**Prompt**

I've combined three quotes from Riddley Walker below.  Analyze them in terms of what Riddley is saying about the power of words, reading, and books and then write about how changes in our lives and the worlds we live in have a direct effect on the tangible nature of books.  Do a bit of research and bolster your opinion with sources on the changes we see in the world today: languages being lost, writing styles changing, how we prize what we read.

"What ben makes tracks for what wil be.  Words in the air pirnt foot steps on the groun for us to put our feet in to.  I don't  have nothing only words to put down on paper.  Its so hard.  Some times theres mor in the emty paper nor there is when you get the writing down on it. You try to word the big things and they tern ther backs on you.  Looking at them words going down on this paper right this minim I know there aint no such thing  there aint no only my self you all ways have every 1 and every thing on your back."

**Response**

Do words have power? The question is one that can be pondered for days, weeks, months, maybe even years. Looking at the quotes by Riddley, it is obvious that he feels that they wield enormous power. Think first about the fact that Riddley lives in a world where language has degraded and the skills of reading and writing are understood only by a select few (and even then, not very well). Even so, Riddley has an understanding that these abilities truly link him to the very distant past, before the “1 Big 1” and all of the destruction and chaos that followed.

As Riddley says, “What ben makes tracks for what wil be.” In other words, the past greatly influences what happens now and in the future. How is the past understood though? Through language! Here, I feel that Riddley is speaking specifically to oral traditions, because he next mentions “words in the air.” In other words, looking at what has been done gives each of us an idea of what to do next. As a college student, this is evident in every single course that I take, whether it is science, math, history, language, or any of a number of subjects. The pattern is always the same: here is what has been done, here is what is happening now, and here is what might be able to be done in the future because of this. It is, essentially, all cause-and-effect.

Riddley also expresses a feeling of frustration that all he has are “words to put down on paper.” In our modern world, or at least the corner of it that we live in, this would seem to be almost trivial. But imagine not knowing how to put words to paper, and not being able to decipher ones that were already written. And his feeling that the empty paper has more to it than when words are written on it is equally profound. By putting words down on paper, we limit possibilities. By this, I mean that we are defining what we mean to say and eliminating all other meanings. A blank sheet of paper can be used to expressed ANYTHING in the world, but as soon as words are put onto it, it is limited to what those words express. This speaks to the power of written language and its ability to define individuals, societies, cultures, nations, and the world as a whole.

Riddley also struggles with the big, “deep” concepts. There are some concepts that it is just hard to put words to and they therefore become frustrating. We use words, especially written language, to wrestle with ideas by giving the abstract some sort of physical presence (the words on the page or, in today’s world, the screen). But, these concepts are huge and mind-boggling. Is it even possible to limit a concept to a group of words, phrases, or sentences? Often, no. Think of some of the scientific wording in medical journals. The concepts they may be trying to explain or explore are difficult, no doubt, but the convoluted and complex words used to do so make the concept even harder to grasp sometimes. By the same token, it is often hard to “dumb down” a concept because it is just so complex! And then there are cases where one person might find a concept easy to grasp and understand, but another may not. Neither may be able to explain the concept with words, because it becomes something more primal.

Words, when viewed in this context, are extremely powerful. Applying them to a concept limits that concept, even without meaning to. For example, saying something as simple as “the sky is blue” eliminates all other possibilities and interpretations, either about the sky or the color blue. For that instance, that sentence, the concept is limited to the boundaries of those four words. Mentally, however, we take in those words and set the limitations aside. In doing so, we internalize the concept so that it becomes more like emotion or feeling, not organized thought or logic. Words, therefore, are so powerful because they attempt to set boundaries on something that could, potentially, be limitless.

A prominent theme in *Riddley Walker* is, of course, the LOSS of language. My grandmother was raised in Shreveport, Louisiana. To this day, 50 or 60 years later, she fondly recalls the feeling and cadence of the Creole language. Creole is a language that developed in that region from bits of nearly every language present there, including French, Spanish, and a variety of African dialects. In this sense, it is, as Aaron Lansky called Yiddish, a bastard language. However, it is part of a larger, rich culture. Unfortunately, every time my grandmother visited home, she heard it less and less. The number of people that speak Creole is vanishing, rapidly. It is swift becoming a dead language, and people are divided as to whether that is good or bad. The fact is that, with loss of the language, the entire Creole culture loses a huge chunk of its foundation.

In Scotland, we learned that the English tried to stamp out Scottish Gaelic and anything that recalled a cultural heritage. It is demoralizing and disheartening. In another honors seminar, Immigration Across the Disciplines, we have discussed how, in particular Jews, would abandon their cultural heritage (including language and even foods) for a generation or two in order to assimilate. After that, they felt safe returning to such things, but then face the problem of authenticity.

The fact that the loss of a language also means a loss of a huge portion of culture further emphasizes the importance of words and the power they wield. They limit and guide our thoughts, but also allow those limitations to be removed. They open opportunities for discourse and examination across disciplines, cultures, nations, and languages. So, to answer the question: Do words have power? Positively, unequivocally, YES, words have power.