

A desire to read

Award-winning author **Tanya Landman** says we need to encourage children to want to read to become better people



WHEN MY YOUNGEST son started at our local comprehensive, I realised – with something of a shock – that both my boys had gone through primary school without ever having read a whole ‘chapter book’ in class.

When I was growing up, each school day ended with 10 minutes or so when our teacher read aloud to us. We might not all have been fluent readers, but we could all listen. It was the only time when the whole class was engaged, attentive and quiet; the only time when we could all genuinely be said to be enjoying ourselves.

Through my teachers I encountered books I’d never have picked up myself – books I might have considered too difficult or

too frightening to tackle alone. I was pretty much school-phobic for much of my childhood, but I have very happy memories of those reading sessions.

I read to my children at home, but it saddens me that they never had that shared experience at school. They only ever studied book extracts in class – fragmented chunks, taken out of context – and then had to do written comprehension exercises afterwards. So for my two children, who love stories and are both keen readers and writers, literacy was the subject they loathed.

In *Testament of Youth* author Vera Brittain said: “The *desire* to think... must be induced before the power is developed.” I’d apply the same sentiment to reading. The desire to read has to be encouraged before the skill can be taught. And that desire comes from being read to.

Children need books. From the moment a baby’s eyes can focus it should have that wonderful experience of snuggling up with a parent and sharing a book. Growing children need an excess

of books on offer. They need to wallow and bask in the wealth of stories that are out there. They need to discover that books are a pleasure and a joy, a refuge and an escape, a door to different worlds.

I come from a long line of teachers. I know all about the demands of the national curriculum and Ofsted and, believe me, I have no desire to add to the pressure teachers are already under. And yet, and yet... I do think *all of us* need to fight, and fight hard, for libraries and books and the time to read them.

They’re important for three reasons. The first is that stories teach cause and effect; action and consequence. In that sense they are profoundly moral. The second is that they develop the imagination and that’s something we all need, not just those drawn to the arts. Engineers, scientists, our future business leaders; if we’re to progress as a species, we all need to think creatively. Thirdly, reading develops empathy. A book takes a reader into someone else’s head, it shows them the world through someone else’s eyes, it allows them to think ‘what if this was me?’.

Put simply, books make us better people. Teachers, parents, librarians, writers and illustrators – we all need to nurture a love of books. We all need to keep pressing for a library to exist as the beating heart of every school. I know times are tough, and will no doubt get tougher, but in the words of Charley O’Hara, the heroine of *Buffalo Soldier*, “We’re warriors ain’t we? We’ll keep fighting.” ■



Tanya Landman won the Carnegie medal for her novel *Buffalo Soldier*. Her new novel *Hell and High Water* is out now