

# The future of reading

✘ Well, I survived the forum on Friday. I was speaking at the Future of Reading conference, organised by the National Literacy Association to run alongside the Education Show at the NEC in Birmingham.

The idea was to bring together 150 educators, authors and publishers, a handful of speakers and some discussion topics for Roundtable.

I talked about hand-held devices in schools and how the internet means children no longer have to be restricted to the books in their home, their school library or even on the shelves at Waterstones.

My opening question “When did you last see a book in Arabic in Smiths?” started some lively debate but there were a few diehards in the Roundtable sessions, including one man who believes that children’s behaviour changes if they are exposed to a screen for too long.

This was countered by a lady from the RNIB who pointed out that only 4% of all books are available in large print, audio or Braille. People who cannot read standard print are doubly disadvantaged because books in accessible formats are produced much later and are often more expensive so technology is essential to give them equal access.

What the NLA wanted at the end was a new manifesto to be published by Pearson in good time for the Easter education conferences. Hopefully, it will be picked up by the media and become part of the election promises of the different political parties.

This would be great as they all currently seem to be stuck in a rut, just looking at the mechanics of reading – phonics, look and say – and have killed the joy of reading for many

pupils.


The day was chaired by the very suave Professor David Crystal. He had a wonderful Radio 4 voice, kept us all to time and managed a masterly summing up.

There were authors Aidan Chambers and Michael Rosen, giving the writers' viewpoint; Verna Wilkins, of Tamarind Books, and Andrea Carr of Rising Stars representing publishers, and, from the academic world, there was Professor David Wray from the University of Warwick.

Wendy Cooling, founder of the Bookstart Project, spoke up in favour of books – from squeezey books for babies to picture books – as opposed to technology.

On the technology side, Dave Whyley (described as a guru from Wolverhampton) talked about e-readers and their impact on teaching and learning. Chris Meade from The Institute for the Future of the Book also talked about iPods, iPads and the convergence of media. He has just launched Hotbook <http://hotbook.ning.com/> designed to motivate those who don't like reading.

Hotbook has been piloted in three schools where they have tried out alternative uses for classic literature. (For example, a Rosetti poem as a magazine cover, a Michael Rosen poem as a health and safety notice and part of The Origin of Species filmed in Second Life.)

My personal highlight of the day was the closing session where Daljit Nagra, Winner of the Forward Prize for poetry and Costa Poetry Award, <http://www.daljitnagra.com/biography.asp> came and performed some of his work. 

He works part time at the Jewish free school in Harrow and writes about his experiences as British-born Indian living in predominantly white areas. He read a poem describing his conflicting feelings about his mother who stands out and is

not like other boys' mothers, with her exotic, colourful clothes, hair dressed with oil and smelling of curry.

For the audience this was what literacy and reading is all about – the power of language to convey and excite emotions. Not sure how we will get the next government to legislate for this!

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## Sharing a platform with big names



I am very pleased to say that I will be presenting at the Literacy Forum at the Education Show in March. This features many well known names from the world of reading and children's literature, including former children's laureate Michael Rosen, Dr Rona Tutt OBE, chair of the board of trustees at the National Literacy Association, novelist Aidan Chambers and Wendy Cooling, who set up the Bookstart Project.



I am running a workshop in the afternoon, showing some of the materials and discussing findings from my book [Screens and Pages](#) published by NIACE.

I am particularly pleased that I will get a chance to meet Verna Wilkins, author and founder of [Tamarind Books](#). It is really hard to find books which reflect a West Indian heritage and I usually buy some titles at the special needs show in Islington each October for Christmas presents. One of my favourites is Princess Katrina and the Hair Charmer, a great

celebration of the beauty of unruly curly hair.

Come and join us on Friday 5th March, at the NEC and help to shape a 'manifesto' publication. This will be co-ordinated by the National Literacy Association, supported by Pearson and will reflect the views of delegates and presenters on the day. The aim of the manifesto will be to change attitudes towards reading in the UK, in order to improve literacy rates and encourage more children to read for pleasure.

If you want to make a difference to literacy and have your views included in the manifesto, visit [www.education-show.com/reading](http://www.education-show.com/reading) and book your tickets. Attendance to the 'Future of Reading' Literacy Forum is £150 plus VAT for the full day programme.

After the Forum, delegates can come to the drinks reception sponsored by Scholastic. See you there!