

### LETTER FROM THE SERIES EDITOR, FIONA MACKENZIE

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#### Why read (in ELT)?

It's possible for learners to feel that they are jumping through hoops when they're in English lessons or doing homework. If they're in a country in which English is not a language which is used in everyday life, it can appear to be particularly irrelevant. But, even within the constraints of a language-learning programme, reading can be seen to have a real purpose – to find out something new, to read about something we're already interested in or familiar with in our own language, to be engaged, or even transported, by the words on the page. Many of us have experienced the feeling of achievement which comes with reading a book in a foreign language and know the pleasure of seeing our learners have the same sense of achievement. And there are spin-offs of benefit from regular reading as well – think of the exam candidate needing to read concentratedly to a deadline, maybe skimming for gist, and think how much better they might do this if they're used to reading.

#### Why Readers?

Maybe the easiest way to answer this question is to refer to the experience of someone who had a hand in the very early development of Readers, John Milne. John founded a Readers series back in the 70s and I was lucky enough to work with him at the end of his career. He told me that his inspiration came from his experience, as a young teacher, of having to ask teenagers to read Charles Dickens' famous novel *Great Expectations* in its original form. He realized that there were problems caused not only by unknown grammar and vocabulary, but also by the unfamiliar culture and by the bewildering array of characters and information in such a long novel. However, he also realized that the learners loved the story when he made it accessible to them. This was his starting point in inviting learners to engage with specially created retellings, which allowed them to achieve what they couldn't with the full texts – and by extension, to read graded newly written texts. The best of Readers balance an appropriate language load, a good flow of information – not too much, not too little – and clear cultural information with all the excitement and interest of the story and characters so that the 'something' that makes people want to turn the page of an ungraded book is still there.

#### Why these Readers?

An internet search on Graded Readers brings up more than two million results, most of them connected to one of the many series of Readers already available. So, you might ask, is there room for another series? Is there something different which a new series can offer? We think the answer is yes. The *Amazing People Readers* do offer something new and different from other series. Each book is a collection of five or six short stories, thematically organized. Each story stands on its own so the learner can read the book as a whole but also just as easily dip in and read one or two stories. I'm using the word 'story' as rather an inadequate description of a unique kind of writing; these stories are all biographies of people who really lived and who made lasting contributions to our world. The people tell their own stories – they give us real facts in a fictional form which imagines that the person is talking to us – adjectives which occur to me are unique, novel, immediate, quirky.

There are, of course, the texts and – another 'of course' – there are recordings. However, these recordings bring us the 'cinematic listening' of our producer, James Vyner, who through vivid sound effects brings alive the world and experiences of these people. Listen, for example, to the creaks and groans of Blériot's flimsy plane as he makes the first flight across the English Channel (*Amazing Aviators*). Or listen to the

sounds of a live jazz club band as Louis Armstrong is inspired to take his first steps towards a career as a world-famous musician (*Amazing Performers*, Level 3).

And for each of the books, there is a video. One of the characters appears as an avatar and tells her or his own story directly to us, accompanied by an array of informative and inspiring photos, maps and other materials which transport the student into the life and times of the protagonist. Seeing images of the character at work, or with their family, or reading the newspaper headlines in which they featured, helps to make the people feel real.

There are more than a hundred biographies spread across the 20 books of the series and in order to give a flavour of the breadth of them, I asked the authors who worked on the series to tell me who their favourites were and why. Helen Parker chose Harriet Tubman (*Amazing Women*), who not only had the courage and determination to escape alone from slavery, but then to risk her life many times over to free hundreds of other slaves, and Walt Disney (*Amazing Entrepreneurs and Business People*, Level 1) for his imagination and focus. Silvia Tiberio picked out the US president, Abraham Lincoln, (*Amazing Leaders*) and Ella Fitzgerald (*Amazing Performers*, Level 1) but particularly favoured Johannes Gutenberg (*Amazing Inventors*), the inventor of moveable type for printing. She mentioned that some people seemed to be in the right place at the right time, like Fitzgerald, or had the right people standing by them, like Pavarotti (*Amazing Performers*, Level 1) but that Gutenberg showed courage and determination without ever seeming to have a stroke of good luck. Anne Collins chose Yuri Gagarin (*Amazing Explorers*), the first man to travel into space, who had great charisma, and a smile which lit up a whole room – this is evident in his video – and although an incredibly brave hero, was very modest and not in the least bit arrogant. She also thought that the writers Chaucer and Kipling (*Amazing Writers*) would have been great company – keeping her well entertained with their stories. And from her *Amazing Scientists* (Level 3) book, Anne chose Humphry Davy because she got the impression, through her research, that he was a bit of a charmer, with his lectures and demonstrations which popularized science, as well as his life-saving invention of the miners' Davy Lamp. She says, 'I think he had a genuine desire to make the world a better place.'

Anna Trewin felt that Irving Berlin (*Amazing Composers*) was a symbol of hope and inspiration for everyone because of the way he went from being homeless on the streets of New York to being one of the greatest composers of popular music of all time. And from *Amazing Mathematicians*, she chose Descartes because he was a great thinker as well as a mathematician, and philosophers still battle with his ideas today. F. H. Cornish's favourite person was Elizabeth Garrett Anderson from *Amazing Medical People* because she 'got it all right' – she became the first female doctor, fought for women's rights and helped the poor. Other choices were Pablo Picasso (*Amazing Artists and Architects*) who stands out as one of the greatest-ever artists and Montgolfier (*Amazing Aviators*), who was a true pioneer, the first person to achieve manned flight, in whose tracks all others have followed. For me, one of the people who stands out is Michael Marks (*Amazing Entrepreneurs and Business People*, Level 4), the founder of Marks and Spencer. It's been a familiar British shopping institution to me all my life but I had no idea of the story of the young man who literally walked across the whole of Europe in order to find a better life for himself.

So, as you can see, the focus is global with people from most regions in the world appearing and it ranges through history from, for example, Aristotle and Confucius in ancient Greece and China (*Amazing Thinkers and Humanitarians*), to Francis Crick (*Amazing Scientists*, Level 3) in 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain who was one of the discoverers of the secret of human life, DNA.

### **Who are they for?**

I've provided a flavour of the types of people whose biographies appear in the series – but who are the books for? I think the answer is that they are for a wide range of people. In terms of general

English, they are engaging for teenagers, but they certainly don't read in a way which sounds too 'young' for an adult audience. Learners could choose to read the story of someone they already know about so that their L1 knowledge informs their reading in English, they could read the story of someone they don't know much about but whose contribution to human life was in an area they're interested in or they could read about someone they've never heard of.

Teachers may wish to use some of the many strands that leap out of these pages which might link with areas of personal development in education, for example, creativity, inspiration, imagination, resilience, compassion, motivation. There are also many people who were successful language learners themselves. And there are recurring themes, like those of immigration, war and the rights of women. (Learners may like to ponder why it was deemed worthwhile to produce an *Amazing Women* book but not an *Amazing Men* one.)

As well as being of general interest, these Readers have a place in a CLIL curriculum. For many of the subjects that learners might study through the medium of English, there are biographies of key people. There are books about mathematicians and scientists and alongside them, inventors and medical people. Looking at culture and the arts, there are composers, performers, artists and architects, and writers. History can be seen through the prism of the range of people who appear in one book, showing through their lives the development of an area over a number of centuries, for example, aviation. We can also study it through *Amazing Leaders*. Geographers can read about *Amazing Explorers*. Areas of social science and economics can be enhanced by reading about thinkers, humanitarians, entrepreneurs and business people.

### **Which language levels do they cover?**

The series has four levels, covering CEFR levels A2, A2–B1, B1 and B2. The stories are carefully graded to ensure that readers will both enjoy and benefit from their reading experience. There is a new comprehensive grammar and vocabulary framework prepared by Collins to underpin the series. For more information on the Collins COBUILD Grading Scheme, including a list of the main grammatical structures found at each level, go to: [www.collinselt.com/readers/gradingscheme](http://www.collinselt.com/readers/gradingscheme).

This series brought particular demands in terms of vocabulary input, given the specialist nature of a lot of the vocabulary needed for the different subject areas. The basis of the vocabulary grading is the Collins COBUILD corpus. Instead of a narrow wordlist, specifically created for the series, we used a grading of the words in the relevant learners' dictionaries, thus making available the real vocabulary needed. Because reading is a receptive skill, some vocabulary from a level higher than the actual level of the book was allowed, as long as its meaning was clear from the context. Each book has a glossary as is common with Readers, but I should emphasize that the glossaries are largely not full of words which learners should be endeavouring to add to their productive vocabulary! They cover words and phrases which are useful for the stories but not ones which are necessarily useful for the learners to remember – so learners can rely on them for help but not feel any pressure to commit them to memory. So that each story can be read on its own, the words in the glossary are underlined at their first appearance in *each* story rather than only at their first appearance in the whole book.

Levels 1 and 2 books take their definitions from the *Collins COBUILD Essential English Dictionary* and levels 3 and 4 from the *Collins COBUILD Advanced English Dictionary*.

Learners can check which is the right level for them to read by going to: [www.collinselt.com/readers/levelcheck](http://www.collinselt.com/readers/levelcheck). However, it is worth saying that I've certainly noticed that if a learner is interested in a particular topic, they will make efforts to deal with texts which are actually beyond their reading level, so learners with particular interests shouldn't be dissuaded from reading biographies which are at a higher level than they would normally attempt. Also, remember that these

are short stories; learners for whom a whole novel might be an insurmountable challenge could be encouraged in their reading by ‘starting small’.

### **What kind of support is there for the learners?**

The *Amazing People Readers* are useful for genuine extensive reading in that they can be just *read*. There are no activities or comprehension questions within the books. However, we know that teachers do often want to be able to know that students are understanding what they’re reading so there is support of various kinds.

Within the books, after each biography is a Timeline which brings together the key events of the person’s life in date order and gives some extra information if it’s important. It’s probably best to read them after reading the story as a reminder and maybe even for revision purposes.

And to support both teachers and learners, additional materials are available online at [www.collinselt.com/readers](http://www.collinselt.com/readers). For each book there are three types of worksheet: classroom activities, self-study activities and further research. The classroom activities have a specific focus on one of the people and activities which could easily be adapted for use with another of the people are marked. The self-study activities also focus on that one character. These have been written to complement the classroom activities, so teachers should feel free to use them as additional resources to be completed in class or at home.

The further research worksheets list useful resources (websites, books, films, etc.) through which learners can discover more about the people in the book. I suggest that teachers do look at these websites before asking the learners to use them. These were real human beings with real, human, colourful lives which we’ve written about factually but not necessarily exhaustively in the books; you should use your knowledge of your learners and the cultural expectations of your world to make judgements about how much you want your learners to know. With that caveat, I would encourage you to explore the people further online with your learners. The books are thoroughly enhanced by being able to see, for example, the wonders of Leonardo’s imagination, Frida Kahlo’s art or hear the charming sound of the popular song ‘Amy, Wonderful Amy’, so your learners can appreciate the superstar status of Amy Johnson, the aviator, in the 1930s.

As mentioned above, the CDs (with MP3 downloadable audio) and the videos are a key part of the *Amazing People* experience – vivid, both visually and aurally, they shouldn’t be an optional extra, but an integral part of this series. Both, with visuals, sound effects and wonderful actors (specially chosen story-by-story rather than for a whole book) really bring to life the varied worlds of these people.

### **And finally ...**

I hope that you and your learners really enjoy these books. There are, as I said, more than a hundred biographies. However, I’m certain that your imagination will be set to work when you read the names of the people we’ve chosen to tell their stories. Maybe you’ll have heard of them and maybe you won’t, but what’s certain is that you’ll think, ‘Why didn’t they write about X? And what about Y? It’s terrible to miss them out!’ My answer is, ‘You’re right! It was terrible to have to miss out all those other people.’ And it is also to say, ‘Please tell us. Who else do you and your learners think was an Amazing Person?’ If you have any questions, comments or suggestions about this series, please do get in touch at [collins.elt@harpercollins.co.uk](mailto:collins.elt@harpercollins.co.uk).

Happy reading!

Fiona