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THE PLR SCHEME TWENTY YEARS ON:

‘PHONEY AND UNWORKABLE’ OR
‘SMOOTH, EFFORTLESS AND WONDERFUL’?

Twenty years ago Parliament passed the Public Lending Right Act which gave authors a legal right to receive payment for the free lending of their books by public libraries. In this 20th anniversary year, some £4 million will be distributed among 17,000 authors whose books have been borrowed from libraries throughout the country.

The PLR Scheme was established only after a long, and at times acrimonious, campaign. An early opponent condemned it as **‘phoney in conception, ill-considered in policy and substantially unworkable in practice. It also involved a significant misapplication of public money.’** (Letter published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 Sept 1982.)

Twenty years on, have the critics been proved wrong?

By recognising PLR as a legal right, Parliament itself rejected any notion that PLR was phoney or that it represented a misuse of public money. Lord Goodman put the authors’ case as succinctly as anyone: **‘It seems to me as plain as the nose on my face that it is a social wrong to allow a book... to be borrowed from public library without any payment of any kind to the living author. A great deal of sophistry has been wasted obscuring this simple situation.’**

Today PLR’s credentials are firmly established with Government. Culture Secretary Chris Smith, whose department provides PLR’s funding, emphasises PLR’s **‘valuable contribution to meeting the objectives of this Government; in particular, it helps boost out creative industries and enables everyone to have access to the wealth of literature produced in this country.’** (*PLR Annual Report, 1996-97*)

And Britain is not alone in recognising the legal right of authors to be compensated for the free use of their works in libraries.

Fifteen countries now operate PLR systems and a sixteenth (France) is shortly to set up its own PLR scheme following an EC Directive on the subject. Reciprocal arrangements exist between the United Kingdom and Germany.

Predictions that the scheme would prove unworkable have proved unfounded. Some 30,000 authors have registered for PLR since the scheme’s inception. On the basis of loans data collected from a nation-wide sample of public libraries over 80% have regularly qualified for payment.

Experience of two decades of PLR payments has shown that PLR is providing vital financial support for authors, including many who are not bestsellers but who rely on the popularity of their books in libraries for their livelihoods. For example, veteran romantic novelist Nicola Thorne has found PLR **‘a life saver in a career of ups and downs ... a continued source of satisfaction through some dark days.’**

PLR has opened a window on library lending, both for librarians and authors. For authors, PLR provides a personal link with their readers giving feedback on the

popularity of their books in libraries. Mary (Lady Stewart, a household name for all fiction readers, has described her annual PLR statement as a **'sort of barometer – a sliding scale of reassurance, letting me know if my work is still appreciated.'**

For children's writers, particularly, PLR has provided a link with their young library readers and produced feedback on the relative popularity of their books which can be hugely motivating. Tony Bradman, who writes for younger children, sees PLR as a great **'boost to your confidence... I find the image of all those children reading my books very affirming. It's better than royalty statements, so more direct, somehow. It's also evidence that some books which publishers have allowed to go out of print will still have a thriving and rewarding life in libraries.'** For Shirley Hughes, creator of the Alfie stories and one of the country's most popular children's writers, the joy of PLR is the **'thought of someone, perhaps a very young someone, sitting on a library floor enthralled in a book ... and borrowing it over and over again until it becomes an old friend. The arrival of my PLR printout is for me one of the great spurs towards fresh endeavours.'**

A recent national survey of authors' views on the operation of the scheme conducted by PLR office found overwhelming satisfaction with its cost-effectiveness, efficiency and responsiveness. One respondent found the scheme **'smooth, simple effortless and wonderful'**. On this basis it would be easy to be complacent, but any scheme which has rules on eligibility and bases its payment calculations on data derived from statistical sampling inevitably produces winners and losers.

The scheme may be accused of providing high rough justice for some authors, but it is justice nonetheless.

Background Information for Editors

The PLR Scheme is funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and is administered by the Registrar of Public Lending Right. Payments are made annually and are based on the number of times an author's books are borrowed from public libraries. Loans data is collected from a sample of 30 library authorities throughout the UK. These are grossed up to provide a national loans estimate for each book. The total number of loans is then divided into the money made available by the Secretary of State (after the running costs of the Scheme have been deducted) and the resulting Rate Per Loan forms the basis of the payments made.

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Richard House, Sorbonne Close, Stockton-on-Tees TS17 6DA**