

English Years 7 -10: a parent's and writer's perspective

[Presented at a Board of Studies Symposium February 2001]

Thank you for the opportunity to address this Symposium. As someone accustomed to writing alone all day and creating fiction, or if speaking in public, speaking only about my own work or about issues pertaining to the lives of writers, it has been a challenge. A not unwelcome challenge, I might add, for I have found myself thinking hard in order to articulate what it is that I know, or think I know about adolescence, and what I believe about a discipline that I was trained in, and left professionally, many years ago. What I left it for, however, writing fiction for young people, dove tails so neatly with the profession of English teaching that sometimes I hardly feel I've left at all.

First to a few comments about my own background in English Teaching. I was trained in Dip Ed course at The University of Sydney in 1973. People like Ken Watson inspired me, with his passion for literature for young people and that inspiration has led me to where I am today.

While reading the documents sent before the Symposium I was fascinated by the Perspectives paper and I tried to recall what was the philosophical underpinning of the approach to my teaching back then. I couldn't recall one although that doesn't mean none was taught us. I suspect if it were articulated, it would have been a mix between a Cultural Heritage and a Personal Growth model. I taught for two years, traveled, retrained in London in the teaching of English as a second or foreign Language, became a teacher trainer in that area, and gradually reinvented myself as a writer. For the past thirteen years I have been a full time writer of fiction for young people. English teaching and writing are jobs you can leave. Parenting, that other preoccupation of mine for the last eighteen years is one you cannot.

It is as a parent that I am speaking today.

I have three daughters: one has just left the school system having done her HSC, another is in Year Eleven and the third is in Year Eight. My direct experience, my parenting experience, then is only with girls. It has been across four State high schools in the metropolitan area: co-ed and single sex, selective and comprehensive. My indirect experience is far greater as I not only have everyone's experience of friends and family but I also go into schools as a visiting writer and speaker about my work. My husband and I consider ourselves lucky. Our girls are intelligent and all read competently within months of beginning kindergarten. They lived- and still live - in a house where, as little children, they were read to daily and where reading and writing were activities that both parents did and were seen to enjoy.

Many of you are no doubt parents and perhaps some of you may share the feelings I want to describe today. I lurch around thinking I know about adolescence. I'm getting on well with my kids, we haven't had a major, major fight in ages, we can laugh about stuff together and we share views on all sorts of issues. And then something happens - a vicious comment about something I've said or done, a failure on my part to understand, and I think I am like Manuel - I know nothing.

My Year Eleven daughter's room is painted white. Covering each wall and part of the ceiling - in black paint - are song lyrics, other people's not her own, and when I went in there recently, what

leapt out at me was the line: *I am Becoming*

Adolescence is a time of becoming, of working out who you are, what you believe, how you will live your life. And to do that you have to try on ways of being - at the level of emotional relationships, of trying things on with family and friends, of sexual experimentation, of drug experimentation, of judging the world of parents, teachers and adults in general and finding them wanting. It is a time of dramatic physical and intellectual growth. It is a time of swings of mood, of desire for independence, of incredible highs and incredible lows - elation and depression - sometimes clinical. It's a time of intense friendships and equally intense betrayals. There are moments when the same person in the space of days can, by their behaviour, challenge disturb, annoy, terrify and delight you.

I remember the play *Year Nine are Animals*. I used the phrase as the opening lines of a chapter in my novel [Refuge](#). I remember teachers - myself included - feeling that way about Year Nine many years ago. Yet now, as a parent, the phrase appalls me.

Because as a parent I am forced, every day, every moment of every day, to treat my children as humans, as individuals. If I don't, if I resort to that thinking as if from a text book: that all kids are the same, 'no thirteen year old should be allowed to go to the Big Day Out,' or 'no thirteen year old should be allowed to walk out of school on a Demonstration against Racism' or 'no fifteen year old should be allowed to have a boyfriend four years older,' I am confronted by *Why?* by *Don't you trust me?* or by more sophisticated discussion that challenges me with everything else I have ever encouraged them to believe.

In reading through the literature provided I was struck by certain phrases in the summaries Ros Arnold referred to in her Review. Phrases such as the risk of *marking time* in Robyn Barrat's paper, *alienation* expressed by a number of academics including Cormack and notions of *plateauing*, *negativity*, *lessening of enjoyment* and *lessening of engagement* expressed by Hill and Russell.

All of these phrases felt accurate as assessments of adolescent responses to Years 7 - 10. Adolescence is a time of confusion. Hormones bring new feelings and complexities, but I don't believe that these phrases are necessary consequences of being in Year 7 - 10. And yet in my home, there have been times when each of these phrases was relevant, a perfect naming of a sentiment expressed. At the same time, when I consulted them there was acknowledgement that there were moments of exhilaration in their English classes when they were so switched on to what was happening that in Barber's expression - their heads were spinning.

Let me share some of those moments - positive and negative - with you:

- A year seven class, one novel, the same issued to all students. It was weeks before some of the class cottoned onto the fact that the story was written from 2 points of view - switching voices, switching narrative. Methodical working through the text with lots of comprehension questions was the only activity.
- A different year seven class. This time the teacher offered the class 3 novels and encouraged choice - three groups with differing interests and abilities. A wide range of activities adapted for each text.
- Yet another year seven class studying poetry were concentrating on limericks and when two girls asked if they could do some work on Sylvia Plath and Jim Carroll they were discouraged with the 'we have to follow the work in the book' line.
- A year seven poetry class encouraged to look at Rap lyrics as poetry and to read and act them out.

- Shakespeare taught via read around the class method. No attempt to dramatize, to see a performance or to exploit the spate of films that has recently come out. And this to a class that included kids who had gone to see Luhman's Romeo and Juliet four times.

In some of the examples that I've quoted here, there was a clear attempt at student centred learning, at taking seriously the ideas, the interests, and the culture of the students, of inviting them in to participate in the process of determining what part of the curriculum should be.

Believe me, when that opportunity is not presented, the negative remarks about school, the scorn at poor teaching or pointless exercises are overwhelming. And parents like me who believe in defending school and teachers to their kids have a hard time not agreeing with them.

My references have been primarily literary texts. As a creator of these, it is where I feel most at home, but I am also excited by the use of other media, especially film in the English classroom. I have seen the response of my children when a movie they have seen in their leisure time has been treated as a text worthy of close study at school. And this study brought them to other similar films they would never have chosen alone. It helped them to grow. This bringing of their outer world into their lives at school goes some way to showing teachers value that which the student values. I am saddened by the many schools I visit where this does not happen: Where students have no part in choosing the texts they will study and where teachers fear a loss of control if different class members are reading different books. What has been common practice in primary schools for many years is viewed with suspicion in many secondary classrooms. Student centered is a phrase widely used in the documentation but given only lip service by some.

As a writer and as a parent I welcome the recommendation that 'the syllabus give equal emphasis to responding and composing' and 'the syllabus give equal emphasis to the imaginative and the critical. I have spoken in a number of fora about what I saw happening in primary education as the emphasis on genre in the creation of texts meant that genuine imaginative, creative writing was abandoned in many classrooms. Students emerged competent in writing reports and procedures - in a simplistic way - but had never written a poem or a story or something reflective of their own feelings. Which is not to deny the rationale or the value of the teaching of genre. Instead lets us acknowledge that in this time of turbulent thoughts and changing feelings and emotions, some emphasis on creativity can assist students respond in literal and in symbolic ways. It can be a mode of self reflection which I believe can be enormously powerful and valuable to everyone and to this group in particular. And a small point before I move on to the final area that I want to bring to your attention.

It concerns visual texts and literary theories. As a creator of picture books to which many kids are exposed from the earliest stage of their lives I am struck by how few of these books find their way into secondary classrooms. A well-created picture book is not a story decorated with pictures, but is a work of art with a visual narrative alongside the written one - supporting it or in contradiction to it. It is an ideal and relatively cheap medium for the study of all aspects of the visual creation - use of space, line, colour, and tone and much more. It is also the place where little children not only learn to read in the sense of decoding but where they often experience for the first time sophisticated notions such as irony.

Finally some information I received only this week that I think has implications for all of us - parents, teachers and writers.

There is in Melbourne an Institution *The Australian Centre for Youth Literature*. It is housed in the State Library of Victoria and its aim is to bring to the community books, writers and reading. Projects

it organizes include talks and evenings for an adult audience on issues such as *Boys and Books*. It has assisted the Sydney based *Lateral Learning* in the development of its program. It has developed the concept of the *Book Gig* - a performance based approach to literature which sees a group of actors perform a piece from a literary text and then engage in discussion with an audience, with the writer and with the director about the show and about the original text on which it was based. Funding allowed these gigs, entitled *Page to Stage* to travel to regional Victoria. If funding permitted it would be a national program.

The Centre and the Australia Council as partners commissioned research into reading:

Young Australia Reading: from Keen to Rebel to Reluctant Readers. A more minor partner in the research is the Victorian Teachers of English. The report is finished but is not yet published or widely available. But I am able to tell you a number of the things that are in it.

- Overwhelmingly young people want to read for pleasure.
- More want to read than use the Internet.
- Over 80% of parents want their kids to read.
- A large number of those interviewed do not want to be told what to read all the time.
- The young people, on the whole, regard their school and public libraries as irrelevant.
- There is a big gap in recommendation - those telling are not being listened to and yet those interviewed want to know more about what is available.

The ages covered were 10 to 18 and the report will be published by the Australia Council in about April. There is a lot more in this research than I have mentioned. It was conducted by Woolcott Research here in Sydney.

I have been enormously impressed by the thinking in the documents that I have seen concerning this rethinking of the syllabus. The recommendations do seem to place young people at the centre and I wish you well in your further deliberations and in your attempts to translate your conclusions into dynamic classroom encounters.