

The impact of reader's block on reading groups

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Abstract

Background

The concept of reader's block reflects the cultural anxiety which surrounds our choice of reading material. Reader's block describes the difficulties that are encountered in reading a critically-acclaimed or canonical work and the pressure to persevere with them, despite the fact that little enjoyment is being gained in reading these books. Tied into this is also the issue of choice which faces readers in selecting books from the ever-increasing number of published books. Consequently, readers are in need of more guidance than ever and book prizes, book lists and literary canons provide this direction for readers.

Aims

The aim of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of reader's block, its prevalence amongst members of reading groups and any strategies which may be adopted to combat reader's block. In addition to this, the study also explored whether reader's block affected their reading habits and attitudes towards reading.

Methods

This study took a qualitative approach and the two methods of primary data collection utilised were semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The semi-structured interviews were carried out with four members of library staff in Sheffield public libraries who were involved with organising or running reading groups in public libraries. The focus groups were conducted with four reading groups; three of which were based in a Sheffield public library and one was a workplace-based reading group (who also acted as the pilot group). An extensive literature search spanning library and information science, literary and cultural theory was conducted in order to provide a theoretical framework.

Results

This study found that participants identified with one or more of the aspects of reader's block: not finishing, cultural anxiety and problems with choosing reading material. For most participants, reader's block did not have any adverse effects on reading habits or attitudes towards reading. For some participants, membership of a

reading group proved to be a strategy in combating reader's block; expanding reading horizons and increasing confidence in selection of reading material. Ultimately, the most successful strategy in combating reader's block was developing enough experience in order to confidently give up on books that proved to be challenging or not enjoyable.

Conclusions

The study was successful in fulfilling the key research aims and objectives. Further recommendations for research could include investigating the benefits of reading groups; the skills involved in becoming a reader and the process in which these skills are developed; and the impact of reader's block on individuals who may be classed light to medium readers.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Research context

The term 'reader's block' was coined by Stuart Jeffries (2008) in an article he wrote for *The Guardian* which in turn inspired the idea for this proposed dissertation. The notion of reader's block reflects the anxiety which surrounds the cultural value of our reading material. Reader's block also describes the difficulties that readers encounter in reading a critically-lauded or canonical book and the pressure to persevere with reading such books, even despite the fact that readers may not actively enjoy the process of reading them. In a survey of 4000 readers, it was reported that one-third reported reading 'challenging literature' to appear well-read despite being unable to follow the book. (National Literacy Trust, 2009)

Is reader's block symptomatic of a more widespread cultural problem? Clearly, the UK is a nation of readers, more than 100,000 books are published in the UK annually (London Book Fair, 2009); the UK consumer book market is valued at £2,578 million (Book Marketing Ltd., 2007); and book sales have steadily been on the increase since 2001 (Teather, 2007). Despite this, cultural debates surrounding books and reading still centre around notions of highbrow and lowbrow in a way which is absent from (or certainly less pronounced in) other popular cultural forms such as cinema, television and music. Does this distinction between a 'good read' and 'quality literature' impact on how reading for pleasure is perceived?

The author Nick Hornby (2006 : 5) has commented that "If reading books is to survive as a leisure activity - and there are statistics which show that this is by no means assured - then we have to promote the joys of reading, rather than the (dubious) benefits." Certainly, previous research has shown that the benefits of reading extend beyond literacy. Reading for pleasure can aid in developing sophisticated communication, interpersonal and teamworking skills as mental health and wellbeing (Krashen, 1993; Brewster, 2009). The author, Mark Haddon (Love Libraries, 2008) argues that "The local library service is the NHS for the imagination" and in light of existing research, it is hard to disagree with his statement.

Recent years has seen a significant increase in reader development research. The growth of this area of research coincides with an increasing interest in reader-centred theories of reading. For practitioners, the impact of reader development research can be far-reaching and hugely influential as the Opening the Book (2009a) initiative has shown. The emphasis on “opening up reading choices” in reader development is particularly relevant to the concept of reader’s block (Opening the Book, 2009b). Faced with such a vast and dizzying array of choice, it is easy to see why critically lauded works become a fall-back, reflex choice for readers. However, the signposting of books as markers of literary excellence doesn’t necessarily dovetail with the readability or pleasurable qualities of a book.

This tension between the readability of a book and the work’s literary value is central to the cultural anxiety which lies behind reader’s block. Being able to successfully choose reading material requires a discrete set of skills which are often equated with literacy skills. Successful reading choices start with knowing what you want and whilst this may sound obvious, it is certainly not ubiquitous.

Being able to make successful choices also is also partially informed by cultural knowledge. For those readers who are lost amidst the wealth of choice available to them recommendations, booklists and book prizes, which are frequently disseminated in the mainstream media, may act as an guide. This cultural anxiety has not escaped books themselves either, with two successful and acclaimed titles addressing this issue published in recent years: *How To Talk About Books You Haven’t Read* by Pierre Bayard (2007) and *How Read A Novel: A User’s Guide* by John Sutherland (2007).

1.2. Research aims and objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate the prevalence and underlying causes of reader’s block on members of reading groups. The objectives for this study are to:

- investigate participants’ experience of reader’s block

- investigate the impact of reader's block on reading group participation, reading habits and attitudes towards reading
- explore the role of cultural anxiety in reader's block
- investigate the influences on book selection
- investigate ways of combating reader's block

1.3. Significance of research

This study is located within the library and information science (LIS) field of reader development research and it relates to pre-existing research and previous dissertations undertaken by students. The central concept of this study, reader's block, is under-researched within LIS. Whilst the issues surrounding reader's block, such as reader selection strategies, reader-centred approaches and the benefits of reading groups, have been explored by previous research, this study aims to bring together these disparate strands in order to examine this concept of reader's block.

In gaining a more detailed understanding of the process and importance of choice (in both choosing and abandoning a book), there are potentially practical implications for public libraries and reader development policy in providing reader guidance for library users. However, the main aim was not to establish guidelines, principles or criteria but rather to investigate more thoroughly the issue of reader's block in order to potentially inform other professionals and practitioners in the field of information studies.

1.4. Presentation of study

This study has been split up into thematic chapters, with each one addressing a key aspect of the research question. The findings from the research conducted for this study will be discussed in conjunction with the literature review:

- *Chapter Two* outlines the methodology adopted for this study and discusses in detail the design as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the methods utilised.

- *Chapter Three* is centred around the theme of reading groups and will be discussing the functions and benefits of reading groups.
- *Chapter Four* is an exploration of the role of choice in reading and focuses on reader selection strategies.
- *Chapter Five* examines the central concept of this study, reader's block and looks at the prevalence and underlying causes of this as well as strategies used to combat it.
- *Chapter Six* goes on to examine in further detail one of the underlying causes behind reader's block, cultural anxiety and in particular the role which critically-lauded books plays in our reading lives.
- Finally, *Chapter Seven* summarises and discusses the conclusions of this study as well as further recommendations for research.
- Following these chapters is the complete bibliography of cited works and further relevant literature. The appendices of pertinent data and extra information follow on from the bibliography.

Chapter Two: Methodology

2.1. Qualitative Research Approach

This inductive study utilised qualitative research methodology as the highly subjective nature of individual reading experiences and reader responses cannot be adequately analysed and evaluated in depth using quantitative research methods. Had this study taken a quantitative approach, utilising methods such as questionnaires and quantitative interviews, the resultant data may have been able to reveal details of reading habits across a larger number and wider range of respondents. However due to the more inflexible and structured nature of these methods, the data collected would be uniform in nature which would leave little scope for any unanticipated issues to be addressed. Additionally, the data would lack the detail behind the issues being researched.

Previous studies in this field have revealed that complex processes lie behind reading motivation, reading for pleasure and reader selection strategies. Whilst the nature of qualitative methods means that broad generalisations cannot be made from the resulting data, quantitative approaches would do little to illuminate the more complex nuances of the research question in mind for this study. Additionally, this aim of this small-scale study is not to generate a broad overview of the topic, for which quantitative methods might be more suited.

The primary aim of this study was to conduct an investigation and exploration into a previously under-researched concept. Bryman (2004 : 76) observes that quantitative research is concerned with causality and that explanation rather than examination tend to be the objective. For some of the research objectives, certain responses were anticipated based on results of previous research in the field. Bryman (2004 : 62) notes that quantitative methods are more allied with a deductive approach. However, as there was no overarching hypothesis to be tested it was felt that flexibility would be key in allowing all the relevant issues to be addressed, whether they were anticipated or not. Various unexpected issues and results were found over the course of the study and this was facilitated by the open-ended nature of the qualitative methods utilised.

2.2. Triangulation

Triangulation refers to the research model which is “used to refer to the observation of the research issue from (at least) two different points” (Flick, 2004 : 178). Whilst triangulation can refer to the combination of multiple theoretical frameworks or researchers, it is most commonly employed as a combination of different methodologies. The main aim and strength of triangulation lies in employing multiple research methods aids in compensating for the weaknesses and flaws inherent in each method. As Flick (2004 : 180) observes, “the triangulation of different approaches makes it possible to capture different aspects of the research issue.

This study will employ three methods: focus groups, semi-structured qualitative interviews and a literature review. The focus groups were conducted with reading groups in Sheffield’s public libraries; the interviews with the library staff who organised and led the groups; whilst the literature review will form the theoretical framework of the study.

2.3. Sampling

The sampling methods utilised for this study combine elements of both the snowball sampling method and also convenience sampling. The snowball sampling method relies on the researcher recruiting a small number of initial participants through whom more participants are generated. As this study was conducted with the aid of Sheffield public libraries, the researcher was initially provided with a contact within the library authority who contacted reading groups on behalf of the researcher. Interviewees for the study were generated from the focus groups; the members of library staff who were involved in helping to run or organise the participating reading groups were interviewed.

In total, four reading groups participated in this study; three were public library reading groups and one was a workplace reading group who also served as the pilot study group (See *Appendix A*). In previous dissertations and research on reading groups, it has been noted that reading groups have a tendency towards homogeneity; the majority of reading group members are female, middle-aged and

middle class (Scothern, 2000; Hartley, 2002). The focus group sample for this study comprised of twenty-seven participants, of which only three were male. Four focus groups were conducted in total and of the four groups, two were all-female groups. This correlates with Hartley's (2002 : 25) study which found that all-female groups accounted for sixty-nine percent of participating reading groups.

Of the participating reading groups in this study, two are externally run groups and two are library-based, both of which were all-female groups. The make-up within reading groups which are privately run may be more diverse in terms of gender, age and social class than that of public library run reading groups. Scothern (2000 : 35) suggests that this marked gender difference within reading groups can perhaps be linked to the fact that "more women read and use libraries than men." It is worth noting however that homogeneity and not diversity is the aim with focus group composition as it aids in making participants feel comfortable in sharing and discussing the research topic (Krueger and Casey, 2000; Litosseliti, 2003). In addition to this, the gender, age and social class bias of the research sample ensures that the sample is representative of reading groups.

In total, three interviews were conducted with four participants (see *Appendix A*). The externally run groups did not have one individual who was responsible for the running and organisation of the group, therefore interviewees could not be generated from these focus groups. However, interviewees were generated from the library-based reading groups. One interview was conducted with two participants as the reading group was jointly run by both. A further standalone interview was conducted with a librarian who was responsible for three reading groups, none of whom participated in the study. Once again, the time-restrictions of this study meant that only a small number of interviews were conducted but it is felt that the number of interviews and focus groups are equivalent and suitable for a small-scale study such as this.

2.4. Focus Groups

Focus groups have emerged as an increasingly acceptable and popular method in research in the social sciences. Whilst the technique was originally developed as a

data collection method for commercial organisations, it has been adopted as a valid method in academic research as it can yield large quantities of data in a short amount of time and crucially, the technique places emphasis on the interaction between the participants (Morgan, 1997; Bloor et al, 2001; Litosseliti, 2003). As Litosseliti (2003 : 16) notes: “Focus group research is useful for revealing through interaction the beliefs, attitudes, experiences and feelings of participants, in ways which would not be feasible using other methods such as individual interviews, observation or questionnaires.” For this reason, focus groups represent the primary source of data in this study.

As reading groups will constitute part of the sample for this study, group discussion techniques of data collection would be both appropriate and convenient. As Gorman and Clayton (2005 : 143) note, “a particular advantage of using groups in this way is that a variety of perspectives and explanations may be obtained from a single data-gathering session.” Additionally, the researcher is not only interested in the individual reader’s experiences but also the collective attitudes and experiences of the reading groups and group discussion techniques would be an appropriate and ideal way to explore this.

2.4.1. Strengths and weaknesses of focus groups

Organising, conducting and analysing focus group data is highly time-consuming however the resulting data can be incredibly rich. The most time-consuming aspect of focus groups is recruiting participants for the study as focus groups typically comprise of strangers brought together for the purposes of the study (Morgan, 1997; Greenbaum, 2000; Litosseliti, 2003). However, as this study will be utilising pre-existing groups in the form of reading groups, this time-consuming aspect of the method was minimised.

Whilst on the surface, the focus group technique may seem like a group interview it differs in that the focus group relies on the interaction between the participants whereas group interviews follow the dynamic of one-on-one interviews between the interviewer and interviewee. Morgan (1997 : 2) notes that this interaction produces “data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group.” Resulting data can often be much richer and more detailed as

participants can “share ideas with a peer so that the two of them can build on or argue about a topic being discussed.” (Greenbaum, 2000 : 19). This sense of sharing also extends to the way in which focus groups can explore shared understandings of concepts. This is particularly pertinent in relation to the issues addressed in this study such as attitudes towards cultural constructs such as the literature canon.

As a further counterpoint to qualitative interviews, focus groups “may have an advantage for topics that are either habit-ridden or not thought out in detail” (Morgan, 1997 : 11). Despite the fact that reading groups exist primarily to enable members to share and discuss books, the underlying processes behind reading are rarely explored in reading group discussions. Ideas and concepts which participants may be conscious of are given an opportunity to be articulated:

“the group is a socially legitimated occasion for participants to engage in ‘retrospective introspection’, to attempt collectively to tease out previously taken for granted assumptions.” (Bloor et al., 2001 : 5-6)

One of the disadvantages of focus groups lies in the fact that participants can be influenced by others within the group. Participants may feel inhibited in expressing opinions which conflict with that of other members of the groups. This can also make it difficult to differentiate between the opinion of the group and the individual. In addition to this, participants may feel inclined to provide answers which they feel the researcher is seeking (Morgan, 1997; Litosseliti, 2003). However, unlike interviews, the more limited role of the moderator can help to minimise this danger of bias and manipulation in the data. Additionally, as the focus group participants were already familiar and comfortable with each other this helped to minimise possibilities of participants feeling unable to express conflicting opinions.

Transcription and data analysis of focus groups can also prove to be time-consuming. As focus groups consist of multiple participants, it is recommended practice to record focus group sessions as taking notes is both unfeasible and may prove to be a distraction (Morgan, 1997; Greenbaum, 2000; Krueger and Casey, 2000; Litosseliti, 2003). Transcription of focus group sessions is often a lengthy

process as the recordings feature more than one person speaking. Additionally, focus groups also yield a large amount of data which requires sorting and organising for later analysis.

2.4.2. Advantages and disadvantages of using pre-existing groups

As this study was concerned with reading groups, pre-existing groups were available for use in the research. General practice for focus groups in social research is to recruit a group of homogenous individuals, this has the advantage of giving the researcher a greater degree of control over the variables within the sample. Practitioners of focus groups have noted that using pre-existing groups, whilst minimising one of the more time-consuming aspects of focus group design, does present drawbacks.

Morgan (1997 : 37) notes that the disadvantage of using pre-existing groups is that “although acquaintances can converse more readily, this is often due to their ability to rely on the kind of taken-for-granted assumptions that are exactly what the researcher is trying to investigate.” In the case of this research project, the issue being investigated is a relatively universal topic and the assumptions that Morgan refers to aren’t impenetrable. As a counterpoint to this, Bloor et al (2001 : 5-6) note that focus groups can actually act against these ‘taken-for-granted assumptions’ in that the discussion can help to deconstruct and pick apart these assumptions. The process of actively discussing and reflecting on the research topic can help participants to articulate and think more deeply about these commonly received notions.

The advantage of using acquaintances for focus groups in this research project is that the participants feel comfortable enough with each other to drive the discussion by questioning and responding to each other which aids in generating richer data. Bloor et al (2001 : 23) argue that “pre-existing groups may be advantageous where participation in the group involves disclosure of a potentially stigmatizing condition or status.” Although this research project does not focus on a particularly sensitive topic, reading is a personal activity which is subject to value judgements and the familiarity of participants with each other may help members of the group to feel more comfortable and able to talk more freely.

2.4.3. Focus group design

The focus group questioning route (see *Appendix B*) is based on Krueger's (2000) recommendations that the questions are grouped into thematic sequences, each preceded by a simple opening question. The opening question is designed to help to ease participants into the focus group session by encouraging each member to answer a simple question. By encouraging each participant to talk, an open atmosphere is fostered which helps to facilitate discussion later on in the focus group sessions. The questions for the focus groups were grouped into three thematic sections addressing reader's block, reading choices and cultural influences on reading choices. The questions were open-ended in order to help to facilitate discussion and where possible were phrased in order to generate discussion.

Two exercises were also included as part of the focus group design, one addressing the cultural influences on participant's reading choices (see *Appendix C*) and the other exercise explored participant's perceptions of the literary canon (see *Appendix D*). The exercises were designed to help participants think in more detail about these issues and also served to provide the researcher with more detailed data on these issues. In the pilot study for the focus groups, there were originally three exercises, the third being one which addressed the theme of cultural anxiety surrounding choice of reading material. However, it became clear from the pilot session that rather than clarify participant's attitudes and ideas surrounding this concept, it provoked more confusion and detracted from the topic. Additionally, the second exercise which asked participants to rate influences on reading choices was originally designed with the scaled categories: always, often, sometimes, occasionally and never. During the pilot, there was some clarification needed by the participants as to the definition of the various scale items. As a result this third exercise was omitted from the subsequent focus groups and a Likert scale was employed for the second exercise.

Although the focus group sessions were designed to be approximately an hour long, two of the participating groups were unable to commit to the full sessions and on these occasions, a scaled-down version of the focus group sessions were held. The resulting data from these truncated focus group sessions were lacking the same

depth of discussion and engagement with the research ideas however despite this, rich data still emerged from these sessions.

2.4.4. Role of the moderator

Perhaps one of the defining differences between the group interview technique and the focus group technique is the role of the moderator. Where interviews depend more on the dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee, the role of the moderator within the focus group method is to facilitate discussion amongst participants (Morgan, 1997; Greenbaum, 2000; Krueger and Casey, 2000; Litosseliti, 2003). Perhaps the greatest challenge of the role of moderating a focus group lies in fostering an open-ended and flexible discussion whilst being able to keep the discussion on the focus topic (Morgan, 1997; Greenbaum 2000; Krueger and Casey, 2000; Litosseliti, 2003).

As the researcher was inexperienced in conducting focus groups, there was a distinct advantage in utilising pre-existing groups for the study in that the participants were already familiar and comfortable with each other. Despite the researcher's inexperience, there are distinct advantages to the researcher acting as moderator:

“The researcher also acting as moderator may help increase coherence across the stages of the methodology, minimize the conflict between methodological assumptions and styles, and limit the possibility of intervention and manipulation.” (Litosseliti, 2003 : 41)

In order to familiarise herself with the participants, where possible, the researcher attended the reading group sessions with participating groups. This not only aided in familiarising the researcher with the various participants, which would make the later transcription process easier, but it also familiarised participants with the researcher, enabling them to feel more open and comfortable in participating in the focus group discussion.

2.5. Qualitative Interviews

The qualitative interview is one of the most prevalent research methods within the social sciences, and in contrast to quantitative interviews, they are characterised by their flexibility and emphasis on the interviewee's perspective (Mason, 2002; Bryman, 2008). The qualitative interview commonly takes three forms: unstructured, semi-structured and structured interviews. This study utilised the semi-structured form of the interview as this form allowed for enough structure to compensate for the researcher's inexperience in interviewing but also left enough flexibility to allow the researcher to follow up and expand on any salient points which may arise. Bell (1999 : 138) expands on the benefits of the semi-structured interview:

“[they] allow the respondent to talk about what is of central significance to him or her rather than to the interviewer...but... [there is a] loose structure to ensure all topics which are considered crucial to the study are covered.”

The qualitative interviews will be utilised within this study to explore reader's block from the perspective of the library staff who help to run and organise reading groups.

2.5.1. Strengths and weaknesses of qualitative interviews

In line with the ethos of the qualitative approach, the greatest strength and hallmark of the qualitative semi-structured interview is that it allows participants to express their opinions, in their own words. Flick (2002 : 74) notes that “interviewed subjects viewpoints are more likely to be expressed in a relatively openly designed interview situation.” As stated previously, the qualitative approach allows the complex and subjective nature of reading to be explored in depth. Bell (1999 : 135) identifies another key strength of interviews in their flexibility: “A skilful interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings, which the questionnaire can never do.” The researcher found that having already gained similar experience in conducting the focus groups, that this adaptability in the method did prove to be a great benefit of using qualitative interviews. This particular strength of the method came to the fore when it came to exploring relevant issues and topics which were unanticipated by the researcher.

The drawbacks of qualitative interviews echo those of other qualitative research methods such as focus groups: concerns with bias and the time-consuming nature of the method. Examples of bias in interviews commonly take the form of either participants providing answers which they feel the researcher is seeking and the researcher's beliefs and preconceptions colouring the questions, either through the phrasing or intonation (Bell, 1999 : 139). As in focus groups, a response effect is unavoidable and as such, the active acknowledgement of this unavoidable bias is crucial in compensating for this.

The qualitative interview is time-consuming not only in conducting the fieldwork itself but also in the data analysis stages which may include transcription and coding. For this reason, the number of interviews conducted was limited as a small-scale study such as this did not allow sufficient time for a large amount of interviews to be carried out.

2.5.2. Interview design

The design of the interview schedule (see *Appendix E*) was similarly structured to the design of the focus group sessions in that the questions are grouped in thematic sections. In the case of the interview schedule, the questions fell into two thematic groups: reading groups and reader's block. The section on reading groups is designed to not only glean background information on the reading groups but they also serve as what Kvale (1996) terms as 'introducing questions'. The use of introducing questions helps to establish the atmosphere for the rest of the interview. The aim is to create an open atmosphere in which the interviewee feels able to speak freely and frankly and introducing questions tend to be questions which are easier to answer, helping the interviewee to acclimatise to the interview situation. The remaining questions on the interview schedule fall into the category of 'direct questions' which Kvale (1996) recommends using in the later stages of an interview.

As a semi-structured format was utilised for this study, the interview schedule was designed to guide the interview to enable the key research topics to be covered within the interviews. In practice, although the overall structure of the interview in terms of the thematic content did not vary, the questions asked of each interviewee

did vary, particularly when taking into consideration the questions formulated in reaction to a comment or answer provided by the interviewee.

2.6. Data Analysis

As previously noted, focus groups can yield a large amount of data, much larger than an hour long interview can produce in the same time as a focus group. As the nature of focus group data lies in the content of what the participants say, all the focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed without abridgement. This study adopted a method of thematic analysis which focuses on:

“the identification of themes in qualitative material, often identified by means of a coding scheme. A widely used approach to qualitative analysis, generally treating accounts as a resource for finding out about the reality or experiences to which they refer” (Seale, 2004).

Following Krueger and Casey’s (2000 : 127) assertion that “purpose drives analysis”, the data was initially coded and indexed using themes taken from the research aims. The second iterative process of data analysis involved creating a pictorial display of the data using a data matrix. Following the creation of the data matrix, the data was re-analysed through a close-text reading of the extracts which then generated further thematic codes. The use of a close-reading method is influenced by the researcher’s experience in utilising the technique over the course of her degree in English Literature. In applying a close-reading approach to the data, it is important to bear in mind that:

“...any claim to offer a definitive reading would be futile. The meanings within a literary work are never fixed and reliable, but always shifting, multi-faceted and ambiguous. In literature, as in all writing, there is never the possibility of establishing fixed and definite meanings.” (Barry, 2002 : 35)

The data yielded from the focus group sessions is inevitably themed around the research aims and the data has also been analysed within this research context. Had

this been a larger scale study, it would have been possible to take on a more complex close-reading of the data, bearing in mind Barry's assertion that within any text, there are multiple meanings.

2.7. Literature Review

To complement the primary data collected by the researcher in the course of this study, a literature review was undertaken to support the findings and to locate the findings within a broader theoretical framework. As Neuman (2006 : 110) succinctly observes: "In practice, the process of focusing a topic into a research question overlaps nicely with reviewing the literature." In carrying out preliminary research for this study at the research proposal stage, it very quickly became clear that as a concept and a term, "reader's block" is an area that is under-researched in both the field of LIS and also within the broader range of academic research.

This gap in the research not only confirmed that there was justification and a valid need for this research to be conducted but it also entailed the researcher to broaden the literature review into related and relevant issues which would feed back into the original research question. As a concept, 'reader's block' encompasses issues such as cultural anxiety, the literature canon, literary prizes and reader development theory and practice. In identifying these key issues, it became clear that the primary sources for the literature review would lie in the fields of literary and cultural theory.

As the researcher has a background in English Literature, she was able to identify the key theorists and thinkers whose influence in the field would provide a starting point for the literature review which would be further supplemented by literature found via information chaining ("following chains of citations or other forms of referential connection between material." [Ellis et al., 1993 : 359]) and searches of various library catalogues and online databases. The researcher devised a search strategy which comprised of the following stages:

- identifying potentially useful databases and catalogues to search
- compiling a list of key search terms and phrases

- systematically searching each database and catalogue with the search keywords

This final stage in the search strategy was an iterative process and upon obtaining successful results in the form of relevant literature, more key search terms were generated. Upon the discovery of useful and relevant literature, where possible, the researcher utilised the descriptors that the article was indexed with as a keyword search term. Additionally, for those articles which were found to be key studies in the field or particularly relevant to this study, a citation search was carried out which also yielded further useful literature. In combining these various search strategies, the aim was to gain as much comprehensive coverage as possible in identifying useful sources.

The potentially useful databases identified included the British Humanities Index, ERIC, JSTOR, Library and Information Science Abstracts, Library Literature and Information Science Abstracts, Web of Knowledge, Google Scholar and the Department of Information Studies research publications database. The library catalogues which were utilised were the University of Sheffield library catalogue, the Sheffield public library catalogue and also COPAC, an integrated union catalogue of academic institutions in the United Kingdom and the British Library.

2.8. Ethical considerations

As this research project involved the participation of human subjects in the course of the data collection, there were some ethical issues which needed consideration. However, as the participants were not part of a vulnerable group nor were they asked about sensitive topics, this project was classified as low-risk. The project adhered to the ethical guidelines of the University of Sheffield and in line with this, information sheets were supplied to all participants, detailing the process of this research project and all participants were required to sign a consent form. (See *Appendix F and G*).

Beyond the standard ethical guidelines stipulated by the university and the basic ethical principle of informed consent, there were other ethical issues to consider.

Whilst this study did not explore explicitly sensitive topics, the issue of reading is nonetheless a personal act and this raises issues of privacy. However, as Neuman (2006 : 139) notes:

“the ethical researcher violates privacy to only the minimum degree necessary and only for legitimate research purposes.”

Issues related to the research question such as cultural anxiety, snobbery and value judgements are all factors which may make an individual feel uncomfortable should it arise in discussions. The researcher felt that the best way to counteract this was to assure participants that there was no obligation to respond to every discussion point raised. In addition to this, it was hoped that by fostering an open and welcoming atmosphere, participants did feel comfortable in discussing these issues.

2.9. Correlation between methods and research aims

The use of focus groups in this study compromises perhaps the primary source of data as the focus group sessions covered the all of the key research aims. Additionally, there was also a degree of cross-over in the coverage of the research aims between the focus groups and qualitative interviews; both methods were used to investigate the prevalence of reader's block, the effect of reader's block and combative strategies for reader's block.

Due to the flexible and discursive nature of a focus group discussion, the data was much richer and had more depth. This may be attributable to the fact that within focus groups:

“Participants respond to and build on the views expressed by others in the group - a synergistic approach that produces a range of opinions, ideas and experiences, and thus generates insightful information.” (Litosseliti, 2003 : 2)

The researcher found that the interaction between the participants did indeed sustain the discussion of a topic and helped to foster ideas and discussion which did

not have arise within the individual qualitative interviews. However, the qualitative interviews did yield valuable data from the perspective of the library staff and also background information about the reading groups. The literature review fulfilled the research aims particularly related to the issues surrounding cultural anxiety and also in examining history and development of reading groups.

Chapter Three: The Benefits of Reading Groups

3.1. Introduction

Reading is widely acknowledged to be a solitary and individual pursuit yet somewhat paradoxically, the popularity and appeal of reading groups is as enduring as ever. In fact, the history of reading groups seems to extend as far back as the history of reading itself:

“The Romans did it, emigrants on a board ship to Australia did it, Schubert and his friends meeting to read and discuss the poems of Heine were doing it. In the centuries before print and cheap books, when books or manuscripts had to be shared and read aloud, there must have been some discussion or commentary, however brief.” (Hartley, 2002 : 1)

The recent resurgence in the popularity of reading groups is widely attributed to popular television book discussion groups such as Oprah Winfrey’s book club and Richard and Judy’s book club. The impact of these television reading groups can not only be seen in the explosion of reading groups in the past decade but also in terms of commercial impact: “Reading groups have been spotted and fostered by the book industry, which offers sponsorship in abundance” (Bell, 2001 : 206). Books which are discussed on television reading groups see a huge boost in sales and issue figures and as such, in the UK it has become known as the ‘Richard and Judy’ effect.

Reading groups take place across a variety of settings and within different contexts such as workplace reading groups, neighbourhood reading groups and public libraries. Hartley’s (2002 : 10) extensive landmark study of reading groups found that public library reading groups accounted for 6% of all groups surveyed. The rising number of public library reading groups is not only testament to the increasing popularity of the phenomenon but also to the emphasis on reader development policies.

3.2. Reader development

Although the main focus of reading groups lies in providing a space in which books can be shared and discussed, the functions of reading groups are manifold and multi-faceted. Reading groups not only provide invaluable benefits for their members, they also fulfil many of the key priorities on the reader development agenda which has become an increasing priority for public libraries in the past decade. Reader development is defined as an “active intervention” which aims to increase confidence and ability in reading for pleasure; open up reading choices; and to promote opportunities for sharing reading experiences (Opening The Book, 2009b). From this definition, it is clear where reading groups fit into the reader development agenda. In terms of reader development policies in public libraries, there does tend to be an emphasis on attempts to engage those who aren’t already avid readers. Consequently, reading groups organised by public libraries represents the provision of service to the section of the user base who are heavy users of the services provided by public libraries.

Framework for the Future (Leadbeater, 2003), the government policy document outlining the priorities for libraries in the next decade, highlighted reader development as one of the key functions for public libraries:

“In recent years there has been an important shift in how libraries view and plan their work with reading. As well as its importance as a tool for learning, they have recognised its creative, imaginative role in people’s lives. Reader development strategies have become far more widespread, encouraging people to start reading, whether young or old; helping emerging readers to find more interesting material, whether that be teenagers or adult first time readers; connecting people with similar interests to one another through book groups and reading events.” (Leadbeater, 2003 : 25).

This is not to suggest that library investment in developing and supporting reading groups is an exercise in meeting government targets and priorities. Those who are working within the LIS profession, particularly in the public library sector, certainly

need no persuading of the benefits of reading and those who are members of reading groups will testify to the power of reading.

Educational psychology studies into the effects and benefits of what is termed 'Free Voluntary Reading' (FVR) demonstrate that reading for pleasure can have a considerable impact on the development of sophisticated communication skills. Krashen's (1993: x) discussion of FVR research concludes that reading comprehension, writing style, spelling, grammar and vocabulary are all improved by reading for pleasure. Krashen's research does only focus on the development of communication skills in children, however there is some literature which attempts to explore the effects of reading in adults.

Usherwood and Toyne's (2002 : 37) study into the value of reading fiction found that participants did attribute their literacy skills to reading fiction. One participant noted that her confidence in her literacy skills had practical applications in dealing with day-to-day tasks such as writing formal letters and this was also seen as a positive effect of reading. Furthermore, Hartley's (2002 : 13) study supports Krashen's conclusions, observing of a workplace reading group that members developed:

“interpersonal skills, flexibility, openness to new ideas, the teamwork, and the ability to communicate so valued in today's employees are exactly those qualities which the reading group can be so good at cultivating.”

Communication skills are frequently cited as one of the key transferable skills sought after by prospective employers, so much so that key skills qualifications are often undertaken alongside GCSEs in the UK. Katz (2001 : 190) expands this idea, arguing that:

“intellectual skills learned through reading landmark books can be applied to solving problems in professional careers. A trained intellect, honed by reading Homer or Hawthorne, offers a measure of understanding available to solve life's difficult questions.”

If this is the case, that the ripple effect of reading can be seen as far as in one's professional life, it is clear where reader development intersects with the lifelong learning agenda in public libraries. However, as the government's Key Skills students website (2009) notes, key skills not only contribute to further academic achievement and employability prospects but also towards personal development.

3.3. The power of reading

Mann (1982 : 16) notes that reading like many other leisure activities “result in the development of personal skills that have nothing whatsoever to do with a person's work.” The benefits of reading can extend beyond the immediate practical effects on communication skills, the value of reading can also be felt within the social and personal sphere:

“There is plenty of evidence, and in any case it is common sense, that people who are good at communicating (both in writing and in talking) and at handling numbers and ICT, work well with other people, are well organised, and can tackle the problems that life throws at you all the time, will be both happier and more successful.” (Key Skills student website, 2009)

There is a strong case for the myriad benefits of reading and research seems to indicate that in educational contexts, reading is more effective in teaching communication skills than direct instruction (Krashen, 1993).

Reading as an educational tool certainly seems to be extraordinarily effective but what about when reading is not employed specifically for pedagogical purposes but rather as a leisurely past-time? The notion of reading inspiring personal development and wellbeing is encapsulated within the concept of bibliotherapy. Brewster (2009 : 13) identified three applications of bibliotherapy: self-help bibliotherapy, creative bibliotherapy and informal bibliotherapy and it is the latter application which is relevant to this study: “the use of creative bibliotherapy techniques in an unstructured manner, including reading groups, recommendations from staff and

displays in the library.” Brewster (2009 : 15) found that whilst members of reading groups do not join the groups in order to improve their mental wellbeing, this may be an unexpected bonus. When asked about the purpose and function that the reading group fulfils for its members, the library staff interviewed for this study identified effects which would be synonymous with this definition of bibliotherapy:

“There’s always one or two members in every group where it’s a confidence builder and you know that they get a little bit more out of it. And for some of them perhaps it’s the only thing that they do that’s out of the home and family, or maybe work, home and family but it’s something they do for themselves. There’s some ladies, because some of these ladies are a little bit older, I think it’s something that makes them come out and it’s a good social interaction...Some of them really do need the social aspect, some of them look for it as a bit of support and confidence.” (Participant C18L)

“I think it’s about social interaction and to broaden their horizons and it’s getting together as a community. And also probably, young parents with children who are at school, they may want to have an interest and get back into the community and it’s something they can do for themselves.” (Participant D24L)

“I think it’s quite a nice social event for people in a safe environment.” (Participant E31L)

Throughout these comments, there is a recurring theme of the reading groups making a significant contribution to the social lives of their members. This social aspect of reading groups is highlighted in conjunction with those members of the community who may need encouragement in leaving the home environment and engaging in another social sphere, whether this may be due to family commitments or decreasing social opportunities, especially in the case of the elderly.

It is also notable that Participant E31L labels the public library reading groups as a 'safe environment' and this aspect is particularly pertinent for reading groups. Similarly to conditions outlined for focus group sessions, reading group sessions need to foster a welcoming and open atmosphere in which members do not feel inhibited in making a contribution to the discussion, particularly so when they may be expressing an opinion which opposes that of the others in the group. This is especially important in light of one of the other findings of this study which will be discussed in further detail later on, that conflicting opinions and controversial and divisive books are the cornerstone of a successful reading group discussion. As Participant C18L notes, reading groups may act as a 'confidence builder' for members, whether this is confidence in reading, in literary criticism or in formulating and vocalising opinions and once again, a 'safe environment' is key to allowing confidence to flourish.

3.4, The creativity of reading

The reader-centred approach of reader development is inextricably linked into reader-response theory which has increasingly gained currency within literary criticism. Although reader response has long been explored in the field of literary criticism and can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, reader-response theory emerged as a distinct school of literary criticism in the 1970s. Reader-response theory constitutes a break with traditional literary theory which focuses on searching for the construction of meaning either within the text itself or from the author. As Appleyard (1991 : 8) notes: "All these theories fill in a blank space in the map of literary relationships previously devoted almost wholly to author and text."

The reader-facing approach of reader-response theory dovetails with the notion of reading as a creative act: that the creation of meaning does not end with the writer and the text but that there is space in between the text and the reader. Certainly for anyone who has been involved in a book discussion, formal or otherwise, this notion of the subjectivity in the act of reading is clear in the way in which interpretations of a text will differ. Keeling (2005 : 18) outlines the factors which may influence any one individual reading of a text:

“Reading is a far more dynamic process that we usually believe, as the novel we are reading is re-created in the space between the words on the page and our individual cultural and psychological background.”

Certainly, the creativity of reading was recognised by members of the focus group, with one participant explicitly referring to reading as such:

“But I think it also depends on who’s in the book group because reading is a creative art. Two people can read the same thing and read it totally differently because one reader will bring life to the characters and the scenes and the other it just doesn’t fire their imagination in the same way or maybe they haven’t got an imagination. So if you have a group of people, a diverse group of people, what could to one person seem like a bad book can become...they’ll see a whole different face to it, a set of facets to it because of the range of people in the reading group.” (Participant A3)

This sentiment was echoed by another participant in a different reading group:

“And talking about it [the book] often stimulates thoughts that you hadn’t thought, you know that had come into your own mind” (Participant B7).

In participating in a discussion of book, members of a reading group are exposed to a spectrum of interpretations which may open up a text in unexpected ways to participants. Note that Participant A3 attributes this to a diversity within the membership of a reading group but this in fact is at odds with the statistics regarding the make-up of reading groups. Existing research points to a more homogenous landscape within reading groups (Scothern, 2002, Hartley, 2002). Reader-response theory’s emphasis on the individual response to a text would point to other elements of diversity outside of demographic measures. As Keeling’s above quote notes, the combination of personal experience and cultural background all impact

on one's interpretation of a text and this can account for the experience within reading groups of multiple interpretations being discovered and shared.

This plurality in literary interpretation is not the only distinguishing hallmark of reading for a reading group. The way in which reading group members read a book may differ and this was made explicit in the focus group sessions:

“I read it in more depth, I concentrate more, I try and - if I can't remember now, I write a few notes because I can't remember - and I do take more from it. And I analyse it more, and I analyse the content, the style, whether I like it or not.” (Participant D25)

This more critical way of engaging with a text is encouraged by participating in a reading group. Where perhaps previously, the only arena in which participants may have critically engaged with a text may have been in formal education, the discursive aspect and more challenging nature of the books are all contributory factors in prompting this alternative mode of reading. Jacobsohn (1998 : xv), in her guide to reading groups, makes a similar observation of this particular function of reading groups:

“Outside of formal schooling, book groups function as continuing education. No grades are given. No didactic professors need pleasing. There's an opportunity to read all those “important” books that were never read, or read them again with an adult perspective.”

This notion is consistent with the findings in this study that the books favoured by reading groups tend to be ones which are termed 'challenging' and this aspect will be discussed in a later chapter.

3.5. The unexplored shelves

This increased exposure to multiple meanings is not the only way in which participating in reading groups can contribute to developing reading skills. Many of the reading group members and library staff who participated in this study noted

that one of the key functions of reading groups was in broadening reading horizons and increasing exposure to new reading material. With the number of books published in the UK totalling 100,000 a year, the very process of choosing reading material can be a daunting and Herculean task (London Book Fair, 2009). Reader-development literature has recognised this as one of the principle deterrents in the reading process (Van Riel and Fowler, 1996; Train, 2003). Van Riel and Fowler's (1996 :7) book written in conjunction with the Opening the Book initiative provides advice and guidance on this source of anxiety for readers:

“*Opening the Book* sets out to help you find more of the brilliant reads and to be able to give up on the others without feeling a failure. You can find more of the brilliant reads if you understand what makes a book a good experience for you.”

This literary anxiety is something that is experienced by The Queen in Alan Bennett's (2007 : 47) novella on the benefits of reading, *The Uncommon Reader*:

“To begin with, it's true, she read with trepidation and some unease. The sheer endlessness of books outfaced her and she had no idea how to go on; there was no system to her reading, with one book leading to another. and often she had two or three on the go at the same time.”

Pierre Bayard (2007 : 6) also touches on this issue in his book, *How To Talk About Books You Haven't Read* and he notes that reading in this sense can be viewed as a somewhat futile exercise: “Faced with a quantity of books so vast that nearly all of them must remain unknown, how can we escape the conclusion that even a lifetime of reading is utterly in vain?” Bayard's argument takes the notion of literary anxiety to extreme conclusions and in reading for pleasure, the goal is rarely the pursuit of reading every published item. However, as John Sutherland (1999: xiii) notes:

“There was a time in recorded history when a ‘well-read man’ (unfortunately women didn't qualify) might presume to read virtually everything printed in a year. Well into the twentieth

century, you could probably cover most of what was published in 'your field', without strain. What does it mean in the 1990s to be a well-read man or woman? To have read, say, one per cent of the books in one's field? Booker judges, as a measure, are expected to read 0.5 per cent of the new novels published annually."

Perhaps then this cultural anxiety is an inheritance from our past, a literary hangover which still lingers to this day, despite the fact that as Sutherland points out, the huge expansion in publishing has irrevocably altered what it means to be 'well-read' now. Nevertheless, what Bayard and Bennett address is this potential sense of floundering in the face of an ever growing choice of reading material. Clearly, this paralysis of choice is a cultural concern that is addressed in books but it is also an anxiety which was expressed by participants in the focus groups.

Readers can employ any number of strategies for discovering books, as will be discussed in a later chapter, but it is clear from participant responses that reading groups can fulfil this function for readers:

"I think what's nice about the book club is you choose different authors that you wouldn't have thought of. You know, you sort of choose blindly and quite often you think, 'Oh, that's brilliant, I'll have to look for something else.'" (Participant B10)

"I mean I would come in and I would concentrate on the crime shelves and I probably wouldn't go to any of the other shelves and what happens with the book group is that it sends you to those other unexplored shelves." (Participant D29)

"But the reading group, perhaps as ----- says, it points you in another direction and often people will recommend books." (Participant D25)

What emerges from these responses is that there is an inherent paradox at work within using the reading group as a means of discovering new books. Restricting the

choice of books available to the reading group members can in fact broaden horizons and open up access to these “unexplored shelves”. The overwhelming choice that is available to the modern reader now can lead to a paralysis of choice and in taking away this responsibility, reading groups can aid with relieving the burden of selection. Bayard (2007 : 6) makes the deconstructionalist observation that choosing is inextricably intertwined with not-choosing:

“Reading is first and foremost non-reading. Even in the case of the most passionate lifelong readers, the act of picking up and opening a book masks the countergesture that occurs at the same time: the involuntary act of *not* picking up and *not* opening all the other books in the universe.”

The implications of Bayard’s observation is that in choosing a book and simultaneously rejecting others, the reader needs to have some strategy or criteria in mind when choosing. This not only acts as a strategy in navigating the avenues of choice but it also provides justification in not-choosing other books. As the next chapter will go on to discuss, the notion of choice is a key component of reading skills and the various factors which go into choosing a book can potentially impact on a reader’s attitude and reading habits.

Chapter Four: Choice

4.1. Introduction

In today's marketised society, the notion of choice has positive connotations; it is seen as a boon to consumers that they are exposed to more choice. However as discussed in the previous chapter, a wealth of options can have the opposite effect in paralysing the ability to choose. After all, is choice a benefit when you don't know exactly what it is you are looking for? In being presented with a wide variety of choice, what strategies or criteria do readers apply in narrowing down the potential pool of books that they may choose from? As touched upon in the previous chapter, this dilemma faced by readers today is addressed in the field of reader development:

“Faced with the huge quantity of books in a library or a bookshop, finding the right book for you can become a time-consuming and frustrating task...With so much to choose from, how do you make a decision about what to take home with you?” (Van Riel and Fowler, 1996 :23)

This anxiety surrounding how to choose a book has also permeated our cultural subconscious and nowhere is this clearer than in the abundance of lists of recommended reads which are produced year upon year. In 2003, the BBC ran The Big Read campaign and produced a list of the Top One Hundred most popular novels in Britain (BBC, 2003).

The list of recommended reads is a feature beloved of the culture sections of broadsheet newspapers. In recent months alone *The Guardian* has produced its annual list of summer reads; *The Times* has produced a list of the best sixty books of the past sixty years and *The Independent* offers an alternative to the Man Booker longlist (The Guardian, 2009; The Times, 2009; Guest, 2009).

This literary anxiety has been recognised by public libraries with an increasing amount of library authorities offering reader advisory services, many of which style themselves as 'book doctors' (Buckinghamshire County Council, 2009; Derby City

Council, 2009; Leicester City Council, 2009; The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, 2009). With these issues in mind, this chapter will be exploring the strategies and criteria employed in selecting reading material and also the factors which influence a reader's choice of book.

4.2. Influences on choosing reading material

For those who have difficulty in choosing reading material, there are various sources and cultural authorities that can be consulted in order to better inform your choice. Virtually every media output carries some form of book review segment, from newspapers to magazines and from television to radio. Even within the consumer domain, there is no escaping suggestions with tailored recommendations in online stores such as Amazon and staff suggestions in bookstores. Even social networking has taken up the mantle of compiling suggestions with services such as applications on Facebook and LibraryThing. Whilst literature has long been the storehouse of ideas for dramatic adaptations, the popularity of books as source material for television, film, radio and theatre is certainly not waning. So it seems that wherever we turn, we are continually bombarded with suggestions for where we should turn next for our literary foray.

This issue was one which was explored in the focus group sessions, as gaining an insight into what influences reading choices may illuminate which criteria are utilised in the selection of books. In a focusing exercise during the sessions, the participating reading groups, bar one due to time constraints, were asked to rate the influences on their choice of reading material using scaled categories (see *Appendix C*). As this took the form of an exercise conducted during the focus groups rather than a separate questionnaire, the data collected does not illustrate a representative response. However, Figures 1 and 2 present the data in graph form and they are included to give an brief overview of the most cited and least cited influencing factors on choice of reading material.

Figure 1 depicts the most cited influencing factors on choice of reading material and Figure 2 displays those factors which were least likely to influence participants. (Please see *Appendix H* for further details on the way this data was compiled).

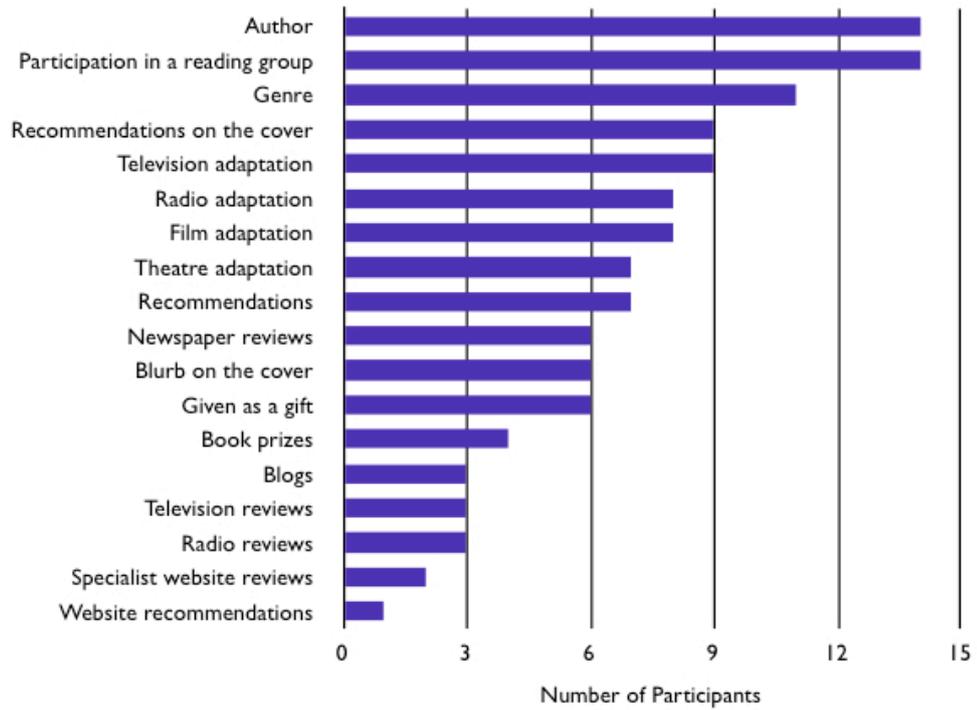


Figure 1. Most cited influences on choice of reading material

As expected, participation in a reading group is a highly influential factor on the choice of reading material for the participants in this study and none of the participants rated this influence lower down on the scale (see Figure 2).

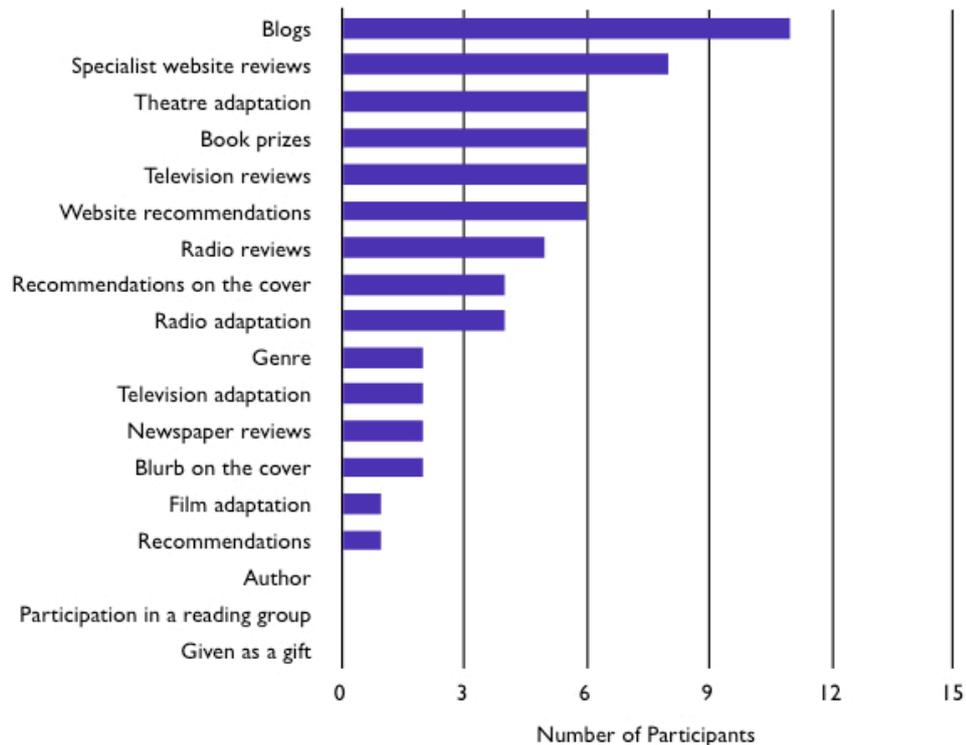


Figure 2. Least cited influences on choice of reading material.

The prevalence of internet-related influences in Figure 2 may be attributable to generational differences. The term 'digital natives' describes the generation who have grown up with digital technology such as the Internet. None of the focus group participants would fall into the category of digital natives. It may be anticipated that were this exercise to be conducted with participants in different age brackets, the results may differ significantly.

4.2.1. Participation in a reading group

As participation in a reading group furnishes members with at least one book a month, this is an obvious influence for the participants in this study. Additionally, in interacting with other like-minded individuals, recommendations were generated through the reading group discussions. It was observed that recommendations were picked up by other members of the group in digressions or in reference to other books being discussed or even in informal, friendly conversation whilst waiting for the reading group session to begin. For one participant, this benefit of membership of a reading group extended beyond her own reading group:

“So one of my friends, -----, will often tell me what she’s reading in her book group, the sort of talking we do here, I mean we haven’t particularly done it this time, but quite often, someone will mention a book and you haven’t read it and you think, ‘I’ve always wanted to read that, so I’ll give it a go.’” (Participant D29).

In one of the participating groups, it was notable that the member of library staff leading the session explicitly devoted part of the hour to asking members what they were currently reading as a way of generating recommendations. Consequently, membership of a reading group can aid the discovery of reading material in more ways than one. For the participants of this study, reading groups provide members with the opportunity to meet with like-minded individuals and this shared passion for reading can have the benefit of expanding literary repertoires.

4.2.2. Author and genre

Alongside participation in a reading group, the other factor which was jointly most commonly cited was author. As one participant simply puts it: “I think I just like authors that I like,” (Participant D30) and this supports findings of previous studies (Spiller, 1980; Yu and O’Brien, 1999; Ross, 2001; Graham, 2007). Graham’s (2007) study of influencing factors in fiction selection included an extensive literature review from which she concludes that there is a consensus across reader selection research that author is the most influential factor.

Spiller (1980 : 245) argues that the influence of author as selection criteria can be attributed to “haste, or by the respondent’s greater knowledge of the fiction scene.” The former reason suggests that selection by author is a quick way to successfully choose a book whilst the latter implies that this selection criteria tends to be employed by ‘heavy readers’, those who are well-read and knowledgeable in the field of books in general. This is supported by the findings of this study with one participant commenting:

“One of us will possibly recognise a title or an author and that will influence the choice, won’t it?” (Participant B7)

Previous studies which came to similar conclusions drew their participants from populations which consisted of a large proportion of heavy readers (Spiller, 1980; Yu and O’Brien, 1999; Ross, 2001). However, Graham’s (2007) participants consisted of 18 - 35 year olds who spanned the spectrum between light and heavy readers. Graham concluded that author proved a highly influential factor between both light and heavy readers.

Ross’s (2001) study also found that genre came second to author in influencing factors which corroborates the findings of this study. This may be attributed to the fact that in using these two factors as selection criteria, the reader knows what to expect. Genre fiction in particular tends to rely heavily on conventions which the reader is often well versed in and this has been proven to be a strong factor in the reader’s enjoyment of the text. Radway’s (1987) landmark study of female readers of

romance novels found that the formulaic nature of the novels, far from detracting from their enjoyment of the books was a key component in their enjoyment.

Despite this, it seems that even using author and genre as a selection strategy has its limitations, as this participant noted:

“[the reading group] opened my eyes up to other authors. You tend to get narrowed down in a certain type of book or a certain type of author and the thing about us sort of taking stuff off a list is that we read something that we wouldn’t normally have read and that’s good I think, it opens up your mind.” (Participant B8)

From this participant’s comments, there is a clear sense of awareness that the discovery strategy previously employed was inadequate and that using author as a selection criteria was narrowing Participant B8’s literary sphere. Whilst the discovery of a new favoured author or a genre may temporarily open up new sources of reading material, it can for some prove to be a cul-de-sac. Both Ross (2001) and Yu and O’Brien (1999) found that for some participants in their respective studies, selecting from a pool of fiction narrowed down using author as selection criteria left them struggling once this particular pool had been exhausted.

4.2.3. Dramatic adaptations

Perhaps one of the more unexpected results which emerged from this exercise was how divided opinions were on dramatic adaptations of books. Traditionally, literary adaptations have often been a source of consternation or disappointment to readers, perhaps precisely because reading is a creative act. In reading a book, the reader is left to bring to life the world of the novel within their own imagination and ultimately, this unique interpretation of the novel is unlikely to match up to an adaptation. This is certainly a sentiment that John Patterson (2008), film critic for *The Guardian*, sympathises with:

“I could also hear my own inward screams as I realised all the imagery and feelings that the novel had conjured up in my mind

were now gone, banished by the dreaded hand of literary adaptation.”

This sentiment was not expressed in such a vehement manner by the participants, nevertheless there was an distinct sense of antipathy towards adaptations:

“Yes, that’s what I kind of struggle with because people tend to really like this [film adaptations]. They see a film, and when I see a film, then I already know what happens in the short version and I know the ending and I want to approach a book completely new and okay, I might have read a short review but I don’t want to know the ending from a film already! So I’m not particularly tempted anymore to read it.” (Participant A4)

“There is that whole thing of films and books and whether you read the book after you’ve seen the film or whether you just don’t bother?” (Participant A2)

From these comments, there is a clear sense that seeing a film before reading the book would spoil the experience of reading the original novel and vice versa. Unlike Patterson, whose critique derives from the fact that dramatic adaptations take away from the personal reaction and impression made by the book, the main source of antipathy is driven towards more than the plot and story itself. As Participant A4 comments, part of the pleasure of reading is approaching a book “completely new”, with very little knowledge of the contents of the text as possible.

Despite criticisms of literary adaptations, it does remain a fact that by virtue of adapting a novel into a television programme or film does promote interest in the original source material. Publishers themselves have long since registered this and very often upon the release of an adaptation, a tie-in version of the novel is reissued. A report in *The Bookseller* (Richardson, 2008) noted that tie-in editions produce great dividends for publishers:

“*Atonement* catapulted Ian McEwan’s book back to number one in The Bookseller’s top 50 last September, and *The Devil Wears Prada*’s tie-in edition went on to sell more than 570,000 copies through Nielsen BookScan, following the film’s release in October 2006.”

Perhaps the sales boost of novels can be attributed to the fact that the visibility and availability of the book is increased. One publishing director in the article notes that the sheer scope of an audience for a film compared to that of a book means that a larger proportion of people are reached: “When you get a film, it gives people an excuse to read things, even if they wouldn’t read it otherwise” (Richardson, 2008). It is of course important to distinguish between the act of buying or borrowing a book and actually reading it, so we cannot assume that because sales of a novel soar, that the readership of said novel increases by that amount. However, it is evident that literary adaptations do have a dramatic impact on generating interest in a novel.

This phenomenon has not gone unnoticed by public libraries either with displays and promotions themed around film or television adaptations becoming increasingly popular. The National Year of Reading in 2008 themed each month around a topic and November’s was ‘Screen Reads’ which resulted in the promotion of novels which had been adapted. This was exemplified by many library authorities and reading agencies developing booklists and promotions around novels which had been adapted (East Sussex County Council, 2009; Herefordshire Council, 2009; School Library Association, 2009).

Of course, it must not be discounted that pure enjoyment of an adaptation may also inspire a reader to pick up the original novel from which the adaptation is based:

“Strictly speaking, most of the ‘old’ classics I have read since I was an adult have come about because I’ve watched them on television.” (Participant D29).

Whilst it is clear from the results from the focus group exercise that opinion is far from unanimous regarding the influence of adaptations on reading habits, there does seem to be a slight leaning towards literary adaptations having an impact on reading

choices. As posited in *The Bookseller* (Richardson, 2008) article, a large factor in this may be due to increased visibility and availability, an unanticipated influence which strongly came across in the focus group sessions.

4.2.4. Visibility and availability

Whilst visibility and availability weren't included as an option in Exercise One, the impact of this factor was made clear through the focus group discussions. Visibility here can be taken to have two meanings: one is the more literal meaning referring to the prominence of position of the book and the other referring to the cultural visibility which is afforded to a high-profile book or author. The importance of the physical visibility and availability of a book came through as a strongly influential factor in choosing a book:

“...there's usually one Book of the Month on the library thing [the library counter] and as we're going out we usually pick it up and have a quick look at it and think, 'Oh yes'.” (Participant B10)

“Well, I've also been influenced by things in the library...the library tends to do these displays...And I only read that [Balzac] because I was sort of standing around there and they had a display of books... and ever since I did that and enjoyed that, I've looked at what they've had on display but often been quite disappointed.” (Participant A2)

“I think also simply being available in a book shop. Because sometimes I do actually go in and buy something, see if something catches my eye.” (Participant A6)

“That's an influencing thing for me. 3 for 2, I've done that.” (Participant A2)

Bar Participant A6, the comments above explicitly make reference to library or bookshop displays and the influence that they have on their choice of reading material. Book displays help the reader to narrow down the field of choice and the

factors which recommend a book to a reader in conjunction with a display are myriad. In the case of Participant A2, the display of reissued classics is typical of many public library book displays which are usually themed. These displays are very often set apart from the usual shelving sequence and are designed to catch the eye, a factor which Participant A6 refers to as influential. Other displays, such as the 'Book of the Month' display referred to by Participant B10, carries with it the cachet of a recommendation, the implication being that the book has some merit and has been enjoyed enough to be vaunted above other choices for that month. Bookshops such as Waterstone's also take a similar approach with displays of books complete with personalised handwritten recommendations from staff.

Participant A2 refers to another popular tactic employed by retailers: special offers. With retailers' special offers, a casual or passing interest in a title or an author is encouraged by factoring in a monetary saving. In an article for *Time Out* magazine, an anonymous bookshop insider (Time Out, 2004) reports that in promoting special offers and recommendations, retailers are more often than not handsomely rewarded by publishing houses and that the top-selling books are often titles promoted by publishing houses in this manner. A book's dependence upon publicity and visibility for success does not go unnoticed by readers, as one participant astutely noted:

“...the fact is that there are any number of bad books that are read and good books that aren't read and a lot of good books simply aren't read because there isn't any publicity behind them.” (Participant A3)

The implication of this situation lies in the fact that “...the big retailers are kind enough to employ experts to recommend the every best new titles” when in fact, they aren't being recommended on literary merit at all (Time Out, 2004).

The consequences of this can impact directly on reading groups particularly as bestseller lists are very often a point of reference for reading groups as one member of library staff confirmed:

“[on selecting for the reading group set list] Librarians and customers, we get them from bestsellers lists and special requests.” (Participant E31L).

This is of course, not to say that all bestsellers have no literary merit or aren't enjoyable, as one participant put it: “...merely the fact that it's published suggest that there are powers-that-be who are putting this person as a voice” (Participant A3). However, this manipulation undermines any confidence readers may hold in the opinions and recommendations of cultural authorities who readers already have divided opinions on.

4.2.5. Reviews, recommendations and cultural authorities

For the purposes of this study, the phrase 'cultural authority' has been used to collectively describe any person or organisation who are considered cultural experts or whose opinion is highly respected and regarded by readers. This definition may encompass literary critics; those who recommend books, either via reviews or by awarding accolades which would include newspapers, broadcasters; and those individuals who sit on judging panels for book awards. These cultural authorities are key in raising the profile of books that may be deemed outstanding or worthy of attention and in narrowing down the field of choice.

For the participants of this study, the respect afforded to the opinions of these cultural authorities varied and was dependent on the reputation of the cultural authority and whether the participants generally agreed with their opinion. In the focus group exercise, of the options given which referred to a review, newspaper reviews were the most influential with specialist websites, radio and television appearing lower down on the scale. In the case of reviews, the popularity of the medium with the participants is a strong factor in how influential they are:

“Yes, because I listen to radio more than I watch television, so I think I am therefore more likely to be influenced by that.” (Participant A6)

“I’ve put blog and television review because I just don’t watch television...I can’t think of a time when I’ve been influenced by a television review. Radio review, yes.” (Participant A2)

Taking this into consideration, the fact that newspaper reviews scored highly in the focus group exercises does not necessarily point towards this form of media being considered more authoritative than television or radio. The low ranking influence of internet generated recommendations will attest to this and is perhaps more a reflection of generational differences and preferences.

Moving back to the point at hand however, the popularity of newspapers with the participants in this study can be used to illustrate this tension between the trust afforded to cultural authorities:

“I mean sometimes, I will look very carefully at what is written on the back of the cover in terms of the recommendations but also, who’s written them and which newspaper they’ve come from. Quite often, if there’s a load of good recommendations from The Sun and The Mirror, I know I’m not going to enjoy it.” (Participant D26)

“You’d rather ones from The Times and The Independent, ones that are a bit more literary.” (Participant D25)

Participant D26 outlines a clear line of demarcation between the cultural authorities which she feels that her tastes do and do not align with. Participant D25 develops Participant D26’s observation further in identifying why broadsheet reviews are more trustworthy, as they are “the ones that are a bit more literary”. This is echoed in Van Riel and Fowler’s (1996 : 16) criticism of the loaded value judgements associated with reading: “There is a great deal of snobbery about reading. The literary establishment is snobbish about the entire range of popular fiction. Popular fiction is rarely reviewed in the quality broadsheets.”

The trustworthiness of the broadsheet press over tabloid newspapers cannot only be attributed to value judgements but also an awareness of the coverage of each type of newspaper. Newspapers are more likely to discuss and review books which appeal to their audience, so more 'lightweight' books such as chick-lit novels will receive coverage in the tabloid press whilst more 'literary' works, as Participant D26 terms it, are likely to be reviewed by the broadsheet newspapers. Publishers are also aware of the cachet that reviews from certain cultural authorities can hold and dazzling reviews from the right sources can also prove a draw or a discouraging factor.

Very often, quotes from other esteemed authors or celebrities will appear as recommendations on a book's cover and this can equally have the same effect. Participants in one particular focus group jokingly noted that their dislike of the author Salman Rushdie could have such an effect:

“So I think it's who's recommending it. Or I can hear somebody on the radio talking about it and if I don't like that person, like Salman Rushdie for example - I don't like him and I wouldn't [read the book].” (Participant A2)

“Now I'm going to start reading books that Salman Rushdie reviews just so I know, the ones he doesn't like I will read!” (Participant A3)

Despite the lighthearted tone to this exchange, the discussion does reveal an insight into the power that cultural authorities can wield in swaying opinion towards or away from choosing a book.

4.3. Choosing for yourself

Whilst on the surface the process of choosing a book is deceptively simple, in reality it is a complex puzzle complete with various interlocking pieces. The influences on choosing a book only comprises one part of this puzzle as this merely provides a reader with the background knowledge and motivation to choose a particular book. Other factors influence whether the reader will consequently read the book. This

process of choosing a book for yourself and for a reading group differs, understandably so when we take into consideration that the divergence between the purposes of both types of reading.

The process of becoming a reader and acquiring the skills to read do not just encompass literacy skills but also the skills required to choose a book and whilst the former can be taught, the latter is learnt through an iterative process. Ross's (2001) study reinforces this hypothesis, she found that a large majority of her participants expressed confidence in their book selection skills and similarly, Ross notes that this to "a result and cause of their prolonged and continued engagement in reading."

Ross' (2001) study also found that the strategies employed in book selection were complex and involved many interrelated factors, including mood. From the focus group discussions, what became clear was that there are multiple criteria and variables to take into consideration when selecting a book, as this participant observes:

"I think it's different things at different times as well, I mean sometimes I'm looking for something which is...for example a plot or an atmosphere where I can either relate to it and at other times it might be something which deals more with ideas where I can either analyse more or try to attribute more meaning to it or I just have to think more about what's going on. So it very much depends on how tired I am, my mood etc." (Participant A4)

There is a clear sense that mood plays an important role in determining what a reader is looking for. The implication of this is that the set of criteria that is used to select books is fluid and differs depending on mood, something which Participant A4 articulates:

"Again, it's mood and time dependent really and kind of like especially if you have a lot to do during the day and you're tired and you can just reading the evening it might be something which is not too complicated in terms of plot because you have to actually come

back to it you can't do it before the next evening and if it's a really complex plot it's really difficult to remember it." (Participant A4)

This notion reflects the advice of Jonathan Douglas, director of the National Literacy Trust, who advocates variety in the reading diet as a way to combat reader's block: "After a satisfying course of Philip Pullman, cleanse your palate with a sorbet of Heat or Grazia" (Jeffries, 2008). This strategy would also combat the problem identified by Ross's (2001) in that consistent over-reliance on the same selection criteria led to reading sources being quickly exhausted.

Douglas' advice essentially is encouraging a more open and inclusive approach to reading. Certainly, in the focus group discussions, there was recognition of the fact that variety was beneficial:

"I suppose it's a bit like sweets, if you eat the same sweets that you like all the time then you get bored with them. With a book, you can't read a good book every time." (Participant B7)

As Participant B7 notes, this open approach also incorporates the idea that a narrow and strict set of selection criteria may eventually lead to ennui and this participant identifies that a more open approach may be beneficial:

"When you're browsing through a bookshop, something that fits what you're unconsciously looking for. Without knowing what it is, suddenly you discover it." (Participant A3)

In this participant's comments, there is a definite sense that at times, what you may be looking for in a book is undefinable to yourself at that moment, as she notes this may not be consciously acknowledged and to a certain extent this can be seen as relying on instinct. This sense of not knowing what you want was also echoed in another participant's comments:

"I don't know what I want to read! When I walk in the library, one of the problems I find is if I haven't got a recommendation from

somewhere, I just pick up about five books off the shelf, take them home, some I like, some I don't like. Some are more challenging than others." (Participant D25)

It is interesting to note that this participant had formulated a strategy in order to combat her particular dilemma. In not knowing what she wanted, her approach was to be open to all possibilities and take a scattergun approach. Although she identifies that this strategy is not always successful, it is doubtful that there any reader selection strategy that can claim to a consistent success rate. Indeed, Participant D25's acceptance of this echoes the behaviour of those who Krashen (1993) terms "highly literate" people, that they feel no compulsion in struggling through a book that is not enjoyable.

This is not to say that this approach is for everyone, indeed the crux of reader's block lies in the fact that there is a proscribed notion of reading and what we should be reading. Some participants in this study had employed selection strategies which are diametrically opposed to that of Participant D25. Some readers may prefer a more structured way of selecting books, with either more clearly defined criteria or relying on guides produced by cultural authorities. Katz (2001 : 193) traces the use of book lists and guides back to:

"The nineteenth century "information explosion" brought about by new technologies, a more literate population and the vast increase of book production, called up a new, pervasive cry. "What shall I read?" Here both amateur and professional critics responded with enthusiastic lists, expansion of the canon by hundreds and later by thousands of titles."

This of course circumnavigates us back to the idea that in being faced with a glut of choice, our instinct leads us to seek out ways in which to narrow down the field of choice. Some participants, rather than employ a strategy consisting of different selection criteria and variables, will instead use pre-existing guides. One participant felt more comfortable in using lists of recommendations to guide their reading:

“That was my reading list, Richard & Judy recommended. Sad as it sounds! Because I needed a guide. I needed a guide to what to read!...I’m afraid that is my guide. Prizes and you know, book lists.” (Participant B7)

What is interesting to note is that there is an apologetic tone in Participant B7’s comments, the implication being that the participant feels as though she shouldn’t need a guide. There is also an underlying sense that there may be a cultural stigma attached to reliance on book prizes and lists as guidance towards books. As previously discussed, the use of book lists and prizes as guides is commonplace and understandably so when considering the vast expanse of the literary landscape.

4.4. Choosing for a reading group

As we have seen, the process of choosing a book is a intricate balance of different criteria against multiple variables. We have already established that reading for a reading group and for yourself differ in purpose, the type of book read and ways of reading. Consequently, it could be suggested that the factors taken into consideration in choosing a book for a reading group might also differ.

From both the focus group discussions and also the interviews with library staff, distinct differences have emerged although this did come through more strongly from the perspective of the library staff. One focus group, when asked about this unanimously thought that there was no difference but the member of library staff thought otherwise:

“I thought it was an interesting question, “Are the criteria for choosing a reading group book the same as choosing a book?” And people didn’t seem to think so but I think it’s hugely different.” (Participant C18L)

This disparity between the perspectives of library staff and readers may be due to the fact that library staff are heavily involved in selecting the reading group books. All of the participating reading groups bar one relied on the public library service to

provide them with books. The public library service in Sheffield has a separate collection of reading group sets, a collection of over three-hundred titles which are loaned out in sets of ten copies. Two of the library staff interviewed noted that as reading groups were reliant on what was available, there were practical factors to take into consideration when choosing the books:

“If I’m honest, if they give me two titles and one’s easier to get hold of than the other, for practical reasons I might get that one...Not because I want to choose that book but for practical reasons that it’s easier to get.” (Participant C18L)

For the participating groups then, their choice was also restricted by what was available to loan and additionally, the list itself. Although the members of the reading groups were encouraged to submit any suggestions or requests for reading group sets, the library staff interviewed did stress that generally new sets were only bought once the title was available in paperback. An analysis of the list of the reading group sets was carried out, with the list being sorted into four categories. Figure 3 shows a breakdown of the analysis and the full list of the titles in their categories can be found in the appendices (see *Appendix I*).

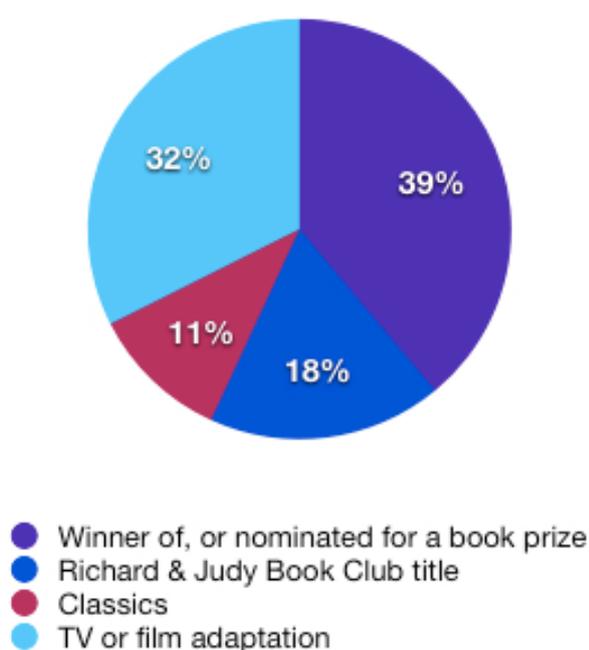


Figure 3. Breakdown of analysis of the list of reading group sets.

The results of the analysis bear out the comments made by the library staff interviewed. When asked how the books for the reading group sets were selected, one member of library staff noted that the titles were largely taken from bestseller lists and customer requests. This would account for the high proportion of books associated with book prizes and adapted into films or television programmes as both factors have a huge influence on sales figures of books. Similarly, books selected as part of Richard & Judy's book club also get a boost in sales but as one interviewee pointed out "a lot of people read them anyway, so they don't always need to come to a reading group with them," alongside the added factor of them being perceived as too lightweight which accounts for the lower percentage of Richard & Judy titles.

The function that reading groups play in helping their members discover new books is only enhanced by the luck of the draw nature of reading group choices. There is an implicit understanding on the part of reading group members that there is a trade-off between discovering new and unexpected sources of reading material and encountering a book that you may not enjoy:

"It's very varied isn't it and quite challenging because I think that's the whole point of it, they'll probably tell you that themselves. Some, they absolutely hate and some they didn't expect to enjoy and they've gotten a lot out of it." (Participant C18L)

This sense that members can get a lot out of reading group books is linked to the participants' observation that great reading group books require an added element that is perhaps not necessary in other contexts:

"It's a bit like clothes isn't it? We'll all have our comfy clothes but we've all got something that we quite like that's maybe a bit nice for a special occasion and those are our reading group books, aren't they? They're the more challenging ones." (Participant D26)

This added element was variously labelled as 'challenging', 'controversial' or 'complexity' and it was picked up on by various participants:

“...it has to be something that generates some sort of discussion.” (Participant E31L)

“I think controversy, that makes a good reading group book. You need to have something to discuss. It’s all very well, we have got books on the list that are very nice books and everybody brings it back and says, ‘Yes, it was lovely!’” (Participant C18L)

“I find there should be a certain aspect of complexity. One facet or the other, either character or storyline or whatever, because otherwise you might just finish your discussion after ten minutes and you don’t have anything to say. And if everyone agrees on the same things...it can put a stop to the reading group.” (Participant A4)

There is a definite sense that conflict or controversy is a desirable factor in generating successful reading group discussions, particularly from Participants C18L and A4. Both participants identify consensus amongst the group as curbing discussion. Participant C18L’s comments about “nice books” is echoed elsewhere in another interview with a member of library staff, who comments on books which have not been popular with the reading groups that they are:

“Maybe a bit too nice and not enough debate to it.” (Participant C19L)

That’s not to say that “nice” books aren’t always inappropriate for reading groups as one participant points out:

“Would it also depend on what the purpose of the book group is? And if it’s people wanting to educate themselves through to people wanting to get together for a nice, warm, unconflicting social time periodically in which they all might be quite happy to say, “Oh I liked that character, I liked this and that reminded me of when I was on

holiday” and that actually may be why they wanted to look at the book.” (Participant A6)

Whilst we cannot rule out the “nice” book as a successful choice for reading groups, as we have already seen, one of the primary purposes of joining a reading group is in order to expand horizons. So what is this “nice” book that the participants referred to? From participants comments, it appears to be that books which may be labelled as more ‘lightweight’ reads fit into this category. One member of library staff used the example of Richard & Judy books and noted that they were popular:

“With individuals, not always with reading groups because sometimes there’s not a lot to discuss about them, they can be a bit too light so it doesn’t always follow that all of them will go into the reading group sets.” (Participant E31L)

Another member of library staff also made this distinction between lightweight and challenging reads:

“Something a bit more challenging. We all want something we can flick through at home and sometimes it will be something a bit more challenging, sometimes it’ll be a crime novel or chick-lit or something you know, quite light but I wouldn’t necessarily bring that to this group, well I wouldn’t! I mean, I love Kate Fforde but I wouldn’t bring her latest one to the group. Great, great reads but for your own time, you know?” (Participant C18L)

It is important to note that here the use of the term ‘light’ in describing a book is not a value-laden term. It is not a comment on the literary value of the book but rather a comment on how challenging a read the book is. Participant C18L’s comments reflect this, she makes the distinction between lightweight and challenging books in terms of the purpose of the reading. The more challenging book is not only more conducive to stimulating discussion but also in satisfying this purpose of

reading whereas, as Participant C18L points out, more lightweight reads are more suitable for your own personal reading.

We have explored and discussed the sophisticated and at times complex strategies which are adopted in choosing a book and the various factors which fall under consideration in book selection. So far, we have also established that there is a vital and distinct difference between reading for yourself and for a reading group in the mode, purpose and type of book read. The discussion so far has been geared towards the benefits of reading and the process of reading but will now move onto the central questions which lie at the heart of this investigation, namely the issues which surround the concept of reader's block.

Chapter Five: Reader's Block

5.1. Introduction

Although the term 'reader's block' may be unfamiliar to any reader who may encounter it, the concept will most likely be one which most readers may have experienced. Jeffries (2008) identifies two strands to 'reader's block'; anxiety borne of "the accelerating onrush of books," and also angst about our own cultural credentials:

"...we are anxious about not having read the great works of literature. So we buy them to silence that anxiety. We present our purchases to the sales assistant with a superior look, and then cry a little inside...But we only rarely overcome this anxiety. Hence reader's block. We start...but we don't finish."

The first problem which plagues those with reader's block is that of being overwhelmed by choice. As previously discussed in Chapter Four, this "accelerating onrush" can be traced back to the nineteenth century boom in publishing and spiralled with Penguin's popularisation of cheap, affordable paperbacks in the 1930s. Despite all the arguments and evidence, such as declining library issue figures, that the popularity of reading as a leisure activity is diminishing, the book trade remains a thriving industry.

This boom in book sales has been reflected in the rapid expansion of book retailers alongside the growth of the Internet. Despite selling a wide variety of products now, Amazon.com originated as a online bookseller and electronic delivery of books is beginning to become popularised with the introduction of MP3 audiobooks and e-book readers such as the Kindle and the Sony Reader. Arguably, the publishing industry, like any other commercial industry, has responded to this overwhelming demand by increasing their supply.

Whether reader's block is down to anxiety due to the sheer amount of choice we are faced with or cultural anxiety, the central motif remains the same: that try as

they might, readers aren't able to finish a particular book and it is "a constant reminder of our lack of resolve" (Jeffries, 2008). For some readers, encountering difficulty with a book may not have very much impact on their attitude towards reading however Van Riel and Fowler (1996 : 32) identified a potentially damaging aspect of not being able to finish:

"If you feel out of your depth you may leave a book thinking that you have failed...This feeling of failure can be very damaging and could make you feel less like taking a risk next time."

What Van Riel and Fowler highlight is that there is a pervasive idea of what successful reading should be and this includes finishing a book and a failure to do so renders you an unsuccessful reader. This chapter will be exploring this central issue in reader's block, namely not being able to finish a book. Furthermore, we will also be investigating any strategies which can be adopted in order to combat reader's block.

5.2. Not finishing

Over the course of this study, both reading group members and library staff were asked whether they had ever not been able to finish a book and to share their experience of this in order to ascertain the prevalence of this. It became clear from the focus group discussions and the interviews that this experience of not being able to finish a book was widespread and shared by all of the participants in the study. Whilst it may not be accurate to argue that this experience is universal, as a reader it is overwhelmingly likely that at some point, you will find yourself unable to finish a book and the wide spectrum of reasons why came through in the participants' answers.

One of the most commonly cited reason, particularly in relation to reading group books, were practical considerations. Unsurprisingly, time was frequently brought up as a potential reason for not being able to finish a book as this participant explains:

“I was very busy that month and didn’t have time to finish it in time for the reading group.” (Participant A3)

Understandably, the frantic pace of modern lifestyles combined with other responsibilities such as family may contribute to individuals not being able to devote time to reading. Busy lifestyles can also contribute to not being able to finish a book in other ways as well, as this participant notes:

“If you’re reading when you go to bed, you really get tired and you take so long to get through because you read like two pages and then go to sleep. And then, you know, you can lose, sort of, drive. Lose the energy.” (Participant A4)

Common as they may be, practical reasons divulge more about an individual’s lifestyle rather than relating to the concept of reader’s block. Not being able to finish a book for the reasons as described by Jeffries (2008) are more intricately tied to the content of the book and the cultural constructs around the actual book itself.

On the surface, the most obvious reason for giving up on a book is simply that you do not like it. However the reasons behind simply not enjoying a book may be attributable to several factors. One reason which was mentioned by various participants was that they felt that they weren’t getting enough out of them:

“I think it was, not because it was badly written but it was just that I think I got out of that book what I wanted to get out of and I didn’t feel that it was going to bring up new things.” (Participant A2)

“I think it got to the halfway stage and I think I got something out of it but I wanted a bit more of a story arc or something or for it to be more obvious where the ideas were going.” (Participant A6)

“It was long - I found it a bit long-winded and I wasn’t interested in all the detail either, so...too much, just too much information and

nothing which was really gripping or really engaged me or not enough at least.” (Participant A4)

One of the characteristics which participants previously highlighted as desirable in a book for reading groups is that it is challenging and this is reinforced in participants stressing that unsatisfactory books have not provided them with enough to engage with. This idea can also be further tied into the concept of reading as a creative act; after all, if the pleasure of reading is to be found in exercising the imagination, then it follows that uninspiring source material will be found to be dissatisfying.

This sense of dissatisfaction also links into the idea that a book may fall into the gap between a reader’s expectations and the actual reality of the book:

“Salinger’s *The Catcher In The Rye* – I’ve a horrible idea that I chose that one for us to read because it was a classic and seemed to be one I should have read and I couldn’t think anything about it and I thought, “It’s bound to be good”.” (Participant B10)

“[on Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*] I started reading it and I just couldn’t get on with it and of course, I’m going to say this thing, I really wanted to persevere. And I just couldn’t. And you think, “Oh dear, I’m a bit disappointed with myself for not reading it” but that was one of the books I found a little bit hard work and I wanted to like it and I think if you want to like it, it makes it more difficult when you don’t.” (Participant C19L)

Expectations of a book can be fostered via previous experience of that author or genre, recommendations or simply the cultural reputation of a book or author. Participant C19L stated that she had chosen to read *A Tale of Two Cities* based on her previous enjoyment of both Dickens and other nineteenth-century novels. In the case of this participant, the disappointment not only stems from her expectations of the book itself but also in that her selection strategy of choosing a novel based on past experience of the author and genre had failed in this instance. The combination

of these two factors can be attributed to raising the expectations of the participant and as she notes, the disappointment is greater due to these inflated expectations.

In both of these participants' comments, there is a strong sense that part of the disappointment is not only fostered by their expectations of the book but also the cultural reputation of the book. Certainly Dickens is considered to be one of the great novelists in the English Literature canon and *The Catcher In The Rye* is regarded as one of the great novels of the twentieth century. For these participants, these books have come with recommendations from cultural authorities, as within our collective cultural consciousness these books have been defined as important works of literature. In fact, as Participant B10 notes, it is precisely the cultural status of these books which may influence a reader to choose a book, perhaps even to feel that they have a cultural obligation to read that book.

Perhaps another under-appreciated factor in reading for pleasure is simply whether the book is enjoyable or not. Ultimately, the driving factor behind reading for pleasure is enjoyment and the definition of 'enjoyment' will vary from reader to reader but it appears that reading for reasons other than entertainment may also be found to be unsatisfactory. One participant recounted the unsatisfactory experience of reading a Mills & Boon novel for reasons other than enjoyment:

"I didn't think it was very well written you know? And maybe it was just a bit too predictable. So, it just didn't motivate me enough and I needed something more intriguing, whatever. And then...I thought it might be interesting to read it from the point of view that they put into operation a kind of recipe...so I tried to see it from the point of view of the writing. But...I felt that I was making myself." (Participant A3)

Whether it is for academic or intellectual curiosity, out of a sense of misplaced cultural obligation or that simply, the books have fallen short of expectations, the reasons behind experiencing difficulty and disappointment with a book are varied. We have established that even within a small sample that these reasons widely vary but what of combating reader's block?

5.3. Combating reader's block

As previously established, the experience of reader's block was familiar to participants although it may not necessarily have been thought of as 'reader's block':

"I wouldn't call it reader's block though! I think I'd just call it a book that doesn't grab my attention enough to want me to read it." (Participant E31L)

Whether this experience is articulated or not, it has not had an adverse effect on the reading habits of the participants, as all are still actively engaged in reading. When asked about whether experiencing reader's block has affected attitudes towards reading or choice of future reading material, the majority of participants did not feel that reader's block did not have any adverse effects on their attitudes towards reading. In fact, for some of the participants, experiencing reader's block had a negligible effect:

"But there are so many books published and you kind of feel if you can't get along with one you can just go onto somebody else." (Participant A1)

The proliferation of published output which is the source of the paralysis of choice can also be the motivation to keep on reading for some. With so much on offer, reader's block need not be a significant problem, the solution may be to simply move on to another book which may prove to be a more enjoyable and satisfying reading experience. However, this approach does rely on the reader feeling confident enough to navigate the glut of books in order to select another title. This lack of apprehension may be due in part to the fact that the participants in this study are more heavily engaged in reading than average but how much is attributable to any strategies which may have been employed to combat reader's block?

The library staff interviewed for this study noted that whilst the members of their reading groups had experienced reader's block, they had not required to employ any strategies to combat this. Two of the interviewees commented that if a member of the reading group frequently encountered reader's block, their strategy would be to

allow that member to select the next book for the group. However, all interviewees stated that this situation had not arisen in any of their reading groups, with one participant pointing out: “I can’t see it being that negative, if they’re turning up every month, they’re obviously getting something out of it.” (Participant C18L) Once again, it is worth noting that as the participants of this study are all heavy readers, the likelihood of them being adversely affected by reader’s block may be less than it would be for a sample of participants who aren’t as actively engaged in reading and the reasons for this soon became clear.

5.3.1. Reading groups as a support system

By far, the most unexpected finding of this study was that the most commonly cited way of combating reader’s block was membership of a reading group. Library staff did not find that not finishing a book for reading group to be an impediment to participation. One interviewee commented that she actively counteracted this by providing encouragement to attend regardless:

“But what it’s about is, like we’ve said to the members, even if you don’t like the book, it doesn’t matter if you don’t finish it, do come along and join in and then it encourages the people to maybe carry on with the reading you see.” (Participant D24L)

This idea that membership of a reading group acting as an incentive for members to finish books was articulated by both the focus group participants and interviewees.

On the side of the reading group members, there was a strong sense of obligation which motivated participants to finish books which they may not necessarily have been enjoying:

“I have always struggled through them.” (Participant D25)

“I think we all feel that we owe it to each other to at least come and read it and have an opinion, one way or another.” (Participant D26)

“Because that’s the whole point of a reading group is to discuss these books whether you’ve liked them or disliked them. One of the books, was it *A Thousand Acres* [by Jane Smiley], I never would have picked that up and I really enjoyed it, that was a really powerful book and I never would have chosen that and that’s the point of the reading group and therefore I think the reading group deserves you to finish the book you see.” (Participant D27)

There is a sense that a tacit agreement exists, particularly in the comments from Participants D26 and D27, that in exchange for the various benefits gained in joining a reading group, members should attempt enough of a book in order to contribute to the discussions. This sentiment that members need not actually finish a book in order to be able to make a substantial contribution to the book discussions was echoed by other participants:

“Oh it didn’t stop me throwing in my opinion!... I probably couldn’t participate quite as well as I might have done had I read it but I still had got quite a good flavour for what it was about.” (Participant A6)

In fact, this notion closely mirrors the central argument of Bayard’s (2007 : 12) *How To Talk About Books You Haven’t Read*, in which he argues that our definition of ‘reading’ is too closely tied to the literal meaning of the term and that to even possess a cultural acquaintance with a text is sufficient enough:

“For the non-reader, therefore, even the most fleeting encounter with a book may be the beginning of an authentic personal appropriation, and any unknown book we come across becomes a known book in that instant.”

According to Bayard’s theory then, not reading a book should have very little ill effect on reading group participation. In fact, as we will go on to discuss, apart from providing members with an incentive to persevere with a book, participating in a reading group can renew flagging enthusiasm for a book.

Both the interviewees and focus group participants noted that attending a discussion which revolved around a book that they had experienced reader's block with often recast the book in a new light for them:

“Twice I’ve not enjoyed a book but I couldn’t have said why and I’ve come and other people have explained things or talked about it and I’ve thought, “Oh, that’s why I didn’t enjoy it” because I’ve known that I’ve not enjoyed it even though I finished it but I couldn’t have said why. So it’s quite interesting to hear other people’s opinions.” (Participant D25)

“And if you do make somebody want to take it away and read it again, it’s a bit like you’ve scored a point because your enthusiasm has made them stick with it.” (Participant C18L)

It is not only the enthusiasm expressed for a book which may persuade an reader to persevere with a book but an extended discussion can open up the ways in which the reader may experience the book. Whilst Participant D25 did not alter her opinion of the book, participating in a reading group discussion has opened up a new way to appreciate the book.

Combating reader's block is not simply about encouraging readers to persevere with a difficult book as the problem of reader's block does not simply centre around not being able to finish a book. Reader's block encompasses the problems faced by readers, the problems of choice and of cultural anxiety. The idea that being a 'successful' reader means finishing books is after all partly why reader's block is a problem and there is another strategy which lies on the other end of the spectrum.

5.3.2. Permission to give up?

Much has been made of the role of choice in reading in this study but this application of the concept of 'choice' in relation to the wealth of books on offer is only one consideration regarding choice in the role of reading. In relation to the concept of reader's block, choice may define the difference between continuing with a book or giving up. Krashen's (1993 : x) definition of reading for pleasure “means

putting down a book you don't like and choosing another one instead. It is the kind of reading highly literate people do obsessively all the time." Indeed, Krashen's observations mirror the advice on combating reader's block in Jeffries' (2008) article:

"To read for pleasure you have got to be in charge of your reading and that means knowing that it's OK to stop reading if it gets boring. Lots of books drop off halfway through."

This advice also echoes that of Van Riel and Fowler (1996 : 35) who redefine the concept of being a successful reader:

"To be a good reader, it's not the number of books you finish, it's the risks you are willing to take, the quality of engagement you offer in the contract with the writer."

However, the idea that being a successful reader is linked to completing books is still pervasive within our collective cultural psyche, despite the efforts of various commentators (Krashen, 1993; Van Riel and Fowler, 1996; Bayard, 2007; Sutherland, 2007; Jeffries, 2008). For the participants of this study, the process of becoming a successful reader has been an iterative process:

"Now I'm not cavalier about it, I do plough my way through some books I'm not enjoying that much but I do give myself freedom occasionally to say, 'That's it!'" (Participant D27)

"I think we were brought up to finish a book but like you [indicates Participant D27], I realised a few years ago, if I really don't like a book and it's for pleasure, I don't finish it but it took me a long time to learn that." (Participant D25)

The process of becoming a reader encompasses developing the literacy skills necessary to be able to read but also those reading skills outside of literacy such as knowing how to select reading material and knowing when to abandon a flagging

book. These reading skills enable individuals to become confident readers, readers who actively choose to engage in reading for pleasure. For the participants in this study, these skills were developed through experience from a continued engagement with reading. Certainly, in her study of reader selection strategies, Ross (2001 : 9) makes a similar argument:

“Being able to choose successfully among materials is an important skill that is never directly taught but is learned by readers who teach themselves, beginning in childhood. Each successful book choice makes it more likely that the beginning reader will want to repeat the pleasurable experience by reading something further.”

If it follows that successful book choices will encourage readers to attempt to replicate the experience, will unsuccessful book choices disillusion readers? Van Riel and Fowler (1996) certainly identify the dangers of this, arguing that this feeling of failure in relation to reading may foster a sense of inadequacy and negatively affect a reader’s confidence. For the majority of the participants in this study, the effects of reader’s block weren’t so pronounced and didn’t go beyond being discouraged from reading a book by the same author or in the same style:

“So it wasn’t what I expected from Charles Dickens and since then it has actually put me off reading any Charles Dickens which might be a bit of a shame!” (Participant C19L)

“You may too, not go back to that author again which I think is often a big mistake because just because you haven’t enjoyed one book by an author, doesn’t mean that you won’t enjoy others by the same author, it’s going to depend on the topic and everything else.” (Participant D26)

“And for me, I don’t think that’s really a good thing because it could just be one that’s a duff one, you know? And the others may be alright! But it just puts you off.” (Participant A5)

Interestingly, although these participants acknowledged that it may not logically follow that not enjoying one book should rule out the rest of an author's oeuvre, this has still not prevented them from feeling disillusioned. However, one participant expressed a disillusionment of a more serious kind:

“I automatically, if I find it difficult to read a book and having to go back because I haven't taken it in, I always used think, ‘Oh god, what's wrong with you?’ but now I'm more inclined to think, ‘Maybe it's the author who's wrong! Maybe they haven't written it very well!’” (Participant D27)

This participant's comments reflect what Van Riel and Fowler (1996 : 32) identified as one of the consequences of reader's block: “If hundreds of other people have read and enjoyed this book, why don't you? Is there something wrong with you?” Once again, there is a sense in this participant's comments that gaining more experience and reading more has not only bolstered her reading confidence but also helped her come to the realisation that not enjoying a book is not a result of something lacking in her.

The assumption that not enjoying a book may point to an inadequacy in the reader is linked to other similarly erroneous assumptions such as there being a correct way to read a text and beliefs in value judgements regarding literature and trash. As Van Riel and Fowler (1996) note, there is a huge deal of snobbery when it comes to discussing and thinking about books, something which is less marked within other forms of popular culture such as music, film and television. This anxiety which surrounds our reading feeds into reader's block and the next chapter will be devoted to investigating the extent of our cultural anxiety.

Chapter Six: Cultural Anxiety

6.1. Introduction

Cultural anxiety refers to the way in which attitudes and value judgements surrounding books and reading can negatively impact on a reader's individual experience of reading. The anxiety which casts a shadow over our reading lives can be felt in our reading choices, how we talk about books and most importantly our attitude towards reading. Jeffries (2008) attributes reader's block to this cultural anxiety: "This is the problem with readers: we aim too high. Ultimately, reader's block is caused by the great is-ought dilemma." However, there is a greater dilemma posed by reader's block, one which finds readers caught in a vicious circle. As with any medicine, we must acknowledge the possibility of side effects; cultural signposts which direct reading choices, such as book prizes and the literary canon, may help to cure paralysis of choice but it may also result in cultural anxiety.

In contrast to other forms of popular culture such as film and television, our reading choices come under more scrutiny. So much so, that a recent poll conducted for World Book Day (Spread the Word, 2009) revealed that two-thirds of Britons surveyed claimed to have read a book that they hadn't read. A similar survey carried out by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) in 2007 reported that out of 4,000 respondents, one-third read books which were perceived as challenging in order to appear more well-read (National Literacy Trust, 2009).

The results of another 2007 survey make a similar inference that people may use literature to appear well-read and intellectual. Fifty-five percent of those polled admitting to buying books for decoration rather than with the intention to read them (Lewis and Ezard, 2007). A qualitative study conducted by Waterstone's also mirrors these results, this respondent discussing classic novels comments:

"A classic novel is a timeless read that I never have the time to read. Classic novels are the ones sitting on my shelf that tell other people that I'm a well-read chap. Classic novels are the ones sitting

on my shelf that tell me that I'm a fraud for never having read them." (Holgate and Wilson-Fletcher, 1999 : 95).

Bayard (2007 : xvi) addresses this aspect of cultural anxiety noting that: "Our propensity to lie when we talk about books is a logical consequence of the stigma attached to non-reading." This stigma which Bayard identifies is historically rooted to the associations between being 'well-read', cultivated and educated, not to mention affluent. Indeed, one participant made this observation and identified the historical roots of this link:

"I think as time has gone on and more people have learnt to read because it wasn't until 1870 that we had education for everybody, I think that people who used to read in the eighteenth and nineteenth century were the intellectuals because other people couldn't read." (Participant D30)

It was not until the introduction of public lending libraries and the paperback revolution that fiction became accessible and affordable. That public libraries became known as the poor man's university is testament to the strong links between the notion of being literate and civilised. The findings of these surveys demonstrate that what we consume culturally is perceived to reflect upon us personally. This chapter will go on to explore the causes of this cultural anxiety in further detail and the way that it impacts on reading habits.

6.2. The 'ought-to' dilemma

For the participants of this study, cultural anxiety proved to be an ambivalent issue with some identifying strongly with it, whilst some felt that it was strongly linked to a youthful desire to impress others. For those who identified with cultural anxiety, it was most commonly manifested in the form of guilt:

"Well, I do feel bad about having never read *Ulysses* or The Bible." (Participant A1)

“I mean, there is this factor of like, you know it’s a book which has been talked about very much and I must say, yeah it does influence me to the extent that if I see *Ulysses* and I think, ‘I still haven’t read this, I should actually know about this book and what it’s about and how it reads.’” (Participant A4)

As exemplified by the comments above, this sense of guilt is most pronounced in relation to great works of literature. Both participants comment on *Ulysses* by James Joyce which is heralded as a modernist masterpiece but also appears in surveys on books that readers cannot finish, alongside another similarly lauded title, *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy (Lewis and Ezard, 2007; Spread the Word, 2009). This ‘ought-to’ dilemma is driven by the notion that these works are great cultural milestones, that they are vital and essential and therefore should be read. This also links into the debates surrounding value judgements and literature and the distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ books:

“This idea, which still thrives in popular publishing, assumes that ‘bad’ books can ‘poison the moral character’, while ‘good’ books have the power to turn their readers into marvels of human adjustment.” (Gorak, 1991 : 73)

Carey (2006) argues that the notion that good literature is an improving force, intellectually, spiritually and philosophically, has been entrenched in Western civilisation since its very inception. He traces the development of this idea from the ancient Classics via the Enlightenment through to the Victorian era where “it became a widespread cultural assumption that the mission of the arts was to improve people.” (Carey, 1996 : 97). This orthodoxy continued through to the turn of the twentieth century with Bennett’s influential essay, *Literary Taste: How To Form It*. Bennett’s essay is not only a guide on building up a library of literature but also on the emotional and intellectual benefits of literature. Whilst the somewhat didactic tone of Bennett’s work may seem archaic to modern eyes, the crux of his argument still informs contemporary beliefs, as Mann’s (1982 : 13) observations exemplify:

“...we have a society in Britain today where ‘book learning’ still carries high prestige and affords high social status. It is essential to be able to read, it is desirable to be able to read well, it is creditworthy to read voluntarily and it is prestigious to have an occupation which is associated with reading. Our ‘book culture’ confers a status on people who work with books.”

However, this overarching cultural orthodoxy has not gone unchallenged with critics such as Harold Bloom (1994 : 16) taking an Aesthetic stance on the issue:

“Reading the very best writers – let us say Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Tolstoy – is not going to make us better citizens. Art is perfectly useless, according to the sublime Oscar Wilde, who was right about everything.”

Empirically speaking, there is little evidence to support the argument that good literature benefits the reader more than bad books (Carey, 1996). Whilst research has been carried out into the benefits of reading (Krashen, 1993), this research tended to focus more on the development of literacy skills which are more easily assessed than subjective experiences such as emotional and spiritual growth.

A long-held belief such as this is not easily challenged however and this notion that literature is nourishing still holds currency today. This participant’s comments about genre fiction, in this case a Quentin Jardine detective novel, illustrate this:

“I read it from cover to cover and it drew you in very well but it was like eating too much junk food. I almost literally felt queasy at the end and it’s the effect of eating junk food, you want more and more chips but you can easily overdo it and that’s a bit how I felt after reading this.” (Participant A3)

The junk food metaphor which the participant employs suggests that whilst the pleasures of genre fiction may be cheap, they are also transient and ultimately

unfulfilling. The implication of this is that the diametric opposite of genre fiction, highbrow literary fiction, is nourishing, rewarding and ultimately good for the reader.

6.3. A cultural rite of passage

For the participants in this study did who did not relate to this aspect of cultural anxiety, the notion itself did not prove unfamiliar, as one participant notes:

“Well, I think I got kind of beyond of that feeling, “Oh I should like these books” because I know it’s a bit associated with some of the classics.” (Participant A4)

It may be worth noting however that the surveys conducted were done anonymously therefore respondents were more likely to be comfortable divulging the secrets of their reading behaviour. What Participant A4’s comments infer is that this aspect of cultural anxiety is not entirely unfamiliar and may also be age-related. Participant A4’s phrasing certainly suggests that at some point in her reading past, she may have felt this cultural anxiety and this is echoed in the survey conducted by the MLA. The survey found that of those in the 19-21 age bracket were more likely to lie about what they had read, with over half admitting to doing so (National Literacy Trust, 2009). One focus group closely identified with the age-related aspect of these literary white lies:

“Yeah, I think age is an issue actually. There is definitely a phase in your life, I don’t know – late teens, early twenties, where you maybe drop the odd name of a book that you’ve read.” (Participant A2)

“I think I’ve read quite a lot but I don’t think I’ve got anything to prove and I might have felt more like that when I was younger. It might have been when I was trying to impress someone. And you actually think that it’ll have an impact on them!” (Participant A6)

This age-related aspect of cultural anxiety echoes the way in which youth subcultures have traditionally used cultural products as a badge of identity

(Hebdige, 1988). Whilst youth subcultures rely on music and fashion more as an external expression of identity, the same concept could also be applied to books. The integration of documenting your reading with online social networking exemplifies this with applications such as Visual Bookshelf proving popular on Facebook and LibraryThing, the online personal cataloguing website. This sense that books may offer some insight into identity is also echoed in the findings of the studies conducted by the MLA and the National Literacy Trust which have found that those who lie about what they have read have done so to impress potential partners and new work colleagues (National Literacy Trust, 2009; Spread the Word, 2009).

Another age-related aspect of cultural anxiety which emerged from the focus group discussions was a sense that reading the classics was a rite of passage:

“But again I think we’re saying that because of our age because we have already done it but yes, I do think that people ought to read the classics at some point in their life.” (Participant D26)

This idea which Participant D26 expresses may be influenced by the fact that the classics regularly appear on syllabuses and reading lists from GCSE to university level, effectively making reading them a cultural rite of passage. As Gorak (1991 : 2) notes: “With the waning of Arnold Bennett’s man of letters and Virginia Woolf’s common reader, the classroom becomes the universally acknowledged site for the perpetuation of canonical texts.” Gorak’s observation that the use of canonical texts in education perpetuates locates the root of our cultural anxiety. That the greatness of canonical texts is impressed upon readers at an early age would explain why some participants viewed cultural anxiety as a phase to grow out of. What of the participants who do experience cultural anxiety in their current reading lives? That issues such as cultural anxiety and reader’s block are still discussed suggests that perhaps the roots lie deeper, beyond the classroom.

6.4. Metanarratives to mininarratives

The stance which Bennett (1909 : 33) takes on the importance of the classics highlights another cause of cultural anxiety: “If you differ with a classic, it is you who are wrong, and not the book.” So, even when we do read highly praised books or great works of literature, we may experience anxiety that our experiences do not correlate with that of other people’s, particularly cultural authorities. If we do not read these books however, we are anxious that we are missing out on great cultural events and allusions.

For the participants of this study, this element of cultural anxiety was one which registered with their experiences. The participants identification with this was very often in relation to books that they read because they felt they ‘ought to’ and had subsequently not enjoyed:

“(about Stendhal’s *Scarlet and Black*) I read a lot of others but couldn’t get into that and I was only reading it because I felt that I ought to read it.” (Participant D26)

“(on descriptive passages found in the classics) You see, I feel there’s something lacking in me that I don’t like those passages.” (Participant D25)

The participants’ comments highlight the link between enjoyment and motivation in reading. It appears that if a reader chooses a book out of a sense of cultural obligation, there is not much pleasure to be gained from the book. Despite this, even when readers have enjoyed these great works, the reputation which precedes the work can affect their reading experience, as this participant in Hartley’s (2002 : 77) study commented:

“I have tended to find that the classics cause us problems, e.g. *The Odyssey* and *Madame Bovary*, not because we have not enjoyed reading them but perhaps because we are overawed by their greatness.”

As we have previously discussed, the processes behind choosing a book are complex and continue to be finely tuned throughout an individual's reading experience. With so many variables, such as mood and lifestyle, to consider when selecting a book, is this 'ought-to' impulse a productive strategy? One participant demonstrated an awareness of the futility of reading driven by cultural anxiety:

“Because there's such a huge amount of literature and music and so forth that is seen as culturally good and is tremendous but it seems pointless just ploughing through with something.” (Participant A6)

Though there is no suggestion that great works of literature cannot be enjoyable, there is a preconception that they are what their name implies: work. Alan Bennett (2007 : 13) makes this observation in his novella, *The Uncommon Reader*:

“Had Her Majesty gone for another duff read, an early George Eliot, say, or a late Henry James, novice reader that she was she might have been put off reading for good and there would be no story to tell. Books, she would have thought, were work.”

Canonical books often carry connotations of being difficult and challenging books and for some texts, this may indeed be the case. Bloom's (1994 : 3) definition of what makes a text canonical isolates originality as the key factor: “The answer, more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange.” It is this “strangeness” may make a book more challenging and the participants in this study recognised this and drew a distinction between the literary quality and readability:

“...people will be deemed classics if they're the first...I think there's a huge class of people who are read because they are a first but actually may not be very good.” (Participant A3)

“The easier to read authors tend not to be regarded as the classics but for me people like Ruth Rendell and Francis Fyfield, there's lots

and lots of folk nowadays that are very good writers and they don't get put in this category, the classics. The classics have remained Austen and the Victorian bunch" (Participant D30)

From these comments, there is a sense of cynicism around the canon, that the canon has remained inflexible in the face of shifting literary tastes and standards. This cynicism may be attributed to the modernist rejection of traditionally dominant modes of expression and the postmodern fatigue with overarching monopolies of truth. As Participant D30 points out, a large proportion of the canon is comprised of authors, such as Austen, Dickens and Eliot, who embraced and popularised the realist tradition¹, a literary tradition which modernism railed against.

Barry (2002 : 82) notes that this shift away from the realist novel resulted in "literature which seems dedicated to experimentation and innovation." It is no coincidence that modernist authors such as Woolf, Joyce and Eliot number amongst those who may be simultaneously considered canonical and particularly challenging or impenetrable. Incidentally, the frequent appearance of Joyce's *Ulysses* in surveys regarding unfinished or lied about books may be testament to this (Lewis and Ezard, 2007; Spread the Word, 2009).

The postmodern influence may lie in what Jean-Francois Lyotard (Barry, 2002 : 86) termed as "incredulity towards metanarratives."² The classics and canonical texts are often cited as having a quality of universality and timelessness, as Katz (2001 : 190) notes that:

"...there is such a thing as best and great books, which contain universal ideas that are worthy of study from one generation to the next. The truth of the books transcends time, race, class and nationality."

¹ The project of realism was ultimately verisimilitude, the notion was that art should hold a mirror up to the world. Barry (2002 : 82) outlines the key features of the realist novel as "chronological plots, continuous narratives relayed by omniscient narrators, 'closed endings' etc."

² Metanarratives or grand narratives is defined as "'big stories' (grands récits) which claim to explain everything" (Baldick, 2008). Examples of metanarratives include Christianity, Marxism, the Enlightenment and Freudism.

Against the rise of individualism and postmodernity, the notion of the universality of literature has faced fierce opposition, not least from those who argue that this universality does not extend beyond the boundaries of the Western sphere. The oft-cited universality of human nature does not take into account other points of divergence such as culture and religion as cultural anthropologist, Laura Bohannan (1966) discovered. Bohannan chronicles her time spent living with the Tiv in Nigeria and how their interpretations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* differed vastly from Western eyes. As Bohannan discovered, *Hamlet* contained 'truths' for the Tiv however these did not correlate with the 'truths' acknowledged in Western civilisation. Lyotard's (Barry, 2002 : 87) argument that a postmodern society represents a move away from metanarratives towards smaller, more localised narratives is mirrored in these comments from a Tiv elder:

“We, who are elders, will instruct you in their true meaning, so that when you return to your own land your elders will see that you have not been sitting in the bush, but among those who know things and who have taught you wisdom.” (Bohannan, 1966).

It could be argued that this scepticism of the canon has bled into other areas of our cultural life. In questioning the canon, we are questioning the cultural authorities who have constructed this canon. As Katz (2001 : 190) notes, the concept of the canon “presupposes a consensus among those who select the titles and those who read and study the books.” For the participants in this study, there seemed to be a similar scepticism with cultural authorities such as critics as well as those in other fields such as book prize judging panels:

“(on the Man Booker Prize judging panel) If you're an intellectual kind of person, maybe you'd choose a different kind of book to your normal reading public.” (Participant D30)

“I think it is interesting to see in bookshops and Oxfam and so forth if there's a 'fiction' and a 'literature' section, there are some authors who can...you can't guess which one they're going to be in.

And you think, “Wait, that person is in ‘literature’ and this person is just in ‘fiction’!” (Participant A6)

“I always worry about the canon-in-making. It’s one of the problems I have with the idea of genres and particularly ‘literary fiction’ because I think that ‘literary fiction’ styles itself as a canon-in-making.” (Participant A3)

These comments demonstrate participants’ critical awareness of the mechanics behind these cultural constructions, whether it is the canon, the labels used to categorise books or the criteria used to judge book awards. Despite these shoots of resistance, it is worth noting that these cultural constructions date back to the dawn of Western civilisation and deconstructing beliefs which have permeated our collective consciousness may be a lengthy process. The existence and continuing discussion of issues surrounding our cultural anxiety is testament to this.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

7.1. Introduction

The aim of this study was to investigate the prevalence and impact of reader's block on members of reading groups. The focus of the investigation lay in the effect of reader's block on the reading habits and attitudes towards reading of the participants and whether any strategies had been employed to combat reader's block. The researcher feels that this study has been successful in terms of fulfilling the primary aim of this research. The implications and key findings of the study are summarised below and are presented in relation to the research objectives.

7.2. Participants' experience of reader's block

This study found that all the participants identified with one or more of the aspects of reader's block. Not being able to finish a book was found to be common to all the participants. The reasons behind not being able to finish a book were divided between practical reasons and reasons to do with the actual book itself. Practical reasons commonly included issues in accommodating reading with time and lifestyle factors.

Outside of practical reasons, enjoyment was a common factor in preventing readers from successfully engaging with a book. Enjoyment was strongly predicated on whether the book met the reader's expectations. The other factors involved in reader's block are cultural anxiety and issues surrounding book selection and these are discussed in 7.4. and 7.5 respectively.

7.3. The impact of reader's block on reading group participation, reading habits and attitudes towards reading

For participants, experiencing reader's block generally did not negatively impact upon participation in reading groups or hinder participants from contributing towards the discussion. In fact, for many members of reading groups, participating in

a book discussion will often encourage perseverance with a book. All of the participating reading groups in this study actively fostered an environment which encouraged members to attend and participate whether they had finished the book or not.

The most commonly cited effect of reader's block on reading habits was in what participants chose to read next. In order to avoid replicating the experience of reader's block, participants noted that choosing a book which was entirely different would be one strategy. Many observed that experiencing reader's block had discouraged them from reading the same author again. This may be linked into the findings which suggest that author is one of the most influential factors in reader selection strategies. This finding is discussed in greater detail in 7.5.

Finally, this study did not find that experiencing reader's block made any lasting negative impact on participant's attitudes towards reading. Participants did report feeling disappointed with themselves when they have experienced reader's block and this is strongly linked with issues of cultural anxiety (discussed in 7.4.).

7.4. The role of cultural anxiety in reader's block

Similarly to the findings in 7.2., this study found that participants identified with or recognised some element of cultural anxiety in their reading experience. Some participants associated cultural anxiety with a youthful desire to impress others. This supports the findings of previous research which found that those in the 19 to 21 year old age bracket were most likely to lie about what they have read to impress others. There was also an implication that at particularly a younger age, readers treat books as an external signifier of identity and personality.

For those participants who still experienced cultural anxiety, this most commonly manifested itself in the form of guilt. These readers felt guilty that they had not read critically acclaimed or canonical works. Some participants experienced cultural anxiety, upon reading such texts and finding that their experience and opinion of the book did not match up with those of others. For some participants, this led to a belief that there was something lacking in them which did not enable them to

appreciate and enjoy these texts. For these participants, an accumulation of reading experience and development of critical skills helped in overcoming this perception.

7.5. Influences on book selection

The consensus in the existing research and in this study indicates that author is the most influential factor in selection of reading material, followed closely by genre. This study also found that membership of a reading group was highly influential on reading choices. The availability and visibility of a title is also an influencing factor in book selection and this may refer to either physical or cultural visibility. Book displays are examples of ways of physically drawing attention to particular titles. The cultural profile of a book may be raised via reviews, inclusion on book lists and being linked with literary prizes.

This study also found that there is a marked difference in the criteria employed in selecting books for reading groups and for individuals. In selecting a book for reading outside the reading group, consideration was given to mood and practical factors such as time. For reading groups, books which were challenging and had an element of controversy were favoured as they were found to be more conducive to encouraging successful book discussions. For library-based reading groups, the choice of books was largely restricted to what was available on the reading group set list.

7.6. Ways of combating reader's block

This study found that membership of a reading group can be a strategy in itself in combating reader's block. Participating in a discussion on a book provides support and encouragement for persevering with a previously discarded book. Often, the enthusiasm of other group members and a deepened understanding of the text will spur on a reader to continue with a book. However, returning to a book did not necessarily guarantee a change of opinion or renewed enjoyment.

Previous research suggests that seasoned and experienced readers are less discouraged in giving up on a book that proves to be disappointing or not enjoyable.

The findings of this study corroborate this, a frequent observation made by participants was that the confidence and ability to give up on a book was something that was learnt. It appears that this particular part of the reading skill set is developed through an iterative process and sustained engagement with reading.

7.7. Recommendations for further research

One of the limitations of this study has been that the participants represent a homogenous sample in some respects. Existing research indicates that the make-up of reading groups is by and large female, middle-class and middle-aged. Additionally, by virtue of participating in a reading group, the participants were heavy readers, that is to say individuals who had an active and sustained engagement with reading. Therefore the findings of this study of the impact of reader's block on reading habits and attitudes towards reading may only be applicable to heavy readers. Further research into this area with individuals who are less engaged with reading may yield different results.

This study has also explored the myriad benefits of participating in a reading group. The benefits span the social, personal and reading dimensions and membership of a reading group has proven to be enormously rewarding to many. However, despite the surge in popularity of reading groups within the past decade, reading groups for the large part have a homogenous make-up. With increasing research being conducted into bibliotherapy, further investigation into the benefits of reading groups may be timely. In addition to this, ways in which to promote reading groups to those who are currently under-represented in reading groups would be beneficial to public library authorities.

The findings of this study raise questions regarding the nature of becoming a reader. Reading skills are commonly equated with literacy skills despite the fact that the reading skill set encompasses abilities outside those of basic literacy. Becoming a reader is primarily concerned with developing the necessary skills that encourage a sustained engagement with reading. This includes the skills required for critically engaging with texts, navigating the avenues of choice and above all, enjoying reading as a leisure activity.

Research into this area is particularly pertinent in light of comments made by the former Children's Laureate Michael Rosen, challenging the National Literacy Strategy (Powling, 2005). Rosen argues that the functional, extract-led approach of National Literacy Strategy is a contributing factor to the decline of free voluntary reading. This focus on literacy not only potentially discourages reading for pleasure but it also places less emphasis on the other skills required to become a reader.

Word Count: 24,872

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Appendices

Appendix A: Table of participant codes

Focus Group ID	Description of Focus Group	Participant Codes
Focus Group A	Workplace-based reading group. Not affiliated with a public library. Acted as pilot focus group.	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6
Focus Group B	Externally run library-based reading group. Small branch library in a socially disadvantaged area of Sheffield.	B7, B8, B9, B10, B11
Focus Group C	Library-based and run reading group. Small branch library in an affluent suburb of Sheffield.	C12, C13, C14, C15, C16, C20, C21, C22, C23
Focus Group D	Library-based and run reading group. Small branch library in an affluent suburb of Sheffield.	D25, D26, D27, D28, D29, D30

Interviewee Code	Description of Interviewee
C18L	Paraprofessional member of staff based at a small branch library. The library is located in an affluent suburb of Sheffield.
C19L	Paraprofessional member of staff based at a small branch library. The library is located in an affluent suburb of Sheffield.
D24L	Paraprofessional member of staff based at a small branch library. The library is located in an affluent suburb of Sheffield.
E31L	Professional member of staff based at a large branch library in Sheffield.

Appendix B: Focus group script

Opening remarks:

- Thank participants for agreeing to take part in the study.
- Briefly explain the aims of this study.
 - Research is part of dissertation for MA Librarianship
 - Interested in the phenomenon of “reader’s block” - the difficulty of finishing books which are critically acclaimed or considered classics and how this relates to participation in reading groups and also on attitudes towards reading
- Explain what is going to happen in the focus group:
 - The session should last for approximately one hour
 - Will be recording the session but everyone will be anonymised in the final dissertation and the recording will only be available to myself and my supervisor
 - Over the course of this hour, we will be discussing three broad topics around reading in general and reading within reading groups and also cultural issues around reading
 - There will also be a few short exercises during the course of this session too and you will have already been given the materials for this
 - The way this session will be structured is that I will start off the discussion with a question or exercise and this should lead onto further discussions on the topic. Please feel free to respond to remarks that anyone else has made as an interesting and enjoyable discussion is what we are aiming for here!
 - Does anyone have any questions?

Focus group questions:

Reader's block

- Ask participants to think of a book that they have given up on. What was it in particular about this book that made it difficult?
- How does giving up on a book influence what you read next? Does it influence you at all?
- Have you experienced any difficulties with books that you've read for the reading group? How has this affected your participation in the reading group?

Reading choices

- What qualities make a good book?
- What qualities make a good reading group book?
- How do you choose a book? / What influences your choice of reading material? (See *Exercise One*)
- Have you developed any strategies or patterns in your reading habits? (e.g. reading more than one book at a time; alternating different types of books; reading a succession of similar books etc)

Cultural influences on reading choices

- How much do book prizes such as The Booker or the Orange Prize affect your choice of reading material?
- What does the term 'English Literature canon' mean to you? (See *Exercise Two*)
- How relevant do you think the concept of the English Literature canon is?

Closing remarks:

- Ask if there is anything else that participants would like to talk about that they feel hasn't been covered.
- Thank participants again for taking part.

Appendix C: Focus Group - Exercise One

How do you choose a book? What influences your choice of reading material?

Please rate each influence using the scale, where 1 is always and 5 is never.

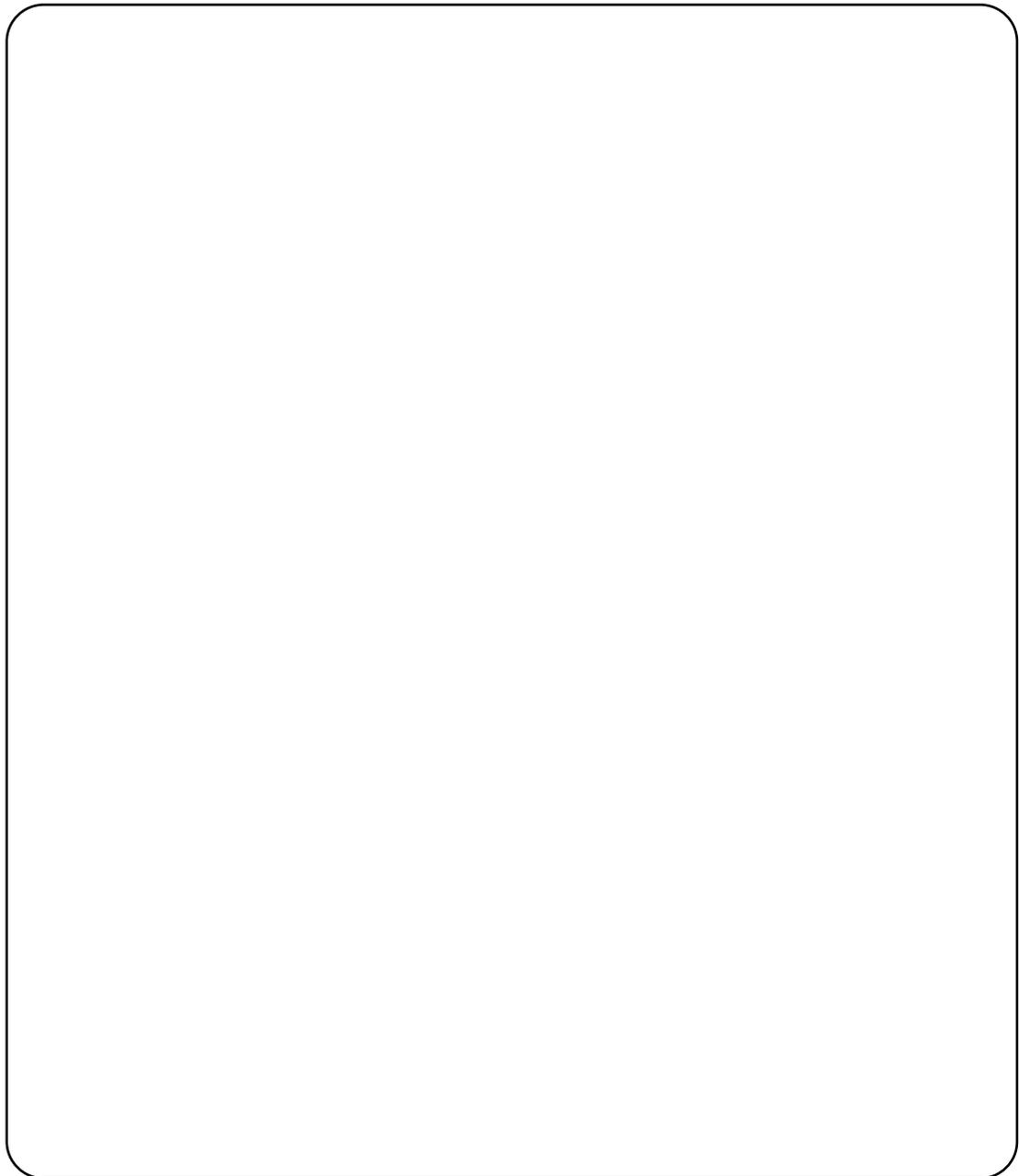
Influence	1	2	3	4	5
Recommendations					
Book prizes					
Television reviews					
Radio reviews					
Newspaper reviews					
Website recommendations (e.g. Amazon)					
Specialist website reviews					
Blogs					
Television adaptation					
Film adaptation					
Radio adaptation					
Theatre adaptation					
Genre					
Author					
Blurb on cover					
Recommendations on cover					
Participation in a reading group					
Given as a gift					

Are there any other influences that have not been listed above? Please specify:

Appendix D: Focus Group - Exercise Two

The literary canon

What books and/or authors would you classify as part of the literary canon? Please list the first five which come to mind. Why have you chosen these books/authors?



Appendix E: Interview schedule

Ask interviewee to state name and position for the purposes of the recording.

Reading Group

- How long has this reading group been running for?
- How many members are there?
- What kind of books do the group read?
- Who chooses the books for the reading group?
- How do they choose the books?
- What factors make a book suitable for a reading group discussion?
- How much do high profile books such as classics and book prize winners account for within the reading group choices?

Reader's Block

- Briefly explain the concept of reader's block to interviewee.
- Have you ever had this experience personally of being unable to finish a book?
- How has not being able to finish a book affected your attitude towards reading subsequently?
- Do the members of the reading group experience reader's block? How often?
- Does not being able to finish the book affect attendance and participation?
- Have any experiences of reader's block affected the way in which the reading group is run in anyway? For example, books that are chosen etc.
- What kind of guidance and support do you provide for the reading group?

Thank interviewee for agreeing to participate in the research.

Appendix F: Sample of participant information sheet

Participant Information Sheet

The impact of readers' block on reading groups.

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Prior to taking part in this research, please read this information sheet thoroughly and if you have any questions or queries, please feel free to discuss this with the researchers or any others if you wish. Participation in this research project is entirely voluntary and you can opt out at any time. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. Again, if you have any questions or if anything needs clarification, don't hesitate to discuss this with the researcher or any other participants. Thank you for your time and attention.

What is the project's purpose?

This project is being undertaken as part of a Masters degree in Librarianship at the University of Sheffield and it will be running from May 2009 to September 2009. The aim of this research project is to investigate whether readers' block has any impact on the participation in reading groups and upon the attitude of members of reading groups towards reading as a leisure activity.

Readers' block is a term used to describe the difficulty that readers have in completing books which are critically acclaimed or deemed as 'classics' and the pressure to persevere with these books, despite the fact that the reader may not be actively enjoying them. Bearing this in mind, the intention of this proposed study is to investigate how reader's block affects the participation and attitudes of members of reading groups. Very often, the books chosen by reading groups fall precisely into the category of book (such as classics and Booker Prize winners) that tends to promote reader's block.

In gaining a more detailed understanding of the process and importance of choice (in both choosing and abandoning a book), there are potentially practical implications for public libraries and reader development policy in providing reader guidance for library users.

Why have I been chosen?

You and all the other participants have been chosen to take part in this research project as you are a member of a reading group run by Sheffield Public Libraries. As this research project is specifically interested in reading groups and the researcher is based in Sheffield, it was felt that the reading groups at Sheffield Public Libraries would be ideal research participants.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this research project is entirely voluntary, it is completely up to you whether or not you wish to take part. If you decide to participate, you will be given this information sheet to keep and you will be asked to sign a consent form. However, you can at any time decide to withdraw your consent at any time without affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You will not have to give a reason.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be asked to participate in a focus group either prior to or following your usual reading group session. Within this focus group, the researcher will lead an informal discussion around the issues which are key to the research topic. This will range from a general discussion of what books participants consider as 'classics' to participants experiences, if applicable, of readers' block. It is anticipated that the focus group will last for approximately an hour.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Although there may be no immediate benefits for you, it is hoped that this research will have some practical implication on reader development and reader guidance policies within public libraries. Additionally, it is also hoped that this research may have some application in the choice and variety of material for public library reading groups.

What if something goes wrong?

If you have any complaints about the way this research project has been conducted, you may raise this with the supervisor of this project:

Dr Andrew Cox
Department of Information Studies,
University of Sheffield
Regent Court
211 Portobello Street
Sheffield
S1 4DP
a.m.cox@sheffield.ac.uk

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All information collected in the course of this research will be anonymised and kept confidential. You will not be identified in any reports or publications. Any information which identifies you will be destroyed after this research project has been completed.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

An audio recording of the focus group discussions will be made and the researcher would like to assure participants that these recordings will only be used for analysis for this research project. No other use of them will be made without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original records. Upon completion of this research project, the recordings will be destroyed.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The results of this research project will be published as a dissertation at the University of Sheffield in September 2009. You will not be identified in the publication of this dissertation.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the Department of Information Studies ethics review procedure. The University's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

Contact for further information

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Appendix G: Sample of participant consent form

The impact of reader's block on reading groups

Hong-Anh Nguyen

Participant Identification Number for this project:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
3. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.
4. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research.
5. I agree to take part in the above research project.

Name of Participant Date Signature
(or legal representative)

Name of person taking consent Date Signature
(if different from lead researcher)
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Lead Researcher Date Signature
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Copies:

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix H: Tabulated data from Focus Group - Exercise One

Table 1 presents the raw data from Exercise One, completed during the focus groups.

Table 2 presents the data from Exercise One, as presented in the charts in the final study.

Influences	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
Recommendations	3	4	7	1	0	15
Book prizes	3	1	5	4	2	15
Television reviews	2	1	6	3	3	15
Radio reviews	2	1	7	3	2	15
Newspaper reviews	1	5	5	1	1	13
Website recommendations	0	1	4	2	4	11
Specialist website reviews	0	2	1	3	5	11
Blogs	1	2	1	2	9	15
Television adaptation	1	8	4	1	1	15
Film adaptation	1	7	4	1	0	13
Radio adaptation	3	5	2	1	3	14
Theatre adaptation	2	5	0	4	2	13
Genre	4	7	2	1	1	15
Author	3	11	1	0	0	15
Blurb on the cover	2	4	6	1	1	14
Recommendations on the cover	1	8	2	3	1	15
Participation in a reading group	8	6	1	0	0	15
Given as a gift	2	4	5	0	0	11

Table 1.

Note

The numbers in the *Totals* column is not consistent for all the *Influences* listed.

Where the total reads as 11, this is due to the fact that this field was added after the pilot focus group session. These categories were suggestions which came out of the focus group which accounts for the lower total.

Where the total reads as either 13 or 14, a participant had not rated the influence on the Likert scale, leaving that row blank. This may be due to either not being able to rate the influence or missing out that row accidentally.

Influences	1 + 2	3	4 + 5
Blogs	3	1	11
Specialist website reviews	2	1	8
Theatre adaptation	7	0	6
Book prizes	4	5	6
Television reviews	3	6	6
Website recommendations	1	4	6
Radio reviews	3	7	5
Recommendations on the cover	9	2	4
Radio adaptation	8	2	4
Genre	11	2	2
Television adaptation	9	4	2
Newspaper reviews	6	5	2
Blurb on the cover	6	6	2
Film adaptation	8	4	1
Recommendations	7	7	1
Author	14	1	0
Participation in a reading group	14	1	0
Given as a gift	6	5	0

Table 2.

Note

This table presents the data which has been manipulated in order to gain a clearer overview of the views of the participants in this study. As explained in Chapter Two, as the figures in the raw data are not sufficient enough to draw any definitive conclusions, the two most positive and negative results on the scale were added together in order to achieve a better insight.

Appendix I: Table of categorised reading group sets

Winner of or nominated for a book prize	TV/Film adaptation	Richard & Judy	Classics
Accidental Tourist by Anne Tyler	2001:A Space Odyssey (Arthur C. Clarke)	The Abortionist's Daughter by Elizabeth Hyde	Bleak House by Charles Dickens
The Accidental by Ali Smith	Accidental Tourist by Anne Tyler	Brick Lane by Monica Ali	Brideshead Revisited by Evelyn Waugh
Anil's Ghost by Michael Ondaatje	All Quiet On The Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque	Cloud Atlas by David Mitchell	Brighton Rock by Graham Greene
Arlington Park by Rachel Cusk	And When Did You Last See Your Father? by Blake Morrison	The Life and Death of Charlie St. Cloud by Ben Sherwood	Catch 22 by Joseph Heller
Arthur and George by Julian Barnes	Anita and Me by Meera Syal	East of the Sun by Julia Gregson	Catcher In The Rye by J.D Salinger
Atonement by Ian McEwan	Beloved by Toni Morrison	Empress Orchid by Anchee Min	Cranford by Elizabeth Gaskell
Before I Die by Jenny Downham	Boy A by Jonathan Trigell	Eve Green by Susan Fletcher	The Diary of a Nobody by George Grossman
Beyond Black by Hilary Mantel	Brave New World by Aldous Huxley	The Girls by Lori Lansens	End of the Affair by Graham Greene
The Book Thief by Marcus Zuzak	Brick Lane by Monica Ali	Half of a Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	A Farewell to Arms by Ernest Hemingway
Buddha Da by Anne Donovan	Brideshead Revisited by Evelyn Waugh	Highest Tide by Jim Lynch	For Whom The Bell Tolls by Ernest Hemingway
Catch A Fish From The Sea (Using the Internet) by Nasreen Ahktar	Brighton Rock by Graham Greene	The Historian by Elizabeth Kostova	The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald
Poppy Shakespeare by Clare Allan	The Buddha of Suburbia by Hanif Kureishi	The History of Love by Nicole Krauss	Howard's End by E.M Forster
Cold Mountain by Charles Frazier	Catch 22 by Joseph Heller	Hunting Unicorns by Bella Pollen	I Capture the Castle by Dodie Smith
The Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers by Xiaolu Guo	Poppy Shakespeare by Clare Allan	The Island by Victoria Hislop	I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou
English Passengers by Matthew Kneale	Cold Mountain by Charles Frazier	The Jane Austen Book Club by Karen Joy Fowler	Jamaica Inn by Daphne Du Maurier
Everyman's Rules For Scientific Reading by Carrie Tiffany	The Collector by John Fowles	Labyrinth by Kate Mosse	Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte
Fifteen Tales of Modern Attraction by Alison Macleod	The Colour Purple by Alice Walker	The Laments by George Hagen	Lady Chatterley's Lover by D.H. Lawrence
Fingersmith by Sarah Waters	Cranford by Elizabeth Gaskell	Liars and Saints by Maile Meloy	Lord of the Flies by William Golding
Bel Canto by Ann Patchett	The Crow Road by Iain Banks	The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold	Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert
Beloved by Toni Morrison	Disgrace by J.M Coetzee	Lucia Lucia by Adriana Trigiani	Mary Barton by Elizabeth Gaskell
Betrayal by Karin Alvtegen	Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood by Rebecca Wells	March by Geraldine Brooks	Nineteen Eighty-Four by George Orwell

Winner of or nominated for a book prize	TV/Film adaptation	Richard & Judy	Classics
Boy A by Jonathan Trigell	End of the Affair by Graham Greene	The Mermaid and the Drunks by Ben Richards	A Passage to India by E. M. Forster
The Buddha of Suburbia by Hanif Kuriishi	Enduring Love by Ian McEwan	Moon dust by Andrew Smith	Persuasion by Jane Austen
Charming Billy by Alice McDermott	Atonement by Ian McEwan	My Sister's Keeper by Jodi Picoult	Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen
Cloud Atlas by David Mitchell	A Farewell to Arms by Ernest Hemingway	No Time For Goodbye by Linwood Barclay	Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy
The Colour Purple by Alice Walker	Fingersmith by Sarah Waters	Notes from an Exhibition by Patrick Gale	To Kill A Mockingbird by Harper Lee
The Conservationist by Nadine Gordimer	For Whom The Bell Tolls by Ernest Hemingway	Notes on a Scandal by Zoe Heller	The Woman In White by Wilkie Collins
A Crime In The Neighbourhood by Suzanne Berne	The French Lieutenant's Woman by John Fowles	The Outcast by Sadie Jones	
The Curious Incident of the Dog In The Night-Time by Mark Haddon	Girl With A Pearl Earring by Tracey Chevalier	The Promise of Happiness by Justin Cartwright	
Disgrace by J.M. Coetzee	The Go-Between by L.P. Hartley	P.S. I Love You by Cecelia Ahern	
Eve Green by Susan Fletcher	The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald	Random Acts of Heroic Love by Danny Scheinmann	
Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels	House of Sand and Fog by Andre Dubus	The Remains of the Day by Kazuo Ishiguro	
A Gathering Light by Jennifer Donnelly	Howard's End by E.M. Forster	The Righteous Men by Sam Bourne	
The Ghost Road by Pat Barker	I Capture the Castle by Dodie Smith	Rose of Sebastopol by Katherine McMahon	
God's Own Country by Ross Raisin	I by Robot by Isaac Asimov	The Shadow of the Wind by Carlos Ruiz Zafon	
Half of a Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	In A Land of Plenty by Tim Pears	The Sixth Lamentation by William Brodrick	
The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood	Jamaica Inn by Daphne Du Maurier	Starter for Ten by David Nicholls	
Heglioland by Shena Mackay	The Jane Austen Book Club by Karen Joy Fowler	Then We Came To The End by Joshua Ferris	
The History of Love by Nicole Krauss	Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte	Visible World by Mark Slouka	
House of Sand and Fog by Andrew Dubus	The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini	Want To Play? by P.J. Tracy	
Idea of Perfection by Kate Grenville	Lady Chatterley's Lover by D.H. Lawrence	We Need To Talk About Kevin by Lionel Shriver	
If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things by Jon McGregor	Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee by Meera Syal	The Welsh Girl by Peter Ho Davies	
The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai	The Line of Beauty by Alan Hollinghurst	Blood River by Tim Butcher	
The Island by Victoria Hislop	Lord of the Flies by William Golding	Feel by Robbie Williams	

Winner of or nominated for a book prize	TV/Film adaptation	Richard & Judy	Classics
Labyrinth by Kate Mosse	Love In The Time of Cholera by Gabriel Garcia Marquez	Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson by Paula Byrne	
Larry's Party by Carol Shields	The L-Shaped Room by Lynne Reid Banks	Toast: The Story of a Boy's Hunger by Nigel Slater	
Empress Orchid by Anchee Min	Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert		
Last Seen In Lhasa by Claire Scobie	Man and Boy by Tony Parsons		
The Line of Beauty by Alan Hollinghurst	Mapp and Lucia by E.F. Benson		
The Lizard Cage by Karen Connolly	Memoirs of a Geisha by Arthur Golden		
Man and Boy by Tony Parsons	Mildred Pierce by James M Cain		
March by Geraldine Brooks	Miss Smilia's Feeling for Snow by Peter Hoeg		
Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie	Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont by Elizabeth Taylor		
The Observations by Jane Harris	My Sister's Keeper by Jodi Picoult		
Old Filth by Jane Gardam	Nineteen Eighty-Four by George Orwell		
On Beauty by Zadie Smith	Notes on a Scandal by Zoe Heller		
On Chesil Beach by Ian McEwan	On The Black Hill by Bruce Chatwin		
On The Black Hill by Bruce Chatwin	Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit by Jeanette Winterson		
Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit by Jeanette Winterson	Oscar and Lucinda by Peter Carey		
The Orchard On Fire by Shena MacKay	The Other Boleyn Girl by Philippa Gregory		
Oscar and Lucinda by Peter Carey	A Passage to India by E. M. Forster		
The Other Side of the Bridge by Mary Lawson	Perfume: The Story of A Murderer by Patrick Suskind		
The Outcast by Sadie Jones	Persuasion by Jane Austen		
A Passage to India by E. M. Forster	Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen		
The Perfect Man by Naeem Murr	The Prince of Tides by Pat Conroy		
Playing With The Moon by Eliza Graham	P.S. I Love You by Cecelia Ahern		
The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver	The Quiet American by Graham Green		
Property by Valerie Martin	Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier		

Winner of or nominated for a book prize	TV/Film adaptation	Richard & Judy	Classics
Random Acts of Heroic Love by Danny Scheinmann	The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne		
Regeneration by Pat Barker	The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic by Sophie Kinsella		
The Remains of the Day by Kazuo Ishiguro	The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd		
The Restraint of Beasts by Magnus Mills	Q&A by Vikas Swarup		
The Road Home by Rose Tremain	Snow Falling on Cedars by Peter Hoeg		
Saturday by Ian McEwan	Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy		
The Sea by The Sea by Iris Murdoch	A Thousand Acres by Jane Smiley		
The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd	To Kill A Mockingbird by Harper Lee		
The Secret River by Kate Grenville	The Woman In White by Wilkie Collins		
A Short History of Tractors by Marina Lewycka	America Unchained by Dave Gorman		
The Siege of Krishnapur by J. G. Farrell	Long Way Down by Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman		
Q&A by Vikas Swarup	Midnight In the Garden of Good and Evil by John Berandt		
A Small Island by Andrea Levy	Touching the Void by Joe Simpson		
Snow Falling on Cedars by Peter Hoeg	The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas by John Boyne		
The Soldier's Return by Melvyn Bragg	Freak the Mighty by Rodman Philbrick		
A Spell of Winter by Helen Dunmore	The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole by Sue Townsend		
The Story of Lucy Gault by William Trevor			
The Tenderness of Wolves by Stef Penney			
Then We Came To The End by Joshua Ferris			
A Thousand Acres by Jane Smiley			
To Kill A Mockingbird by Harper Lee			
Twelve Bar Blues by Patrick Neate			
The Van by Roddy Doyle			
Vernon God Little by DBC Pierre			

Winner of or nominated for a book prize	TV/Film adaptation	Richard & Judy	Classics
We Need To Talk About Kevin by Lionel Shriver			
The Welsh Girl by Peter Ho Davies			
Blood River by Tim Butcher			
Midnight In the Garden of Good and Evil by John Berandt			
Toast: The Story of a Boy's Hunger by Nigel Slater			
Touching the Void by Joe Simpson			
How I Love Now by Meg Rosoff			
Looking for JJ by Anne Cassidy			
Merrybegot by Julie Hearn			