

‘Real’ books: Keeping up with our multiliterate kids

Of all the art forms, literature is the most curricularised. The other arts – music, dance, drama, the visual arts – have a status in education that is somewhere between ‘soft’ subjects and hobbies. Literature, however, has a place at the heart of the curriculum, especially at second level, where it is a core part of a core subject, mandatory for all pupils. In the primary school too, since the vogue for ‘real books’ in the classroom (even though, as I understand it, the use of ‘real books’ at school is tending to give way, these days, to anthologies with only bits of real books in them), literature is also central, in one form or another, to what happens in the classroom.

This intense curricularisation of an art form is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, literary practitioners – writers, in other words – can be happy that all children are exposed to their art form from the nursery to the Leaving Certificate – and quite often beyond, as good educational experiences with literature tend to lead on to a lifetime of reading for pleasure. On the other hand, the essentially academic environment in which most people first encounter literature can weigh it down, freighting it for some students with negatives ranging from the mild – boredom, routine, the quotidian – to the more threatening, such as failure, exclusion and illiteracy.

Now, all this is just speculation on my part. I can’t actually prove this link between intense classroom exposure to books and the alienation from reading that is so common among children, and especially boys, as they get older, but that such alienation happens is certainly a fact, as is dolefully recorded in *What’s the Story?* a Children’s Books Ireland 2002 research report on Irish children’s reading habits.

There is a certain amount of hand-wringing that goes on among concerned adults about how books are expected to compete for children’s time with attractions such as iPhones and Twitter, Bebo and texting, DVDs and, goodness me, e-books – as if e-books are somehow not books at all. But it’s not just a question of time. It’s a question of what is attractive, and I’m sorry, but what is attractive is not what is used in the classroom as a literacy tool.

What has charm for children is what is forbidden in the classroom – the mobile phone, the iPod, the Nintendo, the DVD player. Even the computer has already lost that charm of the forbidden, for it has long been a classroom tool. It’s not that children don’t enjoy using computers at school, but computers do not have the same allure as the forbidden items, and the most interesting thing you can do on a computer is what is forbidden in school – go on Facebook or Bebo or email your friends.

It is hardly surprising, then, if children find iPhones more thrilling than books – the iPhone is a treat, a privilege, a status symbol and, best of all, it is frowned upon by adults, whereas a book is approved by adults, associated with tedium, homework and more or less painful literacy acquisition, and it is attractive mainly to the least popular class members: swots and nerds. I exaggerate here, of course – there are lots of children who love books, and there are lots of schools where teachers have managed to enthuse children about books, but these schools tend to be of a particular type. They are often (though not always) girls’ schools, and they tend to be in wealthier areas where enthusiasm for books at school is supported by parents who see reading achievement as a marker of social status.

When I was at school, novels were mostly dull red hardbacks that lived in locked glass-fronted bookcases and were carefully removed once a week, for a special privileged reading half-hour on a Friday afternoon. You could say this was depriving children of access to books, and certainly I wouldn’t want to restrict children to only half-an-hour’s reading time per week, but another way of looking at it is that by keeping the books in a special place and giving access to them only at a

particular time, the school was giving children the message that reading is a treat and a pleasure. Of course I am all in favour of having ready access to books and of using ‘real books’ in the classroom, but there is a danger that when novels are turned into classroom tools, the children may get the message that all books are really textbooks. Teachers can compound this problem by mining classroom novels for examples of simile or by wresting ‘hard’ words and ‘interesting’ phrases out of context and turning them into homework. Where is the magic of reading to find a place in an environment like this?

I visit classrooms regularly, and I often work with children on writing stories. When I ask the question, *What do you need to have in a story?* – the answers I am looking for include plot, character, setting, events, tension, action structure – but the answer I most often get is *Full stops and capital letters, Miss.*

Now, I am in fact a great fan of full stops and capital letters, correct spelling, logical paragraphing and the well-constructed essay. But a classroom in which children think that the main things you need to have in a story are full stops and capital letters is a classroom that is failing children. What’s going on here is that the classroom culture is valuing literacy over literature, and even if the teacher in such a classroom manages to teach children the elements of literacy, she has also taught them, unwittingly, that literacy is not a means to an end but a value in itself, and that is a shame. Literacy is enormously important and *the* essential gift for a school to give its pupils, but it is a gift that is useful only in so far as it gives us access to much more valuable gifts, and if it is presented as the ultimate value, then that is not only pointless but deeply sad.

This fetishisation of literacy is not confined to the primary school. Most educated people are guilty of it to some extent. I had a conversation recently with a person connected with a university, and I remarked that I thought it very primitive that students should be expected to handwrite their examinations, in this day and age, when in real life nobody handwrites anything longer than a post-it sticker or a shopping list. Not only is it tiring for students taking exams, but it is surely unnecessarily difficult for the examiners too, trying to decipher the scrawls that tired and stressed students produce under exam conditions. This university person was shocked at my suggestion. *But then they would be using the spell-checker*, my university person said, as if I had suggested eating babies or poisoning the water table. So what? I wanted to know. *But then they would never learn to spell*, she said.

Now, there is a flaw in this argument.

Take me, for example. I am a writer, a translator, an editor, I spend my time working with words, and I consider myself a good speller. Ladies and gentlemen, you are looking at a person who can spell metempsychosis. But that lovely list of professional occupations I gave you just now – they have nothing to do with the fact that I can spell metempsychosis. The reason I can spell this delightful word is that ... my spell-checker taught me how to spell it.

So you see what I mean about the flaw in thinking that rushes to condemn the idea of students being able to have access to spell-checkers. In fact, using a spell-checker, far from undermining your ability to spell, actually *teaches* you how to spell. Spell-checkers are very bossy. Every time you misspell a word, the spell-checker waves a frantic red line at you. And if you are prepared to take the warning seriously, it helpfully offers you the correct spelling. I wouldn’t call that an attack on civilisation as we know it. I’d be inclined to call it an example of experiential learning.

They’re not omnipotent, of course, spell-checkers, which is perhaps the most endearing thing about them, because a bossy technology that was also omnipotent would be unbearable. They don’t always twig if you write ‘there’ when you mean ‘their’ for example, and they are no substitute for a

good teacher who can explain (a) that and (b) why words that sound the same are often spelt differently. But I wouldn't call them some kind of instrument of the devil designed to dismantle the language as we know it. Quite the contrary.

But what's more interesting than the illogicality of my university person's objection to spell-checkers is the underlying assumption that students should learn to spell. Now, here's a radical question: why does it matter that people should learn to spell?

As something of a language freak myself, my gut reaction, like the gut reaction of teachers, is to splutter, but of course, it's obvious, they *must* learn to spell, if children don't learn to spell, standards will fall, the language will go to pot, we'll all be spelling like the Americans within a generation – people won't KNOW there is a u in colour. Students will be writing I C U when they mean I see you. Unthinkable! The sky will doubtless fall in, and we will deserve it.

Now, I am instinctively the kind of person who does consider it a horrible prospect if people don't know that there is a u in colour. But I do dare to interrogate my own sense of horror. Why is it so important? What does it matter? Suppose we followed George Bernard Shaw's suggestion and abolished the apostrophe. Would that make us a more literate or a less literate people? I wouldn't much relish it myself, but I can see that the abolition of the apostrophe would at least cut out enormous numbers of opportunities for getting things wrong. And as for text-speak: in the first place, I find it rather witty, and in the second place, with increasing numbers of young people using predictive texting – another bossy technology that makes you spell right – I really think that within a very short period of time, text-speak will be of archaeological interest and practised only by texters over fifty who can't be bothered with predictive texting. Already, I find that people of my son's generation use predictive texting to send unnecessarily perfectly spelt and punctuated text messages, whereas my own friends, like me, are still sending those cryptic messages about 2nite and gr8 news.

In any case, I'm not here to advocate for the abolition of the apostrophe, you will be pleased to hear, or for the joys of text speak. I'm simply pointing out that the reason we feel so strongly about something as trivial as spelling really has nothing to do with the desirability of universal literacy and a lot to do with social discrimination.

I admitted earlier that I only learnt to spell *metempsychosis* when my spell-checker taught it to me. Now, anyone at all would know that to be able to spell *metempsychosis* correctly is a very specialised piece of knowledge, and not knowing it is no shame. That's why I can, without losing face, admit to you that my spell-checker taught it to me. There is no real social value in being able to spell a word like that – it's so rarefied as to fall outside the box.

But let's take a word like *accommodation*. I don't think anyone has researched this, but going by my own experience, I would say that a very large minority, perhaps even a small majority of educated native speakers of English spell this word incorrectly – and most of them aren't even aware of it.

So what?

Well, yes. That's my point. *So what?* But you'd be amazed at the number of people who can spell *accommodation* correctly who consider it a point of honour to look down on those who can't. And this is what I mean about the fetishisation of literacy. Being able to spell a word like *accommodation* is important if you are applying for a job as a proofreader, for example, but in most ordinary situations, it doesn't matter a hoot whether you can spell a word like that or not – especially if you have access to a spell-checker which will put you right pretty quickly if you get it

wrong.

You see what I mean? There is a tendency among educated people to overvalue a certain kind of literacy. Not all that long ago, you had to be able to read Latin to be considered educated – not much more than a generation ago, you couldn't get into a university in this country without having Latin in your Leaving Certificate, not because Latin had any practical value, but because it had a certain educational cachet. In the same way, being able to spell and punctuate correctly has a value – like having good table manners or dressing appropriately for a social occasion, but let's not kid ourselves. It is a social value, it's not a literary value, not an artistic value and it's certainly not a moral value – though the way many people go on about spell-checkers and text-speak and the decline of punctuation you'd think it was a prerequisite for heaven at the very least.

Literacy is a fundamental educational good, and giving children access to the world of print is the single most important thing that a school does. Without it, there is virtually no education at all, because almost every kind of learning, apart from very practical skills, depends on print-based transmission. But if we allow ourselves to become enslaved to a kind of literacy-neurosis, then we are in danger of missing the boat altogether and we will be left on the quayside, sitting on our neatly labelled suitcases, while our children sail off to the future on a very different kind of Good Ship Literacy.

Because what constitutes literacy in today's world has changed radically. Of course you still need to be able to read – in fact, being able to read is even more important now than ever it was. Ten years ago, people thought our culture was becoming an intensely visual one, because of the dominance of television as an entertainment medium, and it is certainly true that visual communication has become centrally important, but with the proliferation of technology has come even more exposure to print than before. In spite of the rise of YouTube, the internet is not primarily a televisual medium, but still an intensely print-based one. Googling, blogging, twittering – none of these is remotely like watching TV; they are all forms of reading and writing, and in fact Google is very demanding in the spelling department. If you misspell a word in a Google search, you'll probably get a snooty message asking 'Did you mean ... ?' and the correct spelling inserted in place of your pathetic attempt. Mobile phones incorporate cameras, certainly, but most text messages consist of written words. Writing is not going away, that's for sure. It's changing, it's being used very differently, but it's there, in your face, all the time.

And this brings me around again to books. There is a consensus, not just among teachers, but among most adults with any interest in children and their education that books, and especially novels, works of fiction, are A Good Thing. As a writer myself, of course I subscribe to this view, in a general kind of way. But let's just look beyond that assumption for a moment, and ask why we are so attached to the idea of books as such a good thing that we tend to ascribe almost moral value to them, when after all, the book as we know it is just a particular kind of technology for the transmission of human ideas, communication and stories. All of us here in this room can probably agree that the book is a particularly good technology. It's relatively cheap, and it can be produced in large numbers and easily distributed. You can buy it in an easily identifiable kind of shop, a bookshop, and you can take it home and read it when and where you want to. You don't require any expensive technology to support a book – you don't need to plug it in, or to feed software into it or to hook it up to the internet. Assuming you are can read, the only other thing you need is light. Apart from the fact that you can't read it in total darkness, you can read a book pretty well anywhere, in a comfortable armchair, in bed, in a tent, in the bath, indoors or out, in a hammock, on a bus, or a train or a plane – you don't even have to close it for take off and landing. So it is an eminently flexible technology, needing very little support to yield up its pleasures.

That's what makes a book superior to other media. I'm going to say that again. That is what makes a

book superior to other media – its flexibility, its ease of use, its relative cheapness, its easy accessibility. A book is not inherently superior to other media – it's just one medium among many. misspell A book is not something that has moral value, or even any kind of moral status. It's just one particularly good method of transmitting information, data, human intercourse, and especially story.

Yes, it does have some particular characteristics that make it more appealing or more interesting or maybe even more valuable than other media. For example, if we compare a novel, in book form, with, say, the film adaptation of that novel, we can often find that the book form is preferable for all sorts of reasons.

The prejudice against audiobooks for children is probably rooted in a pedagogic anxiety about literacy. There's a fear, perhaps, that children who 'merely' listen are missing out on opportunities to improve their reading skills. But to see reading fiction as a kind of extension of schoolwork is a flawed way of thinking. It might be better to turn the notion on its head and ask why we learn to read at all.

There are perfectly valid answers to this question, to do with the absolute necessity of literacy in a society like ours. But there is another answer that goes way beyond the functional, and it is that reading vouchsafes the reader the incomparable pleasure of entering and inhabiting an imagined space and experiencing that space and the characters and situations it contains in an especially intimate and engaging and often quite exhilarating way.

But we can enter imagined spaces also through the medium of the audiobook, and the same benefits accrue, regardless of the physical form of the reading experience. It is just as valid an aesthetic and imaginative engagement to listen to a book as it is to read it, and it makes the same kind of imaginative demands on the listener as reading does.

One reason people give is that a book engages the reader in a particular kind of way. When we read a book, we enter into a kind of co-creation of the story with the author. The author provides a certain amount of coded information, in the form of printed words, and in reading the book, we go beyond decoding – we engage in an imaginative act whereby the story seems to 'run' in our head in much the same way that a film runs on a screen. Now, most readers find that this creative reading experience provides them with a particular kind of pleasure; but some readers seem to think that reading also brings with it a particular kind of virtue. This is really a terribly odd idea. That some people obtain a particular kind of pleasure or satisfaction from reading that they don't get from watching a movie, say, is understandable – but only in a culture that fetishises literacy and that values it above other kinds of interaction with the arts could moral superiority be attributed to reading.

This over-valuing of the book, this quite possibly unconscious snobbery that elevates reading as an activity over and above other kinds of cultural engagement is, I believe, very possibly at the root of the discomfort that so many children feel around books. They pick this up, the sense that books are somehow A Good Thing, even a morally good thing, whereas the cultural forms that may appeal to them – TV, computer games, DVDs, whatever – are considered less worthy. This leads, paradoxically perhaps, and certainly sadly, to a rejection of books and the whole literate, academic culture that they stand for.

Now, like you, at least, I think like you, I do believe that what books have to offer is in fact more valuable than what all the other technologies put together can offer us. I do truly believe that the book's requirement for the imaginative input of its reader, in a way that is not a requirement of any

other story-telling medium, is something that makes books more valuable, and for this reason, I do want our young people to engage with books, to learn how to do it, and to experience the inimitable pleasure that comes from co-creating the story with the author by supplying the pictures in their own heads that the words the author has used only roughly indicate.

And so, like you, I desperately want our young people to grow up not just functionally but also imaginatively literate. And, like you, I often despair of this.

But I don't think that beating kids over the head with books is the way to go about restoring this kind of literacy. The first thing we need to do as adults in this culture that is brimming with so many forms of literacy, is to recognize those other forms of literacy as valid and worthwhile, and to develop an attitude towards media like the iPhone or the internet, Twittering and DVDs, text-messaging and Facebook, that is far less patronising, and then also to reclaim the book – not so much *from* the classroom as *for* the library.

I spoke to a teacher recently from a school where the children come from poor backgrounds. An area where families are poor and books are not a feature of home life. It was one of the schools that, as part of the Junior Certificate Support Scheme, had recently acquired a library.

It is an appalling indictment of our educational system that the provision of a library to a school is considered a special measure to support schools where children are at risk of failure – surely a library should be as normal a thing in a school as a staffroom, a playground, indoor toilets. But we all know that this is not the case. In Ireland, maybe uniquely in western Europe, a school library is considered a luxury, the kind of thing you expect to find in only the wealthiest schools.

In any case, in this poor school, in a poor area, where the children are in danger of dropping out of school early, a library – meaning not just a dedicated room but a dedicated room full of bookshelves, filled with actual books, along with a properly qualified non-teaching librarian – such a library had been provided.

And how is it going? I asked the teacher.

How is it going? he said. The children are fighting to get into it.

Isn't that fantastic. Children fighting to get into a library! The provision of a library can make that much difference to children's attitudes to books – here is a development on the locked, glass-fronted bookcases of my childhood: put your books in a special place, treasure them, honour them, give children the message that reading is a treat and a pleasure – and you will get children fighting to read.