

HOW TO TEACH



a passport to everywhere

Reading for Pleasure

KENNY PIEPER

EDITED BY PHIL BEADLE



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FOREWORD BY PHIL BEADLE

Shouting about how good you are seems to me a sign of little more than insecurity and immaturity. There are a lot of people in British education using channels to let everyone else know how good they think they are. If they were really so free from the lacerating self-doubt that nightly plagues them in their sleepless and sweaty beds, they wouldn't be showing off quite so obviously, and self-praise, as my dear old mum would say, is ... well, y'know.

Social media, and specifically Twitter, is a distorting mirror that can turn us into Calibans. There are those who use it to boost their careers, those who use it to display the plumage of their egos, those who use it to be disagreeable and there are those, like Kenny, who use it to learn, to make friends, to find out things that will make them a better teacher than yesterday.

Kenny is a mature and developed adult who understands that part of the responsibility of being a man is to behave with quietness and with strength, to question inherited opinion, to devote one's self to something outside of that self. He is a devoted teacher to the students he serves and understands that keeping things simple is a work of great intellectual complexity. I admire him and think him a better man than myself.

His book is, I think, much like the man himself, a quiet and understated gem. It is a human work glittering with empathy. Kenny recognises the part that a love of reading has played in his own transformation from blue collar worker to white collar *littérateur* and holds a hand down to younger humans so that they might use reading in the same way that he has: to transform their circumstances and their outlook, to enrich their experience of being alive by communing with the human frailties, doubts and poetry of others who have recorded their souls on paper. In working on this book together,

HOW TO TEACH: READING FOR PLEASURE

we have been very much in symbiosis: two working class adult males trying to pass on a tradition that we both benefited from greatly, making obscure gags about seventies footballers, having an occasional lighthearted swear up. I regard Kenny Pieper as the epitome of decency and a valuable and engaging (and engaged) voice on a subject of profound political importance. After reading this book, so will you.

Phil Beadle

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Foreword by Phil Beadle</i>	ix
1 Books and Me	1
2 Ten Minutes	15
3 The Library	31
4 Taking It Up a Notch	45
5 The E-Reader	63
6 Talking About Reading	75
7 Writing About Reading	87
8 The Reading Habit	99
9 Boys 'n' Books	111
10 Every Day's a Reading Day	123
Last Word	137
<i>Bibliography</i>	139
<i>Index</i>	145

Chapter 1

BOOKS AND ME

It was contagious! Seventy pages!¹

I BLAME ALEX DICKSON

Back when I was a lad, before the Internet and the Twitter and the Facebook, I had nothing but a little silver radio to keep me company. With one tiny white earphone to stick in my ear, I would listen to the local station, Radio Clyde, every night as I drifted off to sleep. It was a different time; don't judge me. On certain evenings, Alex Dickson would talk to me in the strangest, deepest, most exotic (but still unmistakably Glaswegian) accent about books: strange adult books, detective stories, historical fiction, biographies. I totally and utterly fell in love with them.

The fact that adults could have conversations about such things was a revelation to me. We had books at home when I was growing up – not many: some encyclopedias (my dad is American so we had the curiously extravagant *Encyclopedia Americana*), the odd novel, piles of *Whizzer and Chips* and *The Broons* annuals. It would be unfair to say we were not a reading family: there were books, I had seen them; but on 'Alex Dickson's Bookcase', the host and his guests would talk about them for half an hour. They informed me, not about any one book in particular, but about a whole world of reading. Each week, at 10 o'clock, the sound of Jimmy 'Schnozzle' Durante singing

1 Jimmy Durante, '(I'll Never Forget) The Day I Read A Book'.

HOW TO TEACH: READING FOR PLEASURE

'(I'll Never Forget) The Day I Read a Book' signalled a strange kind of heaven to me: a heaven that would change my life forever. Here was a life of books!

So, from there, how did I go on to become a reader? Certainly not from being forced through some half-baked reading scheme at school. My earliest bookish memories are of visiting the cavernous town centre library in East Kilbride with my pal, Gerry, and staring in awe at the covers of the 'Alfred Hitchcock and the Three Investigators' series, debating the merits of the Famous Five over the Secret Seven and, well, just being in a library. Long before the emergence of big windows and airy freedom, before coffee and computers, we would sit on a jaggy green carpet reading for hours. I even recall early on in secondary school skipping school dinners to sit in the library flicking through *The Guinness Book of Records*, dropping sausage roll crumbs into the pages. Pub quiz colleagues would thank me years later.

George: I'm gonna read a book. From beginning to end. In that order.

'The Summer of George', *Seinfeld*²

I take the act of reading for granted. Perhaps you do too. You've picked up this book and you're reading it comfortably enough. During the course of the first chapter you may even begin to read the signs that I'm a strong champion of reading for pleasure. If you were in my classroom, I might ask you to read my lips to make sure you knew exactly where I'm coming from. If you couldn't, I might have to keep you behind and read you the riot act. You may well be reading between the lines and getting the gist of what I'm saying already. Reading isn't a problem for you, is it? Do you read me?

At this point, you may be able to read my mind and understand that reading is a serious business. You should know that by now. You've read the fine print.

2 'The Summer of George', episode 22 (season 8), *Seinfeld*, dir. A. Ackerman (originally aired 15 May 1997).

The point is that reading as a concept is part of our everyday wardrobe, our language, our existence. You've always read; you do it as naturally as breathing or eating.

However, the word 'reading' itself doesn't have the same connotations for everyone. I teach kids for whom the mere mention of reading causes them to shrink like a salted snail. They sneer and smirk and avoid it at all costs; inside they cringe and cry. The ubiquity of the word 'reading' in our lives makes it easy for *us* to assume it's not actually that big a deal, but what about those who do find it a challenge? Their lives are terrifying obstacle courses of reading related problems. They know they struggle with reading. Everything that happens in their day-to-day existence reminds them of this. They know that not being able to read well differentiates them from most of their peers. It leaves them isolated and lost. And we know it too.

A WORLD OF WONDER

Tom sits cross-legged in the library. He's not a reader, never has been, and I can see this is difficult for him. It's not only that he doesn't like reading or doesn't like this particular book; he finds reading difficult. It's difficult because he really wants to please me, his new English teacher, in the first week of his new term in his new school. He wants to like it – he really does – and he concentrates hard so as not to move his lips as he reads. He wants to read 'A Series of Unfortunate Events' by Lemony Snicket because his friend liked the books, and he watched the movie over the summer and quite liked it too. He can't do it though. He can't really read, you see.

Tom is probably representative of hundreds (maybe thousands) of kids going through the same thing that week. What have we done to him? He is 11 years old and has lost, or never discovered, the joy of submerging himself in a

HOW TO TEACH: READING FOR PLEASURE

book. He's had seven years of school and is sitting and hoping forlornly that it will all click into place for him. Until that happens, he'll feel excluded from an amazing world: a world his friends inhabit comfortably.

He won't wander the dark and ancient corridors of Hogwarts; he won't leave Rivendell side by side with Bilbo Baggins, an imaginary backpack stocked for the journey; he won't climb through the wardrobe into Narnia or fight alongside a young James Bond. And something about that doesn't sit right with me. As an English teacher, it breaks my heart to see kids like Tom who, through no real fault of their own (perhaps they are victims of circumstance), have missed out on the opportunity to fall in love with books. I'm not blaming anyone aside from a system that appears to have failed him. For what greater gift can we give children than the ability to read well?

No role model exists at home for them. Every time we ask them to read they may smile and go along with us, but – like the opening scene in *WarGames*, where Mr Blonde from *Reservoir Dogs* and Leo from *The West Wing* have to turn their keys at the same time to launch a nuclear missile³ – the keys ain't turning. They freeze and nothing happens. No reading inspired bombs go off. And they leave school, not merely unaffected by this strange reading thing, but saddled with a great deal of emotional baggage about being an outsider, even more entrenched in a belief that reading is for others more intelligent than them.

We need to step up and be their reading mentors, getting involved in their lives, or at least be the ones who will properly encourage them to turn the key. It won't happen by accident; it won't happen if we just leave them to it.

3 *War Games* (1983), dir. J. Badham.

TRIPS DOWN AMNESIA LANE

You'll remember the days when all of your friends would gather at school and discuss the progress you'd all made with that difficult Dickens novel you'd agreed to read by the end of the month. The fall-outs and arguments over whether Jane Eyre was a victim or a heroine. Whether Thomas Hardy could ever stand up to Jane Austen. No? Me neither. The problem English teachers have is that we forget that developing a love of reading is a process, not a switch. It takes time. When we assume that children will read simply because we ask them to, when we accept that some of them, well, they just ain't readers, and give up on them, then we may be embedding a stigma that will stick with them forever. We can chuck piles of cash around on elaborate reading schemes, but unless we get involved in their reading we're leaving it to chance, and that's not a chance I'm happy to be any part of.

MY LIFE WITH BOOKS

I love being around books. I love the way they look on the shelf: their spines lining up in rows, increasing in length throughout my life. I love the idea that I can hold all of *The Lord of the Rings* or the complete works of Shakespeare in my hand. I love the mess of them as they pile up on my desk. I love seeing other people reading them on the train. I love them second hand in charity shops and brand new through the post. Still do. My wife doesn't have to look too far if we lose each other in a busy town centre. I'm to be found in the bookshop spending good money on books I may never get round to reading.

The first thing I look for when I'm invited into the homes of others is a bookcase. That's the true way to judge a person's character: I check out what they read. If there's no bookcase then I give you permission to turn around and run; run like the wind and never look back. Save yourself. Don't be a hero

HOW TO TEACH: READING FOR PLEASURE

and try to save your friends. Time is of the essence here. You have no place in this person's world. For a house without a bookcase filled with books is not a house; it is a vacuous den of reality TV and the Xbox. Nothing to see here. At best you're condemning yourself to a lifetime of brainless dinners in this place, counting your life away discussing the moistness of the chicken. At worst, you could end up marrying this cretin. Don't think twice.

If there is a bookcase then head straight for it. Pretend to be listening to your host's light conversational openers, perhaps have a salt and vinegar crisp or a sausage-on-a-stick as your eyes glance sideways at the books on offer. The deal hasn't been sealed yet. They could still let themselves down. At this point, you're on your own. If it were me, I'd be looking for some serious literature on that shelf. Not necessarily things I've read, but a clear sign that this is not the bookcase of an idiot. The autobiography of a politician? Maybe. The autobiography of Gary 'set the' Barlow? Get out of there!

Of course, if I spotted some Philip Roth, Marilynne Robinson, P. G. Wodehouse or Orwell, I'd be looking around and wondering where I'll put my records when I move in. The point is that what we read forms part of the person we become. Like it or not, readers are judgemental. Regardless of how hard we try, adult non-readers are a strange animal, more often than not to be avoided.

KIDS TODAY, EH?

We seem to be too accepting of a society that has stopped reading, or at least stopped seeing reading as being something important. In this book, I want to argue that we too easily take our children's reluctance to read as something we can do nothing about. We shrug our shoulders, raise our eyebrows and say, 'Well, what can you do?' Even if it were true that kids

no longer read – and I’m not convinced this is the case – as educators (or those interested in reading for pleasure) surely it’s our duty to do something about it. To rekindle a love of reading for kids, to provide them with a route to improved literacy and an end to what might well be a generational problem of poor reading skills – a cycle which leads to and embeds poverty, lack of opportunity and an ever increasing wealth gap. Reading changes lives; of that I have no doubt. It changed mine.

In a previous life, I was unemployed for over two years during the Thatcher-led eighties. Eventually, I would work on factory floors, in shops, in a hospital; I worked for months on night shifts and twilight shifts, as well as 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. day shifts, barely getting by. What I remember from those days is not the work I did, because it was difficult to differentiate one day from the next. I recall some great friends and some great laughs, but nothing whatsoever about the jobs I did. Mostly I remember what I read.

I read every day. Every lunch break. I spent time in bookshops and libraries. I read reviews. I wasn’t university educated, but I could see this was something important. This was a life. A year of night classes from Monday to Thursday got me to university, and I never really looked back. The first in my family. It was reading that got me there. I could only have been an English teacher. Now I work in a building that has a library. How perfect is that?

THE DAMAGE WE DO

I wanted to write this book to share some of the strategies I’ve used in classes over the years, but also to raise some issues about the manner in which we, as teachers, help to create, even embed, negative attitudes to reading. Lack of choice, lack of good books when there is a choice, lack of time to read in school, lack of care. Together with a culture where reading

HOW TO TEACH: READING FOR PLEASURE

for pleasure has become an extravagant extra in the classroom, we are in the midst of creating a national scandal, a potential minefield.

The Read On. Get On Campaign claims that, rather than raising achievement for all, 'Our education system too often entrenches disadvantage and inequalities.'⁴ Think about that for a minute. Then think about it for another minute. We have been unable to change this situation. For many generations – in Scotland anyway (I don't know what the hell was going on elsewhere) – we have voted Labour in the hope of some working class reawakening, placing our trust in a political system that, surely, had our best interests at heart? But our education system just isn't working for those who need it most; those who are screaming out for a break and a way in to some sort of normal, comfortable life; those sweetcorn kids who we spit out at the end of a ten year period little better prepared for the rest of their lives than when they entered the system.⁵

In all likelihood, we'll never see the revolution we have hoped for during most of our lives (the end of guffawing posh boys telling everyone else to tighten their belts), but we can help to create a generation of kids who will be able to tell when they're being shafted. Too often, we vote for those who will impose their political ideologies on us because we fail to engage in the detail of the debate. We don't read newspapers; we don't know about the intricacies of the economy; we accept things too easily. We even resent those who protest on our behalf because they cause trouble and block our streets. So, maybe, by creating the conditions for our students to become good readers – that is, readers who read because they choose to, readers who question, readers who think – then we can, at least in some small way, prepare them for the life of political oppression that is to come.

4 Read On. Get On Campaign. *Read On. Get On: A Mission to Ensure ALL Children in Scotland Are Reading Well By 11* (London: Save the Children, 2014). Available at: http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/Read_On_Get_On_Scotland.pdf, p. 3.

5 Sweetcorn tends to leave the system in the same form as it entered. Don't think about it too much.

Rather than concerning ourselves with the vaporous gibber of '21st century skills', we need to get our young people reading and enjoying reading. The kids who sit in front of you and me in our classrooms every day could well be future teachers, doctors and lawyers; a child in your Year 6 class at the moment might be the girl who cures cancer; the boy next to her might invent something that solves global warming. So shrugging your shoulders and harrumphing, 'What can you do?' just doesn't cut it.

I began writing this book in the midst of the greatest political and cultural shift in Scotland in my lifetime. In 2014, 16- and 17-year-olds were given the vote in the referendum for an independent Scotland. We were told that young people weren't mature enough to take that vote responsibility; we were told that they didn't care; we were told that they wouldn't take it seriously. But, do you know what? They did all of those. They got involved in the political process for the first time in their lives. They read up on the important issues, discussed them among themselves and others and, for the most part, took their responsibility seriously. The referendum saw one of the highest turnouts in any national referendum in modern history.⁶ And look what happened: the greatest political transformation in a generation.⁷ Okay, we'll have to wait and see how much genuinely changes, but involving young people in the process and giving them the opportunity to read up on the issues and discover how powerful they can be is hugely important. It can bring change, even on a local level. So let's not underestimate the importance of getting our young people to read.

6 Electoral Commission, Scottish Independence Referendum: Report On the Referendum Held On 18 September 2014. ELC/2014/02. Available at: http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/179812/Scottish-independence-referendum-report.pdf, p. 1.

7 It also turns out that 71% of 16- and 17-year-olds voted to leave the union. See J. Burn-Murdoch and A. Wisniewska, Scottish referendum: who voted which way and why?, *FT Data* (19 September 2014). Available at: <http://blogs.ft.com/ftdata/2014/09/19/scottish-referendum-who-voted-which-way/>.

AND IF THEY DON'T READ?

What scares me rather more than the admittedly borderline unlikely possibility of a generation of illiterate kids is the rather more real possibility of them being what Donalyn Miller describes as 'aliterate': a generation of kids who can read perfectly well but who choose not to.⁸ In a sense, illiteracy is something we can tackle. We may not be particularly good at tackling it at the moment – in a recent government-financed Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy it was discovered that, while literacy levels are high in Scotland (80% of all 12–13-year-olds performed well or very well in reading), that percentage had dropped over the previous five years.⁹ But our politicians are, seemingly, willing to throw money at the problem. They just haven't been very successful thus far.

When it comes to adults we find similar problems with literacy. Research completed by the Scottish Government found that 'around one-quarter of the Scottish population (26.7%) may face occasional challenges and constrained opportunities due to their literacy difficulties, but will generally cope with their day-to-day lives; and within this quarter of the population, 3.6% (one person in 28) face serious challenges in their literacies practices'.¹⁰

Aliteracy seems to me to be somewhat different. People who can read, but choose not to, make an active choice to disengage from political reality. They have not been convinced of the importance of reading in their lives. What difference does it make to them? If we fail to answer this question for them

8 Donalyn Miller is a legendary teacher from the United States who focuses on getting kids to read. I came across her book, *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), in a bookshop in New York and it changed my life. It is the book I would recommend to everyone; after reading this one, of course.

9 See Scottish Government, *Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy 2014 (Literacy)*. Statistics Publication Notice. Available at: <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0047/00475898.pdf>.

10 See <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Life-Long-Learning/17551>.

We hear so often that kids don't read any more that we've almost become resigned to the idea. Kenny Pieper thinks it should be every teacher's mission to prove that it isn't true.

Based on his own experience as both a reader and a teacher, and, appropriately, on his extensive reading on the subject, Kenny Pieper has gathered a range of tried-and-tested strategies to get kids not just reading, but enjoying reading.



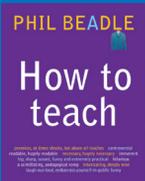
Kenny Pieper has been teaching English for fifteen years and still loves every minute of it. He stands shakily on the shoulders of giants in the shape of his amazingly inspiring colleagues. Deep down, he still can't believe his luck that he gets to do this.

@kennypieper

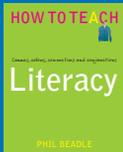
Kenny cares for his students and the stories that they encounter. Passionate about the power of narrative, he guides us through a rich seam of strategies and ideas for developing the reading habit and deepening children's inner world. Surely, this book will speak to every English teacher's heart – the possibility of growing a love of reading that will last long after the school gates have slammed shut.

Pie Corbett, teacher, author and storyteller

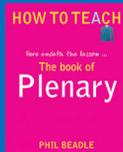
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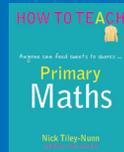
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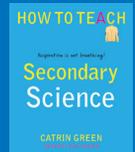
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