



It's not every day you get an invite to 10 Downing Street, or a medal that says you are a national reading hero. But, earlier this year, that's just what happened to me...

Paul Cookson

READING HEROES PHOTOS © DOMINIC TURNER

It all started on a Thursday evening in November when the telephone rang. The voice on the other end told me she was from the National Year of Reading. I knew all about that. I'd done loads of NYR events – I'd been Poet-in-residence for *Literacy Time PLUS* and had visited lots of libraries and schools.

The lady asked if I'd heard about Reading Heroes. Apparently, people were nominating others who'd inspired them to read. Expecting her to ask: 'As a poet, who inspired you?', I was about to say, 'Mrs Graham (my English teacher), Roger McGough, Noddy Holder, Stephen King'. But then she told me that not only had I been nominated as a Reading Hero, I'd also won an award!

"Is it like a Blue Peter badge?" I joked.

"No – it's better than that. You've got to come to 10 Downing Street and receive it from Sarah Brown."

A heroes' reception

It was humbling to meet the other Heroes – librarians, social workers, and children, like Shaheen Mogradia (pictured with Paul above right), who has been busy encouraging her teenage peers to get back into the library. All had inspired

others to read – by starting reading groups, recording books for the blind and a host of other fantastic things. I must admit to feeling that any number of poets and writers, who work tirelessly in schools, often unnoticed, four or five days a week, could have been here as well. So, if I was a Hollywood



Oscar® winner, I'd dedicate this award to them – and to my father, who sadly died just after Christmas.

Posing for photographs outside the famous black door felt great. Even tourists were taking pictures of us! Once inside, we were guided to a reception room for tea, coffee, sandwiches (no crusts!), mini éclairs, meringues and scones (lovely... I had several but did manage to spill cream on the carpet ... whoops!).

Sarah Brown welcomed us, saying that she was proud to be part of the NYR and to meet so many Reading Heroes. I was impressed with her warmth, friendliness and approachability as she gave each person their medal and mingled. I mentioned to her that it was great to look out and see Horse Guards Parade from one window, and the garden with trampoline and multicoloured Wendy house from another! She said that if we'd been there during the snow, we'd have seen the garden full of snowmen, and that Gordon really switched off when he was with the children and watching football.

After No 10, it was off to The Atrium, near the Houses of Parliament, for

speeches by the NYR and by American Louis Ferrante (who has transformed his life from Mafia insider to full-time novelist!).

So, after 20 years of being a poet, I'd found myself at Downing Street. I started my year at *Literacy Time PLUS* talking about the places poetry had taken me – there's another. It really is a great job! I'd like to say thank-you to Honor, Catherine and Emily from the NYR for a memorable day – keep up the good work! The last word, though, needs to go to Helen Watts, Editor of this very magazine. I found out that it was Helen who had nominated me as a Reading Hero. So thank you, Helen, and if I was still doing my Oscar speech I'd dedicate it to you as well.



P.S.:
If Sarah Brown reads this, I do apologise for the cream on the carpet!