

Slow Reading: The Power to Transform

By Dr Pam Macintyre

At the beginning of the teaching year, our first year undergraduate education students were asked to complete a short survey about their reading attitudes and behaviours in preparation for their first assignment. As expected, the responses were varied; from those for whom reading was an integral part of their lives, to those who were frank about disliking it intensely.

The three teaching staff, all passionate readers, began each tutorial by reading – a picture book or an excerpt from a longer work. And each week a different approach to thinking, talking about and analysing the reading experience and responses, was the frame for discussion. What emerged across the classes – not for every student of course, but for many – was an ignited or reignited pleasure in reading. It became clear this was based on a deeper understanding of what it is a reader does: those active processes that bring a text alive, and knowledge about the way texts are crafted. For some, this was the first time these processes of analysis had been presented to them, and that they had shared a close, deep reading. It reinforced for the teaching staff what we believed, and what Nodelman & Reimer (2003) express so clearly, that greater understanding produces greater pleasure.

Each week too, class members shared what they had been reading – for some, coping with first year university demands left little space for leisure reading, but others contributed varied reading tastes and preferences. Often a particular book shared by a class member was a trigger for others to read: Morris Gleitzman's *Once* (2005) in one class, John Green's *The Fault in our Stars* (2012) and *Looking for Alaska* (2006) in another.

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One highlight occurred when three students, attracted by its appealing artwork and the author's reputation, chose Shaun Tan's *Rules of Summer* (2014) as their book to share and discuss. Their initial reading and response was that they hadn't a clue what it was about. It was clear that there was no intention or excitement on their behalf to explore further, or perhaps no ready mechanism to unpack its meaning for them, to enjoy thinking about why the book was a puzzle.

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The book was lying closed on their table when I approached. The strategy for that week's class was simple: write down two questions you have about the book, and use these as the basis for discussion. We

had spoken about one of the pleasures of literature being the opening up of questions, the invitation to puzzle out our own meanings, and that rich texts provide space for and support multiple interpretations. For these three students it seemed a task too big . . . until they did it. All three had noticed the birds on each page, and each wrote a question about what their significance might be. They went back into the book for a much closer reading, focussed exploration and engaged discussion about what the birds were doing on each page and how they related to the events for the two boys in the story. By the end of the class, each student had come to a completely different, well-articulated, symbolic understanding of what the birds were doing in the story. Their delight in their achievement and new understandings was palpable.

At the same time that these classes were happening I was reading – well, dipping into – Terry Eagleton's *How to Read Literature* (2013). Eagleton is a learned, witty writer whose works I always find inspirational, if demanding. He opens the book with an imagined discussion in which a class of tertiary literature students talk about *Wuthering Heights* as if they were gossiping about a group of friends. This resonated with me. I had become concerned (well, irritated) with the ubiquity of the word 'relatable' in relation to the value of reading for young people, the basis for recommending texts and what the expectations of response would be. It was more than an irrational aversion to the word itself. Certainly, to become a reader we need to find our

experiences mirrored in what we read as children. But as experienced readers we don't want to leave our young readers stranded in such a place, where their only motivation is to read about lives similar to their own, or characters like themselves. We know that literature is full of characters we love (Alaska and Felix are two examples) because they are distinguished from us. As experienced readers we know what reading offers us in expanding our repertoire: confirming, unsettling and challenging our views of the world and of others unlike us. We don't have to relate to the characters; we don't even have to like them. (Does any reader *like* Humbert Humbert or Anna Karenina?) We need to remind our young readers that characters live only in the text, and that texts are 'patterns of meaning' (Eagleton, 2013, p. 46). Learning to understand and appreciate the creation of those patterns of meaning, and the uses of literary devices deepens reading engagement and pleasure.

It is always interesting that when you begin to organise your thoughts about something, you serendipitously come across ideas that overlap with the train of thought. One example is the recent *Children and Reading* report by the Australia Council (Dickenson, 2014). It has few surprises: girls read more than boys; socioeconomic status affects reading; reading declines in adolescence; bookish homes and parental models are significant. Sadly, perhaps what is also not surprising is that there has been a significant fall in children's pleasure reading from 2006 to 2012. This is confirmed in PISA, PIRLS and ABS data. While the decline is across formats, the author of this extensive literature review concludes that "it is possible that the decline has occurred more strongly or even exclusively, in the reading of traditional paper texts" (Dickenson, 2014, p. 9).

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One reason might be (and the review suggests there is plenty of space for more research in the area) the loss of the 'slow reading' of literary, or the term used in the report, 'traditional' texts: the close attention to literary form and technique, the pleasures and understandings it brings, and the enjoyment of language and admiration of those who use it to move us. Our students are in danger of missing the appreciation of literature as being about the felt experience of language, not just the practical use of it: to quote Eagleton, "not just the meaning of experience, but the experience of meaning" (2014, p.192). This to me rightly challenges the view of David Ryding, director of Melbourne's City of Literature office who is not a fan of the term 'literature'. In Melbourne's *Age* newspaper he declared: "By its nature, literature makes people think about pretty words, pretty spaces, and it sounds elitist," he says. (*The Age* May 29, 2015). Clearly there is no challenge for him to change these perceptions.

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Schools, universities and libraries are accepting the challenge. Students need us to slow the reading, to model and facilitate the enjoyment of contemplation and the sharing of responses and interpretations. We need to share our enjoyment of language, and the

delight in the places reading can take us well beyond the physical, geographical, emotional, intellectual boundaries of our daily lives. We also need to share our knowledge and pleasure about the *how* of what is said not only the *what*. Picture books are the ideal starting place for this 'slow reading' no matter what the age of the audience. They employ pared down, poetic texts, dual storytelling combining word and image in a unique synergy in which nothing, a comma (or the absence of one) or a brushstroke is accidental.

The second serendipitous contribution to this article came from another favourite writer, Mohsin Hamid, who in his recent collection of essays, wrote about a favourite book and probed what made it so memorable:

we [readers] are unsettled and given more to do. An unexpected narrative space opens up before us, nags at us, seduces us . . . the lessons [the book] teaches us about how fiction works have the power to transform (2014, p. 66).

This is Eagleton's point precisely and one that can enrich the reading experience for our young readers.

Let us make certain that we are initiating them into what Eagleton says is what literary texts demand: "a peculiarly vigilant type of reading, one which is alert to tone, mood, pace, genre, syntax, grammar, texture,

rhythm, narrative structure, punctuation, ambiguity" (2013, p. 2). They are depending on us. The rewards are waiting.

References

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