

Edinburgh International Book Festival: The 2017 Siobhan Dowd Trust Lecture



If like me you were a child of the sixties, you probably read a lot of books. You did this partly because, swinging as things apparently were in Carnaby Street, just about everywhere else life was deeply boring.

❌ No internet, no X-Box and a television with two channels usually broadcasting the test card. You also read because books were all around you. You didn't have to be affluent (though you did have to be quiet) to join the library. You could go there by yourself from an early age, because in those days you just did. And your school, be it ever so humble, usually had shelves and shelves of reading matter.

Today's children's lives are different.

Libraries are being closed by cash-strapped councils. ❌ Parents are working longer and longer hours just to make ends meet. City streets are dangerous – few 7 year olds can do as I did (in London!) and ride their bikes to the library. Few schools have libraries and even fewer have librarians.

Who is going to bring the joy of reading to children and young people deprived of access to books and of the opportunity to read?

The Siobhan Dowd Trust was set up to do just that.

❌ **Siobhan Dowd** (top) wrote books for children, books that were full of empathy, understanding, and fabulous plots. Then, at the age of just 47, she died. In the last days of her

life she set up The Siobhan Dowd Trust, gifting to it the royalties from all her work for projects to 'take stories to children and young people without stories.'

In 2014 the Trust held its first **Edinburgh International Book Festival** lecture, given by **Patrick Ness** (the author who completed Siobhan's last, unfinished work and turned it into the brilliant *A Monster Calls*).

Since then **Matt Haig** and **Chris Riddell** have taken the stand, each of them giving inspirational speeches. This year it's the turn of writer and illustrator **Cressida Cowell** (*How to Train Your Dragon; The Wizards of Once*). So how does she think we can bring the joy of reading to those who need it most?

Getting children to read is, says this Nestlé Children's Book Award winning author;

'a heart-breaking, fascinating, rewarding, worthwhile task'


There are two key factors affecting a child's economic success in adulthood. The first is parental involvement in education, the second the child's reading for pleasure. In theory, Cressida says, these factors cut across all social classes; any parent can be involved in their child's education, and any child can read a book. Or can they?

'If you have no access to books, how can you become a reader?'

Like many authors, Cressida visits schools all the time; some have no reading books at all – but even if the books are there, how do children, and their parents, know which ones to choose? A badly written book can turn a child off reading for years, as can too much pressure to read 'good' books. Remember all those set books when you were at school? After being force-fed Dickens I didn't read him again for 25 years.

Charities like The Siobhan Dowd Trust don't just give people books, they give them a love of reading; they fund

storytelling sessions and authors' visits, support **Prison Reading Groups' Family Days**, (when trained volunteers offer book corner activities for children of prisoners, and advice on choosing children's books), help fund Edinburgh's own **Craigmillar Book Festival**, support special projects for young people in care, children in hospital, bereaved teenagers, and children who have been newly registered blind, and work with a scheme for teenage parents, providing picture books for the babies and YA books for the Mums and Dads. And of course they do much, much more.

It's one thing to bring a child to a book, but quite another to make that child want to read it. Books, says Cressida, may be seen as 'schooly' and old-fashioned. Children who struggle  with reading can feel excluded;


'Books need decoding. If reading feels impossible, children may start to feel stupid. And I hate things that make me feel stupid.'

Cressida does *not* stop her own children watching television or films, both of which she sees as 'glorious media that can do things books cannot do', but books, she says, do something unique; they encourage empathy. A child reading a story has to fill in the blanks;

'A book is partly what I write and partly what you imagine.'

In our 21st century world, empathy is sorely needed;

'The language of the past helps us to approach the problems of the future.'

Children today also have far more options, so even for  those who find reading easy, books need to be 'pacey and intelligent' with plots that 'rattle along'. Visual aspects are important to children used to lots of screen time – Cressida packs her book with illustrations (right), uses

different fonts and shiny covers, 'rewards for sticking with the story'. Keeping things irregular and exciting 'keeps children on their toes'.

✘ Cressida doesn't believe in mollycoddling children either; they need, she says, to be engaged and challenged, not just entertained – 'they don't want to know from the start that the ending is going to be happy...children are anarchists'. She learned from Roald Dahl to take her readers to the edge; to make them laugh, cry – and think. She doesn't shy away from using 'difficult' words or complicated ideas;

'I *never* dumb down. You have to write *up*.'

Siobhan Dowd, she says, never shied away from the big issues, but she combined them with cracking plots.

It's also essential to create characters that children care about;

'Otherwise your story is dead; no-one cares.'

Reading aloud is another thing Cressida sees as vital;

'Books read to you in your parents' voice live with you all your life. Nothing can beat the parent, grandparent or teacher; I remember every book read to me by all of these.'

Tony Bradman (right), Chair of The Siobhan Dowd Trust, and prolific author himself, recalls a teacher reading the whole of *The Hobbit* to his class over the course of a year; ✘

'That got me where I am today.'

✘ And it was Tony's phone call to Siobhan, all those years ago, that got us where we are today; at EIBF, listening to this lecture. Tony asked Siobhan if she knew anyone who could write a story about Travellers for a book about racism. Siobhan ended up writing it herself. The short story has now become a book, *The Pavee and the Buffer Girl*, illustrated by

Emma Shoard. From small beginnings great things can happen.

The Siobhan Dowd Trust is, says Tony, about reading for pleasure; it's not a literacy project;

'Books are important, powerful things; they can change lives.'

Read more about Cressida Cowell and her books [here](#).

For more information about The Siobhan Dowd Trust, visit <http://siobhandowdtrust.com/>. The Trust is also on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/sdowdtrust>

For information about Prison Reading Groups see <https://prison-reading-groups.org.uk/>



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