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Living on the Planet of the Readers

Exploring Books Beyond the Boundaries of literacy

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Abstract

This paper examines implications of books and their appeal in 21st century contexts of SMS text messaging, films and television, CD-ROMs, videos, and so on. It views books as entry to a world of spiritual and emotional satisfaction for all to explore, as, regardless of the literacy competencies that are basic to the mechanics of reading, there is a much larger and richer aspect of reading that goes well beyond such competencies. There are whole worlds of literature to explore as well, and it can be a most satisfying experience for adults and children as they explore them together. The 21st century has emerged from a long tradition of culturally satisfying and spiritually delighting engagement with the language arts that are embodied in literature, and not just literacy. This paper explores some of those things from our more ancient pasts, and examines their relevance for adults, particularly parents and teachers, and children and young adults in the present age, in the area of literature. In doing so, it goes beyond concepts of literacy, exploring notions of literature.

Keywords: narratives, fictions, reading pleasure

Introduction

The everyday existence of 21st century life is, as Ericson (2001) suggests, 'awash in a kid culture' (p. ix), with colour televisions, VCRs, radios, CD-ROMs, teen movies, computer-based entertainment, SMS texting and the Internet providing intense competition with reading as a source for stories. The existence of the competition does not take away from what a number of people have represented as a deeply-rooted human need for narrative, deriving from pre-history (Egan, 1992; O'Donnell & Wood, 2004; Reid, 1992; Rolton, 1995; Rosenblatt, 1991; Saxby, 1994; Saxby, 1997; Wajnryb, 2003; Zeegers & Smith, 2004). This paper is about that need for narrative in human life, of the sort described by Britton (1992) that starts with what might be called gossip in the narratives of daily life and leads to deeper, more complex narrative genres that nonetheless have their bases in the need to explore the parameters of others' human existence. The key to this need is what Ericson (2001) sees as the experience of being 'enraptured' (p. xi), enraptured that is by the story that transports the reader out of their own lives and into that of another, or others. It is literature that the authors are talking about here; it is not literacy.

Literacy

Concepts of literacy for children tend to start with adults, including teachers, rather than children themselves, with a concern that children become literate with the support of teachers, parents and caregivers. Part of the attraction of literacy for

children has little to do with what has been embraced by their literacy teachers as *The Four Roles of the Reader* (Freebody & Luke, 1990). These four roles are, briefly, that of Decoder, User, Participant and Analyst of texts. None of these roles suggests that the reader may be an Enjoyer of these same texts, an issue that the authors have explored elsewhere (Zeegers & Smith, 2004). The authors argue that children and young adults start from this fifth role position, regardless of what their More Knowledgeable Others, the adults in their lives, may think of the situation; that it is the young people themselves exploring areas of pleasure and enjoyment rather than mechanical skills with texts.

Adult readers want the children in their care to be inspired to read books—works from William Shakespeare and Jane Austen to those of Stephen King and Bryce Courtenay—because that is what they enjoy, knowing just what it means to curl up with a good book. To enable this to happen means adults facilitating the transportation that reading provides for young people to the place that adults inhabit as readers, what Mayher (2001) calls *The Planet of the Readers*. It is as far out of the world of our everyday existences as its name suggests. While it means taking up Cambourne's (1988) notion of children approximating adult behaviours in literacy, it also means taking a step further and going into that area of magic that is embedded in literature.

Adults remember magic in books from their own days as early readers, and can recall the pleasure that their favourites gave them, or the pleasurable anticipations of new books. They can relive that sort of pleasure when their children take up similar

books as they climb onto adult laps with absolute confidence that a book that they are about to encounter, or re-encounter, will transport them into different worlds well beyond that particular lap and that particular piece of literature. These young people are already neophyte residents of The Planet of the Readers, engaging with the greatest satisfaction the new worlds and their inhabitants that they encounter through books. In all probability, they will continue to grow, explore and develop along the paths they have already laid down, however tentatively.

What the young people themselves are doing with reading engagement is only tangentially connected with the Four Roles of the Reader. That is something that teachers take up in their systematic teaching of literacy skills, even though the children, and later, the young adults they are teaching, do not come to them from the Year Zero: they have interests and reading backgrounds of their own before any teachers can introduce them to the language of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Austen. They may have developed into *Asterix* readers (see for example Goscinny & Uderzo, 1995), or superhero comic book aficionados; they may have a particular affection for *Bambi* (Salten, 1942), or any such works that have a particular appeal for young people. They do read their favourites over and over again too. They supplement their engagement with enjoyable texts with television shows such as *The Simpsons*, and they enhance their enjoyment of the *Harry Potter* books (see for example Rowling, 1997) with cinema outings and DVD ownership. The authors suggest that this be accepted and applauded, for those children have already got into the magic of the written word in their own way, but that an essential aspect of teachers taking up issues of young people's reading is that adults start from the very position that young people themselves have already established.

Unless adults acknowledge and themselves engage the enrapturing power that young people's own literature has, and see it as akin to any that adults themselves find in books that they cannot put down, they cannot enter or lead young people into children's and adolescents' quarters of the Planet of the Readers. Unless they do, they and their young charges can only loiter on the fringes. When adults have managed to inspire a child with the idea of the fascinating world that is literature, and a young reader approaches for advice on where to start, those adults need to be able to go beyond their own childhood era favourites, such as *Man Shy* (Davison, 1944) or *White Fang* (London, 1953), to enable their charges to be transported by the literature they engage.

This is especially so when one considers the large number of literate young people unable to be transported to The Planet of the Readers. Boys as a group, for example, have been identified as such a

neglected part of the potential book-reading population (Moloney, 2000). The whole process of learning to love a book is, as Moloney (2000) puts it, one that has its roots in home contexts established long before a child ever comes to school, and this is an issue taken up by Jennings (2003). Both of these writers are highly successful authors of children's and young adult books in Australia, and they have identified the reading enjoyment needs of their reading audiences. Such authors exhibit the sorts of understandings of the reading needs of young people, evidenced by the success of the sales of their books. The publisher Nieuwenhuizen (1996) has commented on author John Marsden's work (see for example Marsden 1992; 1997; 2001) and its popularity with young people, acknowledging its success as based mainly on his writing as emanating from the place occupied by the readers themselves, rather than a place occupied by the writer.

Each text brings certain concepts and images of things, of people, of actions, of scenes, certainly. A decoder, a user, a participant, and/or an analyst of texts may access any or all of these with varying levels of proficiency. What is missing in such exercises is the sense of rapture in the experience, as the reader draws upon their own personality, their own memories as well as their present concerns and preoccupations, their particular mood of the moment, all of which form part of their immediate surroundings, in what Rosenblatt (1976) describes as a never-to-be-duplicated combination (p. 30). The sorts of activity thus described by Rosenblatt (1976) is represented by Mello (2001) as crucial to human experience in expressing knowledge and thought, something which cannot be done without interactive, negotiated narrative transactions (p. 1). A good example of a genre demanding high levels of reader interaction and negotiation with narrative, is science fiction as it deals with impossible worlds, with actions of characters within its worlds nevertheless being based on the possible as well as the probable, given science fiction's dependence on its folklore heritage of fantasy and magic dealing with talking and clothed animals and characters with extraordinary powers (Gangi, 2004). While science fiction is not the only genre that does this, it is a good example of human experience, as Dewey (cited in Greene, 1978) suggests, is thereby being concentrated and enlarged (p. 171). As Rosenblatt (1991) further suggests, that human experience is stored in each reader's own reservoir of life experience (p. 445) which rises into readers' consciousnesses as texts are savoured by those who live on The Planet of the Readers.

Rapture

Rapture, savouring, pleasure: these are terms that are missing in descriptors of literacy programs. It is an issue that the authors have canvassed elsewhere (Zeegers & Smith, 2004):

In our own times, given the quite right and proper positioning of adults as protectors of children and young adults from [covert and] increasingly overt incidence of pedophilia, notions of pleasure may take on sinister overtones. Barthes' (1975) view of the sensual aspects of pleasure in reading, not only of *plaisir* but also *jouissance*, nevertheless captures that sort of lap reading and the intense joy that characterise engagement of reading as literature ...the whole experience of *jouissance*, in fact (p. 3).

Nieuwenhuizen (1996) has something to say on this in relation to Australian author Marsden's work as well. She points out that adults encountering Marsden's specificity regarding details of young people's sexuality tend not so much to be shocked as to be uncomfortable. Adult reaction tends towards an attitude that such things not be raised in books aimed at a younger reading audience. Such things may require adults having to countenance, perhaps even confront, an aspect of young people's lives that they would prefer to assert does not exist; that they may have to discuss things that may arise from the reading engaged by adolescents and raised by the adolescents themselves on their terms rather than terms adults may prefer. Marsden's sort of abstraction of human (and not just childish) concerns forces adults to move out of their accustomed operations within comfort zones established in more conservative works, such as *Tom Sawyer* (Twain, 1975), for example. The authors argue that the abstractions involved in literature reading experience are the very things that carry within them transformative possibilities, even as they induce adult discomfiture with concepts of children's and young adult's pleasure as sensuality. The discomfiture crowds the reading experience and edges out the very features that mark enraptured responses of the young reader. Failure by teachers to acknowledge the strength of sensibility in children and young adults as readers, even as they themselves experience and acknowledge these as part of their own experience as adult residents of *The Planet of the Readers*, constrains the potential of young readers to deepen and enrich reservoirs of their experience of their worlds that form beneath enraptured readership.

The World of the Young

There is a great deal of research to inform us of the needs of the young. This research has already been done for us by marketing organizations commissioned by the corporate sector that has identified a particular market for its products in the form of nuclear-familied young people with disposable income (Egan, 1992). Young children constitute the major consumers of traditional narratives, in the form of written, oral and cinematised or televised texts (Morgan, 1992). Indeed, the very process of becoming literate carries

within it seeds of attractions to texts and their manipulation as enjoyable (Morgan, 1992). The authors of this paper would add that this is so even at the level of text decoding. Given the essentially solipsistic position of the young child in the world (Zeegers, 2003), this sort of engagement with literature may serve as a vehicle for decentring that position, with young readers being exposed to the lives of others as they imaginatively enter author-created worlds, doing so pleasurably as they analyse, predict, and make their own meanings from their encounters (Parker, 1988).

The research relating to adolescents' reading, is, as Thomson (1988) says, 'all quite explicit' as to what adolescents at least see as important in their lives: to be accepted, valued by their peers, have their accomplishments recognised, their particular and significant identities respected, and so on (p. 6). While they may have major concerns as to living up to images of socially-determined beauty in relation to themselves, they are vitally interested in and intrigued by the possibilities that life has to offer them at the same time as they are fascinated by the opposite sex, sex itself, and the parts that parents and other adults play in all of these aspects of their lives (Thomson, 1988, p. 6).

As far as adolescents are concerned, a large measure of their needs is taken up by a need for independence from the restrictions of the adults who still tend to treat them as children still. Brown and Stephens (1995) suggest that adolescence, as a recognisably separate developmental stage in humans, has been born out of modern industrial society's tendency to defer entry to the privileges and responsibilities of the adult world as the young are institutionally educated to perform the complex functions of workers in modern commercial environments. Added to this are the concomitant 20th century changes that have seen women able to control their own fertility and take initiatives in divorce actions, and the higher social profiles of ethnic diversity and powerful mass media influences in the wake of enormous social changes (Brown & Stephens, 1995, p. 48). As well, the deadly potential of young people's ignorance of sexual matters in the midst of an AIDS pandemic means that young people are more informed on sexual activity, along with toleration of difference that knowledge will always carry with it.

Exercising Leadership

A problem then may emerge. The leadership role, the 'guiding' role that van Manen (1995) exhorts, cannot be dropped because teachers want children to read. Neither can teachers become so disapproving that they censor certain books, for that is not playing the role out to its full potential either. Certain books will do the rounds, be noted and commented upon, in spite of teachers' best efforts, but if such books come as recommended to them in the process of

young people's reflections and discussion on what is being read, it means that adults in a pedagogical role are able to raise problematic issues with the absolute legitimacy of a guiding role. It then is part of an established procedure where all readers discuss all that they have read on the basis of literary style and social, emotional, political and psychological concepts as well. In this case the scope of the activities on the Planet of the Readers reinforces the importance of reflective thinking as a tool for teaching and learning about reading. As an aim for the pedagogue as suggested by Dewey (cited in van Manen, 1995) it may be used as a deliberate pedagogical device without compromising the quality of reading programs that teachers undertake with young readers.

This is something that teachers face whenever they take it upon themselves to introduce students to the pleasures that living on the Planet of the Readers delivers; when they have their students engage literature and encourage and support their efforts in selection and enjoyment of very personal reading decisions. It becomes a problem though, only if teachers abrogate leadership in their pedagogical roles. Van Manen (1995) gives a definition of pedagogy as the 'study or practice of guiding or rearing children' (p. 33). For him, this carries the meaning of 'discretion, judgment, caution, forethought' in the role of the pedagogue (van Manen, 1995, p. 33), and it is a role not to be treated lightly. There will be those books that make teachers quail. There are those who still shudder at the thought of the old *Flowers in the Attic* (Andrews, 1979), so aptly dealt with by Thomson (1987) as dishonest dealing between the author and her young readers. Nonetheless, these are among the books that appear on the Planet of the Readers, and they must needs be dealt with in responsible fashion.

Adolescent children are in a transitional stage of their development, caught between the rock of the educational demands of fast capitalism and the hard place of a search for self identity in a rapidly globalising world, positioned in a place where the transactions that they may conduct with texts are well beyond the sorts of transactions that the adults in their world conducted when they were young. Teachers are similarly caught, between their own rock of responsible pedagogy and the hard place of the pedagogue's obsolescence in the natural progression of teacher-learner relationships. However, there is a natural progression in all of this, and identifying and embracing it as such is part of the answer to the induction of new inhabitants of the Planet of the Readers.

Even so, teachers engaging permissible classroom versions of lap reading with very young children are in effect acknowledging that sort of pleasure, and exploiting it most effectively for the purposes of preparing young people for residence on The Planet of the Readers. Children who have been through lap

reading experiences know to anticipate a reading encounter as a pleasurable experience, and anticipating that pleasure even before the process begins. To be able to do this, though, requires engaging authors who, as Chambers (1992) suggests, are successful in their field because they take the position of an empathiser or an ally of their young characters who are facing up to or squaring off against the world that they have to negotiate. This is a major point of departure from adult literature, where that sort of ally is essentially redundant.

A special appeal of reading for adolescents, therefore, is that of placing the reader in the centre of a world that is to be negotiated by central characters in fashion similar to the reader, with all those fascinating questions to ponder and troublesome aspects to resolve, while the reader remains in the everyday world themselves. The new worlds may be explored in as much detail as the writer allows, and then some, as the reader's own experience is brought into play through reading engagement. It is not imagination alone that is brought into play when a young reader is working through various problems thrown up. Readers encounter this sort of thing in the situation of a Mrs Frisby in dealing with the needs of a sick child (O'Brien, 1971), or by a Simon Martin with his flour baby trying to work out why his father had left (Fine, 1994), or by a Liza Winthrop in working through her lesbian relationship with an Annie Kenyon (Garden, 1988), or an Anne Burden surviving the disaster wrought by technology gone wrong AND the arrival of a Zachariah (O'Brien, 1975). Current works are taking young people's issues even further. Taking up mental illnesses as grist for literature mills, as seen with a child's world framed by Asberger's Syndrome in *The curious incident of the dog in the night-time* (Haddon, 2003), young people are offered a work which takes them more personally and specifically into the area than even *I am the Cheese* (Cormier, 1974), while *Up on Cloud Nine* (Fine, 2003) takes the reader into explorations of adolescent suicide. It is in-the-world experience that discerns the grain of authenticity in the situations presented by the authors of such works, and upon which imagination may be brought to bear.

The works suggested here are only a tiny part of the multiple points of entry to other worlds peopled by other young men and women and children, often in problematic relationships with adults. They generate their appeal to young readers by engaging the very concerns that the readership has, and focus on active meaning making by that readership. It is a type of meaning making that is the essence of literature as reading, which is not the same as literacy as sets of reading skills. The sorts of literature to which the authors refer deal with powerful social forces and issues that are similar to

those that modern adolescents face. By their very nature, they are the sorts of literature which do not form part of current literary canons, which, excellent as they, are pleasurable experiences engaged mainly by adults on the Planet of the Readers.

Research also shows that narrative engagement through books brings general academic success for young people in schools (Mello, 2001). The research of Applebee and that of Favat (cited in Mello, 2001) suggests that school students call upon their own lives to make connections between their own and those of the characters, the plots and events in books (p. 2). This process will not be news to any adult readers already on the Planet of the Readers. What may be news to them is that other feature of adult reading behaviours—so aptly captured in the conversational gambit of ‘Read any good books lately?’—and so much a part of the enjoyment that is derived from reading. That is, residents of The Planet of the Readers reflect on what they read, and talk with some enthusiasm about what they read with other readers. They watch book shows, read the reviews in what are considered to be the quality magazines and papers that canvass new literary worlds for them to enter, and they make selections and decisions about further reading on the basis of these. It all harks back to Cambourne’s (1988) idea of young people approximating adult reading behaviours, certainly, but it also picks up on Bruner’s (1986) notion of actual minds and possible worlds, where transactional relationships between children’s reality, imagination, and memory and those represented in books enable a connectedness that has them exerting their own power over their understanding and their knowledge.

So, how to manage all of this in pedagogical positions as More Knowledgeable Others vis-à-vis children and adolescents; how to captivate, motivate and interest students; how to find ways to have students hunger for books; how to establish a context where students ‘unselfconsciously read, read, and read some more’, as Gangi (2004) puts it? An eminently manageable program employs not only texts for class study but also a wide reading program, such as Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) or Uninterrupted Silent Sustained Reading

(USSR) (see for example Tucker, 1998; Watson, 1998). Added to this is a program of reflection on reading that is done, perhaps as a sort of a reflective journal of readings. The introduction to classrooms of Literature Circles (see for example Da Lie, 2001; Daniels, 1994) as part of a total program completes the approximation of adult reading behaviours. These sorts of systematic activity require a commitment from all parties to engage in a reading program essentially self-directed by each party, but also subject to advice and direction from each other.

Conclusion

Reading, systematically and regularly engaged as enjoyable literature, responses recorded in reflective reading journals in the form of positive recommendations rather than censorious commentary, discussions along adult Book Club lines—all of this allows all of the parties’ reading, not just teachers’ reading, to have validity and respect as engaging pleasurable experiences. For young people, then, being able to live with adults on The Planet of the Readers opens up new worlds to be entered and explored even as their own everyday one is being negotiated. Reflection on new encounters raises the issues grounded in the everyday world in innovative and stimulating ways, at the same time helping to formulate and articulate the problematic. It also helps to formulate possible solutions, and identify further problems and their solutions as the young readers become more absorbed in the book reading that those on The Planet of the Readers take up as an essential aspect of their lived human experience. Young people’s experience of school and the whole of their lives outside of school may be made so much more positive with their own reflective activity supporting their daily experiences as thinking, living actors on their own life stage. In tandem with a reflective teacher, it becomes a combination which no colour televisions, VCRs, radios, CD-ROMs, teen movies, computer-based entertainment, SMS texting and the Internet can better. In that direction lies the most positive and desirable future of the book.

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