The Rights of the Reader

Daniel Pennac

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For Franklin Rist,
a great reader of novels
and a reader worthy of a novel.

To the memory of my father,
and in daily remembrance
of Frank Vlieghe.

Foreword

There may seem to be something a bit crazy about writing an introduction to a book that has been in print for over twenty years and sold over a million copies in several languages. Even so, I hope there may be one or two footnotes that this Englishman and escaped school-teacher can usefully add to *The Rights of the Reader*.

Daniel Pennac is one of the best known and most successful writers in France today. His extraordinary imagination, occasionally bizarre humour and gifts as a storyteller have ensured that all his novels are best-sellers; so are his stories for children, and when, in 1992, as a former teacher, he came to write this book about young people and reading, it proved to be no exception.

What you have in your hands is a new translation by Sarah Ardizzone and, it seems to me, a remarkably confi-dent and sustaining one. She does Pennac with, if I can be allowed a couple of extra French words, élan and panache. What she doesn't do, with the profoundest of intentions, is attempt to translate the furniture and fittings of the culture from which the book arises. When Pennac refers to *Madame Bovary*, she doesn't attempt to substitute *David Copperfield* or *Vanity Fair*; and the text is a weave of local references, from newspapers such as *France-Soir* and *L'Equipe*, children's books such as

Babar and Marcel Aymé's *Les Contes du chat perché*, paperback series such as Livres de Poche and the Bibliothèque Verte, through to the fact that French children call their parents Maman and Papa. And what Daniel Pennac says about education relates to the organization of the French system and how French examinations work.

Of course, we hope that the reader to whom all this is unfamiliar will find it informative and flavoursome, but the last element, education, is of special importance because Pennac's reaction to it spurs him to argument and demonstration. The French approach to education has been essentially centralised, logical. There is a steely respect for the intellect (so, for instance, a teacher in a French secondary school is there exclusively to teach his/her subject, not to be responsible for discipline), and in order that pupils may get a taste of all of French literature, it is taught chronologically and using extracts or isolated poems. The possible failure of young readers to warm to reading within this constraining grid is one of the issues that Pennac addresses. The rights he demands are claims for liberty: you are allowed to skip bits, to read anything you like; maybe even, sometimes, not to read at all.

Perhaps the fact that I trained to be a teacher of English such a long time ago, in the fifties, broadly disqualifies me from taking part in the argument, but it

does enable me to make one small observation. Presented with Pennac's book at that time, I'm not sure that my friends and I would have known what to do with it – I mean, most of us thought something like that already, didn't we?

It's rather chastening to discover that we have more need of it now. We know – people professionally involved in education know better than I do – that a creative approach can sometimes mean a neglect of standards; generally among those to whom standards were irksome anyway. By contrast, we are now in an era of tests and targets. There is nothing wrong with accountability; properly understood, we need it. What is disturbing is the withering effect of its demands when they are not properly understood. The French version of this is a rather dry respect for art and letters. In our country, one senses not so much a respect for the subject as an urge to convert an elusive entity into something that can be tested. Am I just imagining it, or is there, behind all the tests and targets, a sort of fear of the rich, fluid diversity of the material – a fear, perhaps, amongst those who want to be in control at many levels of art and educational administration, that they cannot actually see or feel the substance they have put themselves in charge of? How satisfying, by contrast, the reassurance of a well-ticked box.

In reaction to this, many well known authors who

write for children and young people have spoken up for a tradition of real books and real poems; one might almost say for real life. It is not surprising that teachers and librarians in Britain who are aware of Pennac's book should be eager to have this eloquent support from across the Channel readily available to them.

And now here it is. I don't want to get between you and it for any longer than it takes to observe how tonic and fortifying Daniel Pennac is, how positive; how, while researchers prepare their statistics, he reports on real life, dramatizes and relives it for us, so that we have a vivid sense of being addressed by a real writer, a real teacher, a real reader-aloud.

And of the possibilities he offers us.

Quentin Blake

Parents, teachers, librarians,
please on no account use these pages
as an instrument of torture.

D. P.

1

Birth of the Alchemist

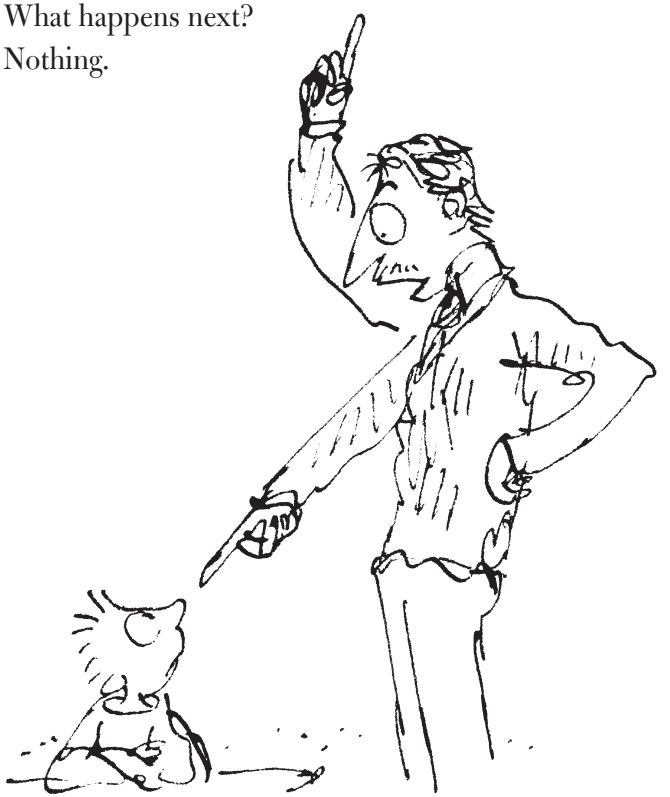
One

You can't make someone read. Just like you can't make them fall in love or dream.

You can try, of course. "Go on, love me!" "Dream!" "Read! Read! Read goddammit, I'm telling you to read!" "Go to your room and read!"

What happens next?

Nothing.



The young reader has nodded off over their book. The window suddenly seemed wide, wide open onto somewhere tantalizing; they flew out that way to escape it. And yet they sleep warily: the book is still open in front of them. If we opened their bedroom door, we'd find them sitting at the desk, dutifully reading. Even if we tiptoed upstairs they'd hear us coming.

"Do you like it, then?"

They can't say no. That would be treason. Books are sacred, how can you not like reading? No, they'll tell us that the descriptions are too long.

Reassured, we'll head back down to the television. Their remark might even provoke a heated debate with our friends.

"They think the descriptions are too long. They've got a point. We live in an audio-visual age; the novelists of the nineteenth century had to describe everything."

"That's no reason to skip half the book!"

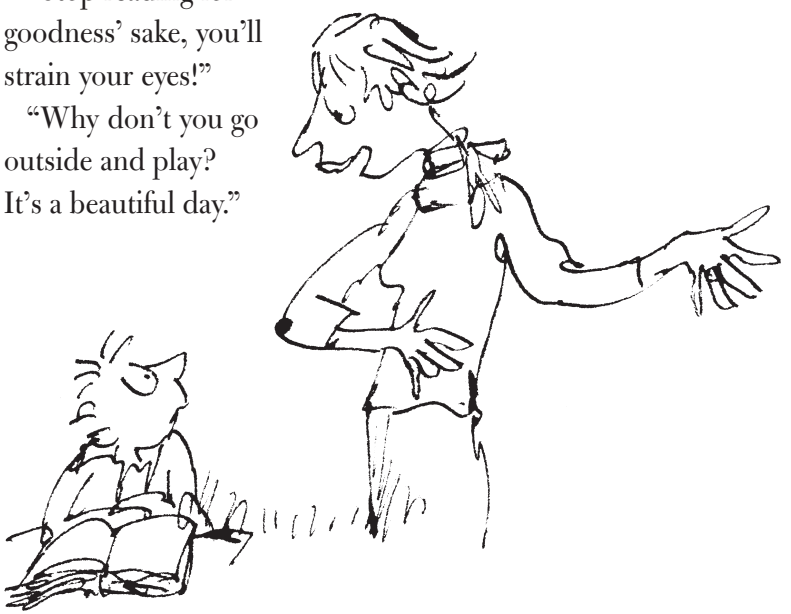
Why waste our energy? They've gone back to sleep.

Two

Children's reluctance to read is all the harder to understand if you're of a generation, a time, a background, a family, where everyone always tried to stop you reading.

"Stop reading for goodness' sake, you'll strain your eyes!"

"Why don't you go outside and play? It's a beautiful day."



"Lights out! It's late!"

Yes, the weather was always too good for reading. And the night too dark.

It's interesting that even back then reading was rarely