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English

Keeping Your Hair On in the Digital Maelstrom or Why, More than Ever, Your Children Need Books

Looking at the technical data relating to our online lives is a very sobering experience. According to their own technical information, limits for Twitter accounts are 1,000 messages per day, tweets 2,400 per day, following (daily) 1,000 per day, with the caveat that 'once an account is following 5,000 other users, additional follow attempts are limited by account-specific ratios.' If the thought of following 5000 users is not mind blowing enough, the mind boggles at the survey which reports that up to 2000 times a day we feel the need to touch our phones, and that's without even the intention to connect. Over on the other side, the number of Facebook users is expected to reach 33 million in the UK in 2018, in spite of Youth's ongoing mass defection to social media sites where they don't run the risk of being 'liked' by deeply unhip maiden aunts.

So let's assume a tweet takes a minute or two of our time and then add to that the time spent checking our email, What's App, Snap Chat and Instagram accounts, the time spent keeping up with blog posts and podcasts, the time spent watching live streaming of news and, of course, the time spent browsing YouTube for clips of animals doing charming things. Not surprisingly, Social Media Today estimates that 5 years and 4 months of our lives will be spent on social media. Not forgetting the 7+ years of television we watch in a lifetime, that's a great deal of time spent in the unreality of the digital universe; (for how that same 5 years and 4 months might be spent offline - you could walk the Great Wall of China 3.5 times, apparently - check out this highly entertaining infographic: <http://www.socialmediatoday.com/marketing/how-much-time-do-people-spend-social-media-infographic>).

There is much good in social media, not least its ability to connect people or to bring about radical social change, but if you have children, tweens particularly, you will know that social media suggests to them a permanent state of 'now' which can sometimes make the past, 'history', seem so distant as to be irrelevant. Put this alongside the immediacy of the online universe, and you create children who struggle with anything that isn't instantly engaging and

'in the moment'. To offset the culture of 'same day delivery', as antidote, counter-irritant and the slow-burning flame of critical thinking, now more than ever children need books. In books children meet tenacity and resilience, curiosity and openness, tolerance and empathy and all their mirror opposites, allowing them to experience these emotions in a controlled way and to have the space to think them through for themselves. Moreover, in a time when our children are expected to grow up far more quickly than previous generations, books keep childhood alive, keep the past a vibrant country and keep our children grounded to the emotions which matter.

While we are able, on our mobile devices, to view real child refugees fleeing real conflicts in real time, books about war, particularly children's experiences of war, seem to matter more than ever. We cannot know, simply by looking, the individual stories of those caught up in conflict; only books, through the writer's imagination, are able to give us the flesh of those stories. *Anna and the Swallow Man* by Gavriel Savit, *Traitor* by Gudrun Pausewang, *Wolf* by Wolf by Ryan Graudin, *After* by Morris Gleitzman and *The Island* by Armin Greder are all books which give teens tough lessons about war and the reality of being displaced, but emphasise too, the place of compassion in even the most horrific of circumstances. *Lois Lowry's Number the Stars* and *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* by Judith Kerr recognise the egocentric way in which younger children experience life, even such damaging life experiences as war. Often, they only see its inconveniences: no more lovely meals made by the housekeeper, the sadness of leaving behind a favourite toy when asked to choose from many favourites, adults (soldiers, in both cases) stopping your games: younger readers will readily understand such irritations, but books ask children to imagine them more deeply, here setting them against a reality of fear, oppression and revolt.

Technology has the ability to persuade us that all which matters are our individual desires and that these can be realised through force of will (try Googling 'Just Believe' quotations). The notion of 'rugged individualism' has been the basis of much Western thought and certainly one concept with which our modern child is very familiar. But

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what of other emotions? *El Deafo* by Cece Bell is a very important book, developing in pictures and words (this is a graphic novel) the many shades in the human response to adversity. Loosely based on the author's own experience of becoming deaf in childhood, it shows how responding to a disability may take many forms. In this book, the main character invents an alter ego, El Deafo, who helps her negotiate the complexities of life in the hearing world, but the book does not shy away from showing that disability has many aspects, some practical, some emotional, that compassion is everything, that 'winning' is good for some but very tough for others to achieve. *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli, *Lucas* by Kevin Brooks and *Black Angels* by Rita Murphy all examine 'difference' with this same nuanced approach; none of the extremes of the freak show here, page by page, readers learn to know their characters as individuals, with time to develop a proper response to the events which involve them and the issues which absorb them.

Keeping childhood alive in the digital age seems not to be on the agenda of many current children's authors. Difficult issues are explored earlier and earlier (not necessarily a negative) but sometimes frivolous and silly is the order of the day. *Waffle Hearts* by Maria Parr and *The Story of the Blue Planet* by Andri Snaer both achieve a high level of each but in quite different ways. If best friend, but neighbour from hell is your idea of funny (read it if only for the cow on the boat episode) or something more of fantasy (a planet with no adults), then both books provide a wonderful window onto childhood as it should be lived. Equally grounding are the *Adventures of Shola* from the Basque author Bernardo Atxaga; nothing politically correct about the adventuresome little dog in these stories; she tells life like it is.

For older readers, *Death or Ice-cream* by Gareth P Jones has plenty of the sweet creamy stuff of childhood, but lots of death too, and is a quirky take on what life really is for everyone, children included: an ongoing battle between our good side and our 'evil' one. The book is 'issue' driven, but in a way you absolutely don't expect, and full of humour too; blink and you miss the hilarious references to reality television sub-culture; one television programme in the book is a veiled reference to 'Cash in the Attic', but in this version, at the end of the programme, what contestants have not been able to sell is burned in front of them. How grounding is that!

'The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there', a line from L.P. Hartley's novel, *The Go-Between*, has never resonated more poignantly than it does now, caught up as we are in the staggering mental overload that is real-time news, and it is vital that we bring

children to the books that set their present in the events of the past. The following list of books run from the period of the Vikings, to the period of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, just before Germany invades Russia, on to the 'Troubles' of 1980s Ireland and encompassing along the way two time slip novels (one combines and draws parallels between the Second World War and the reign of Richard III and the story of his nephews - the much discussed 'Princes in the tower', the other is post-war Norfolk and Puritan England, specifically Cromwell and his desecration of East Anglian churches), then there are the Victorians, the American pioneers of the Mid-West and the 1st World War from the American perspective. Treating of more than one period in history, Mal Peet's novel shifts from rural wartime Norfolk, the tense period in the 1960s of the Cuban Missile Crisis to Lower Manhattan in the noughties. *Life: An Unexploded Diagram* by Mal Peet, *Red Shadow* by Paul Dowsell, *Moon Over Manifest* by Clare Vanderpool, *The Children of the King* by Sonya Harnett, *Bracelet of Bones* by Kevin Crossley-Holland, *May B* by Caroline Starr Rose, *The Lie Tree* by Frances Hardinge, *Bog Child* by Siobhan Dowd and *Waterslain Angels* by Kevin Crossley-Holland all have in common an evocation of their historical 'moment' that orientates children to their own place in the continuum of history: without May B and Faith, there is no fighting the gender pay gap, without Misha there is no voicing against the State machine, without Fergus there is no understanding of how our public and private faces must be one and the same if we are to unite disunity. Without knowledge of our history there is no preventing the preventable.

Technology continues to alter our landscape at an incredible speed; up ahead is the likely further development of 'Intelligent Agents' and more automation in areas which might surprise us, but however exciting, the slow time of a story's fictional world continues to offer a way in for children which allows them to explore 'Life' safely; whether difficult or emerging feelings, the past and how it might affect their future, challenging concepts - try the combination of fear, guilt and duty in *Runners* by Ann Kelley, as well as the risk-laden scenarios of wartime, books let children test run all these things without the dangerous consequences.

In his *Rights of the Reader*, the author Daniel Pennac says we have the right to mistake a book for real life which, for a child, may be the best preparation they can ever have for meeting the challenges of the real thing.

The Best Websites for the English Department

These are the ones which I regularly use but it would be lovely to share the many others which your English department recommends: www.amightygirl.com - 'The world's

largest collection of books and movies for smart, confident, and courageous girls.' – Great for the all-girl environment, but much more than that. www.apostrophe.org.uk – the society for the protection of the apostrophe – we should all belong!

www.learningspy.co.uk – David Didau's website looks at many aspects of education and it is a fantastic resource (his reading list is particularly helpful) but he was first of all an English teacher!

Books and Reading:

There are plenty of great sites for finding books for children, including the wonderful Book Trust (www.booktrust.org) but I particularly like those listed below because they add a dimension to children's reading which isn't always present on the mainstream sites.

www.outsideinworld.org.uk – the best of children's fiction in translation

www.alma.se/en/ - the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Book award for Children's fiction – always interesting winners and much discussion about the choices from other writers, setting off whole new trains of thought.