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RED Activity 2: Working Class Readers

Neville Cardus was from Rusholme in Manchester. Born in 1889, he was an illegitimate child from a working class family, the son of laundry workers. As a boy he read 'boys' papers'/comics, before discovering Mark Twain and Dickens in his teens. Before reaching the age of 20 he was reading Fielding, Browning, Hardy, Tolstoy and Henry James. In later life he said he still regarded these authors as "the best discovered in a lifetime".

Neville accessed books from public libraries, using more than one ("he trudged from one public library to another") and bought cheap books, the "shilling Harmsworth editions". One particular favourite author was J.M. Robertson; in his works he read of a poor boy who had educated himself. Neville found these books "stimulating and his books served as my encyclopedia". He read at meals, in the street, under the lamps at night and in bed. Reading at school is not mentioned – Neville left school at 13.

This sheds light on what books were available to poor working class children at the turn of the century and where they could access them. We don't know who recommended books to him or who steered him towards the classic authors of fiction he was reading as a young man, but they were available at little or no cost.