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# Poetry For Pleasure: Promoting Poetry to Children in Public Libraries

## ABSTRACT

This article reports an investigation of the attitudes and opinions of children's librarians towards poetry, and towards its promotion in the public library. It also reports some attitudes towards literature promotion to young people in general. A series of structured interviews with library professionals currently working in the public sector strongly indicate that children's librarians are themselves enthusiastic concerning poetry, and are firmly convinced both of the benefits incurred by children encouraged to read, write and listen to poems from a very early age, and of children's own enjoyment of this genre. Due to its brevity and memorability, poetry is regarded by the interviewees as the most accessible literary form for poor or reluctant readers, despite its wider image as a neglected and "difficult" genre for children and children.

## INTRODUCTION

This article is based on a study carried out for a Masters dissertation at Loughborough University. The study uncovered a wealth of literature investigating the general subject of literature promotion in public libraries, much of it concentrating on services for young readers. Conversely, a lack of work concentrating specifically on poetry and its promotion in public libraries was identified. As poetry has been shown to be important to children, albeit considered elitist by some, a study was devised to investigate the attitudes and opinions of professional librarians towards poetry for children within the context of literature promotion to children in general. There are various reasons why the promotion of poetry to children in public libraries is important, including the fact that it introduces them to unfamiliar language, repetition, rhyming words, language patterns and words from an oral tradition. Poetry is suited to the spoken word and helps in the development of oral communication and listening skills and of complex comprehension skills. It can also be said to have an emotional, imaginative and spiritual dimension, and to contribute to the growth of children in emotional and moral ways as well as to their intellectual development. The investigation involved assessing the extent to which public libraries are actively engaged in the promotion of poetry and fiction to children, and the means by which any such promotion is taking place. The study employed the idea of poetry in the widest sense of the word – ranging from limericks and nursery rhymes to that which does not have a rhyme. This is discussed in more detail below. The investigation considered the relative importance of promotional activities across a selection of different authorities, and evaluated the

current enthusiasm of librarians towards poetry and fiction for children, and their opinion of its value and importance. This article will present some of the key findings and conclusions drawn from the study, with regard to poetry in particular.

## **BACKGROUND**

The connection between public libraries and children is a widely discussed subject, however, the relationship between children, libraries and poetry is perhaps less well covered ground. There is an abundance of literature investigating the general subject of literature promotion in public libraries, much of it concentrating on services for young readers. The scope of the present article does not allow for an exhaustive discussion of this literature, however, it is worth noting that a recent Audit Commission report entitled *Building Better Libraries* (2002) found that, while other public library services are in decline, reader development in UK libraries is one of the few areas of service provision showing signs of growth. This increasing emphasis on the promotion of books and reading takes place in a context of a decrease in the number of library visits and books issued. Leadbeater (2003; 10) has noted that, “there are 23% fewer people borrowing books from public libraries than three years ago, although book sales have risen by 25% in the same period. The proportion of regular users of public libraries under fifty five is falling”. In a slightly more recent report, Coates (2004; 3) has similar figures, suggesting that, “in the past ten years the number of visitors each year to libraries has declined by 21%; the number of books borrowed has fallen by 35%; and the national cost of the service has increased by 39%.” So, despite an increasing demand for books and other information sources, the public library is less well used for these purposes now than it was before 1992, and its users are growing older. In this context, the development of the young reader remains of great importance.

A notable part of a library’s collection is likely to be poetry, and this is particularly true in the case of literature for children and young readers. There is some ambivalence concerning the image of poetry among children and teenagers – some consider it elitist or exclusive – however, there is general agreement amongst other authorities concerning its importance for the young. For example, Gervase Phinn (1992: 55) expresses the anxiety felt by many concerning the neglect of poetry teaching in schools, and the subsequent lack of interest in the genre among children: “Sadly, research studies and HMI reports confirm that for some children poetry is the poor relation of fiction ... They reveal that many children dislike poetry, considering it difficult and demanding and largely irrelevant to their lives and interests.”

Phinn is describing poetry in an educational context, and as lacking meaning for children and failing to inspire excitement in them. He suggests that the difficulties poetry presents are not a challenge but a threat, and a barrier to further exploration. More than any other literary genre, poetry elicits responses which seem to be contradictory. In one form, it is present in children's playground rhymes and games and functions as a coded language that children use only between themselves (Opie and Opie, 1959 and Thomas, 2004). In another guise, poetry is thought to be the greatest cause of unease and anxiety for professionals seeking to engage children with literature. Phinn (1992; 56) believes that "it is clear that choosing and presenting poetry is not as easy as presenting fiction". This is despite the fact that poems are generally shorter, more memorable and easier to use in speaking and listening exercises than stories. If schools, stretched to the limit with the time they have available for what represents only one facet of a demanding curriculum, are forced to sideline poetry, then it is here that public libraries may come into their own. If, as Goulding has suggested, public libraries are the "natural homes for the promotion of literature skills" (2002; 3), then these institutions carry a particular onus to familiarise children with the broadest range of the best possible literary material, whether poetry or prose. Libraries can reach whole families and can target children and adults simultaneously in their promotions. While teachers rarely see the parents of their pupils for any length of time, librarians spend as much time talking to parents and carers as they do to children, and aim to provide equally for adult needs. Having this opportunity to establish a relationship of trust with the individuals who primarily influence children in their early years is an advantage libraries cannot afford to ignore.

For the librarian, perhaps, poetry is seen from a different perspective. Rhymes and poems are integrated into library story telling sessions for children under five with great success. Here, poetry is not a static form to be studied on a page but is connected with song, dance, drama, games and action. In consulting children's librarians concerning the benefits of poetry for primary aged children, this study attempts to gauge the profile this genre has in libraries, and whether public libraries might hold the answer to the challenges presented by poetry promotion.

### **Poetry and reading development**

Poetry is important to children as a preparation for meeting the outside world, the pressures of reality and the demands of other people. Hart-Hewins and Wells (c1990) are of the opinion that introducing children to unfamiliar language "links words to concepts that may be outside the child's actual experience". Language itself is crucial to children's development, and should not be simplified or diminished because of the limits of a child's reading capability – learning to

listen to stories and poems while others read aloud is a valid and vital stage of the reading process. Hart-Hewins and Wells praise poetry in particular because it contains so many of those “features of language that contribute to readability”. Among these they include language patterns, repetition (of words, of sentences, or of refrains), rhyming words and words from oral language. In the view of *The Poetry Library* (2003), poetry is, of all the literary art forms, “the one most suited to the spoken word”, and, of course, effective verbal communication is fundamental to our success in every area of life. Among the benefits incurred by children encouraged to listen to, read and write poetry in the primary classroom, Hall (1989: 6) includes the development of oral communication and listening skills and of complex comprehension skills. He goes on to note that, as stated in the Bullock Report (Department of Education and Science, 1975), “most communication takes place in speech, and those who do not listen with attention and cannot speak with clarity, articulateness and confidence are at a disadvantage in almost every aspect of their personal, social and working lives” (Hall, 1989: 6). The development of concentration is also cited as being important due to poetry involving a high degree of precision in its use of language, with every word chosen for a certain effect.

The study of poetry requires a level of attention to detail not necessarily demanded by other literary forms, yet it can also be dynamic; it is “to do with *action*” and “the art of listening to poetry is a *participatory* activity” (Wright and Asser, 1995: 130). Poetry is a complex art form, suited to moods of quiet contemplation and to a lively communal story telling session. Further, it can awaken children’s minds to an “emotional and imaginative and even spiritual dimension” (Hall, 1989: 6) in the world. Wright and Asser (1995: 130) stress that children will respond instinctively to genuine enthusiasm shown by an adult – and that it is more often adults who seek to avoid literature they see, at best, as difficult, and, at worst, elitist and simply unnecessary.

Hall (1989: 11) cites the research of Bryant and Bradley (1985) into children’s reading problems to support her argument that exposure to poetry (in the widest sense of the word) from an early age is linked to success in attaining literacy. Interestingly, it is the feature of rhyme that appears to be significant in the development of phonological awareness, suggesting that the kind of verse chosen might be an instrumental factor in enhancing children’s reading capability. Most of the literature held to constitute ‘poetry’ by (adult) theorists and critics does not rhyme. However, to a four or five year child, a limerick or a nursery rhyme is a poem. In fact, Butler (1988: 153) describes poetry as a “natural extension of nursery rhyme”, and suggests that young children are

peculiarly open to the impact of this art form: “Lilt and rhythm are instinctive to childhood and can be enhanced, given form and expression, by familiarity with a wide range of poetry”.

Good literature in general should, perhaps, have an emotional, imaginative and spiritual dimension, and contribute to the growth of children in emotional and moral ways as much as to intellectual development. More than anything, engagement with the thoughts and feelings of a fictional character demands the reader’s ability to empathise, or as Hall (1989; 16) suggests, to take the views of others into account “as on a par with their own”, to understand that there are different perspectives on the world from the one we hold ourselves.

### **Oral literacy: the power of school and nursery rhymes**

Many authors view poetry as the most extreme form of literary art, the most concentrated and condensed. As Hall (1989; 16) suggests, “a crucial witness to the element of mystery in the human experience”. The most complex literary art form to decode, poetry preserves a sense of mystery, a world in itself suggestive of spiritual experience, yet poetic elements can be found in “Jack and Jill went up the hill”. Hart-Hewins and Wells (c1990; 35) have noted that, of the five stages identified as integral to reading development, it is the pre-reader for whom the poetic form is most essential: “nursery rhymes and poems are extremely important reading for these children. They memorize rhymes and read them to themselves, and develop an ear for the rhythms and cadences of language”.

In their 1959 study into the significance of playground rhymes, songs and sayings to school children, Peter and Iona Opie describe the incredible power of apparently nonsensical verse as a private means of communication between the very young. “Language is still new to them, and they find difficulty expressing themselves. When on their own they burst into rhyme, of no recognisable relevancy, as a cover in unexpected situations, to pass off an awkward meeting, to fill a silence, to hide a deeply felt emotion ...” (Opie and Opie, 1959; 18). Here, nonsense verse takes on a life and meaning of its own, with an astonishing ability to propagate itself from one generation of children to the next, without adult intervention. This language is something that ‘belongs’ to the child and represents the beginnings of self expression, and self concealment through a growing control over language.

Making a connection between poetry and the public library setting, Meade (1997; 260) has discussed the importance of utilising audio and visual tools in making the public library a “poetry

place” – or a place equipped to positive promotion of poetry, and literature in general. The advantages of putting poetry onto the web, where it may be instantly accessed and is far more easily assimilated than lengthy blocks of prose on a screen, are summarised as: “poetry is concise, crosses boundaries, is quick to download”. Although Meade does not focus specifically on children’s literature and poetry, perhaps the idea of ‘interactive’ poems on the web is more pertinent to this computer literate age group whom many fear are missing out on the pleasure of books precisely because of the rival lure of new technologies. With this in mind, it is worth noting that ‘library clubs’ have been set up in public libraries in Birmingham, Bristol, Essex, Leeds and Suffolk, aimed at encouraging eight-to-eleven year olds to contribute to a website about stories and poems. Free of charge, the initiative offers children the opportunity to read previews of authors’ and poets’ latest work, enter story and poetry writing competitions and, perhaps most alluringly, to ‘talk’ to authors, illustrators and poets over the web. Surely the image of the solitary reader or writer, closeted away from the rest of society and the lives of real children, must be shattered here. Reading and writing are shared activities demanding verbal communication and listening skills as much as thought and concentration; poems and stories provide the opportunity for public performance and an impetus for discussion of ideas that might prove inaccessible to their audience in any other form.

## **THE STUDY**

The method of data collection used for this study involved nine semi-structured interviews with a specialist children’s librarian in eight different public library authorities. This method was chosen because the study was not only expected to produce qualitative factual results, but was also deeply concerned with the considered opinions, attitudes and ideas of experienced library professionals currently dealing with the issues of children’s reading promotion. A flexible approach to information gathering was therefore required and, as Bell (1987; 71) has suggested, “a major advantage of the interview is its adaptability”. It was thought important to utilise the advantages offered by the interview technique in being able to “follow up ideas, probe responses, investigate motives and feelings” (Bell, 1987; 71). The interview would provide personal and in-depth responses to a research question, encouraging a level of openness and honesty that a standardised questionnaire might not. Furthermore, face to face interaction between interviewer and interviewee would allow “mutual exploration” (resolving possible ambiguities in the wording of a question) and “investigation of causation” (the reasons behind an interviewee’s responses) (Gorman and Clayton, 1997; 124).



Limitations of the interview format tend to arise from the personal nature of questioning as much as the strengths. An interviewee's anonymity is lost, and the interview may be particularly susceptible to bias arising from the "approach, personality or even appearance of the interviewer" (Gorman and Clayton, 1997; 124). This was not an issue here. In order to compare and analyse material based on the subjective outlook of individuals, it was considered vital to have the opportunity to ask interviewees to expand fully upon answers to questions. The opportunity to obtain detailed explanation of ideas and as many actual examples of current practice as possible was also considered of importance.

A "standardised, open-ended" interview was therefore deemed to be the most appropriate method of gathering this information, with a structure flexible enough to allow for radical differences in policies and practices across a range of public library authorities. An attempt was made to procure a purposive sample, representing senior children's librarians working in a number of different types of authority (county, unitary and metropolitan) in the East Midlands and West Yorkshire. The text of the interview schedule can be found in the Appendix.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Librarian's aims in promotion**

Librarians interviewed were able to discuss in detail their reasons for undertaking general promotional activities, and were seeking to develop and extend the current range of events and activities run in their libraries within the constraints of time, money and staffing resources they inevitably face. Pre-school years were felt by many to be the priority, and accordingly parents of this age group are a prime target for promotion. Convincing parents of the benefits of early literacy and exposure to books before the age of five was stressed by one librarian as a key aim of children's promotional work. As well as involving and enthusing parents about library services on their children's behalf (and in many cases, on their own), public libraries were described as acting as "ambassadors" for children's literature, and for reading for enjoyment. In this way they were contrasted with the educational services, although one librarian made a strong case for supporting the work done in schools with children who may never enter a public library building. Many librarians saw their role as complementary to that of the formal education system, but felt there was a need to preserve an identity distinct from schools and to lessen the association with continuous testing, assessment and the National Literacy Strategy with which reading in school is frequently linked.

With older children and teenagers, the purpose of reading promotion was seen to be to encourage emotional, intellectual and creative development. There is clearly a concern regarding the promotion of children's growth as individuals with ideas and opinions of their own, which they have the confidence and ability to articulate. Asking children to participate actively in stock selection and in promotion (for example as a "Book Pusher") is part of this bid to encourage teenage independence and to give young people an opportunity to make their feelings known to adults, and their peers. More than one librarian used the word "ownership" when describing what children of upper primary age and above wanted from libraries and from their reading. A sense of control, and choice, over the books they read, and the kind of environment they choose to read them in is regarded as vital in fostering enthusiastic voluntary readers who will in turn promote books to their peers. Increasing children's exposure to a wide range of challenging literature was a particular concern of one librarian, and another expressed the view that children's poetry can be lacking in literary quality, and should be chosen with a view to extending children's range of reading material.

Publicising library services to the local community was the third major contributing factor behind children's promotions. The importance of communicating the message that libraries are relevant to the needs of those of all ages, and from all backgrounds, was stressed throughout the interviews. Moreover, this is regarded as achievable by reaching children, in and out of their school or nursery environment, through initiatives such as Bookstart<sup>i</sup> and the Summer Reading Challenge<sup>ii</sup>. While parental support is instrumental in reaching younger children, young people can also play a role in encouraging parents who are not confident about reading into libraries.

### **Barriers to promotion**

The respondents were asked about the perceived restrictions to an active policy of fiction and poetry promotion. Financial limitations were possibly the greatest barrier to author visits, due to the fees levied for an author's time. The respondents also noted that lack of staff resources and time had hindered outreach work into schools, and the setting up of children's reading groups because these are particularly time intensive. Lack of staff confidence with, and/or enthusiasm for children's work was another important factor. Although librarians felt that children's work was becoming increasingly less specialised, children's librarians still struggle to find staff to support them in promotional activities. It was also found that stereotypes of the library as a

“silent, disapproving place” were acting as a barrier. This is best overcome by actively promoting library services to the community, and non-users in particular.

Methods used to overcome the barriers to promotion included working in partnership with other authorities to reduce the cost and inconvenience of author visits; working alongside publishers in order to maximise the opportunity for author visits, especially “big names” such as Jacqueline Wilson and Anne Fine; appointing literature development officers to take specific responsibility for innovative promotions (noted in two authorities) and increasing staff training, and thereby confidence and awareness, with regard to children’s work.

### **The means by which poetry and fiction promotion is taking place**

There was a range of activities and events noted by the interviewees. Story times take place in all but one of the libraries involved in the study, and have only recently ceased in that authority due to problems with location. These are held regularly (between monthly and weekly), and, with one exception, are aimed at the under-fives, with some flexibility during the school holidays.

Participation in the Summer Reading Challenge is the next most common children’s promotion, with all but two authorities involved. This is named as one of the most successful library events, wherever it is taking place, with demand outstripping supply in several areas. The two non-participating authorities run equivalent and successful, programmes of holiday activities.

Author visits are felt strongly to be of great benefit to children involved, whether or not they have occurred in the recent past. The number of events tends to have decreased in the past few years, mainly due to financial constraints, but libraries are making good use of the talents of local writers (for example, John Foster, Paul Cookson and Steve Barlow) including performance poets. Author visits are also linked with the Summer Reading Challenge. One librarian suggested, interestingly, that *any* adult who will take a serious interest in children and their reading (and lead by example, demonstrating a genuine enthusiasm for books) can be an inspiration to young readers. Male readers are particularly useful in this capacity as a role model for reluctant boys. While children have a fascination with the “celebrity” status of writers such as J K Rowling and Jacqueline Wilson, this is perhaps less important to them than adult attention in general. The most frequently mentioned benefits of author visits are the opportunity to relate a real person to a book and the consequent demystification of the writing process, giving children the confidence to be creative themselves.

Another important activity is children's visits to the library and librarians' visits to schools. The interviewees were divided in opinion as to which is the more effective means of promotion. Arguments for encouraging children to visit (perhaps in school or nursery groups) centre on the fact that, once over the threshold, barriers have been broken down, and that exposure to resources will, it is hoped, promote the library service to non-users. Opposing arguments focus on the principle of meeting people "where they are". Most librarians employ both methods, although staff time is limited for outreach work. Peer promotion is also regarded as crucial. Most of the real promotion of library services exists in the form of word of mouth recommendations (of events, of facilities, or of book titles). Three librarians mentioned this as being significant in outreach work in deprived areas.

Book Start, and its accompanying schemes (Book Start Plus, Rhyme Start, Wiggly Readers), is widely used, emphasising the priority given by many authorities to work with under-fives. Also important are events built around national reading promotions that are not necessarily library based, for example, Book Week, Book of the Year, World Book Day, National Poetry Day and so on.

Also noted were reading groups, for children and teenagers, including after school or lunchtime initiatives such as "Telling Tales" (building on the success of the Summer Reading Challenge) or "Books 8". There were also libraries' individual promotions, such as "Reading Pairs", encouraging adults to take an interest in children's literature and reading, or "Text on Text", encouraging teenage peer promotion of favourite books. Family days and activities are very important: one librarian in particular was keen to encourage taking a "holistic" approach to promotions, targeting children and adults simultaneously with events.

### **The importance of poetry for children**

The advantages of poetry for reluctant, poor and younger readers were described repeatedly in the interviews. All librarians were of the opinion that reading, writing and listening to poems and nursery rhymes was a vital experience for children of all ages. Rhythm in particular, together with rhyme and repetition, were named as an aid to beginner or struggling readers. Poetry is claimed not to require the same sustained effort in concentration as prose, to be a less restrictive medium than narrative, easier to interpret, compose and perform, and to have a dramatic quality that lends itself to interaction, extending oral literacy skills and capacity for self-expression.

Humour was the most frequently mentioned quality of effective children's poetry, and poetry was strongly associated in the minds of children with the joke books with which it tends to be shelved. Children look for poetry to be quick, easily digested, with a twist or punch line at the end. Despite this, the more thought provoking side of children's poetry – dealing with traumatic themes such as divorce or bereavement – was used in preference to stories in many cases when dealing with children suffering in similar situations. One librarian said that she found it easier to find poetry than prose on a theme suited to a particular child. Stories remain important to children, however. Poems that had an "identifiable subject" (like football) or recognisable characters (such as those in Allan Ahlberg's school-themed collection *Please Mrs Butler* (1983)) were felt to be particularly attractive to children. Characters and situations retain their appeal, but are made more accessible to young readers in poetic form. This accounts for the enduring popularity of verse narratives such as *Roald Dahl's Revolting Rhymes* (1982), combining plot and exaggerated characterisation with a style that is easily memorised and works to great effect when read aloud.

Poets whose work is chosen for use with children are mainly contemporary, and are frequently locally based and prepared to visit libraries and perform their work. Those poets mentioned most often include: Allan Ahlberg, Paul Cookson, Roald Dahl, John Foster, Roger McGough, Colin McNaughton, Michael Rosen, Nick Toczek and Benjamin Zephaniah. Male poets predominated (this was not reflected in the names of fiction writers, perhaps due to the dominance of novelists such as J K Rowling, Jacqueline Wilson and Anne Fine). Librarians felt that boys enjoyed poetry more than fiction, for reasons ranging from brevity to the themes with which it deals. Every librarian interviewed commented on the (general) preference of boys for non-fiction reading on subjects of interest to them, and it was noted that poetry collections are read in much the same way as a magazine or reference book – selectively and piecemeal, not from beginning to end. The librarians noted, importantly, that children enjoy having poetry is performed for or read to them, and are often moved to choose poetry books so that such works are heavily borrowed.

### **Literary quality**

An ongoing debate concerning the need for "quality control" in selecting and promoting books for children remains unresolved. All librarians questioned were in agreement that it is better that children read than not, but there is a range of opinions concerning the rigour with which criteria for selection should be applied. Relaxing standards is felt to be most important in retaining teenage and older readers who may be capable of appreciating challenging books, but, with

increasing pressures in school, have little time for anything other than light fiction or magazines. Material must also be presented in the right way; inviting authors into schools or the library to discuss their writing is seen to have a significant impact on issues of their work. By extension, this places non-contemporary works at a disadvantage: the only pre-twentieth century writer mentioned in conjunction with promotions and outreach work was the poet Alfred Noyes, although collections containing excerpts from Keats and Shakespeare are to be found in the children's poetry section of at least one library involved in the study.

### **Literature promotion as a key function of public libraries**

Defining "literature" simply as "poetry and fiction" (rather than works of a stated literary quality), more than half the librarians interviewed clearly expressed the view that literature promotion was central to the service offered by the public libraries. All agreed that it played at least an important part. Views expressed focussed on the fact that the public library is uniquely placed to fulfil this role and that book promotion (unlike, for example, IT provision) is a specialist function of libraries. One librarian suggested that this was especially the case from the point of view of children's services, and specifically work with early year groups: "We're in the business of *creating* readers". Two librarians expressed the view that book promotion and IT provision are mutually inclusive, equally important to the development of skilled individuals, and contribute to a general literacy to which young people must have access in order to exploit a full range of cultural, creative and educational opportunities. One librarian suggested that reading promotion activities were a means of developing children's interpersonal skills, encouraging them to interact with their peers in a way that is increasingly rare, and which is not promoted by the current emphasis on computers.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The aim of this study was to investigate the attitudes and opinions of professional librarians towards poetry for children, within the context of literature promotion in general. While the research carried out involved only a small sample of library authorities, there was a strong consensus of opinion among those interviewed regarding the vital importance of poetry for the young. Even more significantly, librarians held firmly to the view that, for many children using public libraries today, poetry is not a difficult, outdated or elitist genre. Rather it is the genre that, in the opinion of those interviewed, least needs promoting because it is heavily borrowed. Children respond with enthusiasm when poetry is performed for or read to them; it is frequently chosen over prose when approaching sensitive subjects. Poetry practically "sells itself".

This finding stands in stark contrast to the often negative attitudes towards poetry found in schools by Gervase Phinn (1992). In the informal context of the public library, children accept poetry as an extension of jokes, they are captured by rhythm and rhyme and they find it easier to read and to write than prose. Moreover, it is the less capable and less enthusiastic child readers who appreciate the benefits of poetry the most. It seems significant that many children's specialists regard poetry as a way in to reading – as a means of attracting children to explore further. Librarians are more concerned, in some cases, by the need to move on from brief verses and comic rhyme on to longer and more challenging pieces requiring more in-depth attention and concentration. The majority of those interviewed still regarded books as the primary attraction for young people visiting libraries, at the same time recognising some appeal in IT facilities. Author visits brought children into the library in large numbers, and encouraged book borrowing and book buying on a significant scale.

Public libraries are not primarily concerned with education in a formal sense – although exposure to a range of reading materials and information tools serves to support children's more formal learning. They are concerned with the promotion of *voluntary* reading whether fiction or non-fiction, whether for instruction or for pleasure. More than one librarian expressed concerns that initiatives such as the National Literacy Strategy are improving children's reading ability, but reducing their desire to read. Public libraries are distanced from an environment of constant testing and assessment of children's standards of literacy from their earliest years at school. Perhaps, in this way, they have a unique opportunity to promote books to children as fun, to perform poetry as entertainment and use reading as the inspiration for games, drama and jokes. If, as Wallace Stevens suggested, "Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right" (Sedgwick, 1997; 16), then this genre has a particular resonance with the young as they come to terms with the world in which they live. Poetry can be the means of empowering children as they seek to make choices, articulate their thoughts and ideas and claim "ownership" over both their reading and their lives. Libraries offer a superb environment in which they may do so.

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<sup>i</sup> Bookstart in the UK is the first national books for babies programme in the world. Bookstart aims to provide every baby in the UK with a Bookstart pack of free books and guidance materials. It is committed to promoting the idea of early book sharing and seeks to give every baby the opportunity to develop a life long love of books. See <http://www.bookstart.co.uk/>

<sup>ii</sup> The Summer Reading Challenge is the largest national reading promotion for young people, aged 4-11 years in the UK. It is now taken up by 88% of authorities, and runs through public libraries during the school summer holidays. The reading challenge programme has been developed over the last five years by the whole library profession and is used strategically by library authorities to help deliver services and develop partnerships