

## Shropshire Bookfest Book Award

### A regional model for inspiring children with a love of reading

Research evidence shows that children who read often and who enjoy reading go on to have better opportunities in life. Indeed, reading for enjoyment is a stronger predictor of social mobility than socio-economic background and parents' levels of education. (e.g., [Sullivan & Brown, 2013](#) [PDF]; [Guthrie, et al, 2001](#); and [Kirsch, et al, 2002](#) [PDF])

*The Department of Education works diligently on early years literacy, the Department of Communities and Local Government pays attention to the role of public and community libraries – but you would be extremely hard-pressed to describe encouraging reading as a key concern of government. Nor is this a symptom of Brexit-linked paralysis either: reading has never been seen as important enough to animate a cross-departmental, manifesto-guiding, ‘vision of the nation’ type social mission. Not by this government, or indeed by any other...*

*...When it comes to social mobility, reading can work as a powerful boost to life chances. Reading for pleasure is one of the most important predictors of test scores at age 16, regardless of background.<sup>1</sup> In fact, children from disadvantaged backgrounds who read often tend to score better than more privileged pupils who do not read at all. (“A Society of Readers” by Sacha Hilhorst, Alan Lockey, Tom Speight, published October 2018 [www.demos.co.uk](http://www.demos.co.uk))*

For more than 20 years, the work of the voluntary organisation Shropshire Bookfest has focused on inspiring and enthusing children with a love of reading. We have built close working relationships with primary schools across the county, and in the process we have developed a good understanding of what teachers are searching for in their quest not only to teach children the mechanics of how to read fluently, but to help them to enjoy reading independently for pleasure. This is the key but elusive factor that is often ‘caught, not taught’, but which makes a crucial difference in children’s ability to learn other subjects, opening up pathways to higher academic achievement and wider life opportunities.

Through our discussions with teachers, parents and pupils, our links with children’s publishers and authors, our network of contacts, and the expertise and imagination of our own team of volunteers, we have developed a pupil-led reading development project that has been demonstrated to have a profound and transformative impact on the children who take part. We believe this project can be reproduced at a regional level throughout the UK with similar levels of impact and success.

The Shropshire Bookfest Book Award, first launched in 2010 and run every two years, succeeds time and again in kick-starting reluctant readers, bringing books to life for children who had previously only perceived them as ‘boring’, while still pushing on those who already read avidly for pleasure.

**“It has a massive, positive impact on reading and writing in our school. It is the shared experience that brings the whole class together. Reluctant readers are inspired to read, and the choice of texts means**

**there is always something that is suitable for the range of children in the class. As a teacher, I feel it helps me to keep up to date with current literature aimed at children. This is so valuable.”** *Head Teacher, Castlefields Primary School, Bridgnorth*

**“Shropshire Bookfest is quite unlike any other regional book award. Child-led and centred, it generates a response from young readers that beats hands down anything I’ve ever experienced at other awards for its passion, imagination and creativity.”** *(Piers Torday, children’s author)*

Moreover, Book Award has proved to be much more than a reading development project. Teachers have found they can use the books as a vehicle to addressing sometimes difficult and emotional PHSE issues. Others link the texts to their outdoor learning experiences. Many discover that pupils reveal hidden depths, emotions and talents through being given opportunities to express their reactions to the books through art, creative writing and drama.

**What are the secrets of the project’s success and how is it different from other reading initiatives?**

## **It is genuinely pupil-led**

**“Book Award has children at its very heart which is what makes it so special. They are encouraged and engaged in reading books that they would not always read. Children have books in common which helps to develop a community of readers regardless of their ability.”** *Class teacher, Greenacres Primary School, Shrewsbury*

Unlike most other children’s book awards, where the shortlist is selected by a team of adults, the six books on the shortlist for Shropshire Bookfest’s Book Award are selected from a longlist of some 70 titles **entirely on the basis of children’s reviews and comments.**

To compile the longlist, we invite leading children’s publishers to submit three copies of their ‘best’ books for 9-11-year-olds published in the previous 12 months. These 70 books are distributed across a small number of primary schools who have a long history of partnership with Shropshire Bookfest. The strongest readers in their Year 6 groups are briefed on how to objectively review and select the book(s) they feel that other 9-11-year-olds will love to read. They take this responsibility extremely seriously, and it demonstrates clearly from the outset the central role and power that the pupils have in determining the direction and outcome of the Book Award.

Their honest and unrestricted feedback is collated by the Book Award Steering Group, which is made up of Bookfest volunteers including individuals from the primary and tertiary education sector, and the six favourite books are placed onto the shortlist. Care is taken at this stage to ensure there is no duplication of themes or genres and that the books have consistent appeal across gender.

The fact that all children taking part in the Shropshire Bookfest Book Award know that the books they are being invited to read have been recommended by other children their age, who all go to school in Shropshire, makes an enormous difference to their initial response to the project – as does the fact that it is their votes that will determine the overall winner of the Book Award. Being encouraged by an adult to pick up and read a book that may at first glance look unappealing is very different from being urged to do so by your peers. And as children begin reading the books and discussing them with each other, the excitement grows, the recommendations for reading particular titles strengthen and the project takes on a momentum of its own – fuelled and guided by the children’s enthusiasm and reactions to the books.

We quite deliberately give each class slightly fewer books than there are pupils (although schools can and often do buy extra copies) in order to create extra excitement and a sense of demand in the classroom, with pupils eagerly awaiting the availability of the ‘next’ book and urging each other on with their reading.

Children’s sense of both ‘power’ and responsibility is also reinforced throughout the project by the reminders that their final votes will determine which book wins the Book Award.

**“The children have never read so avidly, and there is so much book talk happening - it’s incredible. We have reluctant readers who are engaged, focused and getting such satisfaction from reading the books.”** *English Lead/Deputy Headteacher - Bicton CE Primary School*

## **The emphasis is on fun, creativity and a celebration of reading**

While the scale and the scope of the Book Award project have grown and developed over the 12 years since it was first launched, its key objectives have remained straightforward, unchanged and tightly focused:

- To help children develop a love of reading by introducing them to a range of well-written and genuinely engaging new books written for children of their age.
- To encourage them to express their views about contemporary fiction through writing, illustration, drama and through discussion – both guided and informal – with their peers and with their teachers
- To find the title published in the last year that children in Shropshire aged 9-11 love the most.

We aim to make the project as enjoyable and as easy and rewarding as possible for teachers too. It is not onerous for them to adopt – it has the deepest of impact even with the lightest of touch, and yet it can also be woven into many other areas of the curriculum. The project serves to replenish their school library shelves with contemporary children’s literature every two years, which ensures that fresh and interesting books and authors get into the hands of children year after year.

The project is launched to the children in early January, and they spend the spring term enjoying reading, discussing and responding to the shortlisted books.

The children gain a vote each time they complete a book, so when Voting Day arrives at the end of March, they can choose how to use them: casting all their votes for one book they particularly love; or spreading them across two, three or more books if they prefer.

As well as a Teacher Resource Pack to guide teachers through the project with suggested fun classroom activities, we also offer pupils the chance to take part in letter-writing, art and drama competitions linked with the shortlisted books. These provide children with creative ways of expressing and sharing their responses to their favourite books and are deliberately a far remove from more traditional ‘comprehension’-type exercises. The aim is to ensure that pupils have every opportunity to respond to the shortlisted books in whichever way suits them best. Competition rules are kept to a minimum, with the emphasis on having fun and enjoying letting their imaginations run free.

The project culminates at the end of April with an Awards Ceremony held in the county’s largest theatre venue, Theatre Severn in Shrewsbury. The biggest excitement for the children is that all the shortlisted authors attend and are on stage for the whole event. As well as responding to children’s questions and reading from their books, they also play a key role in showcasing and celebrating the children’s responses to their books, including their work in the art, drama and letter-writing competitions. It is testament to the sheer joy and excitement of this event that seats sell out within days of schools being invited to take part in the project. The event is also live-streamed to all participating schools, and those who are unable to attend in person often dedicate the morning of the day of the ceremony to watching it in their halls, on their whiteboards or screens, with popcorn and a party atmosphere.

## **The project is local**

Each of the schools taking part in the Shropshire Bookfest Book Award project is linked with a local Bookfest volunteer, who keeps in close contact with them to ensure that teachers feel fully supported with help and advice, and to feed back news, ideas, comments and suggestions from each of the schools to the Book Award Steering Group. In addition to providing teachers with an extensive resource pack containing everything they need to run the project successfully with their class, we send out regular updates and

video messages for teachers to enjoy watching with the pupils, to help maintain momentum and share news and ideas from schools taking part across the county.

Regular visits by Bookfest volunteers to talk to the children add an extra buzz of excitement in the classroom, giving them opportunities to discuss their responses to the books with someone other than their teacher, while also reminding them that they are part of a project that is taking place not only in their school, but across the county. All children are invited to freely submit their views and reviews on the shortlist via the Shropshire Bookfest website. The children are aware of – and excited by – the fact that they are part of a wider community of readers, while not losing sense of their own individual voices within it, which can so easily happen when a project is run nationwide.

Although schools are not required to enter their pupils in any of the accompanying competitions, we offer professional support to teachers for this aspect of the project too. Teachers can opt to take part in Art CPD sessions led by a local artist and specifically designed around the Book Award shortlist. To support the drama competition, schools have access to online drama workshops created specifically for the Book Award project by Pentabus, a Shropshire-based professional theatre company, and can also book Pentabus to deliver bespoke in-school workshops.

**“I think that Book Award is the best project we have ever taken part in. It has bridged a gap between reading and writing in so much that the children have made a connection with authors. They now realise that they are written by real people. Having the opportunity to engage with them, has meant that they have tried to think about the stories in more detail in order to ask the authors questions. For many children they moved beyond 'surface' reading, and reading because they have to, to reading because they want to. Nothing else has engaged an entire class in reading a set of books like this project has.”** Class Teacher - *Greenacres Primary School, Shrewsbury*

## **The full scope of the project is accessible to everyone**

The Book Award shortlist is selected to appeal to a wide range of reading abilities, but we realise that some children will struggle to read all six books in three months. Children are not excluded from voting if they have not read all the books on the shortlist, although they are required to read at least two and teachers will often set specific targets for individual children. And the voting system is another incentive to read as many books as possible: the more books a child reads, the more votes they have to cast.

We are careful to ensure that the cost of the project does not prevent any school taking part, particularly as Shropshire has a large number of small rural primary schools. Schools contribute around 50% of the running costs of the project, with a sliding fee structure depending on the number of pupils taking part. The remainder of the costs are covered by grants obtained from trusts and foundations.

**"As a teacher, I have found taking part in Shrewsbury Bookfest's projects an absolute must for all the children I teach. In fact, I think I'd have a rebellion on my hands if I ever suggested not taking part."**  
*Diane Pye - School Improvement Advisor (previously Head Teacher, Rushbury C/E Primary School)*

## **Picture Book Award for Key Stage 1**

In response to demand from schools to extend the project and create a Book Award for Key Stage 1 pupils, we have worked with teachers and literacy leaders to develop the Shropshire Bookfest Picture Book Award. This was launched to schools in 2018 and was an immediate success.

It follows a similar path to the original Key Stage 2 Book Award (now called 'Big Book Award' to distinguish it from its younger sibling), with the curation of a shortlist of four picture books, peer-reviewed and delivered into classrooms in June. Again, we provide teachers with a resource pack of information and class activity ideas based on each of the shortlisted books. 'Buddy Readers' from among the seasoned Big Book Award participants need no encouragement whatsoever to spend time helping their younger school

fellows in reading, reviewing and discussing the picture books to seek out which book is the most favourite. Again, freedom of expression and collaboration between pupils is supported and encouraged with an art competition and a 'best class display' competition.

The celebration of the competition winners and winning book takes place within schools, rather than in a large theatre setting. Many schools find it a golden opportunity to invite parents and families into the school to take part in the celebration and experience for themselves some of the excitement that reading the books has generated among the children.

## Summary

Year after year, the Shropshire Bookfest Book Award project succeeds in unlocking what many children perceive as being a closed and forbidding world of books and reading, providing the catalyst for learning how to enjoy reading, and thereby widening the potential and life-chances of those children immeasurably. The precise alchemy for how the project achieves this varies from one child to another, and much of it is to do with the power of good children's writing and the special appeal of the shortlisted books. But we also believe that it is based on some of the fundamental principles of the Book Award project itself: handing the voice and control to the children in selecting books; removing all sense of target-setting and measurement; focusing instead on fun, creativity and imagination; giving children the freedom to discuss and share their responses to books within a community of readers; and celebrating the authors, giving children an insight into their lives, their work and the inspiration for their writing.

We know from our regular presentations at The Guardian Education Centre's Reading for Pleasure conferences for primary teachers that there is an enormous demand across the country for reading development projects of this kind. In researching and developing our plans for our first Book Award project in 2010, we found it invaluable to speak to people running similar schemes in Manchester and Sheffield. Sadly, budget cuts have meant that these ceased running several years ago.

In 2018 we produced a short film which goes some way to capturing the reading for pleasure essence of this project and it can be viewed here - [Book Award 2018 - YouTube](#) (please note...in 2021 the organisation was renamed **Shropshire** Bookfest in recognition of the increased reach of its work across the **whole** county. Previous to 2021, it was known as Shrewsbury Bookfest.)

We would be delighted to share further details of our experience and offer a blueprint for how other groups of volunteers, librarians or literacy coordinators could run similar projects in their own areas.

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### Contact:

**Joanna Hughes - Project Coordinator**

[joanna.hughes@shropshirebookfest.co.uk](mailto:joanna.hughes@shropshirebookfest.co.uk)

**07719 401365**

President: Dame Jacqueline Wilson

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