’s (Furedi, 2004, Gingell and Brandon, 2001, Murray, 2000).

This study will refer frequently to this cultural debate as the issues of quality and enjoyment in literature are set in the wider context of the cultural and educational

role of the public library. It will also present the views of a variety of participants on the above issues.

1.6 Aim of Study

This dissertation aims to synthesise existing research, bring in theory from a variety of disciplines including literary theory and philosophy, investigate the opinions of the reading public, investigate the opinions and values of various professionals involved with literature and apply the findings of all these areas to current public library policy.

It aims to answer the nine questions listed below which will be directly addressed in the conclusion.

- 1** What constitutes a ‘good read’?
- 2** Are there any criteria for determining if a book can be termed a ‘good read’?
- 3** Are there any criteria for determining if a book can be termed a ‘quality read’?
- 4** Is a ‘good read’ different from a ‘quality read’?
- 5** Are ‘fiction’ and ‘literature’ different? If so, how do we decide?
- 6** Can there be such thing as ‘expert opinion’ in literature?
- 7** Can there be such thing as a ‘canon’ in literature?
- 8** What are the views of the reading public to these ideas?
- 9** What implications do these findings have for public library policy and reader development?

1.7 Presentation of Study

The dissertation is presented in nine chapters. Each contains a short introduction and conclusion. The intervening sections and sub-sections are clearly labelled. Chapter One contains the introduction including the background, research context and aims. Chapter Two presents the methods of investigation. Chapters Three to Seven present the results of the research and the literature review thematically in a logical order. Chapter Eight contains the conclusion and recommendations and is

followed by areas for further study. The appendices come after the bibliography and contain important background information related to the focus groups and interviews.

Participant quotes are presented in *italics* and indented. Very short participant comments and quotations from the literature review are presented in quotation marks within the text.

The dissertation layout is based on Denscombe's (2003) criteria. It clearly explains the purpose of the research, describes the methodology, presents findings, discusses and analyses them and reaches conclusions (Denscombe, 2003: 286).

As Denscombe (2003) recommends the dissertation is presented in the third person. The University of Sheffield rules and Harvard System are adhered to throughout.

Chapter Two: Methodology

2.1. The Use of Qualitative Methods

Two of the objectives of this study are to analyse the views of professionals in the field of reading and literature such as library staff, literacy professionals, and book reviewers, and to investigate the views of interested readers. They were the focus of structured interviews (see Appendix I). Their responses and views are important and this means that the analysis is fundamentally qualitative. Qualitative research interviews are appropriate for studies such as this because they focus “on the meaning of particular phenomena to the participants” (Robson, 2002:271).

2.2 Methods of Investigation

There were three principal methods of investigation employed in this study. These were the literature review, focus groups and interviews. Additionally, online discussion forums were used to supplement the more traditional methods of the interview and the focus group.

2.2.1 Triangulation

Triangulation is “a research approach employing more than one perspective, theory, participant, method or analysis” (Robson, 2002: 553). This study doesn’t use quantitative methods but combines different forms of qualitative research to get different perspectives.

The aim of triangulation is to get “a better ‘fix’ on the object of study” (Robson, 2002: 553) and it is intended that the different methods used in this study will achieve this aim.

2.2.2 Generalisability

Schofield (1993:221) observes that “for qualitative researchers generalizability is best thought of as a matter of the ‘fit’ between the situation studied and others to which one might be interested in applying the concepts and conclusion of that study”. Generalisability is not really appropriate for studies which are not intending to look at a random, generalisable sample but at the views of a particular group (Schofield, 1993).

The focus group participants come from a variety of backgrounds and age groups and in this sense the results would be generalisable in terms of a notion of ‘the reading public’ and well-read people who are regular library users. One focus group consisted of slightly different groups who are representative of occasional readers and non-library users. For a more widely generalisable study, more such participants would need to be used.

However, this study is looking at those involved with reading and libraries and it is them for whom the conclusions and recommendations will be drawn. For this purpose the results do not need to be generalisable to the population as a whole.

2.2.3 Observational Methods

While conducting interviews and focus groups the researcher made some notes on participant observation. It was very informal and intended firstly, to assist in methodological considerations about the participants and the research methods used and secondly, to enhance the findings of the research.

The ease or difficulty that participants experienced in answering the questions was observed. Power differentials, group dynamics, and the extent to which these influenced participation and vocalisation is examined later in the methodology (see 2.5).

Other observations were made, such as the attitudes to, and approach towards, analysis and judgement of literary extracts. There was also observation of whether or

not participants seemed to have prior views on the topic and to what extent views were altered as a result of discussion.

2.3 Literature Review

A literature review was conducted prior to, and during, the research. This provided a research context and enabled the researcher to draw on a variety of areas of relevance to the study. It also provided the basis for the questions asked in interviews and focus groups.

It was decided not to present this literature review as a separate section or chapter but to intersperse it throughout the dissertation. This has worked to great effect in previous studies of a similar nature (Glenn, 2004, Twomey, 2003).

2.4 Bookcrossing Forums

Online discussion forums on the Bookcrossing website (Bookcrossing, 2005) were used to provide an additional research method.

2.4.1 About Bookcrossing

Bookcrossing is a recent, web-based phenomenon in which a book is allocated a number and then transmitted via friends or left anonymously in a public place. The book is reviewed, registered and the process repeated. Bookcrossers are by definition keen readers used to thinking about and reviewing books. The intention of the researcher was that they would bring another perspective to the research, an expectation which was well fulfilled.

The Bookcrossing website (Bookcrossing, 2005) includes a number of forums and discussion boards which contain a variety of related and unrelated topics. It is informal and not very highly monitored. The message as seen in Appendix C was posted onto the message boards 'Chit-Chat' and 'Booktalk' and received eleven responses.

2.4.2 Use of Forums as a Research Method

Online discussion forums are a recent phenomenon which partially explains the lack of literature relating to their use as a research method. These forums are largely unmonitored and involve a minimal level of researcher control. This may be another reason why they are not widely used for research.

While these disadvantages make discussion forums a poor resource on which to base the core of the research they still provide a useful additional perspective by bringing in a different community of readers; younger, web-literate users from around the world.

2.4.3 Limitations and Observations

In addition to the disadvantages noted above there were other limitations to the use of forums. Firstly, participants could consider their responses carefully before posting them whereas in interviews and focus groups the responses were more instinctive and immediate.

Secondly, there was a relatively low response rate compared to other threads on the message boards. This may be because the quality issue is a controversial one that many people felt intimidated about addressing. Thirdly, the small amount and high quality of the responses indicates that only those with already well-formed views on the topic responded. Finally, each person could view all the statements which had gone before, which could have influenced them.

However, there was still a good range of very well-articulated responses and, provided the limitations are borne in mind, the research was very useful for the dissertation.

2.5 Focus groups

Five focus groups were used to gain an insight into the views of the reading public on the quality and enjoyment aspects of reading.

2.5.1 The Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups

The advantage of focus groups is that they are efficient and allow for a large amount and range of data to be collected at the same time, “participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other and extreme views tend to be weeded out” (Robson, 2002: 284). This certainly proved the case on the good read and quality literature debates. The focus group method is also good because it allows for observation and for the views of participants to be seen in context (Mason, 2002, Morgan, 1998).

“Group dynamics help in focusing on the most important topics and it is fairly easy to assess the extent to which there is a consistent and shared view” (Robson, 2002: 284), a view echoed by Morgan (1998). Again, this was in evidence in all of the groups. It was clearly an issue which only a few focus group participants had fixed views on and it was interesting to see people alter their views and reach a consensus.

The disadvantages of the focus group method are that results cannot be generalised (Robson, 2002, Schofield, 1993), though for a further explanation of this see section 2.2.2. Conflicts between personalities was not a problem. This was due to the fact that all the groups consisted of people of who already knew one-another so nobody felt nervous or intimidated. This raises the issue of confidentiality but they all agreed to participate and said they enjoyed the exchange of views and the discussion of the issues. No-one was nervous about others knowing their opinion.

The focus groups were used to explore the range and strength of views amongst participants and to explore the recurrence of particular views. On a couple of issues there was consensus, but, because of group dynamics and the homogeneity of the groups chosen this consensus cannot be considered generalisable (Robson, 2002).

Another disadvantage of a focus group is that bias can be caused by the domination of a few and the less articulate and less confident may not be fully

represented (Morgan, 1998, Robson, 2002). However, the methods used and the occasional intervention of the interviewer ensured everyone was given the opportunity to voice their views.

2.5.2 Background to the Focus Groups

There were five focus groups in all. One was a pilot group, from which some results were used but which was intended mainly to ensure the activities and questions flowed and were effective.

The groups all lasted about an hour, as intended. The smallest group consisted of five participants, the largest of seven. Robson (2002) suggests eight to twelve but for the purpose of this study smaller groups were more practical as many minority voices may have been lost in a larger group. As it was the participants were able to focus well on the questions and all voice their views. Because the groups all consisted of people who knew each other well there was a lot of lively and highly productive discussion.

The groups were all homogenous which helped the participants to feel comfortable and facilitated communication. Variety in participants was achieved by ensuring that each homogenous group had different characteristics to the others. For example, one was conducted amongst young and middle aged people of both sexes who were friends and who were not educated to degree level. They did read for pleasure but didn't consider themselves to be voracious readers. Other groups were drawn from existing reading groups. These groups were completely female and the participants well-read.

More background on the focus groups can be seen in Appendix D.

2.5.3 Reading Groups

There are an estimated 50,000 reading groups in the UK (Hartley, 2002:xi) and in Hartley's (2002: 25) reading groups survey 66% of groups were all-female.

This gender bias was also found by Cusk (2005) and is reflected in the reading groups used in this study as both the reading groups used were all-female.

Of these two groups one was run by the local library and co-ordinated by a librarian. The other book group was part of the NWR (National Womens' Register) and consisted of NWR members.

An effort was made to use existing reading groups for some of the focus groups but to also use other groups. The range of opinion was equally spread across all groups and there were no particular views or trends which set the existing reading groups apart from the others.

2.5.4 Focus Group Structure and Activities

Focus group participants were asked to bring with them a book which they considered to be a 'good read'. The session was opened by asking each person in turn to introduce their book and explain briefly why it was a good read for them. This meant that everyone had a nice ease-in to the group as recommended by Denscombe (2003) and Robson (2002). It also meant that everyone had spoken within the group before discussion began.

The rest of the session was based around questions printed on cards. Each participant had a numbered card and the facilitator called for each in turn and opened each to discussion. About mid-way there was a break to do the activities based on excerpts taken from books (see Appendix F). This was a very popular activity but, for reasons explored later, the results were limited.

The fact that some of the activities were done by breaking into groups of two or three and feeding back to the group, and that there was a card for every participant to read out, meant that everyone said something at some point so no one felt shy or intimidated.

2.5.5 The Role of the Facilitator

The researcher as focus group facilitator was generally passive but intervened a few times to encourage someone who was quiet or who seemed to disagree with a point but was afraid to speak, or to move the discussion on to the next point. Otherwise the prompts and exercises meant that the discussion flowed well and never showed any chance of slowing down or coming to a halt.

Bias was less of a problem for the facilitator than in the interviews as the questions were read out by members of the group and facilitator intervention was kept to a minimum.

2.5.6 Limitations

The activity based on the excerpts produced limited results because it is difficult to assess a book on the strength of one short extract. Participants were able to assess the language use but not the overall plot, characterisation and other factors considered important. The activity was successful in creating a fun atmosphere and partially-successful in enabling general observations such as the level of consensus, variety of opinion, and difference between which excerpts were considered a good read and which quality. All of this proved useful for the study.

As Robson (2002:289) observes “focus groups explore collective phenomena, not individual ones. Attempts to infer the latter from focus group data are likely to be unfounded”. For this reason a breakdown of precisely how many people said what would be both very difficult to obtain and might hinder the presentation of the findings. Many individual statements will be presented throughout the study but these are explained in the context of the group and it is made clear which were majority and which minority views.

2.5.7 Observational Comments

In the excerpts analysis the researcher had hoped that some participants would question the validity of the exercise and question the validity of comparing such vastly different books on equal terms. However, nobody raised this point.

What was more interesting about the exercise was the wide variety of opinion not only within each group but across the groups as a whole with some praising certain texts which other groups criticised strongly. This was of importance to the results.

2.6 Interviews

2.6.1 The Advantages and Disadvantages of Interviews

The interviewer can control the length, depth and direction of interviews (Robson, 2002). This was an advantage as most of the interviews were between 40 and 50 minutes, which ensured consistency, and when the focus was drifting from the main topics the interviewer intervened.

One telephone interview was almost two hours long and the interviewer had difficulties controlling it and intervening. This was partly due to interviewer inexperience and partly due to the diminished role of the interviewer in telephone interviews as observed by Robson (2002).

Another advantage of interviews is that they allow for flexibility and enable the interviewer to follow-up any points of interest. For a qualitative, contextual study such as this such flexibility was crucial.

There are disadvantages to interviewers in that bias is likely to creep in in tone and inference. The interviewer was careful to keep this to a minimum.

Also, interviewees can bring pre-existing opinions to the interview and be especially keen to voice them (Robson, 2002). While this was the case it was these

views in which the researcher was interested. Robson (2002) warns that often the interviewee can be keen to explain their point of view and it can be difficult to keep the interview under control. This happened on a couple of occasions as the interviewees were clearly very motivated by the issues.

2.6.2 The Interviewees

There were eight interviewees altogether. Many were library staff but others were involved in literacy, reading promotion, book groups, education and book reviewing. A full profile can be seen in Appendix I.

The researcher was careful to interview a range of people to get different perspective on the issues. The researcher was, at the same time, keen to interview library staff involved in stock selection and reading promotion at different library authorities (see Appendix I) to see if their views on the quality issue and stock selection were similar or different.

2.6.3 The Role of the Interviewer

The interviewer kept to a minimal role, asking questions and occasionally using follow-up sub-questions or prompts to control the direction of the discussion. The questions avoided bias and the interviewer was careful to avoid bias in tone and inference, only once making a comment which could be construed as biased. This is because the interviewer had an open mind about the issue and had no prior agenda.

2.6.4 The Structure of the Interviews

A semi-structured interview was used, defined by Robson (2002: 270) thus: “has predetermined questions, but the order can be modified based upon the interviewer’s perception of what seems most appropriate. Question wording can be changed and explanations given; particular questions which seem inappropriate with a particular interviewee can be omitted, or additional ones included.”

While the questions and the order in which they were asked remained as planned in each interview there was flexibility and constant modification in terms of sub-questions and prompts according to the direction of the interviewee's response.

The bulk of the questions remained the same for every interview but some had to be changed. Library staff involved in stock selection and reader promotion were asked some questions specific to those areas. Others, involved in education, were asked some wider questions about literacy and the culture debate.

While they did follow this structure the interviews in some ways followed an "unstructured" format, which was like a "lengthy, intimate conversation" (Robson, 2002:278). The interviewer would have liked to adopt this method fully but it is not recommended for first-time interviewers as it can be very difficult to control (Robson, 2002).

Questions shouldn't be too long or double-barrelled (Robson, 2002). This criticism can be applied to some of the questions used in this study and in future studies the researcher would make the questions shorter and sharper. However, generally participants managed well, either taking the question as a whole or breaking it down into bits.

Open-ended questions were used because they are more flexible, go into more depth, make it possible to get unusual or unexpected answers, as happened on a few occasions, and help the interviewer to follow-up, develop and clarify any points made by the interviewee.

The sequence suggested by Robson (2002:277) for interviews was followed, with an introduction in which the interviewer explained about the study and the purpose and layout of the interview. There then followed a couple of warm-up questions in which the interviewee was asked to talk first about their career and current job and secondly to talk about their personal taste in books. This was aimed to settle down the interviewer and interviewee and proved very successful.

There then followed the main body of the interview in which the questions followed in a logical pattern. Because of the nature of the topic the interviewee often made links with later questions, but generally the structure worked and followed logically.

There was a “cool-off” question at the end, as recommended by Robson (2002) which was a little easier to answer and quite fun to think about. In no cases was there any tension to be broken as the relationship with interviewees was productive and relaxed.

There were also a few occasions in which the interviewee made many good points after the interview had been concluded and the tape switched off. The tape was not switched back on as this would have been dishonest as the interviewee believed themselves to be speaking ‘off-the-record’. However, hand written notes were made, with no objections from the interviewees.

The telephone interviews produced rich material and, as Robson (2002) suggests, the role of the interviewer and possible bias was minimised. This produced good results but on one occasion did mean the interviewer had difficulty bringing the interview to a close.

2.6.5. Limitations

The biggest problem and greatest inconsistency in the interviews was in the medium employed. Most interviews were face-to-face and one-to-one but some had to be conducted by telephone and one had to submit their answers by e-mail. One of the interviews conducted interviewed two participants together. This actually proved to be beneficial as they disagreed with one another on a few points and the logical progression of the debate produced some very useful material.

While the intention of the interviewer was to conduct all interviews face-to-face and one-to-one it was impossible for all interviewees to do this and as they had been good enough to give their time to the interviewer their requirements and preferences were met as much as possible.

2.6.6 Observational Comments

The interviewees were comfortable with the questions and were not afraid to voice strong opinions. They were also good at making the link between their professional role and their personal values and opinions.

Some interviewees had clearly given the issues some previous thought and already had fully-formed views. Others were more contradictory and uncertain but were still not afraid to think about the issues and formulate opinion during the interviews.

2.7 Data Analysis

2.7.1 Recording and Transcribing

The interviews and focus groups were all recorded using a cassette recorder and dictaphone. Taping allows the interviewer to keep a permanent record and concentrate on conducting the interview and making observational notes (Robson, 2002). The researcher decided to tape all interviews and focus groups, including the telephone interviews. The only exception was the interviewee who submitted answers by e-mail.

2.7.2 Template Approach

The researcher initially aimed to employ flexible analysis techniques typified by editing approaches and immersion approaches (Robson, 2002:458) but decided that more structure was needed to avoid bias and misinterpretation.

A template approach (Robson, 2002: 458) was adopted. This involved the creation of sections and codes determined on an *a priori* basis. The categories were derived from the issues identified in the literature, from the aims of the study and from the trends recognised after a first reading of the transcripts.

General trends were identified for each subject and text segments providing empirical evidence were identified and attached to the relevant category. There was some revision of the categories during this process in accordance with the patterns of the findings. A matrix was created on the basis of these categories and this corresponds directly to the issues as they are presented in the rest of the study.

2.8 Ethical Issues

The dissertation required the involvement of humans through focus groups and interviews. None were considered to be especially vulnerable and all were adults. No participant had any special requirements, disability, or potential vulnerability.

Face-to-face interviews were recorded using a tape recorder. Any conducted by e-mail were printed. However, all participants remained anonymous. The forum discussions were also printed off but, as with the interviews, all participants remained anonymous and the transcripts and quotations were only used where crucial to the research.

Before taking part in the research participants were given a 'participant information sheet' (Appendix A) outlining the focus of the research and their role in it. They were then asked to sign a 'participant consent form' (Appendix B) giving their consent for participation.

Chapter Three: A Good Read - Reading and the Wider Context

This chapter presents participants' views of a good read, exploring what aspects are contained in a good read and what benefits readers gain from the reading experience. It asks what role reading plays in the wider educational and cultural context.

3.1 Defining a Good Read

3.1.1 Plot, Structure and Characterisation

The majority of participants felt very strongly that plot was at the centre of a good read and that it was essential to holding the reader's attention. Some participants admitted that they often didn't finish books because their concentration and enthusiasm were not encouraged. As one interviewee stated,

I would define a good read as something I actually finish, because I won't bother finishing it if it's dull and that stops me reading.

As observed by Van Riel and Fowler (1996:23) reading involves a "continuous process of choice" and the reader may well choose not to keep reading a book if it does not deliver what they want.

A sense of mystery, the feeling that not all was yet revealed, was an important part of the plot, with participants saying about their favourite good reads,

It intimates that there's a lot more than what they're actually telling you at that moment.

The climax of the story is not what you expect. You can guess and then two chapters on you think 'ooh no, that might not happen, we're going this way now'.

Many participants felt that a good read was a book it is difficult to put down and a few spoke of being ‘drawn in’,

It starts with the bare bones of the story...and draws you in and in.

Other elements which were considered important but on which there wasn’t such clear agreement were ending and plot. Most participants felt that a good ending was important but some admitted they couldn’t even remember the endings of some of their past ‘good reads’,

I like a good ending but I think actually when I think about good books I’ve read I can’t actually remember the endings.

Characterisation was considered to be the other major element of a good read though views on what made good characterisation varied. Many participants said that it was important for them to be able to identify with the characters,

You can relate to the characters and I think that’s what I like in a book.

I don’t like books where I don’t like the people.

Other participants, however, didn’t feel it was necessary to like the characters. Part of the enjoyment of reading was seeing nasty characters come to bad ends,

Bad people get punished...well, not punished, they just don’t get what they want, and good people prosper.

Some participants also said that they felt they could learn to better understand characters they couldn’t personally identify with and didn’t like. This is where a novel can be a useful tool for taking the reader out of themselves and improving their understanding of “difference” and “diversity” (Van Riel and Fowler, 1996:107) As one participant commented,

You might hate a character in a book but understand them more than perhaps you would have understood them if you'd met them in the street.

Crucially, it is less important that the characters are likeable but more important that they are believable. Some participants spoke of needing “consistent characterisation” and characters with “realism”,

They need to have good background, so you know where they originate from.

The characters are also well-written, so strong, so recognisable.

I think everybody could imagine a vision of Owen Meany in their head.

3.1.2 Ideas and Themes

After the requirements of plot and characterisation have been satisfied some participants felt that a book needed something extra and that this often came in the form of the ideas and themes covered. As one focus group participant claimed,

I like clever books where there's a clever idea driving the story.

Another focus group participant, speaking about their ‘good read’ said they liked it because,

It's about alternative worlds, about life, about death, and creation and existence.

There was a great variety of opinion regarding the importance of ideas and themes with some saying they were crucial factors to any good read and others feeling that if the plot was strong enough it could survive without clever ideas to back it up. A few participants also claimed that too many ideas could get in the way of a good story.

There was also a great deal of subjectivity about ideas and themes as most participants admitted that different ideas were pertinent to different people. One participant claimed they were drawn to anything about feminism and the role of women in society whereas another participant in the same focus group said that they would be turned off a book that had feminism as one of its themes.

3.1.3 Familiarity and Stimulation

A good reading experience will take the reader on a journey into another world where they can feel and experience along with characters without actually having to go through it in reality (Byatt, 1992, Van Riel and Fowler, 1996).

All focus groups mentioned the importance of setting and atmosphere to a good read. It could be stimulating to be introduced to a new country or era and immersed in its sights and sounds,

Say you don't know anything about Botswana, having never actually been to Botswana. It really made you feel the heat and the dust.

I felt as though I was there, I felt whipped by the salt water.

One participant liked their favourite read because,

[It] describes the Icelandic people and their conventions and the countryside.

However, some participants also highlighted the pleasure of a familiar setting,

I lived in Edinburgh for a while and I could imagine I was there with the long casement windows.

For some people a good read had a lot to do not only with familiarity of setting but a feeling of knowing and trusting the author, fitting the description of the “self-protective reader” (Van Riel and Fowler, 1996:15). Some readers choose books they

feel safe with because they trust the author and where they are taking them (Van Riel and Fowler, 1996),

With a lot of Jane Green you know what's going to happen in the end as with Marian Keyes, you know what's going to happen, but you enjoy it all the same, it's really good.

Others, however, felt that a predictable read was limiting and dull. Instead they looked for something unfamiliar, not only in the setting but in the ideas, plot, structure and language. People wanted books that were “a totally new experience”, something that was “different from anything else I'd ever read”, elements of which can be identified with Van Riel and Fowler's profiles of the “thrill seeker” and the “ambitious reader” (1996:14-15).

Other participants said they valued unusual perspectives and original observations. One participant said, of 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime', a book about a boy with Aspergers' Syndrome in which the page numbers are muddled,

When I turned the first few pages and I saw the numbers...I thought 'this is a bit different' something that kind of grabs your attention.

Memorability was also considered by some to be an important aspect of a good read,

It's one of the books I remember. I think it's a good read when I remember it because I'm good at reading a lot and then completely forgetting it except for the main things.

This may be a purely emotional response too,

You don't remember everything about the book but you remember your emotion when you read it. And you think 'yes, that was good!'

As well as bringing new perspectives and emotions a good read can also be stimulating. Participants used words such as “eye-opening” and “provocative” to describe some of their favourite reads and valued books which made the reader think about how life might be in different settings,

It's written from [the perspective] of somebody who has got Aspergers' Syndrome.

It does show how precarious your position was as a woman if you didn't get married.

3.1.4 Humour and Happiness

One of the words mentioned most often about a good read was ‘humour’ and when describing their favourite reads participants regularly made comments like “it’s very funny” and “it has a wry sense of humour, which I like”. However, one group decided that, while humour could be an asset, it was not essential. Another group decided that humour was important but that it didn’t have to accompany light, happy reading and was often combined with bitterness and sadness to great effect.

Some participants said that happiness was an important part of their good read,

Generally it's quite a positive book, it's feelgood.

Others, however, didn’t see happiness as important,

I don't think I actually demand happiness out of it.

One interviewee also suggested that a good read was not necessarily enjoyable as the subject matter could be challenging and depressing but also satisfying,

You can read 'The Diary of Anne Frank' or the history of Auschwitz and go 'well, that was depressing' but it was useful, I've learned something, I felt

something, I may not have enjoyed what I felt but it was still important so ...you don't necessarily have to say 'oh, I enjoyed it' but you can still say it was good...

To define enjoyment and pleasure becomes difficult in light of this. Some participants considered enjoyment to mean stimulation and not necessarily happiness. Others, like the interviewee quoted above, felt that if a book wasn't happy it wasn't enjoyable but it could still be a good read and contain some element of satisfaction.

3.2 The Need to Read

Reading is not essential to life in terms of eating and keeping warm but it is important in a different way, to living “an enriched, aware life in which we exercise some measure of control over our well-being, our creativity and our connection to everything around us” (Elkin et al., 2003:1). There are many reasons why we read from communication, knowledge and information, to addressing personal problems, escaping from the restrictions of everyday life, and simply for pleasure (Elkin et al., 2003).

Some participants highlighted the fact that people can learn a lot from books. Reading can improve not only literacy but can teach the reader about other times and other cultures and can spark an interest which the reader will then develop. There were some good examples of this amongst the participants,

I knew nothing about Botswana at all except that it was in Africa. I couldn't even have identified where it is on the map. But it made me go and look up where it is...the sort of cases she investigates made you think a bit more about the culture in Botswana.

[About reading a biography of Queen Mary] It seemed to be centred around her feelings about the abdication. Then when I'd finished I wasn't satisfied. I wanted another person's perspective. So I got Wallis Simpson's book and when I'd read that I got one about the King...And then I got Prime Minister

Baldwin's because he's the one that went to Chequers and told the King he couldn't marry her.

While Lessing (1998) claims we need to get the pleasure of reading back as she is worried about people reading for purely instrumental purposes, as a means for passing exams, there is great concern that in focusing so heavily on ensuring everyone has a 'good read' and a nice time, literature is becoming "dumbed-down" (Cunningham, 1998:10). We are turning our backs on the feeding of the self, the entering into human history and humanity that characterises "classic reading" (Cunningham, 1998:11).

This is in contrast to the approach taken by Van Riel and Fowler (1996). In "Opening the Book" (Van Riel and Fowler, 1996:15) reading is presented as an entertainment, a commodity that goes well with "chocs" and a good bath, and there is a comparison made between choosing clothes and choosing books (Van Riel and Fowler, 1996:33).

The importance of reading is so often justified by its importance for the job market, its enhancements of an individual's chances of success and its benefits to the economy and society in general, as highlighted by Bird and Akerman (2005), Holden (2004), and the DCMS report "Libraries for All" (1999).

However, such justifications shouldn't be necessary, say Furedi (2004) and Roche (2004) in a society which values learning and literature for its own sake. Roche (2004) observes that this is a result of the instrumentalism of modern society where the arts are considered as means to ends rather than as ends in themselves. Therefore when Holden (2004) recognises the benefit of reading to the individual in terms of quality of life and economically measurable success he is using instrumentalist justifications.

Being literate in terms of understanding words is only the beginning. To manoeuvre our way around our complex society we need "critical literacy" (Hoggart, 1998:60). Those who have only basic literacy and education are vulnerable to

manipulation by those who are able to persuade them through advertising and superior verbal reasoning (Cunningham, 1998, Hoggart, 1998).

Reading helps develop a critical and thinking mind, to generate ideas, to stimulate the imagination and aid intellectual development (Elkin et al., 2003, Hoggart, 1998). For a society to become a “civilisation” it needs to be populated by “cultivated humans” rather than “thriving earthworms” (Hoggart, 1998:61).

3.3 Conclusion

Some criteria can be identified as important for a good read. Most important are plot and characterisation. Ideas and themes are of less importance and are seen by some as a hindrance to a good plot.

Familiarity and stimulation were both important to different types of reader. A consensus could not be reached on humour and happiness either though both featured prominently in discussions.

The educational role of reading is important in that it not only improves literacy but also expands our knowledge, experience and human understanding. We must be careful to see beyond the purely educational and socio-economic benefits of reading as a civilisation needs thinking citizens in possession of ‘critical literacy’.

Chapter Four: Subjective and Objective Approaches to Reading

This chapter outlines the philosophical arguments for subjectivity and objectivity. It sets these views in the context of reading and explores the subjective, reader-centred, relativist and objective approaches. It also focuses on creative reading, reading needs and reading personalities.

4.1 Subjectivity and Objectivity

Subjectivity has its origins in modern science and the Reformation, which was based on the individual's relationship with God (Roche, 2004). Rene Descartes (1596-1650) continued the emphasis on the self and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) saw the state as a construct of self-interest, not based on abstract and external ideas, a precursor of cultural relativism (Roche, 2004).

Twentieth century aesthetics has been dominated by *verum esse ipsum factum*, or 'what is true is what is made' (Roche, 2004). Hence twentieth and twenty-first century philosophy has focused on aesthetic concepts as social constructs, as "context-dependent", and questions whether there can be universal aesthetic concepts (Eaton, 1998). The problem with this subjective idealism is that it prioritises function over substance (Roche, 2004).

Philosophers Edmund Burke (1729-1797) and David Hume (1711-76) approached the quest for objective standards by looking at human physical and psychological responses (Eaton, 1998). Hume decided that aesthetic concepts are dependent on a human having 'taste', by which he means the adequate machinery and training for making aesthetic judgements (Eaton, 1998).

Philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) reconciles these subjective and objective approaches. Aesthetic concepts are subjective because they're based on personal experience and feeling, mainly pleasure and pain (Eaton, 1998, Roche, 2004). However, in Kant's view "pleasure and pain are universal responses" (Eaton, 1998).

Subsequently when a person experiences pleasure or pain in relation to an object they are responding as a human being rather than as an individual with particular background and circumstances. Therefore, “aesthetic concepts are subjectively located but universally applicable” (Eaton, 1998).

4.2 ‘Equal but Different’ –The Age of Relativism

Twentieth century philosopher Richard Rorty asserts that we don’t find truths, we make them (Roche, 2004). Similarly literary critic John Carey said that “a work of art is anything that anyone has ever considered a work of art, though it may be a work of art only for that one person” (Morrison, 2005).

When looking a text we should apply “popular discrimination” which looks at social relevance rather than textual quality, therefore, “one reading cannot be ‘better’ than another if the criteria are ones of social relevance rather than aesthetic quality” (Fiske, 1989:130).

Readers look to a text for relevance to their own lives, even if the textual representation is not accurate. Social meanings will always override the textual. “Popular readers enter the represented world of the text at will and bring back from it the meanings and pleasures that they choose” (Fiske, 1989:133). Such views are representative of the subjective, relativist position called by Roche (2004:132) “a cliché of the age”.

Relativism, in its extreme definition “maintains that there is no external reality independent of human consciousness; there are only different sets of meanings and classifications which people attach to the world” (Robson, 2005:22).

This philosophy, applied to literature, provides the foundation for books such as Van Riel and Fowler’s “Opening the Book” (1996), which are aimed at the individual reader, urging them to assess their own reading requirements.

It was a popular view amongst participants. Two participants, in separate groups, used the phrase ‘equal but different’ in reference to fiction books and excerpts. This sentiment was also often applied to peoples’ opinions and reading tastes.

4.3 Creative Reading

The strength of literature lies in its ambiguity and the space it leaves for reader creativity (Morrison, 2005). To take the perspective of deconstructionism, “there is no final meaning, the text remains a field of possibilities” (Bertens, 2001:131). This provides the basis for the concept of ‘creative reading’.

The concept of creative reading is defined by Holden (2004) thus: “Far from being an act of passive consumption, where the reader absorbs the writer’s words like a sponge, reading in itself is a creative process. No two people read the same text in the same way”.

A reader will therefore read into a text whatever they want to find (Bertens, 2001, Fiske, 1989, Manguel, 1997). Creativity is highly individual and so the process of creative reading can only be subjective (Holden, 2004, Van Riel and Fowler, 1996). Reading is therefore an individual experience and a solitary pursuit (Hoggart, 1998, Holden, 2004, Manguel, 1997).

Many people have a problem with recognising the creativity of reading (Glenn, 2004, Holden, 2004) because of an ingrained view of creativity associated with something solid, a physical object, that results from the creativity (Glenn, 2004, Holden, 2004). Slowly, this view is being overturned (Holden, 2004, Van Riel and Fowler, 1996).

Most of the participants in this study, though most were not familiar with the concept of creative reading, supported the idea of different readers reading a text in different ways,

[reading is] a creative act and the detail will say different things to different people

Another interviewee said that,

Reading is a conclusion of the book process –it starts with the author, goes through publishing and editing, and distribution, then gets to the reader. They complete the process by interpreting the text in their own way.

The same interviewee drew the analogy of music. A piece of music is composed but it isn't completed until it has first been interpreted by the orchestra and then heard by the audience and interpreted by them.

4.4 Reading Needs and Reading Personalities

Selecting books is highly personal. A reader will choose something safe, easy and reassuring when they feel stressed or insecure (Elkin et al, 2003, Van Riel and Fowler, 1996). Van Riel and Fowler's book 'Opening the Book: Finding a Good Read' is based on the premise that every reader has their own reading personality dictated by their own reading needs. Everyone has different experiences because reading a book is making a journey, it is a creative act, something the reader is actively involved with (Van Riel and Fowler, 1996).

Participants mentioned the way relationships with certain books changed throughout their lives,

I can read a book and enjoy it and go back to it at a different time and a different mood and not feel the same way.

I think that as you go through life things that you enjoyed at one stage of your life you may not enjoy at another stage in your life. And I think, 'good heavens, did I really enjoy that'!

There is not only individual subjectivity but also an element of cultural relativism at play here. One group discussion looked at the way different books were viewed at different times and by different societies with different values,

In 20 years time a lot of what we've written now will not be acceptable because people will have changed.

Some participants also observed that many famous musicians, artists and authors weren't especially well regarded during their own lifetime or immediately afterwards, it was only through time that they gained a reputation.

There are also literary fashions depending on who is shaping them and what are the norms of that society. One group commented that D.H. Lawrence is currently out of fashion but that in the 1960s and 1970s his books were very fashionable.

4.4.1 Van Riel's Reader

Van Riel and Fowler (1996) in "Opening the Book" guide readers towards finding their "reading personality" (1996:13). Some stick to known authors, others make an effort to try something new (Elkin et al., 2003, Van Riel and Fowler, 1996).

All participants agreed that different reading is needed for different reasons. These reasons can vary from person to person and reflect their reading needs at a particular time. There was a lot of support for Van Riel and Fowler's (1996) view of reading as a subjective activity amongst the interviewees, with most agreeing that if, as Elkin et al. (2003) claim, fifty people were asked to judge the same novel there would be fifty different views on its meaning, quality and standard of writing.

One interviewee observed that,

If you asked fifty different people about a football or cricket match they'd all come up with a different view depending on who they supported, where they were watching it from, what that background was.

Readers can also engage with books on different levels and it is possible for different people to connect with different aspects of the same book depending on the reason for which they are reading it,

One person may be reading a book for its feminist implications, another person may be reading the same book to keep them occupied on a train or because they want to lie outside and get a sun-tan!

Reading habits are also highly subjective with some people spending the majority of their lives reading unchallenging books which allow them relaxation and some form of escapism,

I'm afraid that, for me, reading is very much an escapist, enjoyment thing, so I don't go in for heavy stuff, or disturbing stuff, or stuff that keeps you awake with worrying about some aspect of life, the universe and everything.

The majority of participants felt that different reading was needed for different circumstances. Sometimes they used reading as a way of escape from stress and at other times they wanted something more stimulating,

Especially when I've got a lot on at work ...and there I have to read lots of dire, serious stuff I don't want great literature, I want a light read.

If you're in bed with flu you don't perhaps read 'Crime and Punishment'.

Most participants admitted they read different kinds of books in different circumstances and that their environment and the time they could spend on reading made a difference too,

I've got nobody hanging on my shirt-tail. I just keep putting on the kettle ...and then in a few days it's off to [my friend] who will take three weeks to a month to read it

The circumstances of the reader's life and their personal interests also make a difference to their reading tastes,

*You'll get someone who's a sheep farmer who likes books about sheep.
Everyone else might find it terribly boring.*

[About 'Trainspotting'] I can in no way identify with drug use in Edinburgh tenements but the themes of the pressure to conform and the vagaries of male friendship combined with the style and power of the writing struck a chord when I first read it and made a lasting impression.

4.4.2 Bloom's Reader

Literary critic Harold Bloom (2000) sees reading as an individual encounter with "otherness" (Bloom, 2000:19). Reading is not primarily for education and self-improvement, it is for pleasure, for a better understanding of the self and the world, and as a spark for thought and reflection (Bloom, 2000). Readers must therefore read for themselves and they must read to strengthen the self.

Bloom (2000) rejects the notion of a creative reader bound in ideology, culture and politics. Reading takes the reader beyond these categorisations to the inner self.

Bloom (2000:144) reads for "aesthetic pleasure and for spiritual insight". Amidst the cultural, societal and political factors being applied to literary criticism there is a need for the return to the aesthetic, to "the autonomy of imaginative literature and the sovereignty of the solitary soul" seeing "the reader not as a person in society but as the deep self, our ultimate inwardness" (Roche, 2004:250).

"To read human sentiments in human language you must be able to read humanly, with all of you" (Bloom, 2000:28). In this way a person will become a wiser and better reader, which we might even dare to call a 'quality reader'.

To Bloom, this reader is concerned with finding the “sublime” (Bloom, 2000:29), and the ultimate reason for reading is to seek the “difficult pleasure” (Bloom, 2000:29) that makes reading worthwhile.

Most participants did not share this view. At best, some said that in certain moods and at certain times they “wanted something a bit more demanding”. There was some support for the view that a challenging and thought provoking book was a good read but this was by no means unanimous.

If anyone did fit the description of Bloom’s reader they only did so when talking about ‘quality literature’ and not about a ‘good read’ as shall be explored in chapter five.

4.5 The Reader and the Writer

As has already been observed, a reader brings many of their own circumstances and preferences to a book. As one participant observed,

I suppose every reader brings something of themselves to the novel as the novelist does and as the characters do. It’s an interplay between those three things. So it may be that some people find that interplay with certain books and other people do with other books and whether one of those interplays is better than the other I don’t know.

Different societies and cultures also bring different values to bear. The reader recreates the text in the act of bringing it into being (Fiske, 1989, Manguel, 1997).

Reading is about “the active encounter of one mind and one imagination with another” (Elkin et al., 2003:4). The reader-focused perspective puts more pressure on the writer, it is up to them to impress the reader, to entertain them and to be of relevance to them (Van Riel and Fowler, 1996). The reader will commit to a book once the author has earned their trust (Van Riel and Fowler, 1996).

“The contract with the writer” (Van Riel and Fowler, 1996:27) can, however, be seen a different way. The writer is communicating to the reader and the reader is privileged to be allowed into their mind and imagination and get to know them. As A.S. Byatt claimed, “I can say I know George Eliot better than I know my husband” because “I have shared her inner life” (1992:15).

Some participants shared this view,

It's interestingly a meeting, an interaction, between the mind of the author and the mind of the reader.

Overall while most participants acknowledged an interaction and contract between the reader and the writer most felt the reader was interpreting the author and not the other way around.

4.6 Conclusion

Most participants sought different reading for different moods and circumstances. The majority didn't see the need to explore the 'inner self' and 'otherness' and saw reading as entertainment purely for their own needs.

Most took a reader-centred rather than a writer-centred approach. They approached texts in relation to themselves, their needs, and their life at the time of reading. This view is representative of the subjectivity and relativism prevalent in our society today.

Chapter Five: The Question of Quality

This chapter examines the idea of ‘quality’ in relation to literature. It outlines previous debates and looks at the issue from the perspective of the culture debate and aesthetics.

It investigates participants’ views on quality literature and what criteria might be applied to a work worthy of this description. It asks participants to decide whether there is a difference between a ‘good read’ and ‘quality literature’ and makes a comparison of the criteria offered for each. It also examines the criteria offered by a writer and a literary agent and compares them to the criteria suggested by participants.

5.1 The Quality Debate

The quality debate is an old one, with critics in the nineteenth century such as poet and critic Matthew Arnold (1909) advancing the view that public libraries can only fulfil their educational function by stocking quality, as opposed to populist, literature (Arnold, 1909, Choules, 1994, Gingell and Brandon, 2001,). In the early twentieth century this argument was carried by T.S. Eliot (1948) and F.R. and Q.D. Leavis (1972, 1932) to an elitist position in which quality culture should remain the preserve of the few, with ‘mass culture’ an inferior, subordinate culture (Choules,1994).

However, this debate presupposes that there is such thing as quality in culture and in literature and that it can be easily defined. In the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries the shift towards reader-centred attitudes, subjectivity and the notion that a reader may read creatively has put this in doubt.

Quality can be defined by “fitness to purpose” (Choules, 1994) which means that if a book is intended to create enjoyment and it succeeds then it is ‘quality’ literature. Also, if a book is in a library to help improve usage figures and bring more

users into the library and it succeeds then, again, it can be considered ‘quality’ literature.

Train claims that “one reader’s view of the text is no less valid than another’s” (Elkin et al., 2003:39). A reader is not a lesser reader because they don’t appreciate Booker winners (Elkin et al., 2003).

Van Riel claims we should focus on the quality of the reading experience rather than the quality of the book (Van Riel, 1993, Elkin et al., 2003). While this view still places the reader at the centre of quality judgements it separates the reader’s experience from literary quality.

5.2 Aspects of Quality

Writer David Lodge, in his book “The Art of Fiction” (1992), aimed at fellow-authors, focuses on aspects he considers essential for quality writing. He highlights strong, gripping openings, characterisation with depth and insight, a sense of mystery, and consistency of voice and form.

Fiction agent James Cypher (2005) mentions amongst his criteria for quality literature the following factors:

- A new idea, a new voice
- Narrative voice –does the reader like and trust the author?
- Pace –does it keep the pages turning?
- Characterization –are the characters three-dimensional and believable, does the reader care about their fate?
- Plot –this is driven by characters in conflict and characters with strong desires
- Writing style
- Details –accuracy is not essential but the reader needs to be convinced it’s true
- Dialogue –very difficult to write but very important
- Showing versus telling –fiction writing is not reportage, it needs to present the story not as a blow-by-blow account but show it, reveal it, in a way that excites readers

- Grammar, usage and punctuation –this is very important. Language must be accurate but also well chosen and appropriately used
- Length –there is little market for long works now

Plot and pace were not considered essential for quality literature by participants but were important for a good read, as shall be discussed later in this section. Participants also made no mention of grammar, though they did think good writing style and construction was important, and no-one said anything about length. Characterization needed to be believable and convincing but in quality literature was subservient to the ideas and themes.

The participants did not pick up on the distinction between reportage and imaginative writing but did say that it was important that they were drawn into the story and that it was well-written. Only one participant made a reference to “good dialogue” in explaining why their choice was a good read.

There is definitely a similarity between these criteria and those suggested by the participants but the differences are just as revealing. Not only does this difference show how many different quality criteria there can be but it also shows that someone involved professionally with the writing of or assessment of a text looks for slightly different things to a reader.

5.2.1 Writing Quality

The issue of quality of writing proved controversial. Some interviewees went as far as to say they didn’t think it mattered at all, and that the reader tends not to notice structure and word use. One focus group participant claimed that using too many “difficult” words could alienate some people and exclude them from the process.

Others were more appreciative of writing style, agreeing with Cypher (2005) that the writer should use the “right word, the right phrase, the right sentence, the right paragraph, the right scene, the right chapter and the right story”,

We are talking about literature that is 'crafted' ... often you will read a paragraph and stop and read it aloud. You copy down sentences.

In the words of one Bookcrossing respondent,

It must be well written, and be able to be read at different levels. Is there any symbolism, irony etc? What is the book trying to tell us?

Literature advances what can be done with the written word, but with the credibility of having meaning within the text rather than being mere experiment.

Interestingly, one participant suggested that quality literature is more about 'substantiality' and that this comes in the most part from the language,

I want to have a read of something a bit more substantial, although by this I normally mean the language is a bit harder, rather than the stories are more philosophical (eg. A Tale of Two Cities, or Jane Austen).

5.2.2 Theme, Character, Impact

Participants also felt that quality literature had an impact and left a lasting impression,

I suppose one thing about quality literature is that if you read what you consider to be a very high quality book it stays with you, you may even learn from it, it changes you in some way. Whereas your average bodice-ripper you'll read through it, you won't remember it.

Another word that was mentioned on a few occasions was "substance". Part of this substance comes from what two participants called 'integrity' and what F.R. Leavis calls "moral seriousness" (Gingell and Brandon, 2001:70). This usually manifests itself in the characterisation and in the themes explored and leaves the reader feeling they have become deeply involved with the book, not merely skimmed the surface,

What I felt between the difference of something like Dickens and the Da Vinci Code is when I read the Da Vinci Code I felt that, at the end, we hadn't explored anything, it's like a single thread really. The thing about Dickens is that his characters are so well-formed and have got such good depth.

Participants also viewed a quality read as thought-provoking and demanding, treating the reader with respect and challenging them to think deeply and expand their horizons,

They kind of draw you in and make you think...and I think that is one part of quality literature.

It assumes more of the reader, treats the reader as a grown up, as someone who either recognises those allusions or who is prepared to look them up.

5.2.3 Depth, Universality, and Innovation

'Good quality' can be defined in terms of what Penelope Lively terms as "ballast" (Lively, 2005) meaning writing with substance, concerned with the life of the mind which F.R. and Q.D. Leavis call "felt life" (Gingell and Brandon, 2001:70). It is a view shared by Cunningham (1998), Hoggart (1998) and Lessing (1998).

Though many participants did not share this view there were a few who did,

A good book for me is something that talks about the inner self ...someone like Henry James. He really talks about the psychology of what's going on and the mind and motives and reactions.

This echoes Lodge's (1992:47) observation that reading effectively written interior monologue is "like wearing earphones plugged into someone's brain".

Another participant agreed that a book should have,

A certain amount of interior monologue, the thoughts of the characters, so you get inside the characters.

Some participants mentioned originality. This was also considered to be an important aspect of a good read but in the context of quality literature it was seen as what Harold Bloom calls “strangeness” (Bloom, 1994:3) and a “tang of originality” (Bloom, 1994:6).

An element of ‘universality’ was also important, with many participants saying that a book must be able to stand the test of time and reach out to people of many cultures and eras to be considered great. This agrees with James (1992:2) that a book “can only rank as great literature if it is a work of high imagination and originality, in which style and content are most perfectly blended and which is able to speak not only to its generation but to all time”.

As one Bookcrossing respondent claimed,

I have reread books that I had once thought were a fantastic read, but 20 years has dated them terribly. It has to survive.

Other participants shared this view,

There are I think some books that you might consider to be quality literature because people across the ages, across countries, across cultures, across language ...they are capable of being ...universal.

If a book is rich in text, character and sub-plot people will latch onto certain aspects of it, e.g. Frankenstein can be read many different ways dependent on age, education, personal preferences, politics and gender.

These observations echo the debate about familiarity and stimulation discussed in chapter three. As Cusk (2005) argues, ‘great’ books are those which focus on the familiar but which contain characters, ideas and observations that will resonate

throughout different cultures and eras. Setting may be part of the appeal of a ‘good read’ but in ‘quality’ literature it is of less importance.

5.3 A Good Read and Quality Literature – Are They the Same?

As one online reviewer said of ‘Midnight’s Children’ by Salman Rushdie, “I would say that this book is a good subject for study but I’m not sure that it’s a good read” (Amazon, 2005).

During the interviews and focus groups the question “is it possible to respect a book as great literature but still dislike it and to love a book which you accept is of lesser quality?” was put to participants.

A minority maintained that quality could only be subjective and was therefore inseparable from the individual’s tastes, values and reading needs,

People have different opinions and would say something is good quality literature if they like it and vice versa.

This is a view found amongst participants in previous studies (Choules, 1994, Twomey, 2003). However, Twomey (2003) also found many participants could differentiate between a good read and quality literature.

This pattern was borne out in this study with the vast majority of participants of the opinion that a good read and quality literature are separate,

I’ve read many books for book group which I know are very good literature but I can’t stand them!

I really enjoyed it but wouldn’t say that it was good quality.

I don’t think a good read necessarily has to be good literature.

One Bookcrossing respondent observed that there is a light, easy, quick read in which characterisation and writing style are often subordinated to plot. There is little depth and few long words or lengthy descriptions as these would hamper the story. In this sense Hemmingway and Dickens can almost be considered ‘bad reads’! The same respondent also claimed that there is also a quality read, one which has more depth and uses more complicated language in which plot may be considered of less importance than the ideas and themes portrayed.

This distinction is not new. The difference between literature and fiction is inherent in the Dewey system (Shiflett, 2001) and The London Library has separate sections for ‘literature’ and ‘fiction’.

This approach was supported by many of the participants,

I think there must be some level of quality to do with people who've studied English Literature and understand about how you form a sentence, and writing, and character development...but in terms of just people reading day to day I think you can just imagine someone thinking something's good even if it's not necessarily quality.

There is a distinction between studying literature in an academic discipline and reading for pleasure.

From this it is possible to identify two different reads for two different purposes. This distinction builds on the trends discussed earlier which showed that reading needs differ depending on mood and circumstances. It also explains why participants were able to offer different sets of criteria for a good read and for quality literature. When assessing excerpts many participants were able to distinguish between one excerpt which they considered to be better quality and the other which, though they considered it to be of inferior quality, they admitted might make a better read.

Participants were strongly in favour of the idea of a subjective reader, as discussed earlier, but most of those same participants also believed there can be quality literature of intrinsic value. This is not the contradiction it immediately

appears and the distinction between the ‘quick read’ and the ‘quality read’ demonstrates why.

The problem arises in refining the distinction and the criteria on which it is based. There arise questions of authority and expertise and it becomes necessary to examine who decides and on what grounds.

As one participant observed,

Sure ‘quality literature’ exists. Whether there can be mutually agreed criteria or even a short list is probably undecidable.

Another participant felt that drawing up criteria on which to base this judgement would be far too subjective,

I don’t think that you can create a definitive list [of criteria] that everybody can agree on, it’s very much a personal set of opinions.

Contrary to this statement most participants were able to agree on the main elements of quality literature, as highlighted previously, and what sets it apart from a good read.

There were, however, different responses when they were asked to compare anonymous passages from books and decide which was better quality. The participants not only provided a wide range of views on which was better quality, they didn’t always choose the one that would be regarded the best by reputation.

Two interviewees and a focus group participant queried the status of Charles Dickens as a writer of quality literature, and one participant described the Brontes as “overblown, melodramatic and over written”, an assessment other participants agreed with after assessing an excerpt from Jane Eyre.

5.4 A Comparison of 'Good Read' Criteria and 'Quality' Criteria

'Good Read' Criteria	'Quality' Criteria
Characters you like Understandable, consistent characters Strong characters Believable characters	Characterisation important but not essential Characters need to be believable rather than likeable
Realism*	Substance Integrity Depth "Ballast"
Relationships –can include love and sex Humour*	Relationships must be believable Humour and relationships important but not crucial
Well described settings Atmosphere Introduction to new places e.g. Botswana	Setting relevant but not crucial Concerned with the life of the mind
Plot Good driving narrative Story that carries you along Can't put it down Good ending Interweaving plot lines and structure	Plot not essential
Original observations of the everyday Memorable* Different*	Different Original Lasting impression
Well-written*	Writing quality important
Interesting ideas* Addresses a particular issue (though this can be uncomfortable)* Provocative*	Thought-provoking, challenging Interesting ideas
	Universality

* =factors with which some participants disagreed

A comparison of the criteria for a good read and quality show that, while there is some overlap, the criteria are largely different. In 'quality' literature plot plays a less significant role, whereas in a 'good read' it was considered of crucial importance. Characterisation is still important in quality literature but is not fundamental.

Ideas and themes, however, are most important of all in quality literature. Though these were amongst the good read criteria there was disagreement with some saying that too many ideas got in the way of plot and hindered a good read.

Writing style was also considered to be of much more importance to quality though not irrelevant to a good read. Setting and atmosphere was more important to a good read than to quality. In quality the importance was in the depth and the observation, whatever the setting.

5.5 Conclusion

There is such a thing as quality literature. It is not the same as a 'good read' and the criteria applied are different. We're left with two main types of literature which may be called the 'good read' and 'quality literature', the 'quick read' and the 'quality read' or 'fiction' and 'literature'.

Working with the latter set of definitions 'fiction' is a book whose main purpose is to entertain and to fulfil the criteria mentioned above for a good read. 'Literature' is a work which does more than entertain and whose criteria are different to that of fiction.

Both are intended for different purposes and different audiences. The distinction is not an easy one to make in practice and while there was consensus on the aspects of quality, there was a range of subjective opinions regarding what met these criteria and what did not.

If the pure relativist, subjectivist stance is applied to these conclusions it appears that while literature may have the implied tag of 'quality' it is not superior to fiction, there can be 'quality fiction' and 'quality literature' depending on how well each book meets the aforementioned criteria.

Objectivists counter this view claiming that, while literature and fiction may be different, the educational and cultural importance of literature is such that the 'quality' tag is always attached. Literature must also be scrutinised by more objective standards as its quality status is reliant upon more than one individual's personal reading needs. It is therefore necessary to examine the concept of expertise.

Chapter Six: Expertise and the Canon

This chapter looks to philosophy and literary theory to justify the need for objective standards of quality. It looks at the ideas behind the concept of expertise and examines participants' varied views on the subject. It looks at the idea of a literary canon, exploring why such a canon is needed, who can create it and on what criteria literary works can be judged for inclusion.

6.1 The Need for Expertise

If reading is a solitary, subjective activity and if quality is the fulfilment of an individual's expectations and criteria based upon those expectations then it follows that we should respect the "pretensions of those who can see no reason why the efforts of their eight-year-old should not be considered on a par with Keats" (Gingell and Brandon, 2001:31). If the reader enjoys the eight year old's poetry more than they enjoy Keats then for them the child's poetry is 'better'.

This is the fundamental problem with subjectivity. There cannot be a debate if all the critics are saying is "I like this book" and "I do not like this book", two views which are compatible and not in conflict (Dickie, 1997). Discussion then becomes about the people and their tastes, not about the object and its properties (Dickie, 1997). Therefore we need objective standards of quality (Arnold, 1909, Dickie, 1997, Gingell and Brandon, 2001, Roche, 2004) and these are provided by consensus and expertise.

The concept of "aesthetic value" (Bloom, 1994:1) means that we can't create a definitive list along the lines of 'if something is blue and round and made of glass it will be beautiful' (Dickie, 1997, Eaton, 1998, Roche, 2004). This is because these factors, that it's blue, and round, and made of glass, are non-aesthetic properties, there is something else in addition which determines whether the object is beautiful (Dickie, 1997, Eaton, 1998, Graham, 1997).

So, if a text meets the quality criteria identified in this study, it is likely to be quality literature but it is not guaranteed. Therefore what is required to make quality is not only a meeting of criteria but the possession of some extra aesthetic aspect. Just what this aspect is and who can recognise it brings us to the next area for discussion –expertise.

6.2 The Philosophy of Expertise

To return to Gingell and Brandon's (2001) example of a child's poetry being considered as good as that of Keats, we can allow for this as poetry doesn't have the same claim to truth as physics does (Culler, 1997, Fiske, 1989),

It is useful to have academic definitions of what counts as literature but it is not a quantifiable science or art.

It's different because it's so much more subjective, I think. It's not pure science.

One participant saw quality as independent of critics and experts, as something organic on which they could voice opinion,

Scholarly distinction occurs only after a book is written –so how could that 'make' quality literature. You are confusing cause and effect. They do not turn sawdust into gold ...they merely bring gold to the attention of others.

Some participants, however, did say that they believed in the concept of expertise,

I would agree that there's going to be someone who knows more things than you.

I think one of the worrying trends of the last ten or fifteen years is the fact that we have dismissed the views of experts in almost every field...that's not being snobbish. I'm totally impractical so if my TV set or my plumbing goes wrong I want an expert.

Amongst participants there was some scepticism about the role of experts, particularly academics, and many felt that this ‘expert’ opinion was tainted by the competitive environment in which it was formed,

You can't keep a job in English Literature unless you do a lot of research and there's been so much written on things that you're always going to be in pursuit of the stupid things no-one's thought of before.

I think they've all got their own agendas.

Others felt that expert opinion was as subject to personal values as any other,

Some scholars, if they're looking at it from a postmodernist perspective will slate anything that doesn't happen to be postmodern.

Hume's view of expertise is that “people whose taste is sufficiently sensitive and who have been correctly trained will competently apply aesthetic concepts, and will agree with other similarly competent judges” (Eaton, 1998). While he allows for some degree of subjectivity there is also an expert consensus in which can be found the objective basis for aesthetic concepts (Eaton, 1998, Graham, 1997).

A more recent philosopher, Frank Sibley (1923-1996), built on Hume's concept of ‘taste’ and concluded it to be a mental faculty, something which not everyone possesses (Dickie, 1997, Eaton, 1998, Graham, 1997,). Agreement is the foundation of objectivity (Eaton, 1998, Graham, 1997). While poetry is an art and not a science we can still rely on experts in the field to explain to us that a Keats poem is better than an eight year old's, and explain to us why (Gingell and Brandon, 2001).

To Kant art precipitated access to a higher realm of truth and beauty, bridging the gap between the material and spiritual, a realm which not everyone was capable of understanding (Culler, 1997, Morrison, 2005, Roche, 2004,). The purpose of an

“aesthetic object” is therefore to unite physical properties with those located in the senses.

Many participants also said that, while individual expertise may be limited and prone to subjectivity, there needed to be a body of expertise and that this could be built up over time, thus taking a Humean perspective on consensus as the basis of expertise,

Within music there are certain musical tracks that people who know about music would say ‘this is a good track’, and in art there are certain paintings...with books there are certain books that most people who know about the subject would agree...

I think there’s got to be a body of knowledge ...there may be individual peoples’ theories but there’s got to be a basic body of knowledge that you, you learn in first year as an English Literature student ...the consensus about books that have been around.

I suspect that with literature it builds up ...it’s not just one person as then one person adds to it and so on...a consensus builds up.

This consensus is also built up through interaction and debate,

Everyone’s view is valid but if people are going to progress then views change because you take into account views of others in your literature class or reading group ...and you revise your view because of what others say.

Post-structuralist literary criticism is making a grave mistake in losing sight of canons, authors, classics and selfhood. Instead it tries to “democratise all utterance as ‘literature’” (Cunningham, 1998:17).

Some interviewees expressed concern that expertise is no longer fully respected and said that the views of literary critics and the views of other experts, including librarians, should not be dismissed so lightly,

The great tradition of literary criticism seems to be waning in the face of such democratic platforms as reader reviews on Amazon and reading groups.

We should respect experts more and librarians aren't always comfortable as being arbiters of quality and taste.

6.3 The Canon

Some form of canon has existed consistently throughout the ages (Katz, 2001, Manguel, 1997) but is needed now more than ever as we have access to a lot more books and wider perspective of culture than our ancestors (Katz, 2001, Roche, 2004,). This makes it harder to create a canon but also more important.

In our current age we are caught up in the immediate and literature is important in that it takes us beyond our own experience speaking to our current selves from another time (Bloom, 2000, Mairesse, 2005, Roche, 2004). There is also a sense that we are losing sight of the “organic” and “holistic” (Dwyer, 2001, Roche, 2004:253) and that we need to link part and whole. Art and literature are important parts of this process. It is therefore vitally important that we draw up a literary canon relevant to addressing these problems of our age (Roche, 2004).

The canon is not a syllabus (Byatt, 1998) or a list of must-reads (Bloom, 1994) but is a form of literary memory (Bloom, 1994, Hunter, 1997, Mairesse, 2005,). Canonical works are part of an ongoing literary process, free from the society and politics of their era, and those works deserving of inclusion build on and advance what has gone before (Bloom, 1994, Katz, 2001). Literature is about our links to the past and to wider civilisation and we must take our place in it (Bloom, 2000, Hoggart, 1998).

6.4 Objectivism, Aesthetics and the Canon

Canons, like that proposed by Bloom (1994), claim to be politically neutral and to have sprung from a process of literary natural selection, comprising those works which have survived time and become widely regarded (Lauter, 1991, Roche, 2004).

Some critics (Fiske, 1989, Lauter, 1991, Roche, 2004) claim this cannot be as all canons have contexts. The people who construct them are influenced by their station in life, education, interests, views and tastes (Culler, 1997, Lauter, 1991, Roche, 2004,). People have different views about the future and what is necessary for people to be taught to take with them into this future (Lauter, 1991).

This criticism is in part answered by Katz (2001) who maintains that the concept of the 'best' preserves the link between civilisations of the past and the present, a view shared by others (Arnold, 1909, Culler, 1997, Gingell and Brandon, 2001). The canon is always being added to and revised and in this sense it helps diversity (Culler, 1997, Katz, 2001).

Consensus on the literary canon has evaporated in recent decades (Roche, 2004) for a number of reasons. Firstly, canons have too often been based on tradition rather than reason and this has rightly been brought into question (Lauter, 1991, Roche, 2004).

Secondly, we ask different questions today employing criteria other than purely aesthetic ones. Thirdly, the advent of cultural perspectives and post-structuralism have lead to the view that "one should read in any seminar x number of works by a particular group or culture" (Roche, 2004:250).

Fourthly, literary criticism is being devalued due to the democratisation of expertise (Furedi, 2004, Hoggart, 1998, Roche, 2004, Usherwood, 2005a, 2005b). Finally, there is a much higher quantity of literature available than ever before. It is impossible for any one person to view it all and make comparative judgements (Katz, 2001, Roche, 2004).

Despite these problems we should not conclude that the canon is redundant, indeed there are many reasons why it is more relevant today than ever. The sheer quantity and scope of literature available is one good reason (Katz, 2001, Roche, 2004).

In our information age, driven by instrumentalist concerns, it is too easy to lose sight of the centuries of human experience that have been left to us. As Bloom (2000:19) asks, “information is endlessly available to us; where shall wisdom be found?”. It shall be found, say some (Arnold, 1909, Bloom, 1994, Gingell and Brandon, 2001, Roche, 2004) in the ‘best of what has been’ and this is the basis of the canon.

6.5 Criteria for Canonical Works

Katz (2001:190) defines a literary canon as “a list of secular titles with lasting qualities”. The criteria for inclusion in such a list makes much of these ‘lasting qualities’ and views from the literature and the focus groups support this. Impact, depth and universality, all aspects of ‘quality’ literature, are essential properties of canonical works, what Roche (2004:251) terms a “supertemporal dimension”, that speaks to people across the ages and can resonate both now and then.

Idea and theme are also important. Canonical works must contain a “substantive idea or concept” (Roche, 2004:251) and have substance and meaning. A canonical work must be “organic” (Roche, 2004:251) implying a need for consistency and unity. It must also be well-written, “crafted in such a way as to be sensuously attractive in terms of its style and rhetoric, its diction and expression” (Roche, 2004:251).

A canon is not fixed, it can change through time in accordance with the needs of a particular era (Roche, 2004). So while there may be many works which meet the canonical criteria, they may not always be included in a canon (Roche, 2004). What is needed is a representation of the best of an author, school of thought, style or era,

without falling into the trap of total representation and political correctness (Gingell and Brandon, 2001, Roche, 2004).

As Hoggart (1998:63) concludes, “what are called the classics or the canon are not selected by ‘the elitists’ just to show their superiority. They survive because some people in each generation find important enquiries into the business of being human in them, what we do right to call lasting or even universal qualities”.

6.6 Conclusion

Having concluded earlier in the study that there can be ‘quality’ independent of personal opinion, no consensus could be reached amongst participants on the validity of expertise. While many supported the need for objective standards of quality agreed upon by ‘experts’, many also questioned this idea.

The rise of relativism and the movement of literature towards a vast, even plain means the need for a ‘canon’ is greater than ever. The criteria identified in the literature review have a lot in common with the ‘quality’ criteria identified by participants, universality being the most important.

Chapter Seven: Public Libraries and Reader Development

This chapter sets the debates explored in this study in the context of public library policy and reader development. It explores changing and conflicting views of the role of the public library, examines the attitudes behind stock selection policy, and investigates views of participants to examples of library-based and media-based reading promotions.

7.1 The Role of the Public Library

The public library has many roles. Today it is considered largely for its information provision and leisure roles but there is some emphasis on its role in literacy and education. As one librarian summed up,

Really the public library's got three strands –educational, which covers the literacy aspect, the leisure which obviously reader development comes into that as well, and the cultural aspect as well, providing the books that different members of our community want to read. So, I think fiction comes into all of those categories.

Amongst the benefits of public libraries today are empowerment through access to information and knowledge, and improvement of literacy through provision of a safe, comfortable and approachable arena for adult learning and reading (Coalter, 2001, Goulding, 2002, Holden, 2004). Most library staff interviewed felt that their role was increasingly access provision and reaching out to a wider audience,

We can't set ourselves up as gatekeepers for everybody and that's not the purpose of the librarian, it's to provide as much access to as much as possible.

However, one interviewee was concerned that the educational role of the library is being overlooked in the drive towards widening access,

I'm all for social inclusion. The question we have to ask is 'what are we including people in?' ...if you turn a library into a nursery or a play centre, is that the main function of the library?

The social and cultural impact of public libraries should not be underestimated either, and in the drive for higher usage figures and a wider user base this aspect of the service should not be overlooked (Coalter, 2001, McKee, 1992). In trying to get more users in and increase usage figures libraries are suffering from “a curious mix of populism and political correctness” (McKee, 1992:38).

It may not always be possible to balance the entertainment and educational roles of the public library and sometimes priorities must be decided,

*As a chief librarian what you have to say if I've got a finite amount of money what is my major role?...if you have a choice between buying another 1000 copies of *The Da Vinci Code* or a few copies of a Booker prize winning novel I think at some point we have to say 'what is the role of the library?'*

This view is echoed by Robert Hutchison (1992:13) who claims that “books can be loosely divided into two classes, the books of the hour and the books of all time” and suggests while public libraries should provide both the balance should be tipped in favour of the latter. On this issue there were starkly contrasting views with one public librarian interviewed saying,

We're in the leisure library business...so we've got to provide the things they want to read.

Another said,

If you take my view that [the role of the library] is to give people the opportunity to come into contact with the best then you have to make sure that criteria is met first, is given priority.

7.2 Stock Selection

It appears that whatever issues the quality debate may raise it has had little impact on those responsible for stock selection. As far back as 1978 financial pressures lead many librarians to err on the side of caution buying only those books which they were confident would return high issue figures (Day, 1978).

Libraries need to stock a variety of fiction as readers have book preferences and are not likely to change (Ross, 2001). Most library staff interviewed admitted stock selection was dominated by trying to please their existing readers and was driven by a notion of what these readers liked,

If there's a pair of clogs and a shawl on the front we think 'oh yes, we have to buy forty copies' and it's true. If there's a submarine or a ship on the front it will go out, it's true, because that's what people want to read.

Judgement was made more in terms of what the readers would like than in terms of quality,

There is discrimination but less on grounds of 'quality' and more on the grounds of 'my readers' and their view of what their readers would like to read.

Libraries are increasingly called upon to justify the existence of their collections according to financial criteria and issue figures (Baker, 2002, Stoker, 1992). This was reflected in the responses of participants, for whom issue figures appear to be a major factor,

Sometimes I'll think 'maybe I won't get many issues out of this' so I'll err on the side of caution.

Education, literacy, social inclusion are all government objectives but usage has got to be important too.

All librarians interviewed were keen to stress the importance of keeping value-judgements out of stock selection,

I think to a certain degree you should try to keep value judgements out and you should look at it and go ‘will this book work?’ ‘how well will it work?’ ...and if it’s going to work well ‘how many copies do we need?’ So are we satisfied that people are going to want to read it?

Interestingly, one interviewee also felt that there was reverse discrimination by stock selectors regarding quality, or highly regarded literature,

There is a certain amount of anti-intellectualism. Stock selectors can be turned off by anything they think is too highbrow or demanding for their readership.

This “anti-intellectualism” was present in some of the stock selectors interviewed and was also identified in previous studies (Choules, 1994, Hemsley, 2003)

It may be that these selectors are unnecessarily lowering their standards and that there is demand for quality literature (Murray, 2000, Usherwood, 2005a, Usherwood, 2005b, Williams, 2005). As Lord Reith, former Director of the BBC said, “he who prides himself on giving what he thinks the public wants is often creating a fictitious demand for lower standards, which he will then satisfy” (Murray, 2000:60).

7.3 Promoting Reading

The letters page of ‘Update’ has in recent months played host to a debate about the usefulness and validity of the reader development approach to reading promotion. Some are of the opinion that reader development is about empowerment and widening tastes (Case and Weatherly, 2005, Van Riel, 2005) others (May, 2005, Rooney, 2005,) consider it to be “intrusive and patronising manipulation” (Rooney, 2005:20).

Now, in an age of soundbites and visual images, with increasingly busy lifestyles and ever shorter attention spans (De Kerckhove, 1998) there are criticisms that many public services and educational establishments are ‘dumbing-down’ (Furedi, 2004, Hoggart, 1998, Usherwood, 2005a, 2005b, Williams, 2005) in an attempt to maintain their popularity and appeal to the ‘masses’.

Some are questioning this purely customer-driven approach (Furedi, 2004, Gingell and Brandon, 2001) and the selling off of reserve collections to make way for modern, popular community and user-focused collections is a trend that worries many (Hoggart, 1998, Stoker, 1992, West, 1991).

7.3.1 Reader Development

Public libraries can stimulate the creative process through serendipity, by encouraging browsing and introducing an element of “randomness” (Holden, 2004) to the way they present their collections (Holden, 2004, Van Riel, 1993). Leeds public libraries organise some of their books by colour (Holden, 2004) and Van Riel would like to see “a romance promotion which put *Jane Eyre*, Anita Brookner and versions of *Romeo and Juliet* among the Mills and Boon” (Van Riel, 1993).

The reaction amongst participants to both these examples was generally negative. Some participants expressed concern at the idea behind such promotions, one referring to it as “a bit evangelical”,

I sort of take the point that it's good to get folk to read diversely and so on but there's also something to be said for if people who are regular library users and are quite happy reading what they're reading maybe they don't want to change.

If they've read from that library for ten years then probably by themselves they're going to try something else at some point and if they don't then they clearly don't want to you know... and it's no bad reflection on them if they don't.

Some people read six Mills and Boon every time and will keep doing so for the rest of their lives.

A minority of participants took the view espoused by Furedi (2004), Gingell and Brandon (2001) and Hoggart (1998) that what the person reads is of importance, that in fact not many make the transition from ‘trash’ to great literature on their own. Most readers don’t progress upwards, “they go round and round” (Hoggart, 1998:63) and continue to read the same kind of books with the same formula.

Amongst criteria for a good read some respondents said they liked to learn something from a book,

I like to read stuff where I actually come out feeling like I’ve learned something.

Some (Ross, 2001, Singleton, 1999) say it doesn’t matter whether readers get this from genre fiction such as formulaic thrillers and romances, or from Booker prize winners and James (1992) suggests that readers will progress from basic reading to something more demanding.

Some participants agreed that any reading is better than no reading,

I think the benefits of just reading words, whatever form they take (Mills & Boon, Magazines, back of cereal packets), are underestimated and that literacy and vocabulary, in general, are improved by reading anything at all.

However, some participants also felt that the reality of peoples’ abilities required a basic and unambitious approach,

I think this utopian world where everybody reads what might be described as ‘quality’ stuff is just...it just isn’t on.

They also felt that in practice such promotions wouldn't succeed in widening peoples' reading habits, just in confusing them,

I can imagine a Mills and Boon reader suddenly coming across Jane Eyre and finding it quite a challenge and bringing it back.

There was also evidence from some of the participants' own experiences of library collections becoming ghettoised, not liberated, by reading promotions,

This past week I went into Sheffield Library and they have got a 'Womens' Collection' ...and I picked up three books that I don't think should be there...men should be reading them. Jennifer Johnston. Barbara Kingsolver...it was ghettoising books that they thought women should read and I disliked that, a man wouldn't go over to something called a 'Womens' Collection'.

This approach can also lead to the alienation of existing library users. One male participant said,

I saw these posters saying 'men reading gladly' and I felt a bit insulted. I've been a man reading gladly for over thirty years and had never given it any thought but this made me think 'so, what's unusual about me, why is being a man reading gladly such an odd thing?'

Despite this scepticism some participants were sympathetic to the aims of reader development,

A big collection of books can be daunting to readers so promotions and reader development can be good at helping them choose what to read and in broadening their tastes.

The criticisms from these participants were aimed at the way it is done. One interviewee urged caution and expressed that it is crucial reader development is done sensitively and gently,

I don't mind signing up to the idea that people should be stretched but I don't think they should be bullied into it... you talk them into it by saying perhaps try this, or 'you might like this'...one shouldn't look down on someone who feels that they can't cope with a large chunk of literary heritage.

The same interviewee went on to suggest that some of the problem may lie in the term 'reader development', a view corroborated by another interviewee, in that it implies some aim towards the improvement of the reader rather than the explanation offered by Rachel Van Riel that reader development is about "opening up reading choices" (Van Riel, 2005). Another interviewee agreed with this approach but, again, urged that it must be done well,

If it's done well with the right sort of person and the right kind of atmosphere I'm quite happy for people to open doors for me.

7.3.2 Media-Based Promotions

When asked to consider the impact of media promotions, especially the BBC 'Big Read' (BBC, 2003) and Richard and Judy's Book Club (Richard and Judy, 2005), interviewees responded positively,

They've not tuned in to watch a book programme, they've tuned in to watch Richard and Judy...so I feel that Richard and Judy have actually tapped in to a different part of the market.

It's made [reading] fashionable again.

One interviewee did point out that there is judgement on the part of Richard and Judy and that this judgement, while it does wonders for highlighting new and lesser known novelists, is exclusive in that there are many good books which won't get the same level of recognition.

Other interviewees felt the popularity of reading might be less to do with these promotions and more to do with the growth of popular fiction,

Now it's trendy to read Harry Potter on the train isn't it!

I wonder if it's so much [Richard and Judy] or the Big Read or whether it's actually Harry Potter and the Da Vinci Code

While reading promotions such as the Big Read and Watershed Fiction were supported by all the interviewees, a few focus group members felt the results were a little too obvious claiming,

I took part in a session for the 'Watershed Fiction' and was really disappointed. People took either really obvious choices such as 'Rebecca' and 'Jane Eyre' or fairly tacky romances which were important to them because they'd helped them through difficult times. I didn't think that was what it was supposed to be about.

Another focus group participant said of the BBC 'Big Read':

You look at the list and you think 'well that's totally obvious, I could have guessed it from the start'. People make safe, obvious choices they know everyone else will agree with. To me it seems like lazy thinking.

However, while the Big Read may not have involved in-depth debate or highlighted obscure masterpieces, it did bring into the limelight many 'classics' (Clifford, 2003, Greer, 2004) and the overall benefit of these kind of promotions has been to raise the profile of books and reading.

7.4 Conclusion

The role of public libraries is in a state of flux and there is a lack of agreement about which aspects take priority. Stock selection attitudes suggest that libraries are leaning more towards access provision rather than collection-building

and that issue figures and giving readers what makes them happy are the most important considerations.

Attitudes to reader development and book promotions were similarly mixed with many expressing the view that reader development was either a bad idea, or a good idea implemented in an ineffective, misleading and perhaps patronising way.

Libraries are in a great position to precipitate the serendipitous pursuit of knowledge and the informal exploration of cultures and ideas past and present. To neglect this role would be a major failing. While public libraries do have an important role to play in literacy and social inclusion they must not lose sight of their role as protectors, and perhaps promoters, of culture. By this is meant 'high culture' in which 'quality literature' is included.

Chapter Eight: Conclusions and Recommendations

In section 1.6 the aims and objectives of this study were outlined and the key research questions listed. This conclusion answers those questions directly and makes some recommendations for further study.

What constitutes a ‘good read’?

A good read is fundamentally a book which fulfils a reader’s individual criteria. This is determined by their needs and moods and different people look for different traits in a good read.

Are there any criteria for determining if a book can be termed a ‘good read’?

It was possible from the focus groups to identify a list of criteria applied to a ‘good read’. A good plot that holds the reader’s attention and believable characterisation were considered the most important aspects. The fact that opinion varied on these characteristics highlights the subjectivity of defining a good read.

Are there any criteria for determining if a book can be termed a ‘quality read’?

Is a ‘good read’ different from a ‘quality read’?

A good read is different from a quality read and different criteria are applied for each. For example, plot is very important to a good read but can be hindered by too many ideas and too much internal monologue. However, for a quality read ideas and the life of the mind are considered of utmost importance, more so than plot. The feature which was most widely considered to be important to quality literature was ‘universality’ but this was not considered important in discussing a good read.

Are ‘fiction’ and ‘literature’ different? If so, how do we decide?

As a good read and a quality read can be separated there needs to be a clarification of terminology. This study decided, in reference to the research question, to call them ‘fiction’ and ‘literature’, two different reads for different purposes, different readers and different needs.

Although criteria were offered in this study on which a distinction can be made between fiction and literature it is not an easy distinction to make. Differences in participants' interpretations of excerpts and their contrasting views on the quality of certain writers demonstrated this.

Can there be such thing as 'expert opinion' in literature? Can there be such thing as a 'canon' in literature?

If there is to be such thing as quality literature some form of objective judgement needs to be made. This is done by 'experts'. Participants acknowledged the need for objective quality criteria but some were sceptical about experts.

There is a great need for a literary canon due to the vast amounts of literature around today, though this does make it harder to create. Expertise and canon creation can involve some subjectivity and contextual bias which brings their legitimacy into question. However, it is important that 'experts' endeavour to create them and to single out works of universal relevance and lasting quality of use to this generation and to others.

What are the views of the reading public to these issues?

The research results are notable for the wide range of opinions represented. The only issue on which there was a strong consensus was that reading is highly subjective. This is representative of the subjectivity and relativism dominant in our culture today.

A minority of participants applied absolute subjectivity to all the issues raised. However, most accepted the need for objective standards of quality. The wide range of opinion was mostly in response to creating criteria for a quality read and on discussing the quality of various authors and textual extracts.

Responses to examples of innovative reader development ideas were met with optimism by most of the interviewees and scepticism by most of the focus group participants. This was the only occasion on which the two main sets of participants differed strongly.

What implications do these findings have for public library policy and reader development?

Public libraries are right to stock a wide range of books to fulfil a variety of tastes and needs but in ignoring the distinction between quality literature and a good read they are making a grave error. There was a wide range of views on this issue from the participants and while many supported the idea of blurring boundaries many felt it was open to confusion and abuse. Many felt that readers are capable of assessing their own needs and tastes and of finding what they want by themselves. Some want only Shakespeare, others want only Mills and Boon, and these are fixed and private habits.

There were also suggestions that anti-intellectualism and the pressure of usage statistics meant fewer titles that might be termed 'literature' were bought. While popular titles are important this trend raises concerns that public libraries are losing sight of their duty to ensure that everyone has access to 'high' culture and 'quality' literature (Hoggart, 1998, James, 1992, Usherwood, 2005a, 2005b).

The public library should endeavour to entertain and educate but also to preserve cultural and literary heritage. As it is impossible to fulfil all these roles and to satisfy all the people all of the time the emphasis should be on the latter role. G.K. Chesterton observes, "literature and fiction are two different things, literature is a luxury, fiction a necessity" (James, 1992:2). However, as P.D. James suggests, it may be the other way around.

Areas for Further Study

- 1) Look in more depth at the concept of a 'canon', outlining its history and looking at different canons.
- 2) Examine the role of the public library in light of the cultural debate.
- 3) Examine the factors affecting stock selection in public libraries, especially at the pressures of budgets and usage figures.
- 4) Focus on a particular author or genre and undertake a quantitative and qualitative survey. For example, look at how many Henry James novels are stocked by public libraries, whether their usage figures are high or low, and examine library staff and readers' attitudes to Henry James.
- 5) Investigate the book group phenomenon, looking at what makes people form book groups, what kind of books they read, and why so many book groups tend to be single gender.
- 6) Investigate the prevalence of 'anti-intellectualism' in cultural establishments, especially the public library, and assess the views of library staff towards the notion of 'high culture'.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

Project: **What, if anything, distinguishes ‘a good read’ from ‘literature’? An investigation into the roles of quality and enjoyment in reading.**

Researcher: **Abigail Phillips**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the project?

This research is being undertaken as part of an MA in Librarianship at the University of Sheffield. In-depth research has already taken place. It is now necessary, on the basis on findings from this research, to gain a view of the opinions of the reading public and of various professionals involved with fiction.

The focus of the research

The concept of quality in literature is at the heart of many heated debates regarding reader development and stock selection in public libraries. It is intended that through interviews different aspects of these questions will be considered.

What will I have to do?

I will ask a few general questions and some specific to your professional role. These will provide a basis for informal discussion of the issues raised. The interviews can be conducted face-to-face, via telephone or via e-mail.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

Any face-to-face interviews will be recorded. However, the names of the participants will be kept anonymous. Transcripts of interviews may be included in the appendices of the dissertation.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The results will be collated and the findings woven into the dissertation. Some direct quotations may be included but these will remain anonymous.

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Project: **What, if anything, distinguishes ‘a good read’ from ‘literature’? An investigation into the roles of quality and enjoyment in reading.**

Researcher: **Abigail Phillips**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis.

4. I agree to take part in the above project.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix C: Bookcrossing Forum Post

Quality literature?

I'm writing a dissertation about the concept of 'quality' literature and 'a good read' and I thought I'd sound out my fellow bookcrossers to get some views on the issue (don't worry, I won't quote anyone by name).

Here are some questions I'm considering, feel free to give me your views on any or all of them.

1. What defines a 'good read'? Think back to books you've especially enjoyed and ask yourself why.
2. Is there such a thing as 'quality' in literature? Can we say that 'Great Expectations' is better than 'The Da Vinci Code'? If we make a distinction, how can we justify it?
3. Where does genre fiction fit into this? Are some genres more 'worthy' than others?
4. Does the concept of expertise apply to literature? If scholars and critics value a book does this make it quality literature? We respect the opinions of experts in, say, physics, so why not in literature?
5. Is a 'good read' necessarily the same thing as 'quality' literature? Is it possible to respect a book as great literature but still hate it and to love a book which you accept is of lesser quality?

Appendix D: Focus Group Profiles

Focus Group A (Pilot Group): This group consisted of six participants. Four were female and two male. Their ages ranged from 23 to 56. They were all known to the researcher and to each other. Some were university educated, but two were not. All claimed to be keen readers. The group took place at the researcher's home.

Focus Group B: This group was conducted in a pub and consisted of half men and half women. There were six participants. Some of the people involved read quite a lot, others read rarely.

Focus Group C: This was an existing readers' group run by a local librarian. There were seven participants. All participants were female. Their educational and socio-economic backgrounds were varied. The group took place in the home of a group member.

Focus Group D: This group was an existing book group. There were five participants. It consisted of all women, all from well-educated, middle class backgrounds. The group took place in the home of a group member.

Focus Group E: This group was made up of students from the University of Sheffield. There were seven participants. All were in their 20s or 30s and there were two male participants. Their reading habits varied with some describing themselves as keen readers, others as occasional readers. The group took place at the City View Café at Sheffield University.

Appendix E: Focus Group Questions

Question 1: "With help from the group, draw up a list of things that make a book a 'good read'. You have five minutes."

Question 2: "Is there such thing as 'quality literature'? Can we say that 'Great Expectations' is *better* than 'The Da Vinci Code'?"

Sub-question: "If we make this distinction, how can we justify it?"

Question 3: "Is a 'good read' necessarily the same as 'quality literature'?"

Sub-question: "Is it possible to respect a book as great literature but still dislike it and to love a book which you accept is of lesser quality?"

Question 4: "Is reading a subjective activity?"

Sub-question: Do you think that if fifty different people read the same book there will be fifty different opinions of it and fifty different reading experiences?”

Question 5: “Does the concept of expertise apply to literature? If scholars and critics value a book does this make it quality literature?”

Sub-question: “We respect the opinions of experts in physics, is it similar in literature?”

Question 6: “Would you like to see in your library ‘a romance promotion which put *Jane Eyre*, Anita Brookner and versions of *Romeo and Juliet* among the Mills and Boon?””

Sub-question: “One public library recently began to shelve books by their colour rather than by author or genre. Is this a good idea?”

Appendix F: Focus Group Exercise –Book Extracts

The participants were asked to get into pairs or threes. Each was given a pair of excerpts from books. Though the book titles and authors are given here the excerpts were anonymous during the exercise and the participants were only informed afterwards.

The excerpts were presented in pairs i.e. A and B, C and D, etc. Each pair contained a book that might be considered ‘quality’ by reputation and one which was lesser known and less well regarded. Each pair also had some basic similarities e.g. both romance, both contain description of atmosphere and surroundings, both in first person and autobiographical.

Participants were asked to decide which of the extracts they considered better quality and why and to consider which extract they would rather read and why.

Extract A

I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more...On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in that benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. Soothsayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicians ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without a say in the matter. I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon, had become heavily embroiled in Fate—at the best of times a dangerous sort of involvement. And I couldn't even wipe my own nose at the time.

(Salman Rushdie 'Midnight's Children').

For more information see Rushdie, 1995 and Wikipedia 2005b.

Extract B

Here's the thing: for a long time I, Matt Beckford, had been looking forward to turning thirty. I'd been looking forward to the day when, by the power of thirty, I'd own a wine rack that actually contained wine. Not much of an ambition you might think and you'd probably be right, but then again you're not me. You see, in my world, when a bottle of wine enters it's usually consumed in its entirety in anything from twenty minutes (on a rough day) to twenty-four hours (on a not-so-rough day). This is not because I'm an alcoholic (not quite yet) but is simply due to a liking for wine combined with the fact that I have no self-control whatsoever. So what's my

point? Well, the point is this (stay with it): wine racks by their very nature are designed to hold more than one bottle of wine. Some can hold six. Some can hold twelve. It doesn't really matter. What does matter are the big questions raised by the existence and desire for ownership of wine racks:

- 1) Who can actually afford to buy twelve bottles of wine in one go?
- 2) Who (assuming that they can afford it) would have twelve bottles of wine in the house, come in from a hard day at work and resist the temptation to consume the lot?
- 3) Who thinks that wine racks are a good idea anyway?

(Mike Gayle 'Turning Thirty').

For more information see Gayle, 2000 and Gayle, 2005.

Extract C

Cold –despite the heavy flying-suit and the fact he'd only been off the ground about twenty minutes. But –December, for heaven's sake –with the sun barely up, and only high enough over the Dover Strait to spread a smeary, pinkish glow on the close-packed roofs of Eastbourne, most of which was abaft the beam to port now, and flush the frosted slopes of Beachy Head, beyond and around which the sea's glitter was visible only through gaps between drifting banks of mist. A thousand feet was too high, he decided: if there was a U-boat down there –not that there would be within at least five miles, on account of shallows: the Head Edge to start with and then shallow patches as well as a whole litter of wrecks –but except for *those* hazards the bugger would be safe as houses.

(Alexander Fullerton 'Flight to Mons').

For more information see *Fantastic Fiction*, 2005 and Fullerton, 2003.

Extract D

Already it was deep summer on roadhouse roofs and in front of wayside garages, where new red petrol-pumps sat out in pools of light and when I reached my estate at West Egg I ran the car under its shed and sat for a while on an abandoned grass roller in the yard. The wind had blown off, leaving a loud, bright night, with wings beating in the trees and a persistent organ sound as the full bellows of the earth blew the frogs full of life. The silhouette of a moving cat wavered across the moonlight, and, turning my head to watch it, I saw that I was not alone –fifty feet away a figure had emerged from the shadow of my neighbour’s mansion and was standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars.

(F. Scott Fitzgerald ‘The Great Gatsby’).

For more information see Fitzgerald, 2000 and Gaveart, 1998.

Extract E

Again, as he kissed me, painful thoughts darkened his aspect.

“My seared vision! My crippled strength!” he murmured regretfully.

I caressed, in order to soothe him. I knew of what he was thinking, and wanted to speak for him, but dared not. As he turned aside his face a minute, I saw a tear slide from under the sealed eyelid, and trickle down the manly cheek. My heart swelled.

“I am no better than the old lightning-struck chestnut-tree in Thornfield orchard,” he remarked ere long. “And what right would that ruin have to bid a budding woodbine to cover its decay with freshness?”

“You are no ruin, sir –no lightning-struck tree: you are green and vigorous. Plants will grow about your roots, whether you ask them or not, because they take delight in

your bountiful shadow; and as they grow they will lean towards you, and wind round you, because your strength offers them so safe a prop.”

Again he smiled: I gave him comfort.

“You speak of friends, Jane?” he asked.

“Yes, of friends,” I answered, rather hesitatingly: for I knew I meant more than friends, but could not tell what other word to employ. He helped me.

“Ah! Jane. But I want a wife.”

“Do you, sir?”

“Yes: is it news to you?”

“Of course: you said nothing about it before.”

“Is it unwelcome news?”

“That depends on circumstances, sir –on your choice.”

“Which you shall make for me, Jane. I will abide by your decision.”

“Choose then, sir –*her who loves you best.*”

“I will at least choose –*her I love best.* Jane, will you marry me?”

(Charlotte Bronte, ‘Jane Eyre’).

For more information see Bronte, 2000 and Wikipedia 2005a.

Extract F

He reached the window and turned to pace back to the other side of the room, but after only two steps he spotted one of her shoes. Zach bent, picked up the red sandal and sat on the edge of his bed. He stared at the tiny shoe, turning it around and around in his hand. How did women walk in these things? It had a three-inch heel and was nothing more than a couple of straps and a thin sole.

The corners of his mouth twitched. It sure was sexy, though. The silvery innersole bore the impression of her toes, and he smiled wider this time, remembering the sassy red nail polish on them. When she had come sashaying down those stairs in

that swirly red dress and these little-bit-of-nothing shoes it had been all he could do not to ravish her on the spot.

He'd never felt this way about a woman before. He was crazy about her, and she was tying him in knots.

Zach sighed and rubbed his thumb back and forth over one of the red straps.

“Dammit, Willa, why won't you marry me?”

(Ginna Gray 'The Ties that Bind').

For more information see Gray, 2002 and Gray, 2005.

Extract G

After showering, I studied myself in the bathroom mirror, much as I would a stranger on the street. What I saw was a middle-aged woman with a delicate nose and cheekbones, starburst wrinkling at the corners of the eyes, jawline holding firm. Chicken pox scar above the left brow. Asymmetric dimples.

I brushed bangs from my forehead and did a two-handed tuck behind my ears. My hair was fine, blonde turned brown now galloping toward gray. I'd always coveted my younger sister's thick blonde hair. Sprays and volumizing gels never entered Harry's thoughts, while I'd spent thousands on mousse alone.

(Kathy Reichs 'Grave Secrets').

For more information see Reichs, 2002 and Reichs, 2005.

Extract H

At first I didn't see what the trouble was. It wasn't a mirror at all, but a picture.

You couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person's face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to sallow yellow. The person's mouth was pale brown, with a rose-coloured sore at either corner.

The most startling thing about the face was its supernatural conglomeration of bright colours.

I smiled.

The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin.

(Sylvia Plath 'The Bell Jar').

For more information see Plath, 1966 and Wikipedia, 2005c.

Appendix G: Books Deemed a 'Good Read' by Focus Group Participants

At the start of each focus group participants introduced to the group a book which they considered to be a 'good read'. This is a list of the books they brought. It also includes the 'good read' suggestions of the interviewees. All were nominated only once unless stated otherwise in brackets.

Adams, D.	'The Hitch Hikers' Guide to the Galaxy'.
Atkinson, K.	'Case Histories'.
Austen, J.	'Persuasion'.
Brown, D.	'The Da Vinci Code'.
Chang, J.	'Wild Swans'.*

Collins, W.	‘The Woman in White’.
Faulks, S.	‘Birdsong’.
Forster, M.	‘The Memory Box’.
Golding, W.	‘Rights of Passage’.
Green, J.	‘The Other Woman’.
Haddon, M.	‘The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time’.
Hamilton, P.	‘Hangover Square’.
Harris, J.	‘Chocolat’ (x2) ‘Five Quarters of the Orange’.
Hawes, A.	‘Extra Virgin’.*
Hollinghurst, A.	‘The Line of Beauty’
Irving, J.	‘A Prayer for Owen Meany’.
Kingsolver, B.	‘Animal Dreams’. ‘The Poisonwood Bible’ (x2)
Marquez, G. Garcia	‘Love in a Time of Cholera’ ‘One Hundred Years of Solitude’
Marshall, M.	‘The Straw Man’.
O’Connor, J.	‘The Star of the Sea’
Priest, C.	‘The Glamour’
Pullman, P.	‘The Amber Spyglass’ ‘The Northern Lights’
Radcliffe, Z.	‘The Killers’ Guide to Iceland’.
Roy, A.	‘The God of Small Things’.
Saunders, G.	‘Pastoralia’.
Sebold, A.	‘The Lovely Bones’.
Seth, V.	‘A Suitable Boy’.
Shreve, A.	‘Fortune’s Rocks’.
Smith, A. McCall	‘The Kalahari Typing School for Men’ ‘The No.1 Ladies’ Detective Agency’ ‘The 2½ Pillars of Wisdom’.
Welsh, I.	‘Trainspotting’.

*Non-fiction

Appendix H: Interviewee Profiles

1. Two employees of a public library authority, one involved in stock selection, the other involved in stock selection and reader development.
2. A freelance 'Library Consultant' and former Director of Library Services.
3. A freelance reading promoter, involved heavily with children and schools.
4. Experienced book group organiser and reviewer for a book group magazine.
5. A Senior Librarian at the largest library in a London Borough responsible for stock selection, reader development, lifelong learning strategy and services for children and young people.
6. A former Chief Librarian with vast experience in stock selection and library management.
7. Principal Librarian responsible for stock selection and reader development in a public library authority.

Appendix I: Interview Questions

Each interview consisted of 10 questions selected from this list of 13. The questions varied according to the professional role of each interviewee.

Question 1: What is your current job and what does it involve?

Sub-question: Describe yourself as a professional/Outline your career to date.

Question 2: What defines a 'good read'?

Sub-question: Can you think of any books you particularly enjoyed and why?

Question 3: Is there such thing as 'quality literature'?

Sub-question: Can we say that ‘Great Expectations’ is better than ‘The Da Vinci Code’? If we make this distinction, how can we justify it?

Question 4: Is a ‘good read’ necessarily the same as ‘quality literature’?

Sub-question: Is it possible to respect a book as great literature but still dislike it and to love a book which you accept is of lesser quality?

Question 5: Does the concept of expertise apply to literature?

Sub-questions: If scholars and critics value a book does this make it quality literature? We respect the opinions of experts in, say, physics, so why not in literature?

Question 6: Is reading a subjective activity?

Sub-question: Do you think that if 50 different people read the same book there will be 50 different opinions of it and 50 different reading experiences?

Question 7: Why is promoting reading of such great importance to public libraries?

Sub-question: Is it about educating people and improving literacy, is it about social inclusion, or is it simply about getting more people through the doors and improving issue figures?

Question 8: When selecting book stock which of the following methods do you use:

Short lists (and long lists) of prizes such as the Booker, magazines such as ‘The Bookseller’, user feedback?

Question 9: Is it difficult to keep value judgements out of stock selection?

Sub-question: Do you think it is necessary to keep out such judgements?

Question 10: How do you respond to criticisms of reader development by those who consider it to be patronising and intrusive?

Question 11: Rachel Van Riel would like to see “a romance promotion which put *Jane Eyre*, Anita Brookner and versions of *Romeo and Juliet* among the Mills and Boon” (Public Library Journal, 1993). Do you agree with this approach?

Question 12: In your experience, what are the most effective (and least effective) ways of promoting books and reading in public libraries?

Question 13: What impact do you think media promotions such as ‘The Big Read’ and Richard and Judy’s Book Club have had on the popularity of reading and do you think there should be more such projects?