Gweno Williams and Anita Normann (Eds.)

Literature for the English Classroom. Theory into Practice

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Reviewer: Robert Hill

The Meaning of Literature

Over the last few decades what is meant by literature has changed considerably. What used to be a fairly commonly agreed body of 'greatest hits' from the British Isles and North America with, latterly, additions from postcolonial literature, offering a short menu of poetry, prose or drama, is perceived by many as being dominated by DWEMs (Dead White European Males) so that the certainties of 'the canon' are no longer acceptable. For teachers, and readers in general, literature now encompasses works from many different places created by authors claiming multiple identities and writing in multiple voices, in genres and formats that have extended beyond that simple choice of poetry, prose or drama.

The texts included or referred to in this new edition of *Literature for the English Classroom* certainly reflect these modern attitudes to the choice of literature. The emphasis is on variety and the 'alternative': as the Introduction states, 'many of the texts … represent alternative, relevant, authentic reading material for a range and variety of English language learners' (p. 11). I counted just six pages on Shakespeare and a couple of pages on a poem by Edward Lear; the rest of the – many! – texts are modern, and often for young learners, as the colourful and enticing front cover promises.

An Overview of the Volume

The ten chapters (which we shall return to below) show how there is more on offer now than that stark choice of poetry, prose or drama. They cover picturebooks, poetry, global Englishes, fairy tales, young adult (YA) novels, reading for everyone, graphic novels, digital approaches to YA fiction, film and drama. So much for the texts included; now, who is this book intended *for*? This is not immediately obvious! The back cover blurb refers to 'extensive attention to LK20 curriculum competence', which meant nothing to me, and only with the Introduction did I

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discover that the book aligns with the new Norwegian LK20 curriculum. Thereafter, relevant aims of the Norwegian curriculum are mentioned piecemeal in the introductions to the various chapters. A clear couple of pages in the general Introduction outlining the new Norwegian LK20 curriculum might have been useful, for both users in Norway and users elsewhere. It must be said, however, that this national focus in no way excludes users in other contexts; the contents are perfectly suitable for teachers anywhere. As for what level of expertise in the intended readership is catered for, the back cover blurb refers to 'teacher training students of English and TEFL teachers at all levels'. This, however, means that we come across instances of stating the obvious (where trainee teachers are catered for) and instances of taking things for granted (where practising teachers are catered for).

The subtitle of the volume under review is *Theory into Practice*, and indeed most chapters fall into two halves: a theoretical introduction followed by examples of texts and activities. But what theory? Is it the theory relating to the literary format (for example, fairy tales or graphic novels) or the theory underpinning the methodologies in using certain literary texts for language teaching? It tends to be the former rather than the latter, and that preposition 'into' in *Theory into Practice* promises too much: a suggested process where theory evolves into practice turns out more often to be a matter of 'first some theory, then some practice', where the relationship is tenuous.

A Chapter-by-Chapter Walkthrough

In 'Picturebooks' (by Anna Birketveit, co-editor of the first edition) we see some distance between theory and the practice which follows. Five picturebooks are interestingly analysed, but for the interest of the adult reader rather than for use in class, although there is a short but valuable section on multicultural picturebooks. The rather scanty activities are compensated for by a useful table illustrating the pedagogic potential of eleven picturebooks. The inclusion of a generous number of illustrations from the picturebooks discussed will surely whet the reader's appetite.

Much could be said about poetry, but in 'Poetry in the English classroom' (by Marthe Sofie Pande-Rolfson) the author wisely concentrates on saying a few things well. The author emphasizes the performance nature of poetry and illustrates variations on choral reading and Reader's Theatre. She advocates pupils' own poetic production through techniques such as poetry

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walks and found poems, both of which are illustrated with photographs of children's production.

The central section of 'Global Englishes, diverse voices' (by Lalita Murty and Beck Sinclair) examines texts from the Indian subcontinent and Sub-Saharan Africa. It suggests that texts from other cultures can function as windows, mirrors and sliding doors *viz à viz* our own cultures, and neatly combines theory and practice by demonstrating the technique of 'culture capsules', a kind of graphic organizer which facilitates the identification of similarities and differences between cultures.

'Fairy tales' (again by Anna Birketveit) begins with an interesting introduction on the origins, structure and content of fairy tales (clearly a theory of literary format, not didactics), but the practical half of the chapter is disappointing. Only one fairy story is referred to (the text is not given) as an example: 'The Princess who had to have the last word', a Norwegian tale which I did not know. (I hasten to point out that this is the only element in the book that is too localized). A series of activities is recommended – word search, word match, bingo, one-sided dialogue, true-false, dramatization – that have nothing to do with the preceding theory and which could be applied to practically any format of fiction, not specifically fairy tales.

In 'Novels for teenage readers' (by co-editor Gweno Williams) a neat one-page section illustrates the characteristics and stylistic features of YA fiction. This is followed by twelve pages of synopses; Michael Morpurgo, Jacqueline Wilson and Benjamin Zephaniah are represented several times. Teachers certainly want suggestions, but I wonder if this procedure might be improved on. It might have been replaced by or supplemented with a table showing, for each title, author and date, theme, setting, theme, suitability for which age group, language level, whether filmed, and so on. The closing section on 'further didactic suggestions for class activities' is in reality a list of topics and themes to explore rather than activities *per se*.

'Reading for everyone' (by Lalita Murty, Beck Sinclair, Gweno Williams, Marthe Sofie Pande-Rolfson, Anita Normann and Tim Vicary) is a catch-all chapter dealing with diversity and inclusion, verse novels as a literary format, extensive reading, and recommended texts for differentiation. The section on inclusive texts stands out: it includes a useful checklist and then some nineteen examples of diverse and inclusive texts with succinct synopses of three to four lines each. A persuasive case is made for verse novels used for differentiation; the free verse can be remarkably simple. The five-page section on extensive reading is clearly for trainee teachers.

In 'Graphic novels in the English classroom' (by Hege Emma Rimmereide) the theory is

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more impressive than the practice. The key features of graphic novels (pp. 199-206) are an excellent revelation, supported by well-chosen illustrations and a good bibliography. The activities of dramatization and 'make your own comic' seem tame afterwards, although a literature circle adapted to discuss graphic novels is intriguing if ambitious.

'Digital approaches to young adult fiction' (by co-editor Anita Normann) begins with making the distinction between 'digital literature' (literature which is 'born digital') and digitized literature (which is converted from paper form) and then champions action- and production-orientated approaches, which use literary texts as a springboard: learners respond creatively to a text or make their own texts inspired by the original text. Tables about action and production and pre-, while-reading and post-activities make points clearly. 'Digital activities' is the term used throughout, though I propose coining the term 'digitized activities' as a truer nomenclature: some activities are traditional ones but performed with the use of a computer. 'Digital timelines', however, is an activity that is truly digital and useful with many kinds of text. As befits a chapter devoted to things digital, there is a good webography.

'Film in the English Classroom' (by Andy Gordon) is an outstanding chapter, in which theory (features of film and even the paratextual elements of posters and trailers) and practice really are connected: there is constant interplay between them, eschewing the 'first then secondly' model. Tables, boxes, bullet points and lesson plans provide a great deal of information and ideas in the limited space of one chapter. Three YA novels which have been filmed are used as examples from which ideas for using other films are extrapolated. To conclude there is a useful list of YA novels made into films.

In 'Drama in the English Classroom' (by co-editor Gweno Williams) the theory that is laid out in the introduction is didactic and not genre based. The scope of the chapter is ambitious, ranging from drama in the primary classroom to Shakespeare, taking in performing poetry, and this might explain why some activities seem not completely thought through. In hot-seating Macbeth, for example, is there going to be much discussion generated by debating whether it is acceptable to have a friend and his child murdered, or to arrange for women and children to be murdered? (p. 293). A case study based on performing Lear's nonsense poem 'The Owl and the Pussy-cat' allows the author to suggest procedures that can be exported to the dramatizing of other texts.

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Some Final Thoughts

Enthusiasm abounds in this book, so much so that the authors are sometimes tempted into rather uncritical claims for the merits of their literary formats, or a Pollyanna-like belief that no problems are involved in using their texts. In just one example among many, in the introduction to 'Picturebooks', the claim is made that 'the teacher has access to authentic English without worrying about the learner coming across too many unfamiliar words' (p. 17) while on the next page 'the language of picturebooks tends to be idiomatic, rich, varied and suggestive' (p. 18). So, it would appear that whatever the language is like in picturebooks it is a good thing.

But I do not want to end on a note that would seem to criticize enthusiasm! What impressed me most about this book was the quantity of texts the authors have included, whether in extracts, descriptions or the barest references. Salman Rushdie remarked: 'Literature is the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear *voices talking about everything in every possible way'* (Rushdie, 1991, p. 429). This book is a clear indication of how the sheer variety of contemporary literature can open our ears to many voices.

Reference

Rushdie, S. (1991). Is nothing sacred? In S. Rushdie, *Imaginary homelands: Essays and criticism 1981-1991*. Penguin Books, pp. 415-429.

Robert Hill taught in Spain, Greece and the United Kingdom before moving to Italy, where he taught for over twenty years at the universities of Cagliari, Verona and Milan. He is now a teacher trainer and author, based in Italy. He was co-author of the four-volume *Introductions to Modern English Literature* (with Alex Martin) and recently published *World Stories* (with Jennifer Gascoigne), a four-volume collection of myths, legends and folk tales from around the world. He is the coordinator of the IATEFL Literature Special Interest Group.

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