

# English Drama Media



## Literature, Reading and Creativity

- Poetry – issues and attitudes
- The creativity of re-creativity
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- GCSE and Post-16 literature



# Pennac on the Tube

## Revaluating Reading to Children

A London underground journey gives *Daniel Xerri* occasion to reflect on Daniel Pennac's 'Rights of the Reader', and the importance of reading aloud to children.



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### Point of departure

On a cold December evening I made my way to King's Cross St Pancras and boarded a Piccadilly train to Heathrow's Terminal 4, well in time to catch a flight back home. I took out my dog-eared copy of Daniel Pennac's *The Rights of the Reader*, first published in 1992, and continued amusing myself with the delights peppering every single page of this enchanting book. In the absence of pen or pencil I occasionally creased a corner of the page to mark a spot I wanted to return to and burrow for valuable quotations to include in my doctoral dissertation.

After a while the two people who were sitting directly opposite to me caught my attention, not because they were in any way weirdly dressed or acting boisterously as sometimes happens when I am on the Tube, but just because they were engaged in something I have rarely had the pleasure to behold: a father reading to his daughter. The girl must have been about six and she was listening to a middle-aged man who I assumed to be her father. He had one arm around her shoulder, holding a book called *In Control, Ms Wiz?* in his free hand. The girl had an enchanted look on her face, staring into the distance as if totally unaware of sitting in a clanking train carriage hurtling towards the airport. Lost in Pennac's library, the man read in a very low voice, aiming the flow of words directly at his daughter's ear, almost uncomfortable to be seen reading to a young girl. I strained to catch the drift of the story but was mostly interested in observing these two people who seemed to have sprung out of the book I was holding in my own hands.

A while later the man stopped reading and looked about him. I quickly lowered my eyes and stared at the page, not wanting to make him feel even more ill at ease by giving the game away. 'Why have you stopped?' she asked. 'Go on!' The twinge of disappointment in her voice was something I could completely relate to. 'That's enough for now, darling. Here, why don't you read a bit yourself?' The girl refused and badgered her father to go on reading and suddenly I felt that what I was seeing was direct evidence of Pennac's idea that children are sometimes not ready or willing to read on their own.

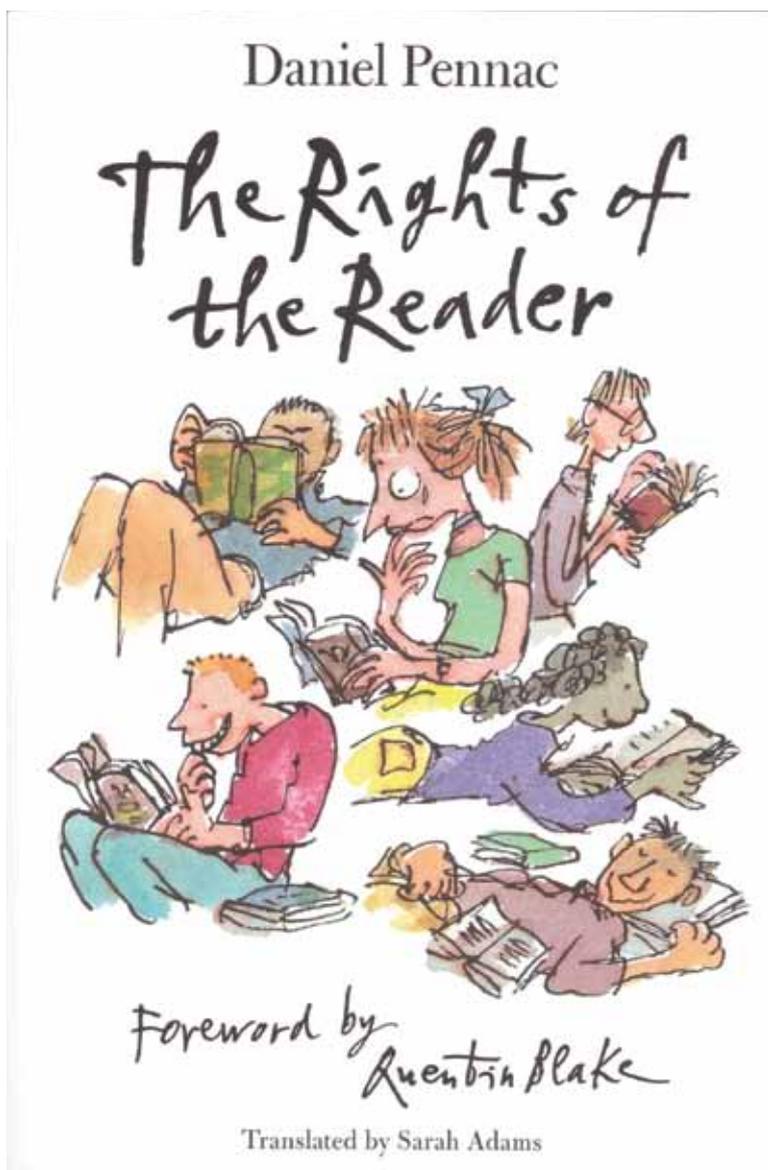
### Reading to children

Undeterred by voices to the contrary, Pennac (2006) explains that parents should not give up the act of reading to their children too early and should certainly avoid considering it a chore:

If we stimulate their desire to learn before making them recite out loud; if we support them in their efforts instead of trying to catch them out; if we give up whole evenings instead of trying to save time; if we make the present come alive without threatening them with the future; if we refuse to turn a pleasure into a chore but nurture it instead. If we do all this, we ourselves will discover the pleasure of giving freely – because all cultural apprenticeship is free. (56)

He emphasises the importance of allowing children to enjoy the intimacy of being read to so that a trinity is formed: child, narrative and parent (Pennac 2006, 51). The act of cultivating their enthusiasm is paramount and if children are betrayed too early by being compelled to read while 'trapped in their bedrooms, their classrooms, their book, in a line, in a word' the effect would be that of making the magic disappear and transforming reading into a punishment (51). As McGuinn (2001) seems to suggest, this magic is very much bound to the pleasure that both parent and child experience when the former reads to the latter. Most parents are probably anxious to see their children reading on their own, however, Pennac argues that we should not rush them and that first we should provide them with a nurturing environment in which we

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help them construct a vital connection with books and wallow in the reading experience merely by means of our own presence as storytellers.

Baker et al. (1997) report that a child's motivation to become an independent reader is heavily dependent on home and family influences: 'Children whose early encounters with literacy are enjoyable are more likely to develop a predisposition to read frequently and broadly in subsequent years' (69). Moreover, in confirmation of Pennac's idea, Baker et al. claim that when parents

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perceive reading as a fun activity rather than a skill that needs to be developed at all costs they will influence their children to adopt a similar attitude. A number of other studies reach very similar conclusions and seem to substantiate the idea that a supportive home environment increases children's motivation to read and leads to an improvement in reading achievement at school (Gauvain et al. 2000; Baker and Scher 2002; Sénéchal and LeFevre 2002; Baker 2003; Sénéchal 2006; Neumann and Neumann 2009). For example, Gonzalez-DeHass et al. (2005) affirm that 'when parents become involved with students' reading activities, students demonstrate greater self-efficacy as readers, are more motivated to read, and voluntarily participate in literacy activities' (118). One explanation for this could be that children feel reassured by the presence of their parent to whom they are thus connected, an experience that Pennac (2006, 33) quite simply describes as intimacy and which can all too easily be lost.

Ofsted (2004) attests that parental support plays a fundamental role in inculcating a positive attitude in children towards reading while Pomerantz et al. (2007) claim that 'when parents cultivate intrinsic motivation in children for reading...children may so enjoy reading that they exert heightened effort in this area, thereby enhancing their reading skills' (376–377). This is confirmed by a number of reports published by the National Literacy Trust (2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2010), which all seem to underscore the role of the home environment in encouraging children to enjoy reading. The 2010 study in particular shows that factors such as the availability of books in the home, parental encouragement to read, parents being seen reading, and talking about books with one's family play a crucial role in boosting a child's enjoyment of reading.

With regards to the girl on the Tube, what is especially interesting is the level of fathers' involvement with their children's literacy, which is supposedly of a lesser extent than that of mothers (National Literacy Trust 2005a, 2009; Ofsted 2009; Morgan et al. 2009; Rose and Atkin 2011). It is suggested that a father's involvement with his child's reading activities has a bearing on reading and other language skills, motivation to read and attitudes towards reading (Gadsden and Ray 2003; Saracho 2007). That is why seeing that particular father reading to his daughter while riding the train felt inspiring, even more so given that when I was a child my father never really had any time to read me any stories and it was usually up to my mother to find an hour before bedtime in which to do so.

The literature seems to consider reading to children as particularly beneficial, especially in helping them to learn to read and ultimately become avid readers (Hahn 2002; Fisher and Fisher Medvic 2003; Trelease 2006; Fox 2008). In the USA the National Institute for Literacy (2001) advises teachers to 'read aloud daily to your students' and to 'encourage parents or other family members to read aloud to their children at home' (22). The main advantage seems to be that children are provided with a model of fluent reading; however, it also 'increases...their interest in reading' (22). Reviews conducted by Saracho and Spodek

(2010) show that a wide variety of studies 'indicate that storybook reading promotes children's language growth, emergent literacy and reading achievement. Thus, family literacy studies have supported the relationship between the role of parental storybook reading and their children's literacy development' (1380). Saracho and Spodek report that when a parent reads to their child the experience is both cognitive and affective, especially since the parent usually does not just read the book but also engages the child in dialogue about the story. Hence the reading experience has a fundamental effect on the child's literacy development.

According to Pennac (2006) the act of reading to children is a crucial process that gradually allows them to 'become the hero of their reading sessions, the envoy appointed for evermore by the author to free the characters caught in the web of the story – so that they in turn can rescue the reader from their daily routine' (60). The child will with any luck become an independent reader with a huge appetite for books, perhaps similar to Spufford's (2002) description of himself as a child for whom reading was an addiction and books 'the kind of object you consume' (7). Spufford champions the idea that reading is a transformative activity for children and upholds the view that 'fiction's onward movement fuses... with the accelerated coming-to-be we do in childhood' (9). Reading books as children 'freed us from the limitations of having just one limited life with one point of view' (10); in his case the painful experience of having a sister suffering from cystinosis. Reading thus becomes a means of expanding one's being since 'the words we take into ourselves help to shape us' (21). The intriguing thing is that this happens invisibly and while parents are reading to their children they cannot gauge what changes are occurring just beneath the thin layer of bone encasing their child's brain. In Pennac's opinion the most obvious positive effect is that very soon the child will seek to reverse roles and read to the parent, an activity that may lead to an increase in literacy-related activities and engagement with text when properly scaffolded (Kim and White 2008). Eventually the child will hopefully desire autonomy and discard the parent altogether.

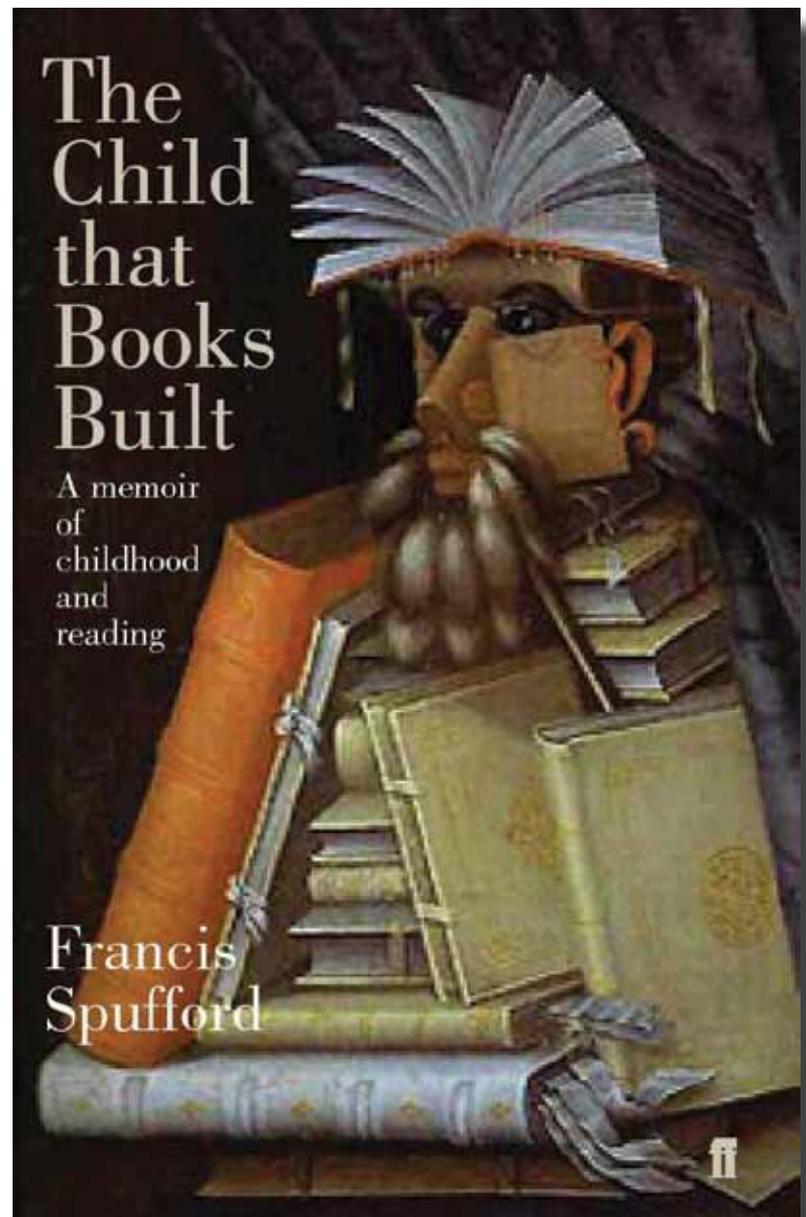
Despite all the arguments posited above one must take note of the fact that not everyone agrees with the idea that reading to children is endowed with any special benefits. For example, Meyer *et al.* (1994) indicate that the amount of time that teachers and parents spend reading to children is not positively correlated with children's reading achievement. They urge teachers and parents to spend more time on activities that contribute to an increase in reading achievement and underscore the importance of engaging children with print rather than believing in the magical qualities of reading aloud to children. More recently, Stephenson *et al.* (2008) affirm that reading to children is not as significant as direct teaching for the development of early literacy skills, however, they do point out that '90% of parents who reported that their children were frequently taught letter names, sounds, or to read words also reported that their children were read to at least once a day' (44). Hence the probability is that

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when children are read to some form of direct teaching also occurs. Moreover, it needs to be borne in mind that for Pennac the essential boon of reading to children transcends literacy and is rooted in the possibility that they will progressively grow fond of reading and develop a desire to do it all on their own.

### **Nearing the destination**

Luckily for the girl, the father ultimately relented and continued reading in the same almost whispery voice until the train neared Boston Manor and then the book was



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tucked away in the girl's tiny green backpack and they alighted, never for me to see them again. A brief encounter of a kind. A chance revelation of words being proven right, of ideas taking substance.

I later discovered that things could not have been more adventitious; finding a digitised copy of Terence Blacker's (1989) 'Ms Wiz' novel I was bowled over to realise that it recounts the story of a witch who tries to save the local library from being closed down by bringing characters to life. On its first page a group of five-year-olds are enjoying

a story being read to them by their teacher. Now that is a stroke of serendipity. For some strange reason I felt fortunate to have witnessed something so marvellous in an age when everyone seems to be groaning about the diminishing numbers of young people reading, when half-baked political decisions threaten to hang the fate of libraries in the balance and at the same time impose arbitrary reading quotas on children, when teachers blame parents for students' lack of enthusiasm for reading and parents point their fingers at complacent teachers for their children's ineptitude; an age when it seems trendy to denounce digital distractions as responsible for the death of the book and most people seem unable to find any time for reading, let alone reading to children.

But here was I, entirely uninvited and unashamedly voyeuristic, encroaching on a moment of bonding between parent and child, made possible only thanks to a story that made one anonymous young girl hungry for more as long as her father was willing to help weave the tale by means of his voice.

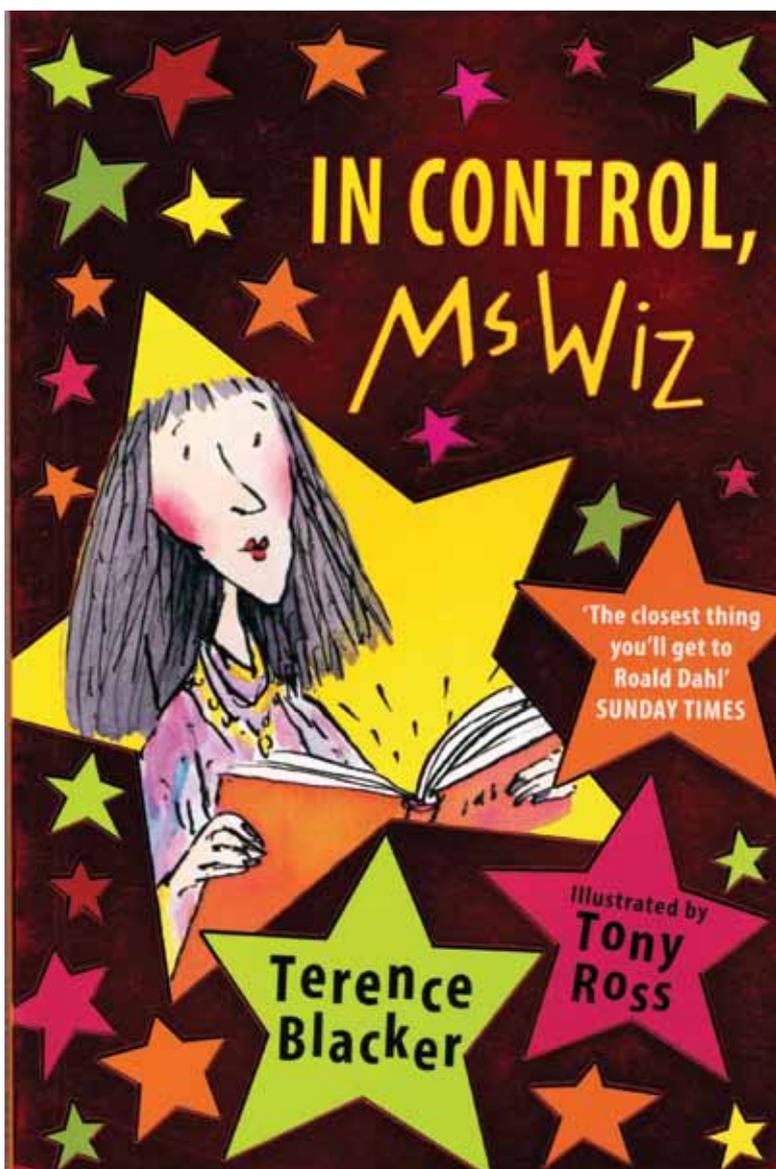
For how long will he persevere in reading to his daughter and thus help her unearth the enchantment of stories? Will she make the leap from captivated audience to autonomous reader? Will she cultivate the love of reading until the day she dies? There are too many uncertainties for anyone to predict any definite outcome. We can only take stock of what Pennac asserts about such a situation and with a strong measure of optimism hope that this father will not tire too soon of reading to his daughter, that she will one day stop asking him to read to her just because she finds that it is no longer necessary for him to do so, that reading (in whichever form it will take in her future) will remain a staple part of her cognitive and emotional diet, providing her with all the pleasure that she seemed to be deriving from it during that evening ride on the Tube.

#### Note

*In this article the terms father and parent do not refer exclusively to biological parents, but also to father figures and other significant caregivers or role models.*

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