Reviews


It is now almost two years since Sir Jim Rose published his Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading, (DfES 2006). The publicity it occasioned has mostly died down, but waves of gloom continue to reverberate: those of us with broad and liberal understandings of what reading is and what reading is for regret Rose’s insistence on discrete synthetic phonics as “the prime approach to establishing word recognition” (2006:20), and are unconvinced that the “broad and language-rich curriculum” (29) into which this teaching will be positioned will be anything like broad or rich enough to mitigate the reductionalist and technicist assumptions that so often accompany phonics teaching in the early years. Where, in all this discrete decoding work, we ask, do children learn what reading is good for? It is refreshing then, to read Colin Harrison’s new book Understanding Reading Development. Here the approach is neither reductionalist nor technicist. Taking as a central proposition Flaubert’s exhortation to a correspondent:

Do not read, as children do, to amuse yourself, or like the ambitious, for the purpose of instruction. No read in order to live. (1857)

Harrison argues that reading in order to live supposes a moral duty: we need to read in order to learn to be. By implication, those of us engaged in the teaching of reading are undertaking a moral and political enterprise: we are helping children to develop the tools they need to be human. It behoves us to make the teaching of reading as rich, as meaningful and as life enhancing as we can. And we need to do it well.

What follows is a complex web of argument to that point. Harrison makes his case by means of a number of strands of intertwined argument. First is his personal subjectivity as a reader and postmodern thinker: this leads him to reject simplistic understandings of “scientific” research into reading acquisition and reading assessment and the rhetoric that flows from them, in favour of classroom-based, particular, ethnographic explorations and celibations of practice. Second is a wide ranging review of research into reading, which sees reading as a social, historical and literary activity, as well as a cognitive task; and third is his account of various classroom activities, the fruits of teacher research and good practice.

It is in this third strand of argument that Understanding Reading Development is at its most engaging and most likely to appeal to the teachers to whom it is addressed. In chapters written with teacher-researchers, Harrison shows us how six year olds can engage in DARTs activities, how eleven year olds make sense of the text books they read and how teachers can model co-operative reading tasks to teenagers. These episodes amply illustrate the point: that reading should be, and can be, meaningful and transformative – and they give the book an energy that is sometimes missing from theoretical texts.

But it is the theoretical underpinning that supports these episodes that is most impressive. Two chapters in particular stand out. The first, in which Harrison provides an overview of reading, which, though firmly located in the political present, is informed richly by historical, literary and philosophical perspectives, positions him firmly in the great liberal tradition of educators. There is a whiff here of almost Arnomdian stature in the scope of his moral interest. The second, chapter three, deals with the complexity of what understanding is. It shows another side of Harrison’s scholarship. This chapter ranges from a discussion of the importance of memory to an exploration of the strengths of latent semantic analysis (read the book if you want to know what this is) by way of oral poetry, story structure and schema theory, and in it we see the academic at work, rather than the polemicist. Here is a mind grappling with diverse, big ideas and making them easily accessible to the reader. Together, these chapters provide what is so often missing in the discussion of reading in the media, and in the evidence submitted to parliamentary select committees: an erudite, educated, really informed exploration of what reading is and what reading might be.

Those readers who are not new to Harrison’s work will find much they recognise in Understanding Reading Development: the thinking on early reading and on assessment, for example, has been published elsewhere. What makes this book particularly worth while for me is the connective tissue, the thinking behind the thinking that shows the breadth of Harrison’s scholarship. Any writer who can move swiftly and deftly from A. B. Lord and his theories of oral formulaic poetry to Wibbly Pig in mere two paragraphs deserves the respect of us all!


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You need to read this book. I can tell you this unequivocally (well, almost) because if you’re the kind of person who reads the reviews section of literacy journals, you’ll want to take account of the arguments Gemma Moss makes in this important new book.

The subtitle of Literacy and Gender is ‘Researching Texts, Contexts and Readers’. The book does exactly what it says on the cover, in relation to primary education, thinking through where we are now in our understandings of literacy and gender in the light of changes in texts and developments in school. Moss brings to the book the clarity of analysis and commitment to classroom-based research which characterise all of her work. She moves easily between representations of recognisable classrooms, populated by children and teachers getting on with the everyday realities of life, and astute commentary on research and theorising in the field. What is particularly satisfying, to this