

## **160 books on must-read list for boys – full of blood, guts and class heroes**

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A list of the top 160 books for teenage boys will be published today by the Education Secretary in an ambitious attempt to encourage them to read more for pleasure and keep up with girls at secondary school.

To launch the £600,000 project, Alan Johnson has promised to give every secondary school in England the chance to choose 20 books from the list free.

The list contains no Dickens and no J. K. Rowling, but Philip Pullman, Anthony Horowitz, Robert Muchamore, Terry Pratchett and Darren Shan all feature in a list that is full of gritty, fighting, spying, fantastical, bloodthirsty and sporty working-class heroes from authors past and present.

There is an inevitable sprinkling of Japanese manga and other graphic novels for the arty, while for boys who prefer data to derring-do there are books of lists, trivia and facts.

The project is very personal to Mr Johnson, a voracious reader, who was brought up in a single-parent household and who is determined that no child should grow up in a home without books, as he did.

He believes that reading is the key to improving the academic and employment chances of working-class boys, who often lose the taste for reading after they start secondary school, leading to a significant reading gap between boys and girls in their early teens.

Mr Johnson told The Times: "Boys tend to read less than girls, and some lose the reading bug completely after they change schools at 11. This will help boys reacquire the reading habit and try out a wider range of great books."

There was a clear link, he said, between reading for pleasure and academic performance, not just in English, but across the whole curriculum.

"Beyond this, reading can enrich their lives by freeing their imagination, inspiring creativity and developing intellectual curiosity," he said.

Among the first books that Mr Johnson read as a boy were *Shane* by Jack Schaefer and *Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain. The latter features on today's list of 160 books for boys, which has been drawn up by librarians from the School Library Association.

Kathy Lemaire, chief executive of the association, said that school librarians were always dreaming up new ways to get boys interested in reading. In the end, though, it was the books that counted. "The right books need to be there when someone wants to read them, and that is why we were delighted when we were commissioned to create this new book list, which will help to get knowledge of such titles to busy librarians," she said.

Along with 20 free books, schools will also receive posters and postcards to promote their libraries.

Numerous studies have shown the existence of a reading gap between boys and girls, which gets wider as children grow older. Research from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has found that girls are much more likely than boys to read for enjoyment: 78 per cent of girls, against only 65 per cent of boys. The same research also suggested that

reading enjoyment is more important for children's educational success than their family's socioeconomic status.