



The Reader Organisation: a mutual improvement society for modern times

With cultural life under siege, the Reader Organisation's aim to bring about a 'reading revolution' among people without access to great literature is just what's needed



Sweet release .. TRO groups in prisons read, discuss and reap the therapeutic benefits of books. Photograph: Martin Godwin

Last month, the British Library played host to the Reader Organisation's (TRO) third annual Reading to Live Well conference. Over the course of two days, delegates from across the country met in London to talk, exchange ideas and listen to testimonials and progress reports regarding the link between literature and mental wellbeing. This is an area of particular interest to me: it was through writing a piece on how Saul Bellow's *Herzog* helped me get through a particularly difficult bout of depression that I first

became aware of TRO. Where my own experience in this area tends to be instinctive and largely private, TRO's is instinctive but very public – with emphasis placed firmly on the shared reading experience.

Established in Liverpool University in 2002 by Jane Davis, TRO is a registered charity. Its aim is to bring about a "reading revolution" through the setting up of reading groups in sections of society that may not have easy access to great literature: hospitals, care homes, schools, community centres, prisons, hostels and so on. The model it is rolling out is simple: a group will meet once a week, read aloud from a text and discuss any issues or thoughts that may occur during the reading. Although the groups are run by trained members of TRO, when I spoke to Davis about the scheme she was keen to emphasise that these meetings are neither seminars nor therapy sessions: all points raised during the session are valid, and by placing all members of the group on an equal footing, discussion flows more naturally – and as a result the sessions end up having therapeutic benefits for the participants.

While TRO is not class-based in its approach (Dr Iona Heath, ~~president of the Royal College of General Practitioners~~, for example, believes it essential that GPs read literature in order to expand their empathy with their patients and see them as human beings), it is possible to view the group as the natural successor to the mutual improvement societies of the 19th century: working-class societies set up at grassroots level, whose members would meet to share literature and ideas. It was entirely apt, then, that one of the key speakers at the conference was US academic Jonathan Rose, author of ~~The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class~~. Rose is a personal hero of Davis's and she described to me the impact on her of reading his book:

"When I first read Jonathan Rose's book, I was moved to discover that there was a tradition of personal engagement with books among the working class. The Northampton cowman and the Manchester factory girl were like people in my own family history. And they had their minds broken open to the beauty and grandeur of the universe – by poetry! And I was profoundly moved by what we have lost – the overwhelming sense, in the book, of a grander world which we can get to – a world of powerful ideas, tremendous vocabulary, social visions, ideals, personal knowledge – through books. And I realised that what we had unwittingly and organically invented in TRO was part of this tradition, even though we didn't know it. It's a powerful thing that demands attention. We need genuine education that is personal, creative, demanding and filled, as literature is, with useful equipment for the inner life. I think Rose's book helped me understand that humans have a natural desire

for big learning. And that we're not, as a society, meeting that need."

Her words were brought back to me last week by a quote from Ray Bradbury that kept cropping up in his various obituaries and tributes: "You don't need to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them." And despite the beleaguered state of cultural life right now, it is comforting to know that TRO does seem to be making significant advances in bringing about change. Last year, the University of Liverpool set up the [centre for research into reading, information and linguistic systems](#) in order to quantify the work carried out by TRO; and Davis was this year named by the Observer and innovation organisation Nesta as one of [Britain's 50 New Radicals](#). Meanwhile, last week saw the publication of [A Little, Aloud for Children](#), an anthology of poetry and prose ideal for reading aloud (and a companion to TRO's previous title, [A Little, Aloud](#).)

As the original mutual improvement societies can be seen as leading directly to the politicisation of the working class and through this to the creation of the Labour party, similarly, I get the feeling that over the next few years it will be extremely interesting to see where TRO may lead.

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