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Afterword: Thoughts on the way ahead

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In this final chapter I attempt to review some salient themes and issues raised by this volume from my own partial perspective, and also to challenge a little the challengers, to take the debate on to further research, books, articles and most importantly to further worthwhile activities in uses of literature in ELT classrooms. The challenge is to move students and teachers to value and seek out challenge, the rewards and difficulties of moving 'out of the comfort zone', when it is easier and more comfortable not to be challenged.

The pleasures and sometimes also the disappointments of rereading are discussed by Spacks (2011) in her informal autobiographical reflections on rereading. For successful readers, it is clear that a book or text that is worth reading is likely to be worth the effort of reading more than once. We discover more about the text, but also about ourselves and our worlds, as we read the same text again over time and in different contexts. Something that can be read once and wholly understood, and which does not prompt a reader to take a second look, is not challenging and for the experienced reader barely worthwhile, except perhaps as information for a specific utilitarian purpose. In such cases, the reading is not the thing. Such purely instrumental reading is not challenging, nor do we learn from it, even if it may help us achieve some more worthwhile end (assembling furniture, following a recipe, troubleshooting troublesome equipment). It is what Rosenblatt (1994) called 'efferent' rather than 'aesthetic' reading, where aesthetic reading is all about process and interaction rather than a take away benefit.

For some, difficulty is the paradigm of literary reading, though the difficulty can lie in the ideas as much as in any unusual uses of language. The language of a literary text can be difficult (vocabulary, grammar, style or other variations) but so too can be narrative devices such as flashback or flashforward in plot, tellings as perspectives (free indirect speech for example), or indeed a whole gamut of unfamiliar cultural practices and events. Some like to travel, some stay at home and avoid those challenges. Challenging reading may be thought of as some kind of travel into a wider world than we are familiar with just as much as (in its other sense) challenging reading may involve a resistant reading to a familiar story or other text with familiar yet questionable values.

While reimaginings or transmedial retellings of stories we know can discomfort, schema refreshment may be the beneficial and challenging result. Engaging literature and engaging language–literature lessons prompt questions to which the answers are not clear or simple and thus encourage deep communication around issues that participants feel matter in a significant way (race, gender, matters of life and death, values and beliefs). There are no right answers for such issues for a comprehension test to assess. Inferencing is a clear challenge of deep reading including literary and critical reading: not what is going on here, but what is 'really' going on here? Yet the mantra throughout this volume is that already elementary children can inference, predict and think deeply about their books. Children will bring their own experience and that of others to understanding and may not be able to formulate a worthwhile response immediately, but the challenging reading stays with them, in some cases for years to come, even across a lifetime. Lack of clarity, we must remember in a sometimes simplistic world, is not lack of value, never mind lack of validity. Literary understanding is contingent and provisional and dynamic – which is challenging.

Texts – as this collection amply illustrates – are no longer simply 'books' as I have been tending to suggest, but increasingly come to us through a variety of formats and manifestations or indeed as complex multimodal experiences often through a screen or other ever-proliferating new technologies. As we once had to adjust our reading practices to the arrival of the codex and, much later, print, so now new hardware and software is prompting new and, yes, challenging ways of reading, and artefacts to read, if not to challenge the very paradigm of what 'reading' might mean. Thus Gee (2015), for example, writes on the demands and satisfactions of computer gaming, arguing for the educational value of the 'challenges' of gaming (a word used three times in his Conclusion). Even before the recent presidential election in the United States, Gee writes that 'human beings are much better at seeking and finding confirmation of their own views than they are at challenging those views' (Gee 2015: 111). Stronger readers are needed. The affordances of different and

ever more innovative media for reader agency, participation and learning are still being investigated by Gee and others (see also Brunsmeier and Kolb 2018, this volume, on the affordances of story apps, including embedded games) but are legitimately seen as extensions of 'reading' in a broad semiotic and communicative sense, with active and creative participation in the construction of the story. Part One of this book most explicitly addresses this final kind of challenge.

Definitions

It is worth pausing at this point to consolidate some of the multiple possible meanings of the title of this collection, *Using Literature in English Language Education: Challenging Reading for 8–18 Year Olds*. Challenging reading is first an activity: we want readers to read critically, to challenge texts, for many educators the final aim of reading development. Then second, challenging texts are *difficult* in some way for a reader to read, a kind of text that can challenge someone in some way – although this will clearly depend on the age of the reader. Ideally, to bring both senses now together, a text that challenges can or should provoke a challenging reading rather than a shrug of the shoulders and a turning away, and it is one of the English teacher's jobs to promote and afford the opportunities for such challenging readings in both senses.

The challenge for teachers is to get younger and less experienced readers to read in ways that more proficient readers know to be among the most satisfying ways to read, and to build the capacities and attention spans and even strategies to read complex texts. Ellis (2018: 97, this volume) introduces the concept of 'learning' literacy with elementary children. She describes challenging reading at this young age as learning to learn in ways that are 'linked to metacognitive strategies and to learner autonomy. It involves developing awareness and understanding of one's own learning processes, personal cognitive preferences and learning strategies. Learning literacy is also about developing an inquisitive mindset and using resources that ignite curiosity and enable experimentation'. An interesting recent study of college-age foreign language readers reading literary texts in Vietnam notes that readers found 'challenging' texts, those difficult to understand and interpret, often to be the most 'useful' for their learning, particularly language learning (Nguyen 2016: 183). This is a paradox, but then again a paradox is precisely an utterance that at first sight does not seem to make sense but yields more insight on closer consideration ('a little learning is a dangerous thing'). Paradox may indeed stand as the epitome of challenging reading. These readers in Vietnam learned more than a little.

In sum then, challenging reading means:

1. Texts can be challenging. However this will be dependent on the language competence, age-related schemata, world experience, cultural background, previous reading experience and so forth of the reader: 'If we know one thing about understanding and learning processes, we know that they are subject to their social context, and even if reading often happens in isolation, the various possible EFL contexts can be expected to have some effect on the reading' (Reichl 2013: 111).
2. Texts can be challenged – through deep reading, critical reading and possibly resistant reading. A number of chapters have referred to 'text ensembles' (Delanoy 2018; Marks and Merse 2018) – reading several works from different perspectives. The idea is, as far as possible, 'to include many experiences from around the world, so that no one particular perspective predominates' (Bland 2018a: 3).
3. Reading itself is an ever more challenged activity for our age due to widespread access to high-speed media in childhood and beyond. This challenge to concentration spans and deep reading has been widely recognized by educators, and the trend towards a hyper attention cognitive style (Hayles 2007) is referred to in several chapters in this volume (Bland 2018b, Brunsmeier and Kolb 2018 and Delanoy 2018).

This collection

So how far do the readings in this book discuss the educational and ELT affordances of challenging reading? And in what ways should those challenging readings be still further challenged? Such challenges generate an unfinalizable project as Bakhtin would have it (see Morson and Emerson 1990).

Part One addresses 'Multimodal challenges'. Necessarily some of the weighty thematic issues that follow in Part Two are also foreshadowed in these first chapters that are more focused on children and younger teen readers. Oziewicz launches the discussion in Chapter 2 by attempting to bring terminological clarity into the field – no easy undertaking as the inventiveness

of today's author – artists is outstripping scholars' efforts to categorize their work. Brian Selznick is a case in point. Clearly destined to be a canonical author of the twenty-first century, and ideal for teaching visual literacy as this chapter shows, his innovative works according to the current state of the art are actually extremely challenging to define. The participatory nature of teaching with multimodal texts, and thus their suitability also for young

readers, is emphasized throughout Part One. In Chapter 3 Bland writes on creativity in ELT, making use of Rowling's Wizarding World, the use of the recent *Harry Potter* play and screenplay for critical literacy and creative writing. Important effects of creative writing for reading as highlighted by Bland are also mentioned, if not always fully implemented, in the Council of Europe's Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR 2001: 62).

In Chapter 4, Arizpe and Ryan deal with literacy and language learning in multilingual contexts with reference to the affordances of wordless picturebooks such as Shaun Tan's (2006) *The Arrival*, a book that fascinates adults as well as children. Such crossovers are an increasingly common phenomenon (Reynolds 2011: 17). Traditional notions of 'proper reading' are contested in the researchers' contexts of Glasgow EAL language and culture learning, including storytelling through David Wiesner's (2013) *Mr Wuffles!* with its evocations of migration and communication issues. Postmodern features are shown as affordances for negotiating cultural identities and reflection, using students' words and bringing their own world experience to bear, active engagement in short.

Gail Ellis in Chapter 5 shows the value of such picturebooks in supporting children's learning and potential, which must not be underestimated just because their English is limited. The compelling nature of apparently simple tales – wordless in picturebooks like Briggs's (1978) *The Snowman* and Lamorisse's (1956) film classic *Le Ballon Rouge* – that have caught the imagination of generations, as well as Staake's (2013) contemporary classic *Bluebird*, are referenced in this chapter with ample proof that the challenge of texts does not rely on the linguistic mode of communication. Beyond core linguistic learning goals, Ellis refers to multiple literacies (with specific reference to Cope and Kalantzis 2000), including film literacy, emotional literacy (in this case, empathy and understanding the feelings of a victim of bullying), nature literacy ('reading' the environment) and the widest educational aims.

Brunsmeier and Kolb investigate how children's reading can benefit from story apps. Beyond the intrinsic interest of the topic, the most salient point for me here was the importance of teacher mediation of story apps as of other software for the most fruitful educational outcomes and experiences. The findings are reminiscent of research on tertiary modern foreign language learners in the United States who are consistently shown to have more worthwhile group discussions of literary texts when a teacher mediates the discussion rather than just leaving the group to work on questions by themselves (Zyzik and Polio 2008).

In Chapter 7 Prusse explores media and critical literacy teaching through the TV series *Lockie Leonard* and Tim Winton's book trilogy. Particularly interesting is the exploration for educational purposes of the features of

series (episodic and relatively self-contained) and the building of seriality as a plot principle in these works, an instance of tensions between repetition and creativity. Prusse rightly reminds us – a recurring finding of history of reading studies from Eisenstein (1979) on – that reading itself as now established in its mainstream meaning (taking meaning from print in a book) was once seen as a rather suspicious activity of dubious value – not suitable for women or servants at least! New formats and media only slowly come to be recognized fully for what they can and cannot do well. Prusse's approach and example will help teachers and students understand the historical point more concretely and should prompt us all to work harder at the creative workings between his two *Lockie Leonard* media. Adaptation is a creative cultural practice, with different plot organization and presentation choices, which are shown to promote classroom interaction and engagement, but also in this case offering insights into modern and historical Australian culture and society.

Part Two is titled 'Provocative and compelling': the texts themselves are the main focus though it will always be impossible to divorce a text from how that text is experienced, in the classroom or elsewhere. There follows a set of chapters illustrating the kind of material and the ways in which challenges can be precipitated, including migration debates, disability, sexual orientation and gender, utopian and dystopian thinking and further non-mainstream ways of being and encountering the world.

In Chapter 8 Werner Delanoy precisely illustrates my earlier truism that the world is not a simple place with his examples of diaspora and migration literature, a particularly controversial issue recently, and of growing magnitude and seriousness globally. He argues rightly that multiperspectivism, 'a cosmopolitan imagination' (Delanoy 2018: 148), is needed for global citizens to appreciate such issues and challenges in the contemporary world, evidently lacking in much recent activity and debate around this topic in cafes, bars, parliaments and news media. Dialogue is recommended, the essence of educational method, including a methodology of intertextuality in which the literary text, here the short story 'Out of Bounds' (Naidoo 2001), is to be read in the context of other relevant texts, with developing and complex degrees and range of participation in difficult contemporary debates which students would be encouraged to join. A wider point raised by Delanoy through his chosen short story is the 'global reach' of English-language literature which can afford educators and students access to an unusually wide range of human experience in search of the desired cosmopolitan values and attitudes through critical engagement with a story and then the anthology it is taken from. Further anthologies of short stories from multiple cultural contexts are introduced in the annotated bibliography (Bland 2018d: 293–4).

Marks and Merse in Chapter 9 suggest extending the experience of readers through non-canonical narratives of cultural otherness, in this case

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to bring to the fore the still relatively taboo subjects in many educational systems that focus on reduced or one-dimensional models of romantic love and exclude for example LGBTQ identities or disability. Romantic love can, of course, be pursued in many ways, and can be validated and normalized where needed with positive representations offered. Again, the tenor is that identities are never as straightforward as convention would have us believe and so convention should be challenged through education, and that as far as possible all readers should have the chance to see themselves in the texts they read. This is a familiar current in young adult or children's literature criticism. Bland (2016), Gray (2016) and Paran and Wallace (2016), for example, have argued that ELT has been slow and ineffective in responding to more subtle understandings of diversity like these, with the development of bland international materials. Teacher intervention can be effective in such instances, but poses a new challenge of course.

Bland's contribution in Chapter 10 is devoted to the challenges of Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*. The study of dystopia is now mandated in numerous education regimes, and Bland gives many reasons why, in ELT settings with teenagers, this twenty-first-century text might be chosen over the more canonical adult literature *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *The Handmaid's Tale*. With *The Hunger Games*, readers can research the contemporary themes – sex slavery, child labour, starvation, refugees, child soldiers and propaganda – and thus, Bland argues (2018c: 182–3), they can become more truly involved in 'engaged reading'. An added challenge is that, with texts not yet canonized, there are fewer published explications and interpretations, the use of which is questionable though still widespread. This is a critical point in the introduction to this volume: 'In ELT, there still seems to be a dominant belief among teachers and their students that there are absolute meanings in texts that must be taught' (Bland 2018a: 9).

Wehrmann argues in Chapter 11 for moving students out of their comfort zones by using science fiction to 'cross boundaries of space, time, knowledge and biology' (2018: 194). Utopian thinking and 'thought experiments' are advocated to prompt readers in our imperfect world to imagine better alternatives to society and 'demand the impossible' as one of the references for the chapter has it (Moylan 2014). This important point, on the cognitive challenge and usefulness of imagining fantasy worlds, has by now been made across the academic disciplines. A function of speculative fiction may, for example, 'be to create greater flexibility and adaptability in unforeseen circumstances. Imaginary worlds allow experimentation with possible eventualities which the mind, locked in its routines, might otherwise not have seen' (Cook 2000: 58). In Chapter 12, Webb illustrates how closely themes of speculative fiction are related to our twenty-first century; the author introduces several exemplars of young adult fiction that address urgent

environmental issues. There is a continuum with topics and concerns of earlier chapters, such as anthropocentrism, migration and refugees, education and literacy, Othering, apocalypse, corrupt regimes – as well as, fatally, the human propensity of turning a blind eye.

Part Two ends with Chapter 13 and Kalogirou on adaptations and reimagining as new challenges to literary readers and performers, in this case Lesslie's 'Prince of Denmark' drama in combination with *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's gem so familiar to many educators, as taught in Athens, Greece. This is a valuable study of the uses of a new version of an old tale for engaging fresh generations of learners in the tradition of making the difficult language and historical stagecraft more accessible, when Shakespeare is still a required author on many curricula for advanced learners.

Part Three opens with a strong empirical study of teachers' views on using literature in language teaching. Duncan and Paran's data relate to the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, with findings reported from teacher interviews in three case studies. The main aim of the study

> was to explore the factors that teachers take into account when choosing literary texts for use in their classrooms; the ways in which teachers use literary texts and the types of activities they employ; and the views of teachers and learners on the impact of literary texts on language learning. For this chapter we took a fresh look at the data from our teacher interviews to understand the way in which teachers negotiated the challenges of reading literary texts. (Duncan and Paran 2018: 245)

Issues of 'difficulty' quickly came to the fore, foregrounding not only language but also conceptual accessibility, appeal, ways into texts including the availability of supplementary materials such as film, also personal advocacy or enthusiasm of individual teachers, and again the affordance of being able to relate to topics already being studied. Organization of reading (methodologies) including use of film and reading aloud are also reported here. In contrast to recommendations in other chapters in this volume, the teachers' use of film is however limited to 'a potential tool for scaffolding understanding [. . .] also a tool in organizing the reading, or "getting through" the text itself' (2018: 253). For further perspectives on transmedial adaptations see Ellis 2018 (film literacy and opportunities for comparative viewing of picturebook and film) and Prusse 2018 (the TV series of the popular *Lockie Leonard* books exemplifies adaptation as creative cultural practice that extends meanings). The investigation found that exam challenges were seen as constantly haunting the classroom and study beyond the classroom. Nevertheless, in a formulation which most of us working in this field would want to underline, a grateful IB student reports: 'Well, rather than talking about the weather you

are talking about *Master and Margarita* in Russian, it's talking about whether God exists and Jesus and the devil being in Moscow. It's more interesting than the weather' (2018: 257).

Thoughts on the way ahead

I have presented – in a nutshell – the undoubted value and some points of particular interest raised by this collection. In closing let me suggest some issues for the field moving forward, beyond the remit of specific chapters but which came to my mind as I read through, and might inform future research developments.

1. The balance or tension between appealing to readers and challenging them
2. Related to this, the need for authentic reading, authentic communication
3. New understandings of reading in the world of the Web, and ever-proliferating new technologies in an ever more challenging world
4. The range of benefits from language to discourse that the reading of literature can bring.

1. The balance or tension between appealing to readers and challenging them

The best-loved children's books tend to challenge rather than uphold conventional adult values (Lurie 1998). Children, and thoughtful adults, love challenges. But challenges also change over time and according to contexts: Today's challenges are tomorrow's conventions or disappear into oblivion. British cultural critic Kenneth Tynan dared to use the word 'fuck' on British television in 1965 – which seems a pretty unremarkable thing to report today. Challenging to whom then? Engagement is a key word throughout this collection and this area of research and practice – no engagement, no challenge.

'Should Singapore children only or mainly read stories about growing up in Singapore?' I found I was asking myself after a recent seminar I attended. Adolescents are often dissatisfied already with who and what they are and their surroundings, and want to move on rather than celebrate being a 'teen'. There is a risk of constructing children or young adults as 'children' or 'teenagers' in a disempowering and limiting discourse. Teachers well know there is often

resistance to invasion of in-group areas by establishment authority figures. 'Let's discuss a pop song now everybody' (cringe). Consider these wise words from a highly successful children's literature writer:

> Anyone who tries to write *down* to children is simply wasting his [sic] time. You have to write up, not down. Children are demanding. They are the most attentive, curious, eager, observant, sensitive, quick, and generally congenial readers on earth. [. . .] In *Charlotte's Web*, I gave them a literate spider, and they took that.
>
> Some writers for children deliberately avoid using words they think a child doesn't know. This emasculates the prose and, I suspect, bores the reader. Children are game for anything. [. . .] They love words that give them a hard time, provided they are in a context that absorbs their attention. (E. B. White, quoted in Haviland 1973: 140)

The treating of difficult subjects in all their complexity is found typically in the best and most successful young adult literature (e.g. *The Hunger Games*).

2. Related to this, the need for authentic reading, authentic communication

Let us consider some examples of successful uses of literary texts in a recent report from London secondary schools (Macleroy 2013). First a less challenging teacher: 'The Year 7 class really like doing really simple tasks. They really like doing comprehension because they understand how to do it and I think you kind of have to start really simple' (UK teacher data in Macleroy 2013: 306); '. . . but you do need for them to know how to use full stops and apostrophes' (2013: 307). David's students, meanwhile (twelve to thirteen-year-olds, mixed ability class with a Bangladeshi background), develop deeper word knowledge as they discuss phrases from a travel writing text: 'flat as a pancake; the blessing and the bane of Bangladesh; lazy meandering waters; water squeezes arthritically from the taps' (Macleroy 2013: 311). These students are demonstrably growing in plurilingual and pluricultural competence: 'They can visualise the flatness of the land and understand the concept of water being the blessing and the bane of Bangladesh in a country where drinking water is scarce, but the country is susceptible to flooding. The metaphorical language gives bilingual learners the possibility of imagining this familiar landscape in new ways' (2013: 311).

Macleroy (2013: 313) discusses the implications of her research as showing that 'emergent bilingual learners can be exposed to high levels of language from the outset and rich discussions around literary texts [. . . and] bilingual learners, at all levels of language, actively engaged with stories and longer

pieces of text and were learning to interpret texts from different cultural perspectives'. As the research amply illustrates, 'a diet of engaging books works much better than a diet of worksheets and drills in developing reading comprehension and academic language' (Cummins 2001: 87).

3. New understandings of reading in the world of the Web, and ever-proliferating new technologies in an ever more challenging world

Multimodality has always been central and basic to children's literature: we may consider pop-up and pull-tab books, as well as animated films, even before the Web, television tie-ins, merchandising and the rest. Even so, growing interactivity is a salient feature of children's literature today. Jenkins (2006) writes on transmedial activities as a *socialisation of narrative*, with widening circles of participation rather than author-centred and delimited. Immersion is, it seems, being replaced by interactivity, creativity, or at least the acceptance of new forms. Reynolds (2011) notes the simultaneity rather than sequentiality of much versioning today, and the increasing interdependence of formats, such as the simultaneous release of films and books.

Challenging the world through education means a search for better futures – critical literacy may reveal the world does not have to be this way. Younger people have the imagination, energy and open-mindedness in principle to lead initiatives to take on the challenges of our time. Some have suggested there may be too much challenge for young people today, for example eco-tragedies and apocalyptic literature pervade children's literature, though we note too the positive ethical features of *The Hunger Games* and others.

4. The range of benefits from language to discourse that the reading of literature can bring

Bloemert et al. (2017) analysed responses of 635 secondary-school students (fifteen to seventeen-year-olds) across 15 different schools and 28 different classes in the Netherlands, who were asked a simple open question: 'What do you think are the benefits of EFL literature lessons?' Their results showed 'the majority of the students consider literature in a FL primarily as language education' (Bloemert et al. 2017: 1). Mostly language approaches were being used rather than traditional literary approaches (study of genre, plot, theme, literary terminology). Students saw English vocabulary and idioms as their main benefit from reading literature – 'I learn synonyms of words I already know' (2017: 9), also some historical social and cultural contexts – 'you learn about how people thought in different periods' (2017: 9). Less than a third of the

students seemed to consider critical thinking skills and personal development – 'It gives you time and space to think about topics that you would not look for on your own initiative' (2017: 9). Overall, however, the authors of the study felt that both teachers and students were missing the possible value of a more comprehensive approach to literature use in ELT. According to *Using Literature in English Language Education: Challenging Reading for 8–18 Year Olds*, a more comprehensive approach to language–literature education would include multiple literacies, reader response, intercultural learning and global issues approaches as well as creativity, transmedial and intertextual approaches.

We should close with another study that emphasizes the social and collective nature of reading and its challenges, this time for apprentice readers of literature in secondary education in the UK. Yandell's (2014) own challenge is against the doctrine, often implicit, that the best reading is private, silent and somehow takes place in a vacuum of independence and self-sufficiency. Against this view, Yandell assembles his data to show the reading of Shakespeare and others can be 'irreducibly social, collaborative, dialogic' (2014: 179) and pervasively challenging: 'Literature [. . .] is valuable precisely as a site of contestation, a site where new cultures and new meanings are produced' (2014: 179). This is the ultimate challenge and value for teachers and learners of literary literacy and deep reading.

Krashen has changed his well-known original 'comprehensible input' hypothesis to the *compelling* comprehensible input hypothesis (Krashen and Bland 2014). Literature, children's literature or otherwise, 'consists of texts which engage, change, and provoke intense responses in readers' (Hunt 2005: 1). From Shakespeare to Suzanne Collins, Tim Winton or David Wiesner, compelling examples are to be found throughout the present collection.

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