

'Reading is subversive. It brings about precisely what fascists do not want: education and critical awareness,'

says Pulitzer Prize laureate author Percival Everett.

Particularly at a time of growing autocracies, the international exchange in book studies and the book economy is becoming ever more important.

Reading is one of those foundational cultural techniques: it is essential for finding and developing oneself in a complex world – for growth, for strengthening empathy, for acquiring knowledge and insight, and for being able to apply them with confidence.

Promoting reading is one of the Börsenverein's core activities. Since its foundation 201 years ago, our Association has had a dual mandate: as an economic and cultural organisation which – very much in de Tocqueville's sense – also assumes responsibility for democracy.

In a country like ours that depends on education and media competence, and that really ought to be on its way to becoming a knowledge society, the situation is disastrous:

39% of children aged one to eight are rarely or never read to. A quarter of children leaving primary school after Year 4 cannot read with a deeper understanding. We have, by now, to speak of an educational crisis.

And the problem continues into adult life: according to the latest PIAAC study – the 'PISA study for adults' – one in five adults living in Germany reads at the level of a ten-year-old child or below.

What, among other things, are we doing to address this? 600,000 children take part in the national reading-aloud competition – and, as it happens, the final takes place today. More than one million children participate in World Book Day. And many more together with highly engaged booksellers and publishers.

We highly value the constructive, critical collaboration with Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and with its book scholars, and we maintain an exchange that is, at times, accompanied by a certain amount of frictional heat.

With an annual turnover of around €10 billion and approximately 60,000 new titles each year, the German book market is among the most significant in the world. If you need further figures for the book market: the comprehensive 'Buch und Buchhandel in Zahlen' will be published shortly, with everything you need to know.

Despite the many economic, cultural-policy and economic-policy challenges – and I will not even begin to address the subject of generative AI here – the German book sector continues to offer a fascinating and diverse range of books in bookshops and publishing houses, as well as attractive career prospects.

In that spirit, in that sense, I wish you all two subversive days together

Ladies and Gentlemen, 'Once you learn to read, you will be forever free' – as Frederick Douglass put it: an escaped American slave, abolitionist, human-rights activist, politician and publisher, and arguably the most influential African American of the nineteenth century.

Over recent days and weeks I have spent a great deal of time in political discussions making the case for the importance of literacy, media competence and deep reading comprehension in safeguarding our open society, our democracy and our European canon of values. After all these conversations, some of them frankly exhausting, I am, quite openly, very pleased today being able to carry coals to Newcastle and to preach to the converted. I congratulate you, dear Christoph Bläsi, and everyone involved in shaping the programme of the eleventh *By the Book Programm*; and I wish you all a fruitful and inspiring exchange