Reading Between the Lines: the Benefits of Reading for Pleasure

A Study of the Benefits to Adults of Regular Reading for Pleasure

A report from Quick Reads, in partnership with Dr Josie Billington, Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society at the University of Liverpool, commissioned by Galaxy®

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Foreword

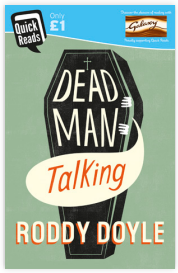
Baroness Gail Rebuck, DBE, Chair of Quick Reads and Penguin Random House UK

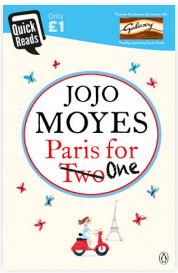
Our journey began in 2006 when Roddy Doyle showed me a series of books produced in Ireland for adults with literacy problems. Roddy and his colleagues at Open Door had realised there was a dearth of appropriate reading material for adults who wanted to become more confident readers, nothing to bridge the gap between books for children and full-length books written for adults.

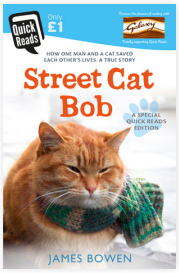
It inspired me to set up the Quick Reads charity nationally, with the help of the whole publishing industry, and we have come a long way since then. We commission a yearly list of short books by bestselling authors which are full of the action and emotion you would expect to find in a well-known author's work, but the books are written and edited to reduce barriers for the less confident reader. We have distributed over 4.3 million books, recorded over 3.9 million library loans and 98% of literacy co-ordinators say that Quick Reads have been effective in raising adult learners' confidence to start reading.

It seems fitting that in the year that Booker Prize winner Roddy Doyle features on our list, perfectly bridging the gap between literacy and literature, that we turn our attention not only to those adults who struggle to read, but to those who simply never read for pleasure.

One in three adults in the UK do not read for pleasure, a statistic that is seldom discussed. I am therefore delighted that Galaxy, our partner and lead sponsor for the last five years, has this year commissioned a report exploring the benefits of reading. While it will not come as a surprise to many people that reading is good for us, the depth and breadth of the benefits of reading for pleasure to our emotional health, empathy and wellbeing are both illuminating and reassuring. I defy anyone not to pick up a book after reading this excellent and encouraging report by Dr Josie Billington.







Executive Summary

Dr Josie Billington, Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society at the University of Liverpool

Introduction

This study explored the emotional, social and psychological benefits to adults of regular reading for pleasure. The research was conducted by Quick Reads, in partnership with the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society at the University of Liverpool.

The study was commissioned by Galaxy which has been Quick Reads' principal sponsor for the last five years.

The Study

A mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) approach was used. An online poll was conducted across 4,164 adults equally divided between readers and non or lapsed readers, with filter questions determining the two groups. The poll consisted of fourteen questions designed to elicit participants' perception of their general mood and well-being, levels of social interaction, capacity for decision-making and empathy, as well as establishing reading habits relative to other forms of leisure activity (watching TV, using social media). To supplement the quantitative survey, 20 non/lapsed readers were recruited to a reading challenge in which they were invited to read a title of their choice from the Quick Reads series for 20 minutes every day for 10 days, keeping a daily email diary of their mood and wellbeing. The findings combine numerical and thematic analysis of the quantitative data, together with individual case studies emerging from the reading challenge.

Findings

The report found that just over half of the UK adult population regularly reads for pleasure, with women reading more than men, and retired people reading most frequently. Bedtime ranks as the most popular reading occasion, with half of readers saying the activity helps them sleep better.

Regular readers for pleasure reported fewer feelings of stress and depression than non-readers, and stronger feelings of relaxation from reading than from watching television, engaging with social media, or reading other leisure material (for example, celebrity, beauty or style magazines). Reading creates a parallel world in which personal anxieties can recede, while also helping people to realise that the problems they experience are not theirs alone. A fifth of respondents said reading helped them to feel less lonely.

Almost a third of adults are lapsed readers, who have not read since leaving formal education or whose reading habits have been interrupted by ill health or a major life-event (having a child, for example). Nearly half of lapsed-readers cited lack of time as the reason they do not read, or do not read more frequently.

Those who read for pleasure also have higher levels of self-esteem and a greater ability to cope with difficult situations. Readers have expanded models and repertoires of experience which allow them to look with new perspective and understanding on their own lives. Readers find it easier to make decisions, to plan and prioritise, and this may be because they are more able to recognise that difficulty and setback are unavoidable aspects of human life.

People who read regularly feel closer to their friends and to their community than lapsed or non-readers. Reading not only produces greater understanding and empathy with others; it also gives a currency for sharing experience more meaningfully than is possible in ordinary social conversation. Readers also had a stronger and more engaged awareness of social issues and of cultural diversity than non-readers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- **Readers feel happier about themselves and their lives.**
- **Reading for just 30 minutes a week**
  - ***produces greater life satisfaction;***
  - ***enhances social connectedness and sense of community spirit;***
  - ***helps protect against and even prepare for life difficulties.***

Section 1

Overview of the nation's reading habits

Our report reveals that just over half (58%) of the adult population is reading regularly with readers averaging 3 hours and 18 minutes of reading time a week.[1]

Women find, on average, an hour more than men to read each week with parents of younger children unsurprisingly reading less (an average of 2 hours and 18 minutes a week) than non-parents (3 hours and 12 minutes a week). Twenty five to 34 year olds spend the least time with a book whilst reading time peaks at an average of five hours a week for the over 65s.

It is also interesting to note the regional breakdown of time spent reading, Wales reporting the least time at just 2 hours 40 minutes per week, and Scotland bucking the national average enjoying 3 hours 48 minutes of reading per week.

However, there are approximately 16 million 'lapsed' adult readers in the UK, people who used to read but who either rarely read now or simply don't read at all. This accounts for almost a third (32%) of the UK adult population.[2]

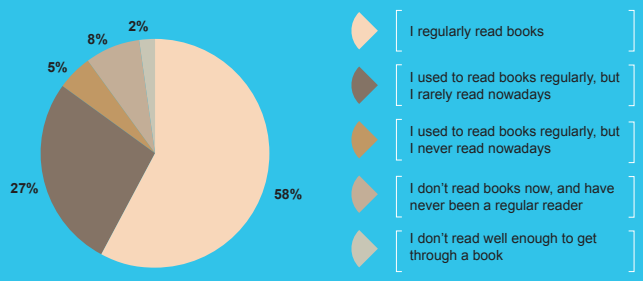
Our report highlights how the habit of reading can often cease when a person leaves the formal education system with 1.4 million adults admitting they have rarely read since they left school.

- 2.2 million people in the UK say they now rarely or never pick up a book because of a difficult life event such as ill health (either their own or a close family member or friend), the death of a friend or family member, losing their job or getting divorced

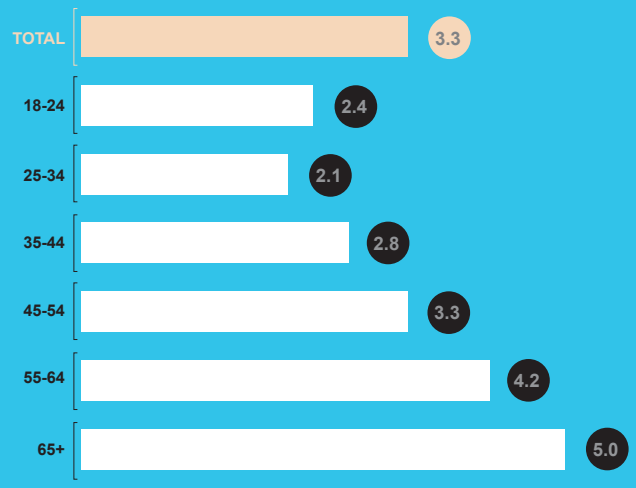
- 1.3 million people say they rarely read because of depression, despite the acknowledged positive impact reading can have on anxiety and low mood

The barriers to reading are explored further in Section 5, *'What is standing between us and the bookshelf?'*

Frequency of reading amoungst UK adults



Hours spent reading in the last week split by age



Hours spent reading in the last week split by region

1 - Respondents who stated, "I don't read well enough to get through a book" did not continue with the survey
2 - 27% of our sample selected themselves as lapsed readers who rarely read whilst 5% said they used to read but never do now.
Figure calculated using findings from Galaxy® Quick Reads 2015 research and the ONS 2013 mid-year population estimates of UK adults over the age of 18

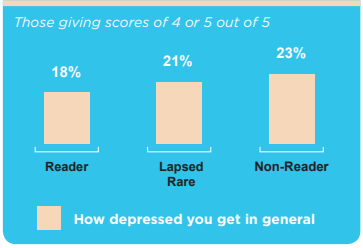
Section 2

How does reading impact our state of mind?

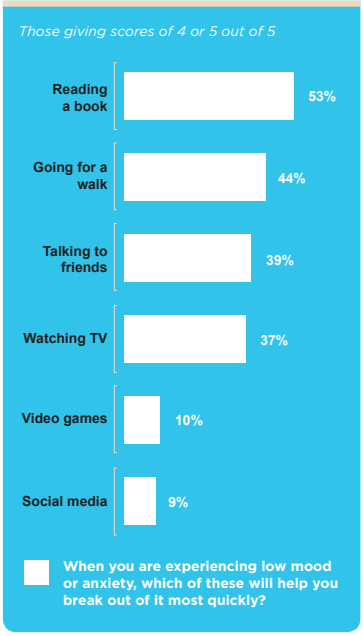
When it comes to enjoyment of life and our ability to cope with the challenges we face, readers report higher scores across almost all measures.

Low mood, depression and stress

Non-readers tend to get more depressed than readers with non-readers being 28% more likely to report feelings of depression.



For readers, the best tonic for a low mood or anxiety is reading a book – outperforming a head-clearing walk, a sympathetic chat with friends or watching TV. In fact, readers are 36% more likely to pick up a book than talk to a friend when they want break out of a low mood.



Furthermore, one in five (19%) of readers say that reading stops them from feeling lonely.

Both of these findings resonate closely with research previously conducted by the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society (CRILS) at the University of Liverpool, in partnership with national charity, The Reader Organisation. Reading produced a statistically significant improvement in symptoms for people diagnosed with depression, chief among which can be feelings of loneliness and isolation.[3]

Reading not only helps to introduce or reconnect readers to wider life systems and more broadly shared meanings. It can also remind people of activities or occupations they once pursued, or knowledge and skills they still possess, helping to restore their sense of having a place and purpose in the world. Reading calls on and helps to find a more multi-dimensional self – the whole person, not just the depressed one. The notion of 'recovery' in such a context related as much to the rediscovery of old or forgotten, suppressed or inaccessible modes of thought, feeling, and experience as to the discovery of new ones.[4]

Relaxation

It is clear that reading a book is a popular relaxation activity with three out of five readers saying that they need their alone time, and it's best with a book. Two out of five cite reading as their favourite hobby and one in ten readers (12%) even say they enjoy their daily commute because of the opportunity to read.

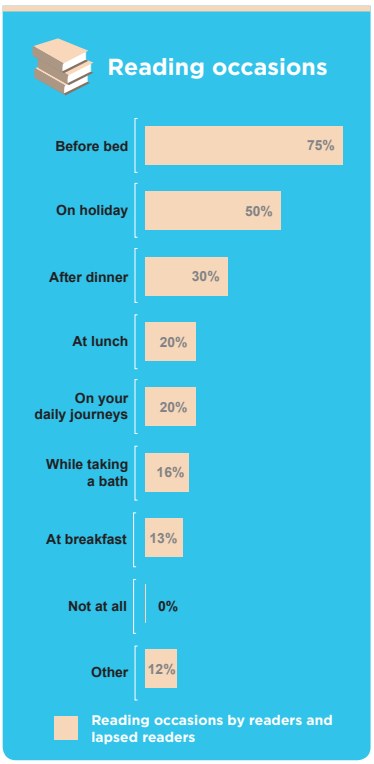
"I found it very relaxing reading on the train as it made the long journey easier. I found that I was getting off the train feeling more relaxed than usual as I was able to block out the other passengers that would usually stress me out."

Charles (41), London

Bedtime ranks as the most popular reading occasion, enjoyed by 75% of readers with half of readers (43%), saying reading helps them sleep better.

"Reading before going to sleep is so much more relaxing than looking at what other people are doing on social media"

Suzanne (46), Stockport



Reading is associated with a particular kind of mentally and emotionally 'engaged' relaxation, quite unlike the passivity associated with other leisure activities, such as watching television. Many 'down-time' pursuits – such as engaging with social media – only apparently help people to 'switch off', and may agitate as much as relax. People who read report how the absorption and concentration which reading demands helps personal worries recede and offers protection from the distractions and stresses of personal anxiety.[5]

3 - Billington et al, 2012
4 - Billington et al, 2012
5 - Billington 2012; Billington et al, 2014

Section 2

How does reading impact our state of mind?

Amongst the further benefits experienced by readers were higher self-esteem and greater self-acceptance. Readers are 10% more likely to report good self-esteem than non readers and those who read for just 30 minutes a week are 18% more likely to report higher self-esteem.

It is common for people who are coming to reading after a long period, or even for the first time, to feel a strong sense of accomplishment and pride. Both the achievement of completing a book, often for the first time since leaving school, and the experience of pleasure in so doing, help to engender a sense of self-worth.[6]

"I felt a sense of achievement that I had read a book and actually found it enjoyable. This is probably the first book I have read front to back since school –and not skipped chapters or pages."

Marvin (21) Manchester

Moreover, one in four readers (23%) say that a book has helped them realise that other people have gone through the same thing as them and therefore to feel better about their situation.

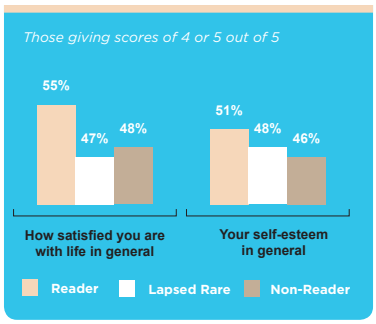
This finding is supported by existing research across a range of populations suffering mental health issues – people with chronic pain, depression and dementia and women in prison. It was found that reading helps people to realise that they are not alone with their problems. People often experience a strong sense of recognition - 'this is me', 'I had no idea other people felt this way' – and a feeling of sharing trouble in common with others.[7] When people are thus able imaginatively to recognise their own situation in another, they not only feel united to a wider world, but are more accepting of their own difficulties or trouble for seeing it as a normal part of human life.[8]

Life Satisfaction

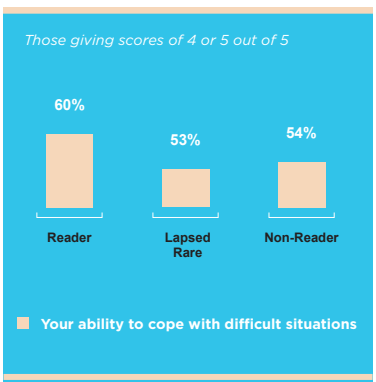
In summary, readers are happier with their lives with those reading for just 30 minutes a week being 20% more likely to report greater life satisfaction.[9]

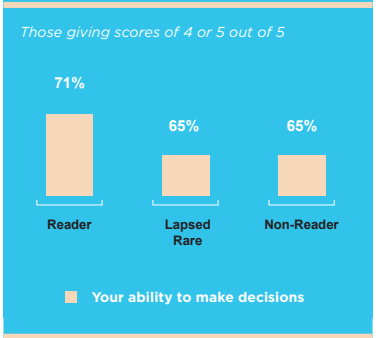
"I am so glad to be reading – after reading for half an hour on my lunch break today I felt happy, sharp and cheerful and the feeling lasted all afternoon!"

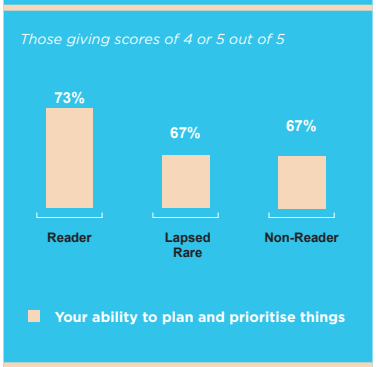
Matt (29), Stockport

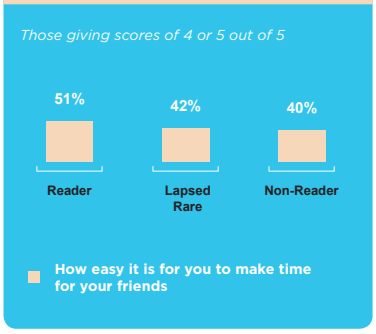


For readers, navigating their way through daily life appears to be just slightly easier than it is for non/lapsed readers. Regular readers report a greater ability to cope with difficult situations. Reading can offer richer, broader, and more complex models of experience which help a person to view their own lives from a refreshed perspective. Reading expands people's repertoires and sense of possible avenues of action or attitude.[10] People who read find it easier to make decisions, plan and prioritise which is further evidenced in a greater ability to make time for friends – meaning they have more time to enjoy the benefits of social connectedness.









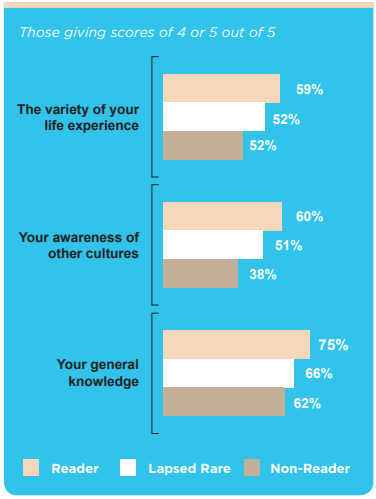
6 - Billington et al, 2012, 2014
7 - Billington and Robinson, 2013
8 - Billington et al, 2012
9 - On a scale of 1 – 5 adults reading for just 30 minutes per week are 20% more likely to give a rating of 4 or higher
10 - Billington and Robinson, 2013

Section 3

How does reading impact on our ability to connect to others?

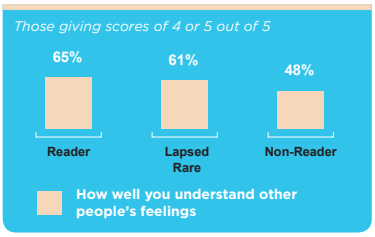
Our research explored the relative social connectedness of readers versus non-readers and found that regular readers feel closer to their friends, their community and even to strangers than lapsed or non-readers.

On a very basic level, readers know more about the world – reading gives you greater access to things you haven't experienced before as well as a greater cultural awareness. In fact, reading for just 30 minutes a week means you're 35% more likely to have greater life experience, 57% more likely to have a greater awareness of other cultures and 21% more likely to have greater general knowledge.

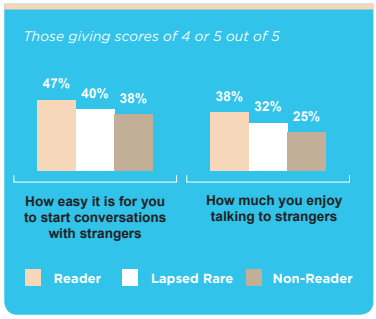


These figures might in part explain the higher levels of empathy experienced by readers who have a greater understanding of others. Having seen how others behave (even if they are fictional characters) in various situations results in greater empathy for people we encounter in the real world. Interestingly, whilst many of the benefits we explored in our research are limited to regular readers – so people who read rarely don't get the same boost – it seems that any amount of reading enhances your capacity for empathy.

Two thirds of readers (64% regular and 61% rare) report strong empathy versus less than half of non-readers (48%). What's more, people who read for just 30 minutes a week are 23% more likely to understand other people's feelings.



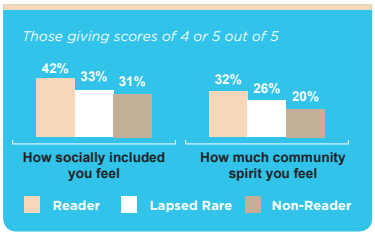
Coupled with greater empathy is a greater willingness and desire to engage with strangers. For readers, their template of what the world is, is widened. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising to see readers are more comfortable with strangers, reporting not only that they find it easier to start conversations with them but also greater enjoyment of these interactions. In fact, people reading for just 30 minutes a week are 27% more likely to find it easy to start a conversation with a stranger and 50% more likely to enjoy it.



The result appears to be a greater sense of social inclusion and community spirit. The act of reading routinely involves inhabiting a position or perspectives which are not one's own. Arguably, it is the only place we really enter and come to know and understand as if it were our own. The sympathetic intuitions which reading summons can make us more open to others' experience and make us feel more part of the wider human community.[11] Reading for just 30 minutes a week means you're 52% more likely to feel socially included than those who haven't read in the last week and 72% more likely to have greater community spirit. Moreover, you're 37% more likely to get greater pleasure out of your social life.

"I feel like it has brought me and a few work colleagues closer as we never had a general topic we all enjoyed except they all like to read."

Kirsty (25), Rotherhithe

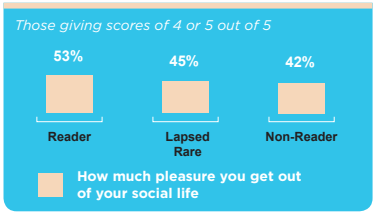


It's interesting to note that readers get significantly more out of their existing social lives than non-readers. Research carried out by the Centre for Reading Research in partnership with The Reader Organisation showed that, in addition to enhancing willingness and ability to communicate with others, reading helped promote respect for and tolerance of others' views.[12] This could be attributed to having new or richer matter to talk about and a greater ability to empathise, resulting in deeper interactions and ultimately stronger interpersonal bonds. Sharing their experience of reading helps give people another way of socialising and conversing - a sort of currency - which often feels more meaningful than more common or conventional forms of social chat.

"Reading my book whilst on the bus to town instead of listening to music or reading the paper on my phone made the journey go much quicker and I felt more relaxed than usual – and my book gave me a good topic for discussion at the Christmas party!"

Marvin (31), Manchester

Because reading thus operates on a level deeper than the social norm, it can help to form connections between people who would not ordinarily combine in a friendship or collegial group.[13]



That said, reading is most commonly a solitary activity and regular readers' social connectedness is not at the cost of taking time to themselves. In fact, 58% of readers say, "I need my alone time – and it's best with a book".

11 - Billington, et al 2013
12 - Billington, 2012
13 - Billington and Robinson, 2013

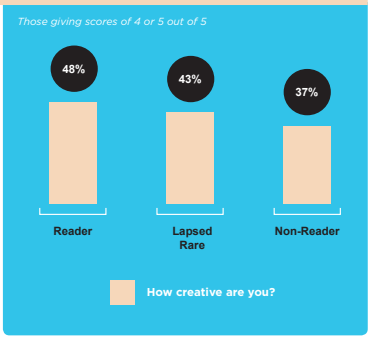
Section 4

What are the wider benefits of reading?

The numerous benefits of reading include the following:

43%
of readers said reading helps them get a better night's sleep

Adults reading for just
30 minutes
a week reported higher creativity (48%) than non readers (37%)



"I'm enjoying the book, but most of all I'm enjoying switching off and having some me time. I feel I'm sleeping a lot better since I've been reading and also I feel a lot calmer. I will definitely be reading in the future"

Sarah (39), Cheshire

"I forgot how enjoyable reading was - I like the way that it's made me relax especially during a very busy time. I like the way that you lose yourself in a book, I engage with a book far more than watching television'

Carrie (46), Stockport

58%
of readers say that reading lets them escape from the real world

Readers were found to be
27%
better able to make time for their friends, perhaps as they were 10% more capable of planning and prioritising

Section 5

What is standing between us and the bookshelf?

Our research suggested that there are 16 million lapsed readers in the UK. Whilst a lack of time was unsurprisingly quoted by nearly half (42%) of lapsed readers and a further 55% of non-readers quoted lack of enjoyment, our research also explored the wider triggers.

2.2 million people in the UK, who used to read, now rarely or never pick up a book because of a difficult event in their lives. When we asked lapsed readers why they had stopped reading, we found the following:

1.2 million

said depression had stopped them from reading

42%

quoted time

13%

of female lapsed readers said they stopped reading when they had a baby

9%

One in ten said they got out of the habit when they left school

14%

said a difficult life event such as ill health (either their own or a close family member or friend), the death of a friend or family member, losing their job or getting divorced was responsible

1%

of female non-readers cite post-natal depression

We explored why 1.4 million people have rarely read since they left school and our research highlights the extent to which a difficult start to a reading career, either at home or at school, can nip a reading habit in the bud.

11% of non-readers cited a lack of access to books, the family not having enough money and their parents not reading to them whilst the same percentage put their lack of reading down to a bad teacher or not being encouraged to read at school. Moreover, 13% said it was because they had been made to feel stupid when they read aloud or because they generally felt they were a bad reader at school. Finally, 11% simply reported that they had not had help and tended to struggle with reading.

"I'd never enjoyed reading before – at school I found the books hard to follow so I would never finish them. This is the first book I have finished in years"

Kirsty (25), Rotherhithe

Highlights from The Ten-Day Reading Challenge

We recruited 20 non / lapsed readers to take part in a qualitative study. They were asked to read every day for ten days and keep a diary recording their experience of and response to reading. The findings from these diaries are featured throughout this report.

Brian (44) from Poynton, had lost his reading confidence having spent the last few years busy raising his two children and renovating his house. When he tried to read again, he found himself unable to absorb what he was reading. Through carving out twenty minutes a day to read, Brian has felt inspired to read with his children again and has felt motivated and empowered to discuss and develop a new business idea with a friend. Taking up reading again has also helped Brian relate to those around him, and sparked conversations between him and his wife about the book he's reading.

Kirsty (25) from Rotherhithe never enjoyed reading – at school the texts she was given didn't engage her and she would lose concentration easily, making the plot hard to follow. This feeling followed her into adult life, with Kirsty only picking up books that were recommended to her by friends and still she wouldn't be able to finish them. Galaxy Quick Reads are the only books Kirsty has finished in years and she feels a huge sense of achievement from completing the challenge.

Charles (41) from London had always been good at Maths at school but struggled with English when it came to reading and grammar. He also experienced a lack of encouragement from teachers in helping him progress with reading in general. He fondly recalls reading a book by Roald Dahl but nothing else really grabbed his attention in this way. As an adult Charles would read the paper but it was only when he started his job in insurance that he realised the importance of being able to read and write competently and spent years getting up to speed in order to perform his job effectively. The reading challenge was the first time he had picked up a book for pleasure since Roald Dahl!

Lisa (40) from London, had a reading repertoire of "trashy magazines" when she was younger and as a result never really got into books. Now a busy mum of two young children, she cites lack of time as the main reason why she doesn't read. Lisa has found common ground with her friends having taken part in the 10 Day Reading Challenge as many of her friends are readers too. Talking about her book and the storyline has been a great way of connecting with them in a new way.

Most of all, Lisa has found that reading has given her the much-needed time to herself that she doesn't normally get, she discovered that reading in the car while waiting to pick up her children was a quiet and peaceful haven where nobody could disturb her. Not only has Lisa found reading to be a great way to relax, but also she has also found a real sense of achievement from reading. Lisa now plans to carry on reading in her daily life.

Methodology

Reading Between the Lines: the Benefits of Reading for Pleasure was produced by Quick Reads in partnership with Dr Josie Billington from the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society at the University of Liverpool. It was commissioned by Galaxy.

The report features previously unpublished research and data:

• An online survey by Vision Critical was conducted among 4,164 randomly selected British adults age 18+ from January 12 2015 to January 13 2015. The margin of error- which measures sampling variability - is +/- 1.6%, 19 times out of 20. The results have been statistically weighted according to the most current data on age, gender, region and education from the most recent census data to ensure the sample is representative of the entire adult population of the UK. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding.

• 'The Ten-Day Reading Challenge' was a qualitative study of 20 non / lapsed readers

Unless otherwise stated, the data in this report is drawn from the Vision Critical data.

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