

Flying Kites and Chasing White Rabbits

We hear a lot in Ireland lately about what we might call the Farmleigh principle: the idea that our economic life may need to reorient itself and to draw its strength and its potential for growth not from industry or commerce in the usual sense, but from culture. The cultural industries, the argument goes, may well be the new sources of our national wealth.

I'm all for cultural capital and I'm all for national wealth, and the Farmleigh way of thinking has a lot to be said for it.

There are people – though not, I am sure, in this room – who think rather reductively about education. Such people believe that the chief function of education is to produce a workforce. But if education is not – or only very partially – about producing a workforce, then what is it for? And what is art for? What is literature for? And what, in particular, is children's literature for?

Some would say that the function of education is to pass on our culture to the next generation, and that children's literature is part of that educational project. According to this view of things, the educational system is constantly trying to gather up the culture and put it in a box – they call it a curriculum – so that it can get passed along as a neat parcel to the next generation. But of course culture is a living thing and it doesn't really fit in a box. And because it is alive, it is dynamic. It is constantly changing. Bits of it decay and fall out of use, and new shoots sprout up every day. So the educational professionals have to keep trying to redefine what goes in the box, and at the same time, they have to keep checking that what's in the box is being passed on properly, in the culturally approved manner – hence the examination system.

All things considered, and especially when you take into account that what's in the box is alive and doesn't really fit in a box, the educationalists do a pretty good job, on the whole. But at the end of the day, passing the culture along in a box has its limitations. Which is why we need children's literature, because literature constantly rebels against the box, the passing along of the box, what's in the box and the checking that the what's-in-the-box has been safely passed along. Fiction and poetry keep saying, yeah, but what about this? And this? And this? This is much more interesting than what's in the box.

Far from being a party to the process of box-transmission, literature doesn't really give a damn about the box or its contents. Children's literature is definitely outside the box. It is hopping about on the ground making excited discoveries. And it's because the box and its contents – worthy and important though they are – can become pretty heavy and pretty burdensome that we need children's literature. Children need to be able to put the damned box down and go chasing after a white rabbit.

That can be annoying for the people who packed the box. They want children to learn to read, for example, and of course they are quite right. The most important thing you learn at school is how to read. It's important because we live in a literate society and in our society it's as important to be able to read as it is to be able to walk and talk – if you can't do these things, your ability to participate in society is restricted. But literature is bounding along ahead like the white rabbit, and before you know where you are, it's over the hills and far away. Because children's literature knows perfectly well that literacy is only a beginning, not an end. It's the starting point, not the goal

Literature soars way up into the air like a kite and makes us gasp. It's held in place by a

string wound around a spool, and the *spool* is maybe in the box. We have to have the spool of string, but the spool isn't the interesting thing. It's the kite that's beautiful and buoyant and alive and that tugs for freedom.

Literature is for reading. We learn to read, not because reading is in the box, but so that we can read. And we read so that we can think, so that we can make sense of ourselves, of the world, and of our place in the world.

We read in the first place to know that we are not alone. That the things that strike us have struck others before us. And how we feel about things is a common experience. Literature, in short, teaches us how to be human. We read so that we can construct meaning, which is, of course, the essential human project. And it is through our childhood reading, and especially our reading of fiction, that we first learn how to construct meaning.

If you think of daily life, what goes on between the time you get up in the morning and you go back to bed at night, it can seem very banal and uninteresting at times. And if our superficial and visible lives were all that we experienced, life would be immensely dull. But life is not dull. Life is exciting and thrilling and full of joy and beauty and love and fun. It's also full of pain and challenge and loss. But it's never dull.

It's not because we are always driving fast cars or going to parties or telling jokes that life is thrilling and enjoyable and fun, but life is constantly interesting mainly because of what is going on in our heads. It is because we are able to think and to feel, because we are able to interpret what is going on around us and use these experiences constantly to correct and adjust and develop our internal model of the world that the everyday is so interesting. And we learn to do those things, to develop that internal model of the world and to develop our inner lives, largely – not exclusively, but largely – through reading, especially fiction.

Through literature, we can live many lives. We can be a barefoot child in the Alps, whose best friend is a goatherd. We can be a boy carved from wood who comes alive and grows a very long nose. We can be a boy with a scar on his forehead or a girl with a secret garden, a bear of little brain, or a very hungry caterpillar. The French-Mauritian Nobel laureate JMG Le Clézio (who probably never wanted to be a caterpillar), puts it like this:

“Writing is a way to lengthen life, maybe ... Writing is a way to make our emotions long-lasting, ... to live things again, and to think again about what you have lived and to invent new ways of life sometimes, to better your understanding and to know yourself better ... In the end, your heart has bitten twice for the same emotions, the same memories in life.”
(Wording slightly amended.)

He was speaking from the writer's point of view, and it was writing that he identified as a kind of life-extending process, but it's equally true of reading: our lifespan is limited, and since we can't extend our lifespan much in a linear direction by living longer than we do, all that is left to us is to extend it breadthways. Imaginative literature allows us to build those extensions to our lives in particularly satisfying and interesting and illuminating ways.

What I have been saying here could also be said, in a way, of , any of the arts. Music, dance, theatre and the visual arts enrich our lives immeasurably. But there is one huge difference between imaginative literature and the other art forms, and I will come to that in a moment.

First I want to examine the idea of story. Lots of writers, and particularly children's writers, will announce that they think of themselves not so much as writers, but primarily as storytellers. And much of the discourse around why literature, and especially children's literature, is so important seems to centre on the idea of story, and how essential it is for us, how our brains seem to be hardwired for story, to the extent that we crave it.

It's certainly true that we turn everything we experience into narrative: that is our way of processing experience. Take sport, for example: it's the ultimate real-life soap opera. New characters are constantly appearing from the wings, taking the stage, doing the wrong thing, doing the right thing, confronting the enemy, winning, losing, plotting, scheming. It's got heroes and villains. It's got excitement and confrontation and suspense. It's got intrigue, it's got history. It's made for the human predilection for story. Same with politics. Unnervingly the same.

In his classic analysis of how fiction functions, *Aspects of the Novel*, EM Forster takes a famously apologetic stance on story. 'Oh, dear me, yes,' he says, with characteristic Forsterian prissiness, 'we must have story.'

And of course it's true. Story – or at least plot, and I am not going to draw a Forsterian distinction here between the two, I will spare you that – is what makes the whole fictional thing work. It's what draws your reader in, and keeps her reading, engages her interest, sometimes over many, many pages, so that when she gets to the last page, she puts the book down with a satisfied sigh.

But you know, Forster had a point. Story is by no means the most important thing in fiction. It pulls the whole thing together, it structures the narrative, it creates shape and momentum and, if well handled, it leads the reader towards that satisfied sigh at the end. But story is really only a skeletal thing. It's a bit like melody in music. For example, you can get a ring tone for your mobile phone that is a Mozart melody. But it's only a Mozart melody – Mozart music it most certainly is not. It's a tinny, electronic shadow of Mozart's music; yet it's still recognisably a Mozart melody.

A story is to fiction what a melody is to a Mozart concerto, let's say. It can be extracted from the work and presented in a kind of essentialized way, but by taking it out of its context, by disaggregating it from everything else that goes to make fiction fiction, you turn it into un-fiction. If you summarize the plot, that's all you've got: the story in some essential form, but something that is the barest ghost of the work of fiction itself.

That's why I'm inclined to shy away from the idea that writing is 'really' storytelling. Of course writers tell stories, but writing is not 'really' storytelling. It's 'really' writing. And story is only one element in fiction. There are all sorts of other things too: atmosphere, characterization, emotion, social observation, language, rhythm, humour.

There's a jingle that we in this country all learnt at school, a kind of nursery rhyme:

Dúirt bean liom
Gur dhúirt bean léi
Gur dhúirt bean elie
Gur inis bean di
Go bhfaca sí bean
Ag bun na sceiche
Ach an bhean, ní bean

Ach sí-bhean í.

This translates roughly as

A woman said to me
That a woman said to her
That another woman said
That a woman told her
That she saw a woman
By the thorny bush
But the woman wasn't a woman at all
But a fairy woman

People usually quote only the first line or two of this: “Dúirt bean liom gur dhúirt bean léi” – Marian Finucane quotes it quite often on her weekend radio programme, and all she usually quotes are the first three words: “Dúirt bean liom” and this tiny snippet is immediately understood to indicate that a story is suspect, because it has been passed around from one person to another – actually, in this case, and I am sure it is no coincidence, from one woman to another – by word of mouth, with no acknowledged source, and so it can't be relied upon. The rhyme is a byword for rumour and Chinese whispers, because by the end of the rhyme there is nothing but confusion: the joke is that by the time we get to the last line, we don't know which of all the women mentioned is being identified as the fairy woman. The truth is distorted by the rumouring process, and we know nothing by the end of it, except that there is a rumour.

From a journalistic point of view, this interpretation of the rhyme makes total sense. Journalists need to be able to pinpoint their sources so that they can identify whether or not a story is factual, and if it is only a “dúirt bean liom” kind of story, then it's certainly not going to meet journalistic standards.

But that's where imaginative literature diverges from journalism. Literature glories in “dúirt bean liom”. Even in detective fiction, where the unknitting of the rumours and the pinning down of who in fact done it, is the point, the pleasure that emerges from the untangling of the rumours is totally dependent on the rumours all being tangled up in the first place.

Fiction, in other words, is a kind of play. It loves the “dúirt bean liom” situation, and that's because fiction is all about speculation: the whole fictional project is founded upon speculation – What if ..., Let's suppose ..., Once upon a time ... Or, as James Stephens so beautifully disrupted the formula, One day, away in a place ...

The kinds of truth that fiction is interested in establishing usually have very little to do with fact or truth in the courtroom sense. We're back to the box again – the one that literature is outside of. Which means that the way we learn to model the world through reading fiction is actually not about modelling the world at all: it's about positing alternative worlds, worlds that may or may not resemble this one that we find ourselves in. But through the process of imagining those other worlds, we come to better understand our own wonderful world.

And this brings me back to the single biggest and most important difference between literature and the other art forms. In the case of, let's say, a painting, the painter paints the painting, and then the painting exists out there in three dimensions in the real world, and we can look at it. With music, the composer writes the music, but unlike the painting, the music doesn't exist out there in the real three-dimensional world. It requires musicians to

call it into existence. Every time it is played, performers remake and renew and to some extent reinvent the music. In the case of literature, however, it is the reader himself or herself who performs the work of art. Like a piece of music, the poem or the story or the novel needs to be performed, inside the reader's head, and every time that it is performed it exists anew, but in the case of literature, the audience is identical with the performer. The reader, like the musician, is collaborating with the author in creating the work of art every time. And it is this active involvement with and interaction with the text that distinguishes the literary work of art from all other kinds of art, including the performing arts, which are performed for an audience, not by the audience. This is what gives literature its very special position in the construction of our inner lives.

And learning to do that, to enter into the imaginative life of the author and to transpose what the author's imaginative life has produced into the stuff of one's own imaginative life is the great intimate privilege that reading fiction brings us. That's why it's so important, and that's why it's so important that all children everywhere have access to children's literature. And the best possible way for children to get access to children's literature is through libraries.

Libraries are a marvellous democratic tool: by being inclusive, open to all, they tend to equalize an otherwise very unequal society and are a force for social justice.

Remember the box full of culture that the education system is killed trying to pass along to the next generation, and the white rabbit that is bounding away ahead of the box, the kite that is soaring way above it all? That white rabbit is on his way to the school library, and the kite has just flown out of the library window.