

Camilla Addey

Readers and Non-Readers

**A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY
IN ITALY AND THE UK**



Copyright © MMVIII
LEGAS

www.legaspublishing.com
orders@legaspublishing.com

P.O. Box 040328
Brooklyn, New York
USA 11204

3 Wood Aster Bay
Ottawa, Ontario
K2R 1B3

2908 Dufferin Street
Toronto, Ontario
M6B 3S8



Copyright © MMVIII
ARACNE editrice S.r.l.

www.aracneeditrice.it
info@aracneeditrice.it

via Raffaele Garofalo, 133 A/B
00173 Roma
redazione: (06) 72672222 – telefax 72672233
amministrazione: (06) 93781065

ISBN 978-88-548-2256-6

*No part of this book may be reproduced in any form,
by print, photoprint, microfilm, microfiche, or any other means,
without written permission from the publishers.*

1st edition: December 2008

Acknowledgments

I am deeply thankful to the following people: professor Francesca Trusso, for her wise guidance and for the encouragement she gave me for this research. Professor Tullio De Mauro for his precious advice. Etain Addey and Melissa Addey for their excellent feedback. Adolfo Morrone for his competence and invaluable help. I also wish to thank the many people who contributed to this book.

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 13 |
| Why read? | 17 |
| Influencing factors..... | 21 |
| Learning the act of reading..... | 21 |
| Family influence..... | 23 |
| The influence of society | 26 |
| The influence of school | 30 |
| The influence of the media..... | 32 |
| Literacy, the desire to read and educational status..... | 34 |
| Libraries | 39 |
| History of compulsory education | 40 |
| Protestantism versus Catholicism..... | 42 |
| Influential historical factors | 45 |
| The Internet effect..... | 51 |
| Reading in the Internet era | 51 |
| The psychology of reading..... | 57 |
| Text interpretation | 57 |
| Types of schemata..... | 59 |
| Focus on Readers and Non-readers..... | 61 |
| In Italy | 61 |
| In England | 63 |
| Non-readers in Italy..... | 65 |
| The survey | 71 |
| Planning and carrying out the questionnaire | 71 |
| Methodology | 72 |
| Results of the survey | 73 |
| Readers' opinions on non-readers | 76 |
| Non-readers: a profile..... | 78 |
| The role of school..... | 80 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| Promoting Reading: Organisations and Events | 83 |
| Festivals in the UK | 84 |
| Festivals in Italy | 86 |
| The UNESCO project | 90 |
| Reader development websites and reading group sites | 91 |
| Bookstart | 97 |
| How Bookstart works | 99 |
| Bookstart International | 101 |
| Bookstart's Website | 105 |
| Significant research results | 106 |
| Nati per Leggere | 115 |
| How <i>Nati per Leggere</i> works | 117 |
| <i>Nati per Leggere</i> International | 124 |
| Recommendations..... | 125 |
| Conclusions..... | 127 |
| Appendix..... | 129 |
| Appendix A: Questionnaires..... | 129 |
| Appendix B: English questionnaire | 130 |
| Appendix C: Italian questionnaire | 136 |
| Appendix D: ISCED classification | 142 |
| Appendix E: Nati per Leggere projects | 144 |
| Index of tables and charts | 151 |
| Cited works and general bibliography | 153 |
| Websites..... | 157 |

Introduction

Attitudes towards reading in Italy and the UK is a topic that can be addressed from many angles and the chapters of this book examine the subject from these various perspectives.

Why do people read? What are the main reasons that can be identified? Do people read to demonstrate their social or educational status in public? Reading books allows for free thinking and translations of books allow for cultural exchange: can books therefore be seen as cultural meeting points and tools for building the democratic process? Possible answers will be put forward in chapter one.

What are the main factors at work in Italy and the UK which may explain the large difference in the percentages of readers and non-readers in the two countries? Are there structural reasons such as the educational status which influence reading habits? Or is there a mix of structural and non structural which have a direct influence such as parents reading to children? The following factors have been taken into consideration: the influence of parents who read to children, the family context, the influence of a specific society and the approach to reading at school, the influence of the media, levels of education and literacy, the role of libraries in the neighbourhood and in schools, the history of compulsory education, historical factors and the approach to reading books arising from the historically prevalent religious beliefs in the two countries. All these factors will be addressed in chapter two.

Has the advent of the Internet really revolutionised the world of book reading? Has the Internet influenced ways of reading and what one reads? Or has the Internet only made big changes to the publishing world? Answers will be suggested in chapter three.

What is happening in the brain when one reads? What role do schemata play? How can one deal with the fact that the same book, read by hundreds of different people, is understood in different ways?

How does psychology explain different interpretations of texts? Does the readers' understanding due to personal schemata explain the extent to which people are more or less inclined to read? These questions will be addressed in chapter four.

What is the general picture of reading habits in Italy and the UK according to the two main statistical bodies, Istat in Italy and ONS in the UK? What are the main trends and influencing factors that statistics can explain? Who are all those non-readers? What studies have been done on non-readers? Are there any indicators of non-reading as a cause of social exclusion? These questions have been addressed in chapter five.

Since the national surveys carried out by Istat and ONS contain very few questions on non-reading, and since there might be highly significant factors at work, what questions should be asked in a research survey on non-reading habits? A survey was carried out to discover pertinent factors, including:

- How important it is to have parents who read to their children, thus passing on both the habit and the love of reading.
- Whether school teachers have an important role in teaching positive/negative attitudes towards reading books, by asking about the activities done in class.
- The key differences in the activities preferred by non-readers to activities enjoyed by readers, e.g. faster, more dynamic, etc.
- What may cause people to stop reading and how non-reading is perceived by the wider public.

By looking at the differences between readers and non-readers and by considering what factors have influenced their habits, we may gain an understanding of why some people do not read. What conclusions can be drawn from the results of the research survey? What aspects would require further investigation? These questions will be addressed in the sixth chapter.

Do book events make a difference to the numbers of book readers? What events of this kind are held annually in Italy and the UK? How can the organisation of projects and events increase an interest in reading in the wider public? Could public events encourage schools to give book reading a more central role in the curricula? Are there web-

sites for readers and reading groups? A list of festivals, events and websites are presented and described in chapter seven.

What programmes currently exist to promote reading amongst the very young? How do *Bookstart* and *Nati per Leggere* work? Where else have these programmes been implemented? Do any of these programmes focus on the parents' role and how they could be taught about the benefits of reading to their offspring? How can the expertise necessary to run programmes of this kind be made available outside the UK and Italy? These questions are addressed in chapters eight and nine.

Lastly, recommendations and conclusions are offered suggesting follow-up research on book reading at an international level and further research that could be carried out on the results obtained to date by reading programmes for the young.

It is hoped that this work will inspire further research on the topic and raise awareness of the benefits of reading. It is also hoped that it will have a practical outcome by offering research which supports the promotion of book reading.

Chapter I

Why read?

There are so many reasons why people read thus what follows is simply an initial summary of potential reasons for reading. Many people read for reasons they themselves cannot identify.

Those who read are often perceived as well-educated people who prefer to engage in more demanding cultural activities rather than watching TV or spending time in other passive activities. In fact, people who do not read often find excuses for not reading. For example, they may say they do not have enough time. These people are aware of the social prejudice which exists against non-readers and prefer to avoid this label.

Although people are not always conscious of the implicit high status enjoyed by those who read, it is quite likely that many people who would not care to admit to watching TV for three hours a day would be quite happy to admit to reading for that amount of time. Therefore one might say that in the eyes of the public, books are an indicator of high cultural status: to read is a high social educational class activity. Book reading indicates that one is a literate person with intellectual interests.

People may read in order to understand themselves or to consolidate opinions: it often happens that a writer can put into words thoughts and feelings which the reader has not been able to focus on consciously. Another reason for reading is to better understand the feelings experienced by other people whose lives are very different from one's own or to be able to appreciate circumstances that one knows nothing about. In fact when one reads, one expands one's life experiences and incorporates the schemata of others. One also reads to get through difficult stages of life with the help of written advice. One gets to know new and previously unimagined worlds since fiction sometimes presents entirely imaginary worlds which are a kind of mental exercise. When one reads, one is stimulated into thinking along lines along which one may never have ventured before. Everyone has

theories about the world and reading is one of the ways in which one “discusses” theories with others. Innumerable specific interests can be explored with the help of books. Reading can help understand one’s own psychology and that of others. It allows people to watch the world even though one cannot be everywhere at once. It allows people to develop critical thought on many issues. To read is also to listen to the words of all those who lived before one’s present day just as to write is to speak to those who will live in future days. To read means to listen to everyone who has something to say in which one might be interested. To read means to share ideas and life experiences with a wider circle than just a close network of friends and family.

So one could say that reading is a way for people to develop their imagination, share ideas and knowledge on a variety of topics. Could one name all the reasons for living? It is doubtful and the reasons for reading are similarly endless. Those who engage in reading have many reasons and their relationship with each book is personal.

In much of the world today, books are the main tools used for learning since formal education is primarily based on text books. But for those who want to further educate themselves outside the education system, perhaps as adults, reading is a way to teach themselves. Those who are not involved in literary activities may experience a drop in their literacy level whereas those who carry on reading all their lives, whether fiction or non-fiction, continue to improve their literacy skills. Books, therefore, are a primary tool for education, whether this education is a formal one or simply the result of on-going leisure activities.

Because some books are translated into many languages, they allow people to be aware of ideas from all over the world. Books that get translated are usually books which are considered to have a high value and a certain degree of popularity, thus perhaps indicating a certain assessment of quality. The books which get translated fall into several categories: classics, best-sellers and specialist works. Reading makes the world a smaller place where people can share the ideas which emerge in other countries and other cultures instead of remaining isolated within their home culture.

Reading may therefore contribute to a better understanding of other cultures as well as global issues affecting everybody.

Books may also help people become aware of human history: society's roots, the stories of ancestors, would be largely unknown were it not for written documents. People know a great deal more about recent history since the spread of literacy across the population. Not only can people read how the ruling classes recorded history but also how ordinary people saw the world: the spread of literacy from the higher classes to the wider population has allowed for this more balanced view of history. Reading, then, can also be seen as a way of preserving knowledge, of preserving history, of sharing ideas not only for present time but also for that of future generations.

Books allow the individual to converse with the rest of the literate world, not only in the contemporary dimension but back over the many centuries of human thought. This vast potential of information, reflection and experience is however only accessible to those who are educated into a sense of personal freedom and choice and who are also instructed in the ways and means of accessing not only mainstream published material but also the many specialised books which do not necessarily get publicised.

The motivation for the present study is a desire to analyse the reasons for the differences in perceptions and habits concerning reading, with a view to understanding what might be a good basis for serious social inclusion of the whole population which makes up the European community. The idea of a community which shares ideas and takes part in the on-going public debate, which is at the base of participatory democracy, presupposes a serious concern for the widest possible social inclusion. Obviously reading is not the only skill which allows for social inclusion, but it is a primary method of accessing information and opinion, and one that is conducive to personal critical thought.