



## Reading for Pleasure: Supporting Secondary School Students . . .

*Children's author and secondary school English teacher Lucy Strange discusses Barrington Stoke books and tactics for engaging reluctant readers at Key Stage 3 and beyond*

The truth is that some youngsters simply get stuck. Intimidated by the hefty novels they are expected to be able to read at secondary school, and too embarrassed to keep on reading the sort of books they actually feel comfortable with, they just stop reading altogether.

There are other factors too of course – social factors; the various pressures of school and home life. The **transition from primary to secondary** can leave some children feeling unsupported with their reading habits, especially those who don't have many books at home. One of the problems I came across frequently in my time as a secondary school English teacher was tiredness (in this particular instance, I'm referring to the students' exhaustion – not my own . . .). The combination of a more demanding timetable, hormones, homework and after-school sports clubs meant that many students could barely focus their eyes on a page when they attempted a bit of bedtime reading. In these cases, I would often prescribe **weekend binge-reading** instead: a Saturday morning trip to the public library, or an hour curled up in a comfy chair on a Sunday afternoon – with their phone safely in another room of course.

In general, many of the reading-culture strategies that have an impact on Reading for Pleasure (RfP) at primary school are also effective at secondary school level: dedicated RfP time; author visits and workshops; "book clinic" appointments with a teacher or librarian; **reader teachers who have an infectious enthusiasm for books** and make personalised recommendations to students – and I'm not just talking about English teachers . . . I've noticed that, at KS3 and KS4, the impact can be even greater when book recommendations come from PE teachers, maths teachers, design teachers, form tutors etc. – it helps to detach RfP from the subject of English: **diverse adult role models normalizing reading** as an enriching and entertaining thing to do.

At Key Stage 3 and beyond, as the study of English literature becomes more analytical and academic, I would suggest that more explicit differences need to be drawn between reading for learning (and indeed for exam preparation) and RfP. That's not to say that literary analysis can't be fun of course, but nobody wants RfP to feel like *work*, least of all reluctant readers (I know I'd be less motivated to pick up a book in the evening if I had to write an essay about it). So, where there is space in the timetable (not to mention the classroom), it is great if teachers and librarians can **find ways of making reading time feel special** – relaxing, fun, indulgent time to get lost in a book – ideally with no "work" attached.

And it has to be the right book. The tastes of young readers are of course just as varied as the tastes of adult readers: there's no such thing as "one size fits all": different books = different hooks. Some reluctant readers need a really gripping plot to get hooked, for others it's all about humour, or adventure, or a mystery to be solved . . . What really matters is that there is something about a book that intrinsically motivates a youngster to read it – so that **reading becomes a choice**. And eventually – hopefully – a habit. For some reluctant readers, it's a case of getting over that initial hurdle – getting past the tricky bit of who's who and what's going on – understanding enough about the story to *care* about what happens. Reading the first few chapters aloud together can help – bringing the characters to life, building up a bit of momentum with the plot, engaging the student's interest and imagination.

A seriously exciting opening to a book helps too. And an unthreatening length. And features such as short chapters or illustrations. Barrington Stoke are particularly good at producing books that are enticing for reluctant readers, as well as being dyslexia-friendly. I'm very proud that in my post-teaching existence as a children's author, I have joined the Barrington Stoke family; I know the difference these sorts of books can make. Importantly for older students, there is **no embarrassment factor**: struggling readers can know that they are enjoying the same mainstream authors as their peers but in a format that is **easy to access and quick to read**. I will never forget one particularly reluctant reader who came into my class one day saying, "I read a book last night, Miss. A WHOLE BOOK!" For secondary school students lacking a confident connection with literature, experiences like this can be absolutely life-changing.



*Lucy Strange worked as a secondary school English teacher for fifteen years before becoming a children's author. Her first four middle grade novels are published by Chicken House, and her latest book, *The Mermaid in the Millpond* (January 2022) is published by Barrington Stoke and is suitable for all readers aged 9 and up.*

