

READING ROUND AND THE ROYAL LITERARY FUND

Reading Round is no ordinary reading group. The ethos behind Reading Round is that of its parent organisation, the Royal Literary Fund, a charitable fund for professional published authors. The Royal Literary Fund has a rich history spanning more than two centuries, encompassing tragedy, excess, dissent and – overwhelmingly – benevolence.

The more recent Reading Round project, launched throughout the UK in 2014, is at the centre of a wonderful win-win-win situation: it successfully fulfils the Royal Literary Fund's Charter objective 'to advance public education'; the writers leading the groups are well-supported in work that is hugely enjoyable; and the public who join these groups have a truly enriching experience.

Here is a very brief history of the Royal Literary Fund, featuring many famous writers (both rich and poor), British and European royalty, and Winnie the Pooh.

THE TRAGIC CATALYSTS

Once upon a time, long, long ago, there lived a very talented young poet called Thomas Chatterton. Sadly, he was unable to make a living from his writing, so, starving and in poverty, Thomas committed suicide at the age of 17, in 1770. And, not long after, in 1787, an impoverished elderly writer, called Floyer Sydenham, died at the age of 77 in a debtors' prison in London.

These two sad endings, particularly the latter, galvanised the Reverend David Williams into action. More than two centuries later, Williams' actions have resulted in (among many other good things for many writers) this Reading Round project.

THE REVEREND DAVID WILLIAMS AND HIS WORLD

Williams was a Welsh philosopher, theologian and dissenting minister, a well-connected, benevolent maverick, who knew how to make things happen.

He was the son of a Calvinist, and his progressive, radical ideas about both education and religion had attracted the approval of some famous international contemporaries, including Voltaire and Frederick the Great of Prussia.

Williams also cared passionately about the arts and the plight of unfortunate writers, like Chatterton and Sydenham. And Williams was a member of a select literary dining club, some of whom, like him, had been friends of Sydenham. So, in 1790, three years after Sydenham's death, Williams took out a newspaper advertisement 'to expiate the grief and shame of the event, by a monument to his memory, in the institution of a literary fund'. He opened an account with Coutts and some subscriptions trickled in. The Literary Fund, as it was then called, held its first official committee meeting on Tuesday, May 18, 1790, at the Prince of Wales Coffee House in Conduit Street, London.

The main purpose of the fund was to help writers in financial difficulties. Within its first ten years, the Literary Fund was disbursing grants to, among others, Charlotte Lennox, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Chateaubriand (who was in exile in Britain) and Jean Armour, the destitute widow of Robert Burns.

Although Williams' views were radical, he was also a pragmatist and he recognised the value of ruling-class support for his Literary Fund. Each year, starting in 1792, the committee arranged a fund-raising dinner. Williams was able to attract some illustrious men to chair these extravagant events: the more distinguished the chairman, the more profitable the event became. In the Victorian era, dinners chaired by the Prince of Wales and the King of Belgium proved to be particularly successful.

These dinners were uproarious occasions with many courses, speeches, recitations and toasts. For example, in 1800, 314 male guests downed 294 bottles of port plus 69 bottles of sherry, in addition to strong beer, porter and punch. 50 years later, in 1850, Charlotte Brontë regretted missing the anniversary dinner (from the ladies gallery) because she was nursing her sick father at Haworth.

By 1806, the Literary Fund had become a major charity, with income from subscriptions, legacies and these fund-raising dinners. The Prince Regent was an early supporter and helped with the purchase of its first headquarters at 36 Gerard Street, in Soho. By this time, Williams himself was ill with paralytic attacks, followed by a stroke in 1811. He had no income so, with appropriate compassion, he was installed in the headquarters, as 'resident visitor', until his death at the age of 78, in 1816.

During these early years, the Literary Fund suffered from some inner tensions. By 1820, the degree of ostentation displayed at the annual dinner was antagonising potential subscribers including Sir Walter Scott, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley and Robert Southey.

However, in the following years, circumstances changed and after 1840, many notable, wealthy writers did choose to support the Literary Fund, among them Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Anthony Trollope, who served as the Fund's treasurer.

THE ROYAL LITERARY FUND

From the beginning, the Literary Fund had support from royalty, and, in 1842, Prince Albert, the Prince Consort, conferred the title 'Royal' on the Literary Fund. The handsome red insignia of the Royal Literary Fund includes a crown and the Prince of Wales' three ostrich plumes.

Over the centuries, many individuals who care about writers, and also some wealthy writers, have supported the Royal Literary Fund. It has always remained independent. During the twentieth century, J M Barrie, Rupert Brooke, Arthur Ransome and Somerset Maugham were among the benefactors.

Prominent authors who have received financial help in their times of need include Joseph Conrad, D H Lawrence, James Joyce, Mervyn Peake and Dylan Thomas. However, the Fund has also aided many hundreds of less prominent writers whose careers have been derailed, temporarily or permanently, by circumstances beyond their control.

Since 1790, more than 5000 writers have been helped with grants or pensions.

WINNIE THE POOH AND THE ROYAL LITERARY FUND

A A Milne, who died in 1956, left a share of his royalties to the Royal Literary Fund. Forty years on, the Disney Corporation was having to pay substantial royalties to Milne's beneficiaries for films starring Winnie the Pooh and other Milne characters. Reluctant to continue paying these royalties, Disney bought the merchandising rights in the work of A A Milne. This meant two things: that the profits from any Winnie the Pooh merchandise all now go to Disney and that the Royal Literary Fund became significantly richer and was able to realise its secondary charitable objective, that of public education.

Hilary Spurling CBE, one of the Trustees, came up with the idea of paying writers to work one-to-one with students on their academic writing. As a result, the Royal Literary Fund Fellowship Scheme was created in 1999. Fellows can now be found at some 60 universities throughout the UK and many thousands of individual students have had invaluable help from them.

In recent years, the Royal Literary Fund also devised the Bridge Project, to help senior school pupils make the transition into higher education, and the Writing Project, where writers go into small businesses, charities or local government organisations to raise the quality and impact of written communication.

READING ROUND

And then there's Reading Round, this unique network of reading groups. Each group is run by former Fellows, all published authors of literary merit. The group leaders, or 'Lectors', may be playwrights, poets, writers of fiction or non-fiction and are all able to offer a unique, writerly perspective on the texts under discussion.

There's no preparatory reading or homework. Instead, each week you listen to at least two different pieces of writing that the Lector reads out loud. The selected writing might be a short story, poem, speech, memoir or piece of narrative non-fiction. The text is then discussed at length and in depth: what effects does it have on us as we read? How does it achieve those effects? Guided by the Lector, you consider the text in detail, looking at tone, choice of words, viewpoint, the effect of a certain image or turn of phrase, and so on.

Groups are run loosely along the lines of practical criticism, where you are encouraged to respond spontaneously to the words on the page in front of you, rather than relying on preconceived ideas about a text. All that is required of

you is a willingness to listen, to discuss and to be open to new ideas. For many, the group provides a valuable opportunity to meet with other word-lovers in a friendly, stimulating and relaxed environment.

As one of the Lectors explains, ‘Reading Round sessions tend to be more intensive than conventional reading groups and more incisive. They focus on the mechanics of a text, on its language, structure and artistry rather than just on its narrative and characterisation. Liking a book is one thing, but discovering why one likes it is another. Most people have responded very positively: they like the element of discovery, appreciate the more impromptu approach and welcome the critical focus.’

THE BENEFITS OF BEING IN A READING ROUND GROUP

The broad aim of a Reading Round group is to familiarise its members with excellent and inspiring writing and – for those of you who are already keen readers – to introduce you to a wider range of literature than you might have discovered alone.

If you are a member of a Reading Round group, it helps to develop your critical thinking skills. You notice more aspects of the writing, you appreciate why the text has been written the way it has, and perhaps you also become aware of how the writer may be manipulating you.

The goal is not to agree, nor to arrive at a definitive reading of the text. Instead, it is to gain a deeper understanding.

So, as a member of a Royal Literary Fund Reading Round group, you are also benefitting, more than 200 years later, from the Enlightenment spirit that informed the foundation of the Royal Literary Fund by the Reverend David Williams. He would be so proud today, if he could see just how successful and beneficial his Literary Fund has become.

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If you would like to learn more, please follow this link to the Royal Literary Fund website: www.rlf.org.uk/education/reading-round/

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