



UACHTARÁN NA hÉIREANN
PRESIDENT OF IRELAND

Message from President Michael D. Higgins

For the ‘Ireland Reads’ Initiative

May I begin by thanking Stuart Hamilton, Head of the Libraries Department in the Local Government Management Agency, for the invitation to send this message of support today. The ‘Ireland Reads’ initiative is such a good idea and so rightly placed within the *Government Plan for Living with COVID-19*.

My hope is that, throughout the month of February, ‘Ireland Reads’ will draw an enthusiastic support from the public as public libraries throughout the country collaborate with writers, booksellers, publishers and those involved in adult literacy.

This national campaign is so valuable and indeed necessary. It encourages everyone to re-discover, or perhaps even discover for the first time, the joy of reading for enjoyment and the wellbeing it guarantees.

The initiative aims to help us all to combat so-called ‘lockdown fatigue’ by encouraging us to reacquaint ourselves with the wonders of literature, and the pleasures of reading, to take time to sit and enjoy a book, or perhaps a poem, a newspaper, a magazine or comic, or whatever it is the eyes might fall upon.

I have to say that books have played, and continue to play, probably an inordinate role, in my own life. Books are a great friend. There are times in the midst of books when the book will “select you” as the great mystic Thomas Merton put it. It was something he called “the serendipity of books”.

A book may be a friend for life.

Libraries are the oxygen of public life, and most important are the library staff who have, over the years, created an atmosphere for generations of Irish children, women

and men. I have long admired, too, the National Adult Literacy Agency for their work. To give the gift of reading to another – is there any greater gift?

So, may I say then how happy I am that libraries are playing a central role in this initiative. Libraries are places for the quiet engagement of the soul, for a peaceful contemplating of any neglected curiosity, of intellectual awakening. They are, to use Socrates' metaphor, the "delivery room for the birth of ideas", encouraging young and old to be inquisitive about the world in which we live, about how our past is part of what has shaped our present, and about how we might use our knowledge and talents to create a better future, helping us to achieve a sense of belonging, of cohesion.

The books in our libraries offer us information and ideas, but they also stimulate us to pursue more knowledge and to form new ideas of our own that add to our curiosity, and encourage our open-mindedness, for the benefit of ourselves, our friends and our communities.

It has been proven, too, that taking time each day to read for pleasure is one of the best ways we can combat fatigue and anxiety associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions that we all must endure.

Books are windows to so many worlds, both real and imaginary. Indeed, it has been said that to acquire the habit of reading is to construct for yourself a refuge from almost all the difficulties that life thrusts upon us.

Reading has been shown to put our brains into a pleasurable trance-like state, similar to meditation, and it brings the same health benefits of deep relaxation and inner calm. Regular readers sleep better, have lower stress levels, higher self-esteem, and lower rates of depression than non-readers.

Reading enhances our language skills and develops fluency, allowing us to express our thoughts and ideas better. Books respond to our thirst for knowledge. Through books, we learn about how things work, understand different cultures, and seek to comprehend the histories of the world.

There can be no doubt that a love of reading and of good literature is one of the greatest gifts that we can offer our children. Books are for them, as for us, a portal into a wider universe and the beginning of an enriching and creative journey that will transport us, and them, to new places, introduce us to new experiences that enable us to experience, engage with and change the world.

I understand that a dedicated website will be available as part of 'Ireland Reads' and that it will enable readers to receive recommendations suited to their choices, their interests, their time availability and capacity. The website will provide information as to how the public can access books and reading materials online, through libraries or local booksellers.

May I encourage everyone – individuals, communities, voluntary groups, sporting associations, those involved in the arts, cultural practitioners as well as those in business – to take part in the initiative, to commit to setting aside time to read on the 25th February, 'Ireland Reads Day', and to share their experiences with family, friends, bookclubs or indeed online. In doing so, all of us will be helping ourselves to mind our own physical and mental health and wellbeing during this difficult period, as well as engaging with others in a nourishing form of active citizenship and participation.

May I wish the 'Ireland Reads' initiative every success.

Guím gach rath ar an tógra cruthaíoch seo.

Beir beannacht.



Michael O'Riordan