



Friday 29 January 2021

Dear Parents, Carers and Students

Today's letter is going to be slightly unusual in as much as I wish to communicate directly to parents, carers *and* students, and (ironically) devote much of my longer than normal letter to the importance of reading. I have chosen to structure my letter in two parts; with a portion aimed at all and sections aimed at each year group with specific information and guidance from me. I hope it is not too complicated!

### *What is your IT provision like at home?*

You will probably be aware that in the past six months we have worked hard to significantly extend students' access to laptops and Chromebooks. We have facilitated a Chromebook purchase programme for over 100 students. Also, we have purchased, loaned or given away a similar number of devices to children who are entitled to the Pupil Premium as well. In recent months we have been able to extend that further to children with special educational needs. This has been made possible through a combination of school funds, a grant from the Chipping Norton Trust, THRIVE donations of used machines, a donation from a local business person *and* the generous contribution of used devices in recent weeks. The combined impact of all of this has been huge and made this second phase of remote learning far more manageable than in 2020.

We are now at the point where we may be able to provide a loaned machine to families who are not eligible for the Pupil Premium, but would benefit from some potential to extend our support still further. We know that the cost of a brand new device is completely unaffordable for many or most of us. Indeed, we may be in two minds about a purchase because we do not know how long this lockdown will last, or how quickly anything we purchase online will take to arrive. For this reason, we now wish to find out how many families would welcome us introducing a used laptop loan scheme, irrespective of personal circumstances. We do not know how much demand exists (and therefore the extent of our reach) but if this is something that you feel would help you then can I ask that you contact my colleague, Jodie Green ([jgreen@chippingnortonschool.org](mailto:jgreen@chippingnortonschool.org)) to set out your needs and interest. We cannot promise anything just yet, but feel we are ready to try and cast our net a little wider to get through this period together.

### *Can you donate?*

In the past week, we have received cheques from former and current families who have sought to help us all through this difficult time – these are amazing acts of generosity. If you wish to make a similar donation then you may do so directly. Equally, you might wish to consider a contribution of any amount to this [Just Giving](#) page that has been set up by the River Learning Trust (RLT).

All funds that are received into this account will be invested in securing devices for disadvantaged children across the RLT family of schools who have not yet secured a device.

*Continued...*



The most immediate way you can support is to donate an unwanted laptop or Chromebook. We can refurbish them and have them in the hands of our students within days. Therefore, if you have one or two lying around unused then please drop them off to our Main Reception and we shall do the rest with our thanks! Even if the charger is faulty or missing we may be able to work some magic.

### *The Importance of Reading Has Never Been Greater*

When I [read about](#) the new images released by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler, I went straight to their site and enjoyed their playful and really poignant updating of their classics. I have pasted two of my favourites opposite. *Room On The Broom* is a classic in our house and I quite admire my own rendition of the dragon in a voice reminiscent of the late, great, Bob Hoskins.

As my own children have grown older, I have experienced the difficulty in maintaining their 'reading for pleasure' levels. However, the case for regular reading is incredibly powerful and we have an opportunity to address this now.

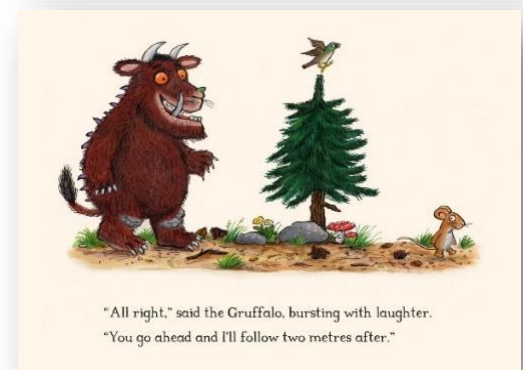
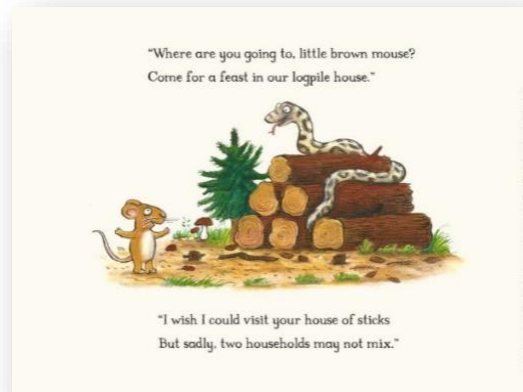
### *Why We Must Read, Read, Read...*

In the first ten years of a child's life there appears to be no debate that the skill of reading is an essential end in itself. The trouble is that we might convince ourselves that once our children reach secondary school reading for pleasure is not quite as important as keeping on top of classwork and homework. This is not an either / or dilemma, but one of 'both' being important – with students needing to read as much and as widely as possible, *whilst* keeping on top of their day-to-day schoolwork. But why?

I could devote many thousands of words to the question of why reading is so important, but wish to focus on one reason with you today: fluency.

The more we read, the more fluent our reading becomes. The less fluent we are the more likely we are to stumble when we encounter words or expressions that are unfamiliar or new to us. A lack of fluency slows down our comprehension, which then impacts on how much we might learn and remember from a portion of text.

Take this excerpt from *Room On The Broom*: a child's enjoyment of this book is greatly enhanced by their comprehension of the words. Without understanding the meaning of those words in white, a child's appreciation of that literature is affected. Through the use of accompanying images and repetition, many of us have watched our own children gradually come to understand, memorise and then adore the story, its characters and the message of companionship and love. That journey of fuller comprehension takes time and energy, but is definitely worth that quest to read for pleasure.



"The witch had a cat  
and a very tall hat,  
And long ginger hair  
which she wore in a plait.  
How the cat purred  
and how the witch grinned,  
As they sat on their broomstick  
and flew through the wind."

From *Room on the Broom* by  
Julia Donaldson & Axel  
Scheffler

That journey to become a fluent reader continues all through life and certainly should not let up during adolescence or the teenage years. Being a fluent and confident reader is not solely an advantage in English lessons. Every single subject asks questions that rewards a child's reading (and writing) skills. For instance, questions in GCSE mathematics and science papers contain more words than ever before, and a student has to navigate their way through the language of the question before they can grasp the questions they are being asked.

### *What can we all do about this?*

I am certainly not going to try and request that every family switches off the TV for a few hours each night and read together for pleasure. Mind you, this is an idyllic and worthy aspiration for us all. I do think that we, the adults, can play an important part in modelling the importance of reading in front of our children; if they see us read and enjoy it then they are more likely to listen to why we ask them to do the same. I would also add that it helps if we can make the case for reading and show that it has immediate pleasurable benefits, but also longer-term gains.

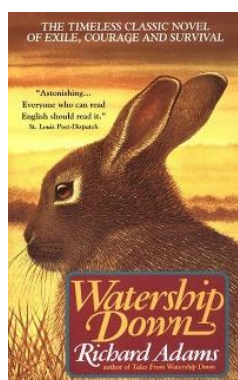
### *Read, read, read...*

Writing this letter has forced me to reflect on the books I have found time to read in the past twelve months. I realise that I have chosen some books for guidance (*Defeat Into Victory* by William Slim), inspiration (*Humankind* by Rutger Bregman), escapism (*Dune* by Frank Herbert) or to increase my awareness of, or empathy for, others' lives (*Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stuart). I guess it is all reading for pleasure, but much more than a simple short term gain. Every page in every book helps us grow a little.

And so, this is my way of urging all students and all families to talk about reading and to agree ways to bring that to the forefront of how 'spare' time is used each day and each week. Even some small shifts towards regular reading will be hugely beneficial, especially if one stumbles on a book that will change their life or stay deep in their memory forever. I have suggested some of these books from my own life in the next part of my letter which is aimed at students.

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### *Message to Year 7s*



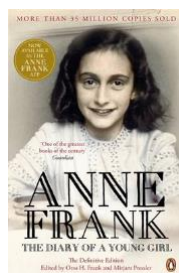
We know that your experience of school has been pretty disrupted for almost a year now. The combination of how Year 6 and primary school ended, alongside the spring term of Year 7 are hard for you. We shall be back to normal this term and, hopefully, sooner than we think, if all goes well with the vaccination programme. Do your best to keep on top of your work and find time every day to read.

Suggested reading: *Watership Down* by Richard Adams. This looks like a kids' book but it is not – it is all about danger, courage, friendship and trusting your instincts. I loved this book when I read it in Year 7 (and then watched the film). Favourite quotation for the book...

*"If there's going to be a story, don't you think I've got as good a right as anyone to choose it?"*

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### Message to Year 8s



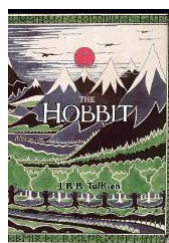
A lot like the Year 7s, your start to secondary school life has been tough, and we know that all too well. Like the Year 7s you have plenty of time left at CNS and we hope that this period in all of our lives will become a distant memory soon enough. Stay focussed and don't waste your time. Work hard each day and find things to do each evening that you enjoy and expand your mind.

Suggested reading: I read *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* when I was your age. You may already know the basic story of how she and her Jewish family were forced to hide from the Nazis. In the years after her death, her secret diary was found and has left millions of us in awe ever since. Her courage and her positive outlook continues to give me some perspective on the toughest of days.

*"I don't think of all the misery, but of the beauty that still remains."*

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### Message to Year 9s



I continue to hear really great things about you all and long may that continue! You are in the middle of your Year 9 options process and this is great because it helps you focus on the future and what you see yourselves doing in the years to come. This is the age when you can probably sense the approaching freedoms of adulthood and that is why I encourage you to read an adventure book like *The Hobbit* by JRR Tolkien. When I read this at your age, it filled me with dreams of travel, mountains, lakes, forests and adventure. These are thoughts that stay with me today. So much of my lifelong love of the outdoors, camping and trekking, comes from the seven or eight hours it took to read this classic.

*"Then something Tookish woke up inside him, and he wished to go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine-trees and the waterfalls, and explore the caves, and wear a sword instead of a walking-stick."*

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### Message to Year 10s



I have a daughter in Year 10 and so I know all of the questions you must be asking right now about your own examinations and how the impact of self-isolation and remote learning will be taken into account. I am afraid that you, and we, shall have to live with some uncertainty for a while longer. But rest assured that we shall do everything here to give you every advantage to see you through and beyond this tricky time. Do stay on top of your studies, stay really organised and find time to feed your brain with books and ideas. Ms Hancock has also asked me to ask you to look out for a Google Meet invitation to a weekly year group assembly at 2pm, every Monday (instead of normal registration).

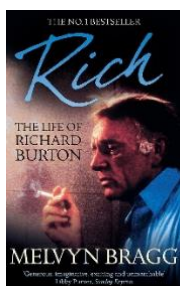
When I was in Year 10 we read and studied *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, in both English and in history. It's a story of justice overcoming racism and prejudice. It scared the life out of me because it suddenly dawned on me that good people can think and do bad things unless someone points out their errors. It made me question my own assumptions about people and life and ask if I held (or hold) intolerant or bigoted views without even being conscious of my mistakes.

*"You just hold your head high and keep those fists down. No matter what anybody says to you, don't you let 'em get your goat. Try fightin' with your head for a change."*

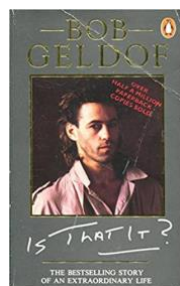
## Message to Year 11s

Just like the Year 13s, you will have so many questions about what will happen next. You can be sure that you will be coming back to school and that you will resume normal lessons with your normal teachers. It is likely that at some point your teachers will ask you to sit tests and this will help us all submit data to the examination boards, in place of those cancelled examinations. My advice is to focus on what you can control and try to stop thinking or worrying about things you cannot control. And so, attend all lessons, stay organised, do well in all tests or assessments you are given - and do not fall behind. This next phase will favour and advantage every student in the UK who will work *with* their teachers and we are certain you are all ready to do that.

In order to get as full a flavour of what life in the sixth form will be like, can I remind you all to explore [this page](#) of our website. You may have all seen our promotional video, but you may not have watched our A level teachers talk about their subjects. These are short, two minute clips that you will find by clicking through to your prospective A-level subjects and seeing staff and students talk about what it is like studying each course.



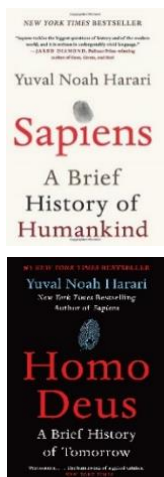
Also, a quick reminder - your PTC will be taking place on Thursday 11 February. It will provide you and your parents or carers the opportunity to meet virtually with your teachers to discuss your progress and any thoughts you might have on the remote learning journey. All your subject teachers are really looking forward to speaking to you all individually. And a quick message from the English team – you will shortly receive the results of your English Literature mock (completed before Christmas) next week. This will be sent to your parents and carers via In Touch.



But do not let your whole life be about those GCSEs; you have to invest time to grow as a person and books are one way to do that so easily. Looking back, I read a biography (on the life of the actor Richard Burton) and an autobiography (by Bob Geldof) when I was in Year 11. I had never read that genre before and the experience was really eye-opening. Reading about the challenges, tragedies, flaws of a genius or a saint help us all feel more confident that we can also be a better person. Furthermore, learning more about your heroes gives you added inspiration, ambition and a much greater sense of empathy for others. Perhaps Burton and Geldof are a bit 1980s now, but why not read the biography or autobiography of someone you admire in the coming weeks?

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## Message to Year 12s



Just like my message to Year 10s, I have a son in Year 12 as well and know the worries and fears many of you will have. You made a stellar start to sixth form and so just 'keep going' – it is as simple as that. Trust your teachers, they are brilliant, and we shall do everything we can to guide you to the same goals and destinations you would have had without this pandemic.

Meanwhile, grow your head as well. Whilst these two books were only published in recent years, I just wish I had read them both when I was your age! It is hard to simplify what they are about, but if you are thinking about a life or career connected to biology, biochemistry, palaeontology, archaeology, philosophy, history, politics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, law, politics, big data or artificial intelligence, then *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus* by Yuval Noah Harari could change your life and make you even brainier! I just wish I had read them and urge



you to do the same. They will make you smarter, kinder and even more optimistic about humanity.

*From a Brief History of Humankind: "We did not domesticate wheat. It domesticated us."*

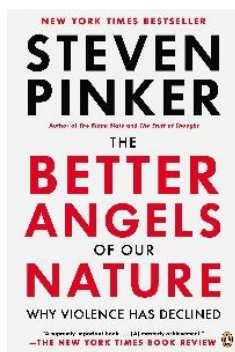
*From Homo Deus: "In the past, censorship worked by blocking the flow of information. In the twenty-first century, censorship works by flooding people with irrelevant information. [...] In ancient times having power meant having access to data. Today having power means knowing what to ignore."*

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### Message to Year 13s

Firstly, well done on your mocks. Overall, you have done incredibly well and secured some impressive scores and grades. You just need to keep going and trust in the advice of your teachers. My message to you is virtually identical to the Year 11s, in terms of what you can expect (and need to do) before June. More than anyone, I urge you to avoid wasting time pondering what none of us yet know and instead focus on what you can shape: today and tomorrow.

The UCAS process is now complete and so thank you for the hard work that you put into this. I would also like to acknowledge the hugely important role that Mr Ward, Miss Davison and the sixth form tutors played in making sure your applications were the best that they could possibly be.



My reading suggestion to you is another book that has become a bestseller in recent years. I also wish I had read it when I was 17 or 18 because it would have made so many things clear and given me insights into so many aspects of the modern world and past that for years have always confused me. Steven Pinker's book would also appeal to anyone interested in the fields of sociology, psychology, law, politics, history, geography, mathematics, statistical analysis, government and media. I would not agree with every one of his assertions but his basic premise that we are gradually becoming a kinder, less violent and a more promising society is overwhelming as he overturns some of our assumptions about the past, present and future. Read it, please.

*"Just as blueprints don't necessarily specify blue buildings, selfish genes don't necessarily specify selfish organisms. As we shall see, sometimes the most selfish thing a gene can do is build a selfless brain. Genes are a play within a play, not the interior monologue of the players."*

*"As one becomes aware of the decline of violence, the world begins to look different. The past seems less innocent; the present less sinister."*

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And that's it! A bit of a saga this week and apologies for that, but I hope the message is clear and my encouragement of this joy is evident in my letter to you this week.

Have a lovely weekend.

Yours faithfully

Mr Doherty, Headteacher