



Questions for: Alison Baverstock

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The publishing professor and Reading Force founder on the vital role of the charity in the pandemic, and finding a new calling



Describe your job

I have several roles, including professor of publishing at Kingston University, but here I'll concentrate on my role at the charity Reading Force, which encourages a sense of connection within Forces families through shared reading. We are used internationally, and have just celebrated our 10th anniversary, having given out over 170,000 reading scrapbooks and over 21,000 free books (which at my insistence we always buy from the industry).

What was your first job in the book industry?

My very first job was as London sales representative for IBIS, a marketing agency specialising in direct marketing and serving publishing clients. This was suggested, by my university careers advisor, as a way to make contacts with publishers and hopefully find a job in the industry.

It worked, and I moved to Heinemann Educational Books after 16 months, but the training I received from IBIS, and the industry overview I gained, were profoundly beneficial. In the space of one year I had contact with virtually every UK publishing house and met many inspiring people.

Who has been the most influential person in your career?

Probably my father. He felt excluded from higher education, and did not enjoy his job (in the Inland Revenue, which was considered "safe" and so to be endured). Listening to him made me conscious of the different choices I had, simply from my date of birth, and determined not to waste them. Inspired by him, I've been very involved in widening participation in higher education, and always continued his practice of buying books for our children (and others) as often as possible.

How has the industry changed since your first job?

In some ways hugely, in others not at all. It is still about finding markets with unmet needs, then developing and providing the products and services from which they will benefit.



What's the biggest challenge in your job?

For Reading Force it's getting sufficient funding to keep providing our service free to Forces families. During lockdowns we experienced unprecedented demand. The role of our Forces during the pandemic has been immense but not widely reported; from the start they have supported the NHS and underpinned all aspects of delivery including vaccines. Many Forces families have been separated for long periods of time, and uncertainty continues.

We saw a huge rise in demand for our shared reading scrapbooks (up 900% in the first month) and our online book groups have proven particularly valuable in keeping isolated families, especially veterans, informed and in touch. A related project we had set up for veterans in prison became a lifeline for contact with their families when all visits and activities were cancelled.

We all know how valuable reading is in developing the individual; within Forces families shared reading can offer a discreet way of building resilience and maintaining connectivity among those who are reluctant to seek support. We benefit all Forces families, including reservists, veterans and former Forces families separated through relationship breakdown or divorce.

I will be the (I hope un-needed) recovery vehicle for a sponsored cycle in August. A link for anyone wanting to sponsor this can be found [here](#).

What's the best piece of book-related advice you've ever been given?

You don't have to finish every book you start. From a librarian!

How did you cope with the pandemic?

I spent most of the last year at theological college in Oxford, fulfilling a long-held desire to be ordained. In addition to other roles, I now have a part-time curacy at St Mary's, Long Ditton in Surrey. I only took a year out, the rest was done part time.

What are the best books you've read in the last year?

Without question, *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell. I just loved it. I found *One of Them* by Musa Okwonga troubling, and was gripped by Anne Sebba's *Ethel Rosenberg*. I also reread several children's classics, including *Heidi* and *The Railway Children*.

What are you reading now?

In addition to about three books on the go, I am working my way through the back catalogue of *Desert Island Discs*.

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