



Kelmscott School

# Literacy News Autumn 2018

# Narrow vocabulary 'hits pupils grades'

**Monosyllabic adolescents may be nothing new, but the latest research suggests a big chunk of them do not know enough words to do well at school.**

According to academics, four out of 10 pupils in their first year of secondary school have such a limited vocabulary that it is affecting their learning.

Many teachers from the 800 secondaries involved in the Oxford University Press research say the problem is worsening.

They blame the "word gap" on too little reading for pleasure.

Studies suggest breadth of vocabulary is strongly influenced by the number of words a child comes into contact with on a daily basis.

This includes conversations with parents, siblings and friends, as well as what they read.

## **'Struggle'**

The report, focusing on schools in England, says the number of pupils with limited vocabulary remains "stubbornly high" across all age groups, despite a range of programmes addressing literacy.

And 80% of the teachers surveyed said children with limited vocabulary would find it "extremely challenging" to understand test papers.

A very high proportion of the teachers said the word gap held back progress in not just English (91%), but in history (90%), geography (86%) and religious studies (78%).

Lionel Bolton, of the Oxford University Press, said: "Whether a child is 11 years old and in Year 7, or 16 years old and in Year 11, if there are words in a task that they do not understand, they will struggle to complete the task.

"The 11-year-old is likely to be able to ask for help or access a dictionary; a 16 year old in their GCSE exam cannot.

"And if they do understand all the words in the task, if their vocabulary is lower than their age, their written response may be less articulate, less effective, and ultimately achieve a lower mark.

"This of course is not new - it has ever been thus.

"But with the changes that have been brought in by the new GCSE exams - increased rigour, removal of controlled assessment, and tiering in most subjects - the vocabulary challenges posed are even more pronounced."

Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders - and an English teacher for 32 years - said: "In reality the word gap will depend on your circumstances rather than your choices - your home, your family, the richness of language and relations, the presence of books and conversations, the habits you form as you grow up. "These are things largely beyond our control."

Monosyllabic – consisting of using one syllable. A person using brief or few words to signify reluctance to engage in conversation.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-43811703>



# Jason Reynolds: ‘What is unusual about my story is that I became a writer’

Jason Reynolds, a 34-year-old from Washington DC, didn’t grow up expecting to be a writer: indeed, he was 17 before he read a book from start to finish. But it might be his atypical background that allows him to connect so powerfully with teenage readers. He has published a dozen novels - mostly for young adults – in the US, has been a National Book award finalist and is a fixture on the *New York Times* bestseller list. He was also recently named on the *Guardian’s* Frederick Douglass 200 list, which honours the 200 living individuals who best embody the work and spirit of the American abolitionist and politician. Now one of Reynolds’s books, *Long Way Down*, is being released in the UK. Told in verse, it follows Will, a 15-year-old boy out for revenge after his older brother is shot dead.

**The starting point for *Long Way Down* came from personal experience. What happened to you?**

When I was 19, a friend of mine was murdered. That night my friends and I went to his mom’s house and we were all planning to figure out who did this to him so we could exact revenge. So we could murder the man who murdered our friend. And I just remember the pain – the pain of the lost friend but also the pain of meeting a part of myself that I didn’t know existed. A part of myself that could lose control to the point where I could commit a murder. That’s a very human thing. I think that most of us don’t ever meet that part of ourselves that exists within all of us. This rage that, when triggered, will cause you to do things that you don’t necessarily understand that you’re doing.

**A key tension in the book is whether Will is capable of going through with the plan to kill his brother’s murderer. You didn’t, but could you have done it?**

Absolutely. Oh yes, without a doubt. But only in a certain time frame. It it was like being frozen in a block of ice, right, and in this moment, within this block of ice, I know that I could commit a murder. There are crimes of passion and there are moments when we lose control and, for me and my friends, we lost control. We lost control! And it wasn’t that we were animals or murderers, we were children who were heartbroken.

**There’s an author’s note in *Long Way Down* where you recognise that young people, particularly boys, don’t like to read. Then you add: “So here’s what I plan to do: NOT WRITE BORING BOOKS.”**

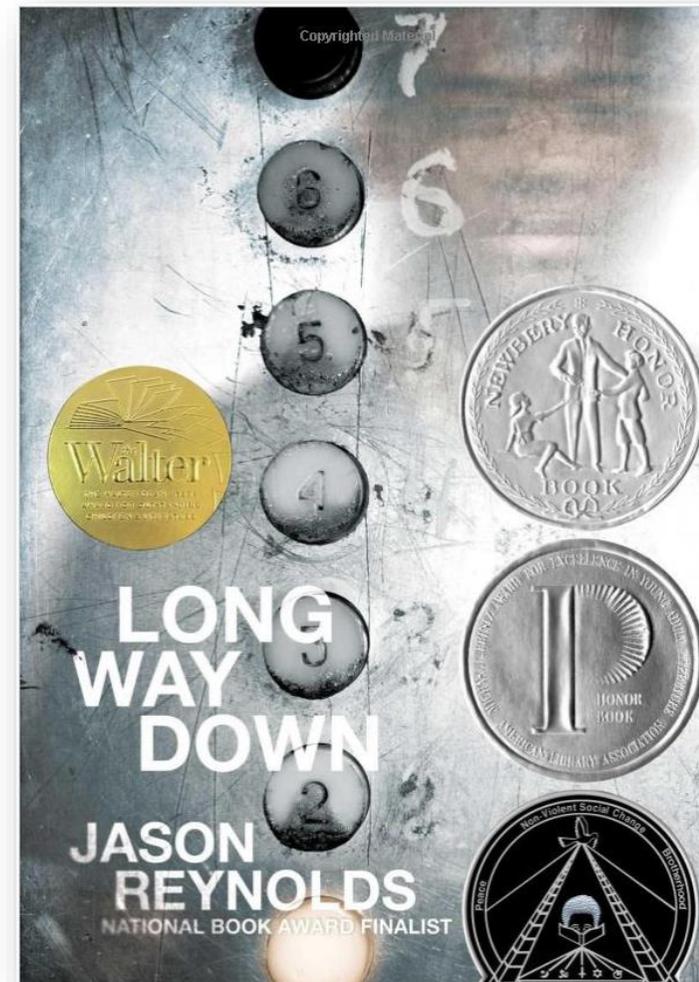
To me that’s one plus one is two. Young people – especially young men – it’s not that they hate reading, it’s that they hate boredom. So my thing was: I need to write a story that is interesting, that is gripping, that can connect to them and their experiences, and write something that’s not very intimidating, because there’s so much white space.

**You didn’t finish a book until you were 17 – Richard Wright’s 1945 memoir, *Black Boy*, about growing up in the American south. Was that unusual where you grew up?**

The only thing that’s unusual about my story is that I became a writer. But me not reading is the norm. And me not reading till I was 17 – none of my friends did. Most of my friends still don’t, and that’s boys and girls.

**You’ve had a lot of success now, but you still do a lot of talks at schools and juvenile detention centres. Why is that important?**

It’s a push-pull thing. One side is about staying engaged, so I can be truthful about the things I’m writing about: you’ve got to know them in order to show them. But it’s also about making sure that they know that they can be me. Because they can’t be what they can’t see. It isn’t rocket science, we’ve seen it happen over and over. Think about golf: Tiger Woods starts playing golf and all of a sudden black kids all over the world are like: “Yo!” Serena and Venus Williams, they play tennis, they have beads in their hair, they’re from Compton, California, and black kids who felt like they didn’t have a place in tennis, suddenly tennis feels more palatable. This is the way it works.



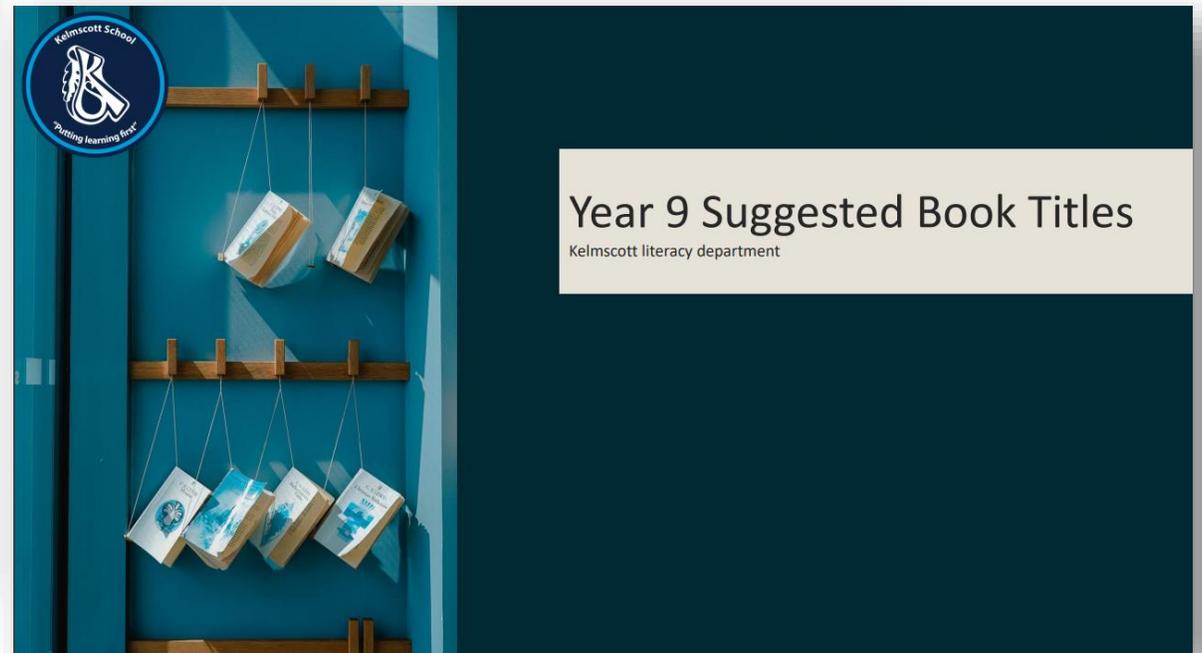
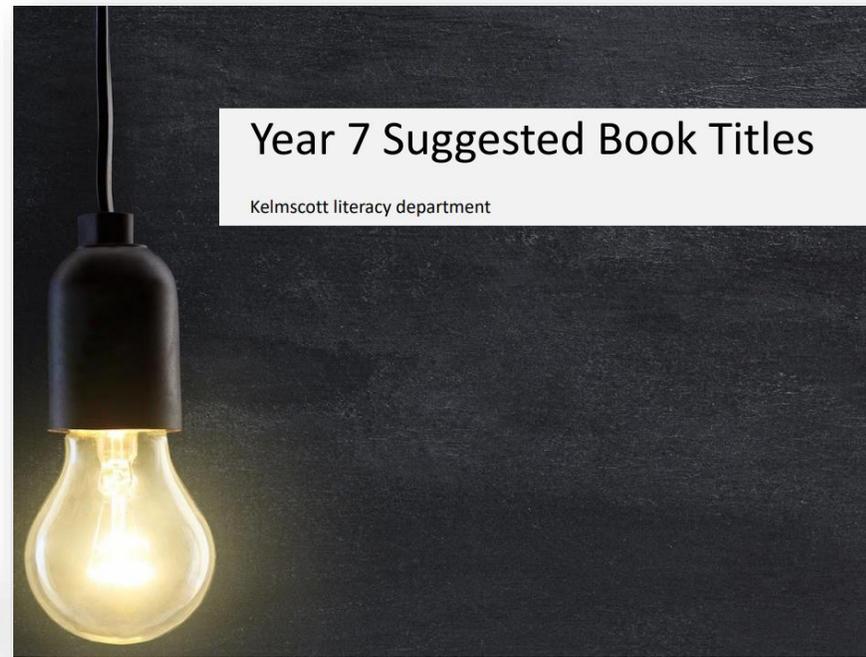
Guardian Newspaper  
Interview by Tim Lewis on 4<sup>th</sup> August 2018

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/04/jason-reynolds-murder-why-young-people-shun-reading-crochet>

Long Way Down available in our school library

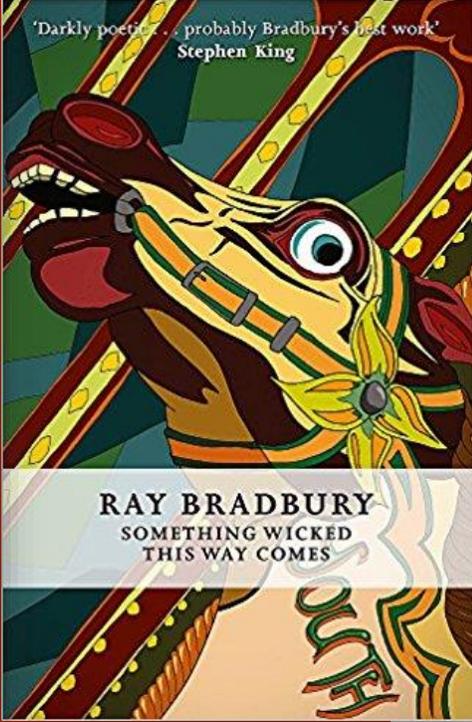
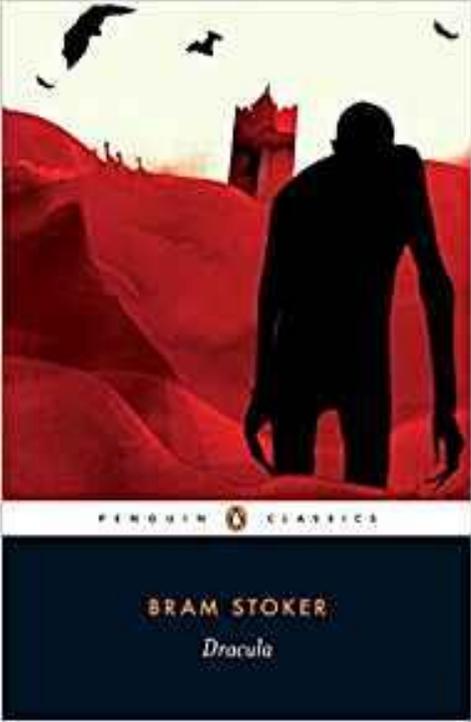
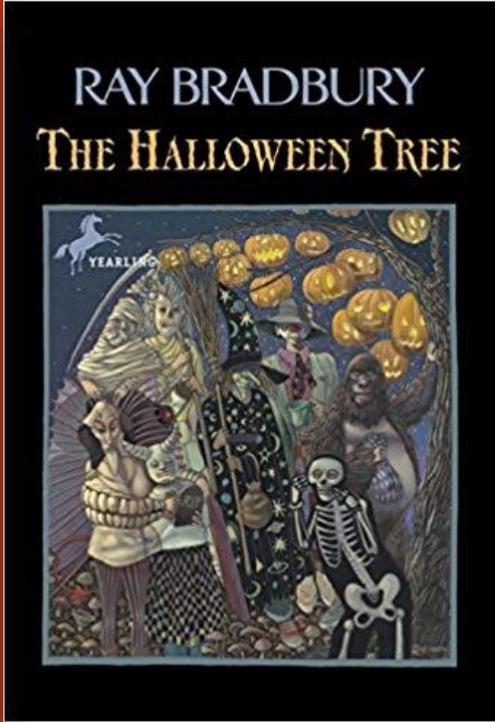
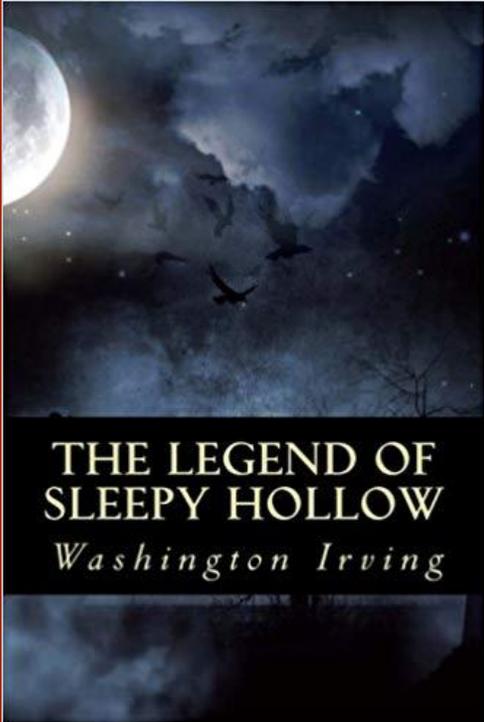
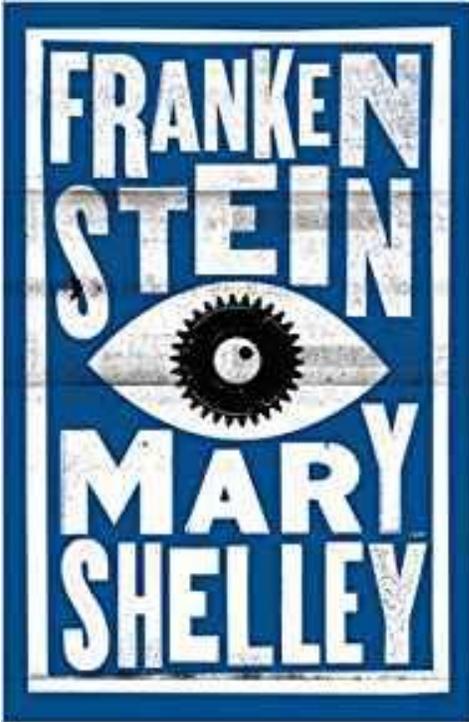
# Suggested Book Titles

On our school website under the Literacy heading we have a wealth of information for you and your parent/carers to look through. One of the most valuable pieces of information are the suggested book title lists. If you are not sure which book to read or you would like to challenge yourself have a look. Each year group area has approx. 15+ suggested book titles and blurbs to give you more in-depth insight about the book. We welcome any suggested titles you would like to add to the lists, please advise Ms Longman.



# Autumn Reading

## Best Halloween Books



All books available from our school library.

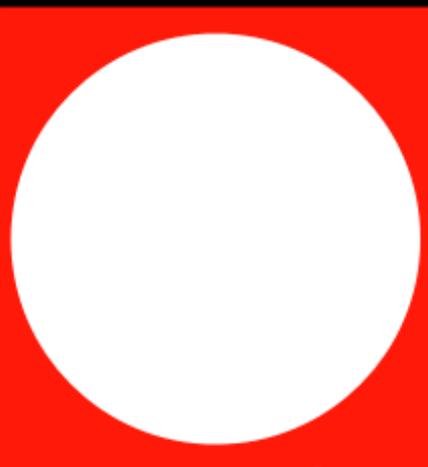
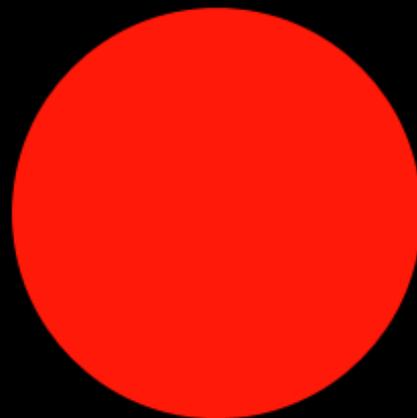
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# Book Club



**Sign up today in the library.**

Create your own group of between 4 – 6 friends. You read the same title at the same time. Meet 6 weeks later to discuss over hot chocolate in the library.



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