

# Learning to Choose

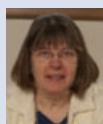
## THE HIDDEN ART OF THE ENTHUSIASTIC READER

*Margaret Mackey*

Many who think they are poor readers willingly invest time and interest in reading when they find the right book. Learning to choose is a paramount skill often neglected in schools.

We know a great deal about the development of successful readers. We know that for most people, the hours of the school day do not supply enough time to become truly fluent at processing text, and that some version of what Stephen Krashen (2004) labels “free voluntary reading” is essential (p. x). We know that to entice young readers to take up some texts voluntarily, we do better if we give them choice and if we acknowledge that recreational reading comes in many forms. Climbing some imaginary ladder of ever-more-improving books is not the only or even necessarily the best route to becoming a fluent and engaged reader.

We also know that reading comes in many more guises than novels, plays, and poems and that the power to say what *counts* as a true and worthwhile reading experience is one of the great invisible power battles of the whole literacy project at individual, family, classroom, and national levels. Too many teachers and



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parents seem to believe that reading extended fiction is the only acceptable mark of a real reader—but reading also takes place on screens, with newspapers and magazines, inside digital games, in hypertextual forms online, and between the covers of books containing nonfiction, sports statistics, comics and other graphic content, and even jokes. Young people are more likely to be persuaded that reading is something they want to do if they are given autonomy in their reading choices.

In that word *choice*, however, we encounter another invisible stumbling block. An independent reader, a reader likely to keep on reading for the pleasure of it, knows *how to find something satisfying to read*. But this skill is often not taught in schools; indeed, the very structure of many English classrooms eliminates all issues of choice from consideration. Students often do not choose the class reading materials; sometimes even the teacher is presented with a *fait accompli*.

Summer reading requirements may introduce some restricted choice. Picking titles from a limited list can be a helpful exercise, but it is even more useful if the activity is augmented with discussion concerning just how, why, and with the aid of what selection strategies the list itself was compiled.

Frank Hatt (1976) observes that even our theories of reading often neglect the issue of finding things to read. “Even the more thorough of the models of the reading process,” he says, “take the coming together of the text and the reader as ‘given’, and locate the commencement of the reading act at the point where the

readers starts to perceive the words on the page. This is hardly satisfactory” (p. 66). Hatt claims that making a selection of what to read next is an essential component of the full act of reading, and that omitting this element has serious consequences for students.

One effect of extending the reading act to include the ‘finding’ of the text is to draw attention to the shortcomings of much of the reading done in educational situations, where students are obliged to read prescribed texts. The ‘finding’ in these cases is highly artificial. The students does [sic] not go through the process of selecting a preferred need, nor of matching a text to it on the basis of descriptions or clues. Having had the first part of the reading act done for him [sic], he has to behave as if it were his own work and assume the right set for the rest of the reading act, and so reading becomes a kind of simulation game. (p. 67)

In this all-too-familiar scenario, students are deprived of the chance to practice choosing something to read for pleasure. Not only that, they may indeed not even be made aware that being able to select is a necessary element of the reading arts, that autonomy of choice is one component of what makes reading powerful.

### Selecting in the Classroom

There is a paucity of hard information about what literature is being taught in English classrooms, but

what exists suggests that a very familiar “school canon” is alive and well. I worked on two connected surveys, conducted in 1996 and 2006, that collected lists of all the materials being taught in 10th-grade English classes in a western Canadian city. There was a long tail of individual choices, but the top novels (those cited three or more times) changed little over the decade:

In the table below, the numbers in brackets represent the number of times a title was cited by a teacher (the 2006 set of participating teachers was smaller than the 1996 pool, but *To Kill a Mockingbird* held its own nevertheless).

The Canadian titles on the list (*Crabbe*, *Dare*, and *Hunter in the Dark*) are young adult novels that were used in the less academic classes. *Who Has Seen the Wind?* is an adult Canadian classic novel by W.O. Mitchell. Most of the other titles will be well known to tenth-grade English teachers—and their students—across the English-speaking world. Their very familiarity speaks to a particular kind of classroom.

### Selecting in the Staffroom

In early 2013, the *Times Educational Supplement* conducted a survey of British teachers’ favorite books for personal reading. Five hundred teachers responded, and their top ten list shares many qualities with the classroom list in the Table. Farrington (2013) reported:

TABLE A Comparison of Top Novels in 2006 and 1996 (Mackey, Vermeer, Storie, & DeBlois, 2012)

#### 2006 Survey

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1960 (33)  
*Deathwatch*, 1972 (5)  
*The Chrysalids*, 1955 (4)  
*Holes*, 1998 (4)  
*Lord of the Flies*, 1954 (4)  
*Crabbe*, 1986 (3)  
*Dare*, 1988 (3)  
*Frankenstein*, 1818 (3)  
*Hatchet*, 1987 (3)  
*The Pearl*, 1947 (3)

#### 1996 Survey

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1960 (35)  
*Deathwatch*, 1972 (10)  
*The Chrysalids*, 1955 (9)  
*Children of the River*, 1989 (9)  
*Lord of the Flies*, 1954 (8)  
*Hunter in the Dark*, 1982 (7)  
*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1885 (5)  
*Who Has Seen the Wind?*, 1947 (4)  
*Animal Farm*, 1946 (3)  
*Crabbe*, 1986 (3)  
*Hatchet*, 1987 (3)  
*Waiting for the Rain*, 1987 (3)  
*Z for Zachariah*, 1974 (3)

1. Pride and Prejudice
2. To Kill a Mockingbird
3. The Harry Potter series
4. Wuthering Heights
5. Jane Eyre
6. 1984
7. The Lord of the Rings series
8. The Book Thief
9. The Hobbit
10. The Great Gatsby

If we remove the two titles written for young people (the Harry Potter books and *The Book Thief*), these teachers are reading novels that could come out of the same stock cupboard as those grade 10 lists. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) is in fact the newest of the adult titles in this set.

It is entirely possible that the congruence of these lists testifies to teachers' eagerness to introduce the young people in their care to the literature they love best. It is also possible to read the overlap as witness to the fact that teachers don't actually have time to read much more than what they have to read for school, and that their choices therefore come out of the same restricted pool of the classroom stock cupboard as their class lists. A more troubling possibility is that some English teachers don't actually enjoy reading for pleasure or lack wide-ranging selection skills, and that, like some of their students, they read only what they must or what they already know.

Of course, "top ten" lists in some ways just offer a caricature. There is more adventurous reading further down all these lists. Nevertheless, with all due qualifications, these sets of titles do not offer a sense of fiction reading as a way of opening windows on contemporary society. And they certainly don't provide any kind of model for making adventurous reading *choices*; without casting aspersions on any individual title, these lists can all safely be described as conservative.

## 21st-Century Choosing

Hatt wrote some decades ago, but his point about the importance of learning how to make a choice is still valid—and his observations about the absence of

this necessary lesson from many English classrooms almost certainly still hold true. Our social, technological, and cultural conditions, however, have changed radically since 1976.

In less than 40 years, we have added many items to our cultural and domestic repertoires: VCRs, DVDs, PVRs, personal computers, the Internet, online bookstores, e-readers, smartphones, tablets, game consoles, streaming video, social media, and much more. The contemporary media mix available for our recreational delight is complicated far beyond what we could have ever imagined only 40 years ago.

It is difficult to believe that a classroom problem could remain obdurate in the face of such change, and yet how students select pleasure-reading material remains an impenetrable black box in many schools.

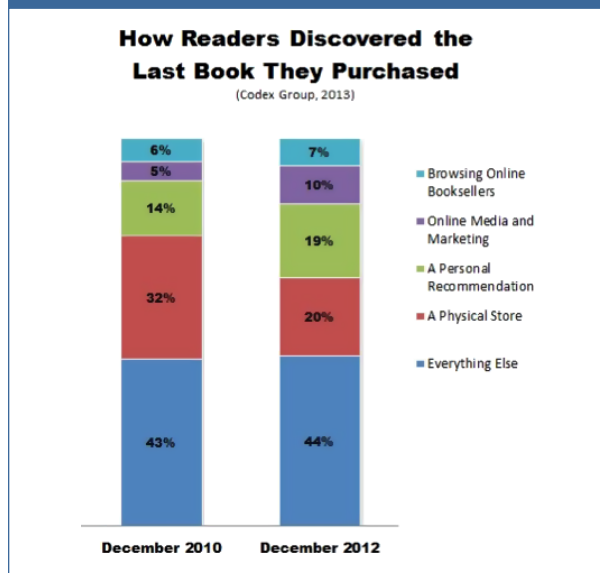
For the moment at least, focused reading remains an important element in our current cultural mix, although there are some straws in the wind that suggest the importance of print reading is beginning to diminish in the lives of many young people (Clark, 2012; Williams, 2013). To value extended reading is not to underestimate or under-respect the fascinating challenges of transmedia narratives, or to dismiss the intricate appeal of a complex game world. It is simply to state that the experience of focused and protracted reading still holds a place of importance in many people's lives.

If we want to support the ongoing significance of that cultural act, if we want to sustain the novel, the biography, the history, the complex scientific or philosophical discussion, the play, the collection of poetry—if we want to keep readers reading as one significant part of our educational mission—then we need to be very clear that the importance of selection is still paramount.

Choosing enjoyable reading material is a substantial achievement. Every year our culture produces many, many more books than movies or games. This fact ought in some ways to make it easier to locate a book that suits our needs exactly, but I strongly suspect that too much choice actually makes things more difficult, especially when the decision entails the commitment of significant time. (In contrast, YouTube and other DIY sites, for example, offer an even larger range of choices, but many of them call for an investment of five minutes or less.)

It is worth remembering that books supply only a fraction of our reading choices today. Paradoxically,

FIGURE 1 Changing Book Discovery Patterns



Source. Codex, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/04/the-simple-reason-why-goodreads-is-so-valuable-to-amazon/274548/>

the multiplication of portals to reading delight also magnifies the challenge. Avid and sophisticated readers know how to weave a pleasurable path through the thousands of available options to find what they want.

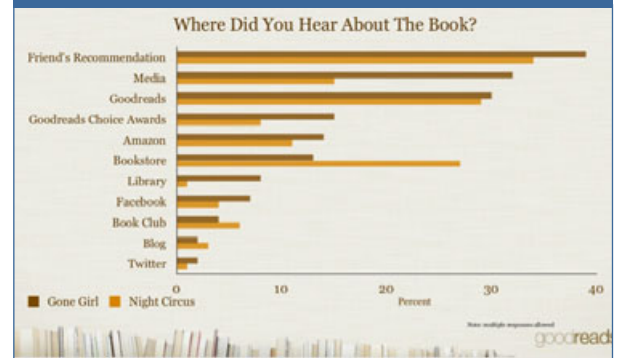
How can teachers and librarians and parents support those potential readers who flounder when it comes to finding something that will tickle their reading fancy? How do we equip young readers to find what they want and/or need to read?

### Selecting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

An abundance of selection aids lies at the disposal of today's savvy reader. Facebook, Twitter, Goodreads, Amazon, and other forms of collaborative and social media allow readers to get involved in subtle exchanges and provide recommendations to one another. Figure 1 offers some sense of how people's information sources are shifting, even in a relatively short timeframe.

This graph is based on Codex's quarterly survey (in 2012, they interviewed approximately 30,000 readers in total). Although the enormous miscellaneous category of "everything else" is frustratingly vague, the graph instructively draws our attention to the enormous reduction in importance of the physical bookstore over a short period. Publishers are concerned that new sources of online recommendation

FIGURE 2 Finding Out about Appealing Books



Source. Goodreads, <https://www.goodreads.com/blog/show/410-what-s-going-on-with-readers-today-goodreads-finds-out>

are not making up the shortfall and that the loss of the ability to handle the physical book is more significant than we perhaps realized (Vinjamuri, 2013) To what degree libraries provide a substitute forum for actively handling books is not clear enough in this graph. We need to know more.

A new study from Booknet Canada (2013) queried a nationally representative panel of 1,044 book consumers (823 parents of children aged 0–13 and 221 adolescents aged 14–17). The report discusses the question of "discoverability," or finding books to read, and points out that redundancy may be part of what makes suggestions work: "Before they decide to read something new, teens hear about the book an average of 2.3 times from different sources" (Millar, 2013).

The loss of the ability to handle a book in a bookstore (even if a purchase does not immediately ensue) needs to be considered in this context of redundant information. It may be that one role for school recommendations is to contribute to the constructive repetition that leads to selection.

The graph from Goodreads shown in Figure 2 offers finer-tuned data. Goodreads surveyed 1,000 members (for each title) who had read *Gone Girl* or *The Night Circus* in December 2012 and January 2013. The answers are intriguing. A sophisticated reader might use all the listed options on different occasions, and it is worth noting that different strategies worked for each title. This list sheds light on possible sources for the 2.3 mentions of a book described in the Booknet survey.

The striking number of alternative sources of information makes room for readers to achieve the kind of redundancy that the Canadian survey suggests

is important, a productive selection benefit of the e-era.

## Avid Readers and Their Resources; Avid Readers as Resources

Almost by definition, participants on the Goodreads site are relatively committed readers. Ross (2001) suggested that avid readers are an underutilized resource when it comes to understanding how readers successfully find their next book. Over a number of years, she and her students interviewed 194 committed readers, deliberately selected as “individuals who read a lot and read by choice” (p. 7). Her participants, like those categorized as heavy readers in a number of North American studies, were preponderantly female, younger, and better educated compared to the population at large.

One question Ross (2001) and her colleagues explored with these readers was how they locate reading material. The findings are illuminating even today, when many elements of our media culture have changed. Avid readers develop tacit kinds of radar for possible book choices, what Ross calls “behind the eyes’ knowledge” (p. 11): “Committed readers typically put out antennae that scan their everyday environments for clues” (pp. 11–12). They build a mental and actual repertoire of possible choices, but the key that helps them select from this subset is introspective. “The bedrock for choice is the reader’s mood: What do I feel like reading now? What will I want to read in the future (that I should borrow or buy now to have on hand)? Readers overwhelmingly reported that they choose books according to their mood and what else is going on in their lives” (p. 13).

After reaching this intimate assessment of their current needs and wishes, these readers turn to more conventional sources of information: author and genre awareness, paratextual elements such as title, book design, and the like, and an assessment of the effort needed to acquire the book. Some of these considerations are enhanced through e-reading (acquisition is often simpler), whereas others are constrained (the selection information offered by book design may be seriously reduced, and the “hands-on” inspection is eliminated, to be partially replaced by the power to read a sample chapter). What remains crucial is that readers must develop ways of *reducing* the overwhelming mass of “all available titles” to smaller subsets that are realistically negotiable.

## Bringing Selection Skills Into the Classroom

Ross’s devoted readers are confident that the requirements of their own psyches and their own lives are a priority in their recreational book choices. Less committed readers may not even think of their own psychic state as relevant. Finding ways to bridge that gap and to offer less keen readers some genuine selection experience is a challenge for everyone who cares about bringing readers and reading material together. Teaching the tacit is always a challenge, but articulating the tacit is an important and fascinating first step.

A very interesting classroom discussion could involve students exploring how they find out about the kind of reading they care about. First, however, it would be necessary to establish that readers have the right both to assert what “counts” as reading for them

## Take Action

### STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

- Try to ensure that students have the regular experience of choosing their own reading materials.
- Always make the act of choosing a part of how you talk about books in the classroom.
- When the book has been chosen by the teacher, talk about how you came to make this choice.
- Where the book has been selected by someone else, talk about how that decision was reached.
- Give students time to practice with small sets; sometimes offer them books to choose from, but you can also work with book covers and/or book reviews as well.
- Explore websites that offer scaffolds for choosing; look at how Amazon markets its books; investigate what goes on in sites like Goodreads.
- As teacher, talk about what you are reading and how and why you chose it. Was it a good choice? How soon could you tell?
- Students may not want to talk about their own private reading lives to their classmates, so keep the discussion on neutral ground unless and until students choose to go further.
- Get students to explore and critique some of the online support systems for choosing books (see “More to Explore” for examples).

and to assess their own individual moods and needs as an important component of the selection package. All reading is not high-minded “literature,” nor does it need to be. A sneaky curricular subtext that aims at using current student choices as a vehicle for “improving” them will be detected and rejected at once.

What does a group of students actually read? Why do they enjoy it? How do they go about finding more? Like Ross’s avid readers, students may have many clear priorities once they are given the opportunity to articulate them. If a classroom atmosphere of trust is established, they can also learn from one another.

Teachers can contribute to that trustworthy relationship by talking about their own methods of finding new books while bearing in mind that generational differences may separate their tastes and tactics from those of their students.

No matter what a person’s reading preferences, selection proficiency matters. It is a significant life skill. Many people who are perceived—by teachers, by parents, and often by themselves—as poor or non-readers are in fact simply poor *choosers* of reading material, a very different concern. Selection aids are in flux, like so much else about contemporary reading. In a time of rapid change, we need to make this issue visible and help students articulate their own needs and wishes as well as their own working strategies. It is an investment in their autonomy as readers that will benefit them for the rest of their lives.

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## More to Explore

CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES

[www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com)  
[www.ala.org/yalsa](http://www.ala.org/yalsa)  
[www.ebscohost.com/novelist](http://www.ebscohost.com/novelist)  
[www.librarything.com](http://www.librarything.com)  
[www.reddit.com/search?q=novels](http://www.reddit.com/search?q=novels)  
[cuddlebuggery.com/about](http://cuddlebuggery.com/about)