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Rights of the Reader, The

Books Reviewed:

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Not to be chosen:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

This inspiring little book was first published in France in 1992, and has sold over a million copies. Now happily translated by Sarah Adams, it is published here in a very attractive edition, with a foreword and illustrations by Quentin Blake. All that really needs to be said about it is that every parent, every junior school teacher, and every teacher of English should read it. Following Pennac's own advice, the next thing a reviewer should do is not to analyse the book but to let the reader hear its own voice, so here goes. What we need to understand is that books weren't written so that my son/my daughter/young people could write essays about them, but so that they could read them if they really wanted to.

This reviewer, to his regret, cannot just quote and go on quoting, still less read bits of Pennac aloud. Read him yourself. His book is a witty, engaging, humane and practical act of praise for the enjoyment of reading, a guide to ways of ensuring that children's and teenagers' encounters with books will invite them in to its pleasures, and a warning against those (such as many now forced upon teachers by the Government and its agents) that will turn them away. Above all it celebrates the importance of reading aloud, both at home and school, and urges parents not to stop this creative ritual early, and not to start linking it to comprehensive questions once formal education is gruesomely imminent. Pennac's guide does not involve 'dumbing down', far from it. Under his guidance such names as Chekhov, Dostoevsky and Flaubert cease to be forbidding cultural monuments and become gifts of pleasure along with Roald Dahl! This last name duly brings us back to Quentin Blake, whose enthusiasm for Pennac's wonderful act of creative subversion I totally share. Read it. If you are lucky enough to have children or students to read to, act on it, for your own delight and theirs.

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