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Quick Reads and Unionlearn team up to address the UK's reading deficit

The Quick Reads initiative, now part of The Reading Agency, is teaming up with the TUC's learning and skills organisation, Unionlearn, to help adults and children to escape the "reading deficit trap" – by bringing the proven benefits of reading for pleasure to workplaces across the UK.

One in six adults of working age in the UK find reading difficult and may never pick up a book¹. The projected cost of this deficit to the UK is £81 billion a year in lost earnings and increased welfare spending². It also affects children, who may be less likely to acquire the habit of reading if they do not observe it in adults³.

Each year, Quick Reads – which was founded by Baroness Gail Reubuck in 2006 – commissions high-profile authors to write books that are specifically designed to be easy to read, making them more accessible to those who lack the time or the confidence to read for pleasure. This year's list includes a re-imagining of *Beauty and the Beast* by Amanda Craig, a road trip in search of Poldark by Rowan Coleman, and a ground-breaking self-help text, *Feel the Fear & Do It Anyway* by Susan Jeffers, the first Quick Reads title in this genre (see Notes to editors for the full list).

Unionlearn will run a nationwide literacy week to tie in with the launch of the Quick Reads programme, on 2nd February, and supply copies of this year's titles alongside The Reading Agency's author, publisher, bookseller, education, commercial and library partners.

The UK is the global leader in the English language generated creative industries and home to the world's most loved and recognised literary brands, from Shakespeare and Dickens to JK Rowling. Yet, against expectations, the country frequently appears at the bottom of OECD rankings for literacy.

The 2016 OECD report "Building Skills for All: A Review of England" rates teenagers aged 16 to 19 the worst of 23 developed nations. England has three times more low-skilled people in this age bracket than the best-performing countries, such as Finland or the Netherlands⁴.

There are an estimated 9 million working age adults in England with low basic skills such as literacy, according to the report. These skills are critical to economic success, and are "associated with higher rates of economic activity, higher wages, and a lower risk of unemployment", the OECD points out.

At a time when the public service is squeezed and work-related stresses of modern life are common, Quick Reads is calling for a wider understanding of the proven holistic benefits of reading for pleasure.

¹ Department for Education, DfES, The Skills for Life Survey (2003)

² World Literacy Foundation, [The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy](#) (August 2016) & Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, [Adult Literacy and Numeracy](#) (2014-15)

³ Common Sense Media, *Children, Teens, and Reading* (2014)

⁴ OECD Skills Studies, [Building Skills for All: A Review of England](#) (2016)

Research from The Reading Agency suggests a wide range of social benefits associated with a positive reading culture, including an increased understanding of self and social identities, empathy, knowledge of other cultures, relatedness and community cohesion⁵. In addition to helping to promote better health and well-being, reading for pleasure can provide the impetus and guidance for people to make significant changes to their lives, such as applying for a new job or taking up routines and hobbies⁶.

Baroness Gail Rebuck, DBE, Founder of Quick Reads, said:

“Quick Reads are the solution to the problem of bringing adults who do not yet read or who struggle to read into the habit of reading for pleasure. Huge resources are now being poured into early learning and rightly so, but we must not forget those families, who for whatever reason, are caught in the reading deficit trap, often with no books in the home. With Quick Reads, adults who are low in confidence, or time, or out of the habit can be encouraged into reading either for pleasure or at home with their children, breaking this cycle.”

The ability to read and write is not only about being able to follow signs or fill in an application form. Reading can help us to connect with others, to make a positive change in our own lives and even lead us to greater wellbeing. As individuals, as a workforce, as a nation, we pay a high price if we do not read for pleasure.”

Sue Wilkinson, Chief Executive of The Reading Agency, said:

“Quick Reads have been created to solve a problem that has serious implications for our economy, and for the well-being and development of our children. Well-known authors write engaging and accessible books that are specifically designed to get adults back into reading, with enormous benefits for both adults and their children. Young people who see their parents and carers enjoy books are much more likely to get into a reading habit themselves.”

The Reading Agency aims to create a better understanding of the positive impact reading has on our personal lives, and on society as a whole. This year we are particularly pleased that Unionlearn are putting Quick Reads titles at the centre of a week-long, nationwide literacy campaign and we look forward to working with them to promote these great books as part of our mission to inspire more people to read more.”

Unionlearn has been working with Quick Reads for the last decade to supply books and promote reading through its network of 35,000 trained Union Learning Reps. There are nearly 350 union learning centres in workplaces across the UK, many of which have book swap clubs and links to local libraries. Last year, Unionlearn supported nearly 220,000 learners. This January, the organisation will be launching its Literacy Works campaign.

Kevin Rowan, Director of Unionlearn, said:

“Quick Reads are a brilliant idea and extremely popular with Union Learning Reps, who use them to promote reading at work. These reps find that Quick Reads are an ideal tool to engage workers and there is always a huge amount of interest in finding out which new titles will be released each year. Reps use the books in the workplace Book Clubs and Union Learning Centres they run, as well as in projects with the wider community.”

“The Unionlearn Literacy Works campaign, launched this month, is aimed at increasing learning around reading and writing skills in workplaces – and Quick Reads will be playing a vital part of this campaign.”

⁵ BOP Consulting, [The Impact of Reading for Pleasure and Empowerment](#) (The Reading Agency, 2015)

⁶ Galaxy® Quick Reads, [The Untold Power of the Book](#) (2015)

Amanda Craig, Quick Reads author, said:

“Quick Reads are a fantastic way to get people reading who have never found, or who have lost their confidence as readers. A lot of people never find the key that gives you this confidence, but it is there for every single person, and once you find it you are never bored or lonely again.

When you can really read, it’s like developing a super-power. Your imagination takes you anywhere, and that can help you with everything. This is why I was so delighted to contribute to the Quick Reads programme.”

Dreda Say Mitchell, Quick reads author, said:

“Quick Reads plays such an essential role in improving reading skills and I was deeply honoured to be invited to participate in the project. I’m also delighted that the Unions are playing their part because literacy is so important both to their members and to wider society.

I’ve seen for myself, as a youngster growing up in a poor area of one of our big cities, and then again as a teacher, the damage that can be done when people struggle with reading. While the focus is often on employment and life chances, it’s worth remembering that literacy has a far wider role than merely helping in the jobs market. Reading helps people understand their own lives, the lives of others, and the world around them. I’ll always be grateful to Whitechapel library for opening these doors when I went there as a child and we need to make this path available to everyone.

But perhaps it was in prisons where I’ve seen the astonishing impact that literacy projects played in individual lives. As anyone who has done work with offenders will know, problems with reading are endemic in our prisons. If society is serious about rehabilitation and reducing reoffending, it needs to make improving reading skills a priority. And this is the thing about focusing on literacy and the work done by organisations such as The Reading Agency, Unionlearn, and projects such as Quick Reads. Not only is it important for the individuals concerned, it is vital for society as a whole.”

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Notes to editors

About Quick Reads

1. Baroness Rebuck, DBE founded Quick Reads in 2006, and she continues to chair the initiative. It commissions, publishes and distributes short books by big name authors to help get people reading.

2. Quick Reads titles are specifically designed to be easy to read, and are shorter and easier to tackle for adults who are less confident in their reading skills.

3. Since its launch in 2006, the Quick Reads initiative has published over 100 titles, loaned more than 4.6 million books through libraries (PLR) and distributed over 4.8 million books, introducing hundreds of thousands of new readers each year to the joys of reading.

4. Quick Reads, now part of The Reading Agency, supports literacy and reading amongst adults.

5. Arts Council England support Quick Reads. They believe that the arts have the power to change lives and communities, and to create opportunities for people throughout the country.

6. Over the last ten years, Quick Reads has established a reputation for publishing top quality bestselling authors, including Andy McNab, Jojo Moyes, Jeffrey Archer, Malala, Roddy Doyle and many more. Each year the initiative aims to publish a diverse and balanced list of six books that will cover the widest possible spectrum in terms of both subject and age appeal.

7. The six titles on this year's Quick Reads list are:

- *Feel the Fear & Do It Anyway* by Susan Jeffers (Ebury) – an adaptation drawing on the late Susan Jeffers' landmark self-help title and its bestselling follow-up.
- *Dead Simple* (Orion) – a collection of original short stories from some of the UK's best crime writers including Mark Billingham, Clare Mackintosh, and Jane Casey.
- *Looking for Captain Poldark* by Rowan Coleman (Ebury) – a road trip novel about four people united by their shared love of Poldark.
- *The Other Side of You* by Amanda Craig (Little Brown) – a London-set re-imagining of Beauty and the Beast.
- *One False Move* by Dreda Say Mitchell (Hodder) – a gritty novel set on the Devil's Estate in London.
- *A Very Distant Shore* by Jenny Colgan (Little Brown) – a romantic novel set on a remote Scottish island, where a Syrian refugee goes to work as a doctor.

About The Reading Agency

The Reading Agency is the leading charity inspiring people of all ages and all backgrounds to read for pleasure and empowerment. Working with our partners, our aim is to make reading accessible to everyone. The Reading Agency is funded by the Arts Council. www.readingagency.org.uk

About Unionlearn

Unionlearn is the learning and skills organisation of the TUC and was established in 2006 in order to provide an ongoing framework to support union led learning in England. The union learning agenda is itself a dynamic way of developing trade unions, responding to the needs of trade unionists and constitutes an important element of the union offer.

Unionlearn works to assist unions in the delivery of learning opportunities for their members as well as managing the Union Learning Fund (ULF). We believe that the life chances of all people can be transformed through access to learning throughout their working lives, and that learning opportunities must be available to the entire workforce.

Unionlearn believes learning and skills can best be delivered collectively in partnership with trade unions, and provides resources to enable a countrywide network of Union Learning Reps and workplace learning centres to support workplace learning. www.unionlearn.org.uk