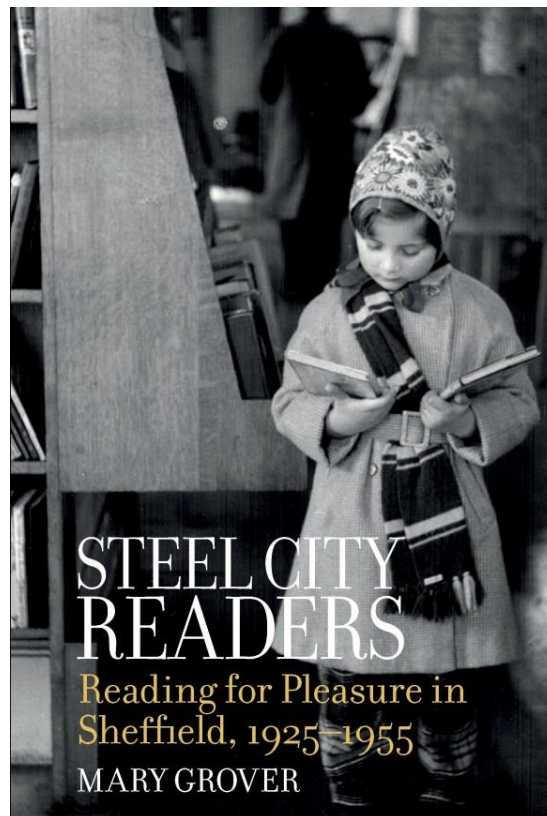


## ***Steel City Readers: Reading for Pleasure in Sheffield, 1925-1955, by Mary Grover***

*This is the text of a talk Mary Grover gave at the launch of her book, in Sheffield Central Library on 12 July 2023, before an invited audience including people interviewed for the book, their families and Mary's own family, friends and colleagues.*



Writing is almost always a lonely process. Whatever you are writing, however supportive your colleagues and companions, you are alone with the next sentence. But, however confused or doubtful, I have never been involved in a writing project in which I have felt less alone. Never have so many people contributed to a book I have produced.

First, there was Chris Hopkins, Professor Emeritus of Sheffield Hallam University who, as he has said, wanted me to launch this project from within the university where I taught. When that proved impossible, he joined the Reading Sheffield team. And that team have, in all sorts of ways been alongside me – literally in the case of Sue Roe whom I found on the next seat of what is now the 120 bus thirteen years ago. Ex-colleagues from Sheffield Further Education College, we got chatting and became the first co-workers. All twelve members of our interviewing team had spent the majority of their working life fostering literacy and a love of the arts in this city. Sue and Ruth Owen, of course were born and brought up here. So, throughout those initial stages I was surrounded by historians of various sorts who could put me right if I was puzzled by an idiom or Sheffield's physical geography – help me to understand what was going on when [Kath](#) made her way from Shiregreen 'down the backwacks to Firth Park Library' or when [Judith](#) ran alongside the rubble of the bombed out city centre to the building we are now in before her mother woke up from her mid-day nap back in Pomona Street.

I hope that Sheffield artist [Jack Martindale](#)'s map and images of the city's libraries in 1939, will help visitors to my book from Ohio or Honolulu understand a little of the physical journeys taken by our young readers to these palaces of pleasure. Jack has managed in these tiny sketches to convey the grandeur of the magnificent Victorian buildings which housed the entertainment and instruction that our readers craved and towards which they hurtled. When I was, as a friend put it, 'becalmed', I would reread stories like Kath and Judith's, and their energy and resourcefulness were an inspiration. Many, though not all, of our readers were from bookless homes. Kath made her way to Firth Park library in the company of her father, but when the Junior

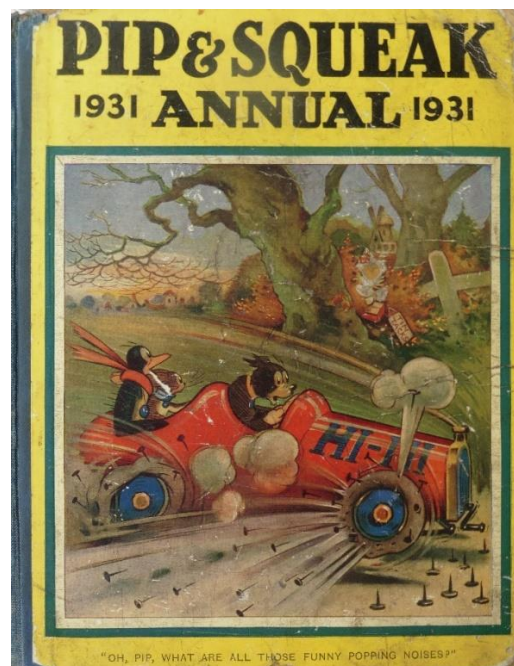
Section opened a horde of children found their way there on their own. The librarians struggled to admit the unruly crowd pounding on the doors.

The Reading Sheffield team not only shared their knowledge of the city and its cultures, but they shared the challenges of recording our readers' memories. Despite the expert help of journalist and oral historian Clare Jenkins and her colleague Steve McClarence, the Zoom recorders left most of us feeling a little dim. The tiny display on our high-quality equipment seemed to get tinier over the next five years. They were paid for by the [Sheffield Town Trust](#), the oldest charity in Sheffield. Without their help we could not have got started. I am particularly grateful to Sue and Loveday Herridge of Reading Sheffield who never raged against our little gizmos and helped me feel more confident as time went on.

When we had extracted our recordings we handed them over to Lizz and Den Tuckerman, respectively an artist and sound engineer, who put their IT and design skills at our service, establishing [our website](#) on which you will find every interview in audio and transcript. It took us eight or nine hours to transcribe an hour of audio. I remember being woken up at 1.30 in the morning by an anguished shout from my husband at the transcription coal face: 'Why another question? I thought you had it all wrapped up!' (I paraphrase.)

Once the transcriptions had been completed, Loveday, Sue and I went and delivered them and the audio CDs to Robin Wiltshire in [Sheffield City Archives](#) in 2013. Now it was my turn to conclude that that was enough of that. The final question had been asked - future historians would have this unique archive at their disposal. And so they will.

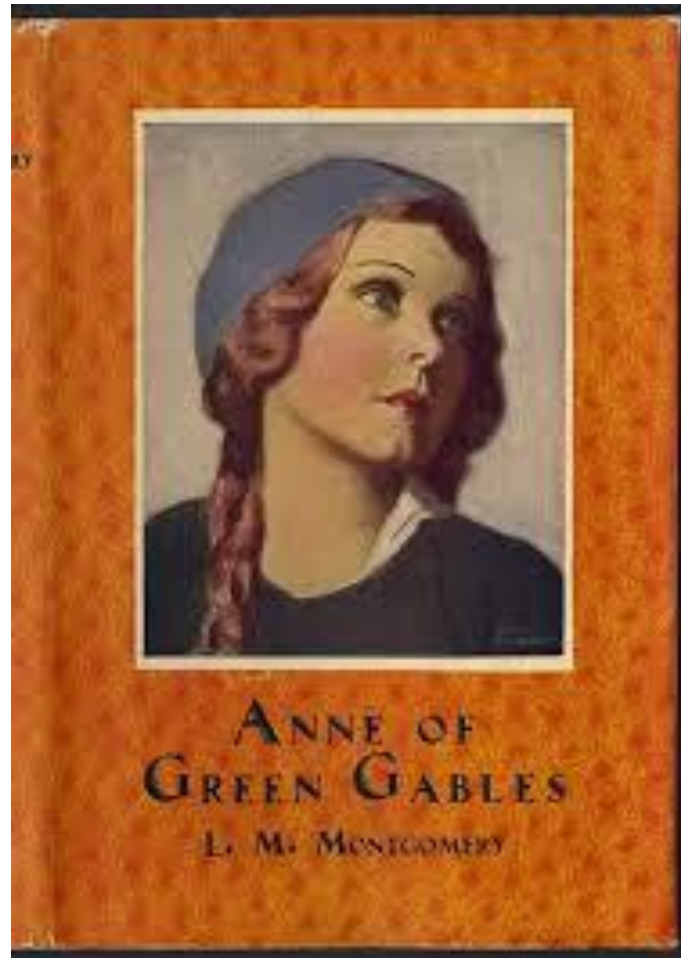
But it was Loveday, Sue and Chris who gently insisted that the job was **not** done in my case. And I gradually came to realise that I did not want to turn off my headphones - that there were still questions I wanted to ask. But above all, I realised that the voices we had recorded had an extraordinary power, that they spoke to people of all sorts of conditions and all ages. As I gave talks round and about the city, the effect of our readers' words on my listeners was remarkable. Twice the organiser of a group told me that a member had spoken for the first time in a meeting, usually when I could accompany a reading memory with a copy of the book that had provoked it. I gradually accumulated copies of the books that had meant most to our readers: pub shelves and Sue's raids on 'Chezzy' [Chesterfield] market were the source of many.



Books like this, a 1931 Pip, Squeak and Wilfred annual which belonged to [Irene Hailstone](#). This picture of Irene, her mother and her brother prefaces the Introduction to Steel City Readers.



By the time this photo was taken, Irene had gained a place at grammar school and was reading *A Tale of Two Cities* and *David Copperfield*, but it was the annuals given to her at Christmas that helped establish her reading fluency. The reason why she cherished these annuals till the end of her life and the reason why my listeners lit up when they held one in their hands again after 70 years, is the part that annuals played in the narrative of their lives. Like no other book, an annual is a precise marker of development. We know the year, the month, the day when we read it, Christmas Day 1931 in the case of Pip, Squeak and Wilfred. Its physical presence is associated with those who surrounded us when we read it and those who gave it to us, at some expense. Its inscription brings back the memory of a loved relative or friend, often an unmarried aunt. As the writer, teacher and researcher [Alison Light](#) has pointed out, many working-class families at that time would have lacked 'treasured biographical objects' to help them tell the story of their lives. Annuals were particularly suited to this role, but any book will do.



Certain books were particularly significant markers of a child or young adult's development. *Anne of Green Gables* was often mentioned. Girls were often robbed of chances available to their brothers. But Anne became a surrogate son. She was an orphan girl, adopted in error by a couple who had hoped to acquire a boy to help them with the farm. Her story, was, in our reader [Doreen](#)'s case, a revelation. Her mother had died while her father was fighting in the Far East. When she read it in the children's home in Leeds or in the loveless home created by her stepmother back in Sheffield, she drew consolation from her realisation that 'there was more than me orphaned'. Many boys identified with David Copperfield, for similar reasons.

Many of our readers recalled the books which, as young adults, changed the way they saw the world. At 13 [James](#) read a novel that overturned the assumptions that underpinned his secondary school curriculum, 'that we were the greatest nation on this earth'.

'Orwell, *Road to Wigan Pier*, really opened my eyes, you know, because living as we did, we were living as he were describing.' The book prompted 'the first dawns in my mind [that] this ain't right. We shouldn't be living like this, and we've no need to live like this.'

Coming of age could be marked by other kinds of literary experience. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is possibly the most often mentioned and the least appreciated of the books that marked adulthood. It is touching to read of a woman whose husband obtained for her a copy of the uncensored book before it was generally available, the volume a witness to growing trust and intimacy.

But the accounts of Mellors and Constance in the woods, though eagerly read, were usually dismissed by our readers. 'Didn't see what all the fuss was about' came up quite a few times. As Richard Hoggart's grandmother put it when he tried to engage her with Lawrence's novels and their frank and unashamed descriptions of lovemaking: 'E makes a lot of fuss and lah-de-dah about it.' As Mrs Hoggart suggests, the descriptions of physical lovemaking also introduced many to the subtleties of class markers. Lawrence may have come from a coal mining village but the solemnness of the way his descriptions of lovemaking marked him out as 'lah-de-dah'.



Less complicated were the pleasures encountered in the [NAAFI](#) library. For a young man called up to do National Service after the war, the NAAFI could be a source of so-called 'blue' books. If I bring a novel by Hank Janson to a group, it can bring a smile of recognition just as wide as a *Girls' Crystal* annual might do. Books like *Broads Don't Scare Easy* and *When Dames Get Tough* not only recalled a moment of entry into worlds beyond Sheffield. For many, they opened up the world of books from which they had previously been excluded. Two men I talked to used Janson's novels to help illiterate soldiers learn to read. His are the only novels to have disappeared at the end of a talk: a memento of a coming of age and an awareness of new worlds. I am afraid Janson constructed a dubious version of adult masculinity and a rather wonky window on what lay across the Atlantic Ocean. Hank Janson was not, of course,



called Hank Janson, and he was not, of course, American. He may have been a little unreliable as a mentor, but he prompted a sense that books were to be sought after and a source of pleasure.

Each chapter of my book is focussed on different stages of our lives, stages which are common to all of us: the period when we are totally dependent on our family for access to books, the years beyond infancy when we are, like Kath and Judith able to seek them out independently, then the years when we might find reading companions or become part of informal reading networks and finally, the various ways in which our adult identity is shaped by our reading choices. This sequence of mine is only a rough structuring device.

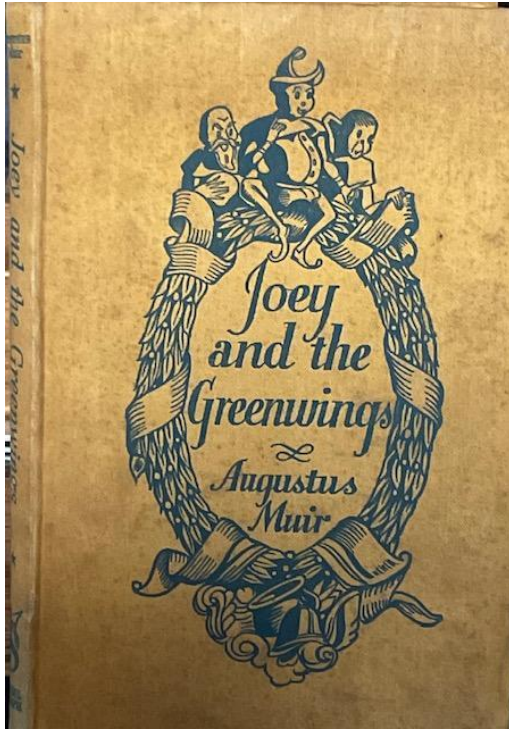
When you listen to our readers' stories, you will find that the Reading Sheffield project helped our readers create their own narrative structures and become eloquent narrators of their own lives. The books they sought and held and read are images of different stages in their lives, chapters in their autobiographical narratives. In every interview, members of the Reading Sheffield team helped our readers define their own particular moments of transition, to tell their own stories.

And I was helped to create a narrative of my own, by historians and critics from various backgrounds who thought the project an interesting one. I am grateful to each one of you who read a draft. Every critical reader helped me clarify what I was doing, and helped me climb out of various black holes into which I had dived. Not only did I spend five years with our readers I was accompanied by critical friends, always the best sort.

And, on a day-to-day basis, whenever I felt stuck, all I had to do was to listen to our readers as they made their way out of the kitchen, down the backwacks and along the shelves, and I catch that sense of movement and excitement.

So in the making of this book I was aided by the story-telling powers of our readers, the skills of the team in prompting memory and ways of moving the individual narrative on and the sustained encouragement of other historians and writers. What I have come up with is not the definitive story of our readers' stories. It is perhaps an interim report. If I was ever alone with our readers' voices, I will never be so now because the book is now a thing apart from me and has become the property of others. It has been a joy in the last four weeks to be contacted by people who have read it. More memories have been shared and questions keep coming in. 'Where is Agatha Christie?' 'Why is the girl on the cover so posh?' Each question prompts more engagement with our readers. Back I go to our source material.

These new readers have prompted new discoveries. A particularly meticulous friend contacted me last week: 'You know page 54, Mary?' (my heart sank) – 'You say there is no record of Judith's childhood favourite, *Joey and the Greenwings*. Well now's your chance to record it.' Steve pointed me towards an affordable first edition on eBay. When it arrived, the vividness of the book in Judith's memory was explained.



The book is about elves banished from earth to an aerial island and attacked by air-born predators. It was read by Judith during the Sheffield Blitz. The striking illustrations of the book depict the predatory Greenwings as fascist bluebottles with terrifyingly wide wings. Once these fascist avatars have been seen off by a plucky little human boy, the boy himself is rescued by a British airman called Dick. The book came out in 1943 just at the time when Judith would have made her way to this library by skirting the rubble that was the Moor. The terrifying reality of German bombardment is deftly transmuted into this jolly story of rather dozy elfin folk protected by a resourceful British lad and a plucky aviator. What a find!

If you would like to revisit it, Judith, it is all yours!

There is one more group of companions I would like to thank, because without them, this book would not have been published. [Liverpool University Press](#)

have a successful scheme to make academic books accessible. They now publish their books online and free to access. Alongside, they publish the paperback versions you see around you. So instead of charging £80 for a book that will be closeted in a few university libraries, we now have two different ways of accessing a book from this press. In order to make this viable, Liverpool charge authors £10,000. Thanks to many generous donors, including local firm [Gripple](#) and local charity [The James Neill Trust Fund](#) and bibliophile and broadcaster, Robin Ince, we raised this amount and in addition the money to buy copies for all our readers. I would like to thank the whole Reading Sheffield team, led by our chair, Val Hewson, for all they have done to reach our target. Special thanks to Margaret Bennett and Mike McCarthy who have worked all sorts of magic to interest others in our project. I believe that thanks to Liverpool's publishing strategy this book has, in the last four weeks, been read by far more people than have read any of my other books.

My final thanks are to our readers. I do hope you recognise yourself in these pages. If you don't, please let me know. Stories like yours have rarely been collected and the interest in what you have shared is immense. It is wonderful share this celebration with you today. Thank you for coming.