

## Breaking up is hard to do: English teachers and that LOVE of reading

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*ABSTRACT: This article explores the prevalence and nature of “reading” in the theory and practice of secondary English teachers. It sets out to describe and problematise this relationship principally, though not exclusively, through examining the reading autobiographies of student teachers of English; these narratives have been collected over a period of 13 years, the great majority are by female student teachers. They are read and analysed from a phenomenological perspective both for what they reveal about the development of readers and for the light they throw on the kinds of readers who go on to become English teachers. Appleyard’s schema of reading stages is also invoked as a helpful analytical framework. Overall this evidence is used to suggest that current conceptions of “reading” held by English teachers may have a somewhat distorting effect on the learning opportunities of students of English and on the nature of the identity of the “good” student of English.*

*KEYWORDS: Reading, literature, professional identity, secondary English teachers, gender.*

### INTRODUCTION

In England the great majority of English teachers first take a degree in “English”, principally a literary one, then a one year Post Graduate Certificate of Education and then join the profession as a life career. In my time (13 years) as the gatekeeper of one particular course this pattern has remained reasonably consistent. There has been a minor trend towards more diverse degree patterns, partly because of modularity but also because of more real student choice. In the last few years it has also become relatively clear that teaching generally is becoming less of a life career. Many more younger teachers leave the profession after three to five years; it is too soon to say whether they will “come back”.

All prospective PGCE students are interviewed in person and so I have encountered perhaps 700 or so candidates over the years. The candidates have some time in a group discussion but are always interviewed as individuals, some times by one, sometimes two interviewers. Early in the interview they are asked to trace their interest in English, with the lead-in question being a phrase like, “So where did this interest begin?” About 75% of respondents reply with a phrase which approximates to “Well, I have always loved reading.” Initially I was simply struck by this commonality but for a number of years have simply kept a systematic note and so 75% is essentially now a research “finding”. I have always felt that this was not a badge of honour but a very real issue that needed attention.

Why do respondents open with this linguistic gambit? Or rather, why do they feel they need to start with this piece of positioning? I would argue that this works on a number of levels. In essence the phrase has a strong element that is straightforward. Their memories of being young readers are chiefly very positive and their later memories, although more ambivalent, are of reading at university and as an adult reader who is able to deal with and enjoy complex texts, especially novels. Equally their perception of English teaching is that it is a

community of readers who teach what they principally enjoy, that is novels. To them they believe they are saying what both they and the interviewer wants to hear, it is what *one ought to say*. And the verb to describe one's feelings about reading needs to be a strong one and "love" is the most common choice. I would also suggest a very strong inflection of gender in this discourse as about 80% of all these candidates are female.

## **DEFINING THE PROBLEM**

My principal source of evidence is also part of the problem, as my conclusions will indicate. As a young English teacher in school I had always felt uneasy when I encountered children who were "poor" readers. I was desperate to help them but not really sure what to do; deep down I did expect, in my big school, secondary arrogance, that primary teachers would have taken care of this problem. I was there to teach whole books (especially novels) and to help young people to enjoy and appreciate them. Of course I had taken a very traditional English Literature degree and came from a home where reading literature (not just books) was the norm. My own PGCE was a leisurely affair and it too, I would suggest, treated the teaching of reading from a principally literary perspective.

Over time I believe I became much clearer that I should be a teacher of reading and that all kinds of texts were important in this process. A few years in a working class school certainly challenged all my thinking at every level. I therefore began my own PGCE teaching convinced that the "literariness" and "bookishness" of prospective English teachers could be a severe limitation. This concern encouraged me to design the first major assignment of the course as a critical reflection on reading. Students were asked to research and write an autobiographical account of their reading history. I would spend a number of consciousness-raising sessions whose aim was to clarify just how eccentric and atypical "we" were because we "love" reading and have actually spent several years in an institution being force-fed capital "L" literature. I would try to illustrate also that although individuals in the group might claim to *have read* thousands of novels they had yet *to write one*; there often was one student who either had or wanted to do just that, but they were literally the exception that proved the rule. I was trying to emphasise that they would be teaching pupils to be writers as well as readers and that their formative experiences might have taught them much less about writing itself. The emphasis therefore was on reflecting on reading development rather than simply describing it. Students were encouraged to get some evidence by talking to family, former teachers, looking for artefacts of their past reading habits and so on and particularly to try to check their vague memories against at least the memories of others, by asking such questions as how they learnt to read and the nature of their family environment.

This was 1989 and there was plenty of time for such work; student teachers only spent about 12 weeks in school. Progressively over the 1990s student teachers had to spend much more time in school, now 24 weeks out of 36, and the standards to address to achieve Qualified Teacher Status have become increasingly all-consuming and the inspection system in England extremely prescriptive and potentially punitive. But the assignment has survived albeit now in a more modest form – the autobiographical element is often only 1000 words – and with an additional focus now on undertaking some school-based research about the teaching of reading in school. It has survived not only because I have considered it to be a useful diagnostic tool, but also because students have evaluated it as such and also because

mentor teachers in our Partnership Schools review it every year and vote to keep it. This is, of course, revealing in itself of the community of readers idea.

These reading “histories” – I acknowledge their constructedness – are essentially a corpus of evidence, then, of successive cohorts coming to terms with their reading experiences as they take on the professional identity of the English teacher. For the purposes of this article I am treating them as a form of evidence although, not surprisingly, a problematic one. The chief reason I can argue for them as “evidence” is because content analysis reveals quite strong and consistent patterns over time and does, I believe, offer some useful insights into what leads people into the profession.

I am adopting a principally phenomenological stance towards these narratives, that is, letting the data reveal patterns and then checking that these are valid and consistent. However, I am aware of some methodological difficulties here. Taking a phenomenological approach does allow one to let the patterns emerge from the narratives and leads towards identifying what these voices suggest collectively are their perceptions. However, a difficulty is that these narratives were formed in a constraining and formal context. First they are an assignment. It was always made clear that they would not be graded and that tutor responses would be personal. However, one cannot set an assignment without expecting the student to conceptualise it as both a task and a test. And here it is the nature of that test that is potentially very constraining. If, as I argued above, you perceive yourself as aspiring to join a community of readers then there may well be a very strong wish to “present” your credentials to a PGCE tutor who guards the gate to that community. What in the end also convinces me that these personal accounts remain principally valid and useful as some form of evidence is that the accounts themselves reveal where that tendency to “please” the reader is strong and where it is not. This will be elaborated below.

I also make use of Appleyard’s helpfully simple schema of reading development, what he calls “shorthand labels for a cluster of distinctive responses” (Appleyard, 1990, p. 14) because his is one of the only ones – to my knowledge – which reviews the life career of a reader, as opposed to focusing on the acquisition of mastery. His subtitle “The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood” is also important, specifying as it does that his model looks principally at fiction. As I have suggested, for these readers that is their own starting point. One student teacher comments in self-revelation, “– my formative reading revolved around novels and stories – Surely I read some poems or plays? I have no recollection of them whatsoever!” The narratives suggest that his schema is very true to the experiences of most of these highly developed and self-conscious readers and helps to support the validity of my evidence. His emphasis<sup>1</sup> is on *the role* that readers take and I find

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<sup>1</sup> Appleyard’s schema:

1. ***The Reader as Player***. In the pre-school years the child, not yet a reader but a listener to stories, becomes a confident player in a fantasy world that images realities, fears, and desires in forms that the child slowly learns to sort out and control.
2. ***The Reader as Hero and Heroine***. The school-age child is the central figure of a romance that is constantly being rewritten as the child’s picture of the world and of how people behave in it is filled in and clarified. Stories here seem to be an alternative world, more organised and less ambiguous than the world of pragmatic experience, and one the reader easily escapes into and becomes involved with.
3. ***The Reader as Thinker***. The adolescent reader looks to stories to discover insights into the meaning of life, values and beliefs worthy of commitment, ideal images, and authentic role models for imitation. The *truth* of these ideas and ways of living is a severe criterion for judging them.
4. ***The Reader as Interpreter***. The reader who studies literature systematically, typically the college English major or graduate student, approaches it as an organised body of knowledge with its own principles of inquiry

this very valuable in this analysis because the writers are conceptualising themselves as active agents in the process.

The body of evidence consists of 240 of these narratives, collected since 1989 but I do not intend to make this a statistical account and reel out percentages, I do not claim that this is a linguistic account nor do I think that that kind of analysis would reveal very meaningful interpretations for our purpose. For example my impression is that the most cited author in purely numerical terms is Enid Blyton. If one accepts the numbers of her novels claimed as read, then the English teaching profession (at least in England) must have read many millions. What is interesting is what most of the narratives have to say about this form of reading and also (I hope) what I have to say about it. So I am defining patterns as very strong, strong, weak or divergent.

Not surprisingly English teachers can write and they can write very well about something that they feel strongly about especially in a mode which unlocks their personal voice, something often trapped for years within the pseudo-objectified literary essay. For the majority this was the first personal piece of writing for many years and they often conclude by explaining the liberation of such writing. “After so many years of rigorously effacing the first person from all formal writing, it is quite a struggle to put down on paper those egoistic pronouns “I”, “me” and “myself” without a squirm of embarrassment.” Most of these narratives “read” well; they have energy, humour and vivid descriptions. The temptation to quote from them extensively is a strong one but it is not effective in terms of space. I will restrict myself to one quotation for each category, chiefly as an illustrative example of the identified pattern and each quotation will be from a different narrative to include as many “voices” as possible. In relation to each pattern, a very strong finding means that the great majority identify themselves, a strong finding is a clear majority, a weak finding is a noticeable one but towards a third of the data set. A divergent finding is that of a small group but a consistent one.

The authors are very predominantly female – 206 out of 240 – and gender therefore is potentially a powerful element throughout the corpus. The male writers, however, do not in this sense form a very divergent group. Their difference as readers is most evident during mid to late adolescence; for most the time their views are convergent with the majority.

## READING AS PLAY

When reflecting on learning to read it is a very strong finding that most have very positive memories of the experience. Two sub-categories are also both strong here. One is that very many cannot remember learning to read, only the act of reading itself, and so school was a problem at first because they were already “a reader”. “It’s a strange thing but I can’t remember a time when I was actually taught to read. It seems as if from the age of two or three I was steaming away effortlessly through any book.” The other sub-category is of

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and rules of evidence, learns to talk analytically about it, acquires a sense of its history and perhaps even a critical theory of how it works.

5. *The Pragmatic Reader.* The adult reader may read in several ways, which mimic, though with appropriate differences, the characteristic responses of each of the previous roles: to escape, to judge the truth of experience, to gratify a sense of beauty, to challenge oneself with new experiences, to comfort oneself with images of wisdom. What seems to be common to these responses is that adult readers now much more consciously and pragmatically choose the uses they make of reading.

strong family reading values. “It is impossible for me to recall a time when books did not play a major role in my life. Our home has always been a book-worm’s gastronomic paradise as my parents love all kinds of literature and have a collection that ranges from the most beautiful picture books to leather-bound classics.” Memories of being read to are very vivid and physical of being, and recall intense pleasure in this experience of stories. “To recall and reflect upon my earliest memory of books is to revive the sensation of joy I experienced when being read to.” The intensity of these memories certainly helps to explain the “love of reading” comments later because, I would suggest, the experience of reading is very strongly associated with being loved and feeling secure. “Books are a comfort and a pleasure, an almost sensual experience – It was a ritual, a time of knowing that despite the irritations of the day you loved and were loved.” For some this may explain how later very negative experiences have been overcome. These positive experiences extend across class and gender boundaries and some writers reflect on their own adult awareness of their atypicality within their childhood communities. There is also a divergent group who had some difficulty learning to read. “When I was young I used to throw books across the room shouting ‘I will never learn to read!’” For them the reading habit emerges much later, but these memory scars are deep and become a motivation to help other such struggling readers.

Overall I note one absence which I think is an effect of adult retrospection. Very few comment on poems and rhymes as part of learning to read with the occasional exception of comments about Dr Seuss or traditional nursery rhymes. This tendency continues in later stages and suggests that reading is chiefly conceptualised as narrative fiction and therefore, later on, the novel (see later and conclusions). Overall these memories of learning to read are very much of the period of Appleyard’s reader as player (see note 1) with a strong element of the “confident player” (Appleyard, p. 14). These readers are already assured about both the value of stories and their ability to comprehend them.

## **THE EMERGENT INDEPENDENT READER**

The primary years were good for the great majority. They survived reading schemes of often unutterable dullness “Then disaster struck at school; the RSA reading scheme – I remember dreading these sessions – if anything stalled my reading development it was this.” Many were star readers in their class and clearly favoured by teachers; others were quieter personalities but avid readers. A feature of this period for many was visiting libraries, especially for older students, perhaps reflecting back on growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. “I suppose my earliest and fondest memories of reading stem from around the age of five upwards when, every Saturday morning, I would be taken to the local library where I was allowed to choose four books every week. I can still recall the interior, cool and quiet, with the distinctive smell of floor polish. It was so exciting to look at all these books.” This is much less a feature of the most recent generation where the bookshop features more regularly. However, throughout the entire cohort, this period is strongly marked by book ownership. For some this includes large quantities of books; for others just a few. But it is the notion of “possession” that matters most, continuing to the present day “You see when friends of mine feel the need to ‘treat’ themselves, they buy clothes or Belgian chocolates. Myself? I visit bookshops.”

A very strong pattern emerges of a physical relationship with books: “I enjoy the smell of old books, the shiny dust jackets of new hard backs.” Reading is referred to as a tactile, visual, olfactory a sensuous experience accompanied by a powerful urge for readers to

surround themselves with books that they own and can enjoy as often as they want. “I still get a thrill from owning a new book, its clean unturned pages waiting to tell the tale within.” This develops into the idea of the collection, “I’ve always loved books, not just to read, but also to look at collected together in bookcases or on shelves – at nursery school – I used to sit in the book area and gaze at all the different books, bindings, titles etc. etc.”

Another very strong pattern is “serial reading”. For most this spans later primary and into secondary. “I found that my reading tended to progress in stages, for example my Little House on the Prairie stage – I managed to work my way through everything she had ever written.” Such reading includes devouring great numbers of formula fictions such as Enid Blyton, often several times. There is no evidence in my encounters with these students that their view of the world has been shaped by such reading; on the contrary, the effect of such reading is negligible in that way. They read such fiction voraciously because it was simple and predictable “It sustained my desire for order from chaos, for clarity from confusions – it was a world in which everything was always resolved.” It was chiefly about children in a simple world. “The next stage was dominated by books which I could easily relate to. My world revolved around schoolboy heroes such as Jennings and Billy Bunter – Realistic childhood adventures in familiar surroundings were comfortable and predictable.” Serial reading also frequently involves repetitive, almost obsessive reading. “What I remember most at this stage is constant repetition. As soon as I read a book I would read it again, perhaps five or six times.”

What emerges is that this stage of reading is vital as a developmental stage and children can be a range of ages when they begin and finish it. But once they do, they are through it for good *as a stage*. I would suggest that it seems to be *a necessary stage* for most readers and one that should be actively encouraged and supported by teachers and parents rather than merely tolerated or in some cases actively discouraged. For Appleyard (1990) this is the reader as “hero and heroine” (p. 14), when the reader enjoys the simplified world of unambiguous characters and straightforward actions that lead to justice being done. It is important to note here one of Appleyard’s most convincing points which is that although his schema reveals why the “higher roles are better ways of reading” (p. 16) the crucial point is that “Reading works best at every level when it subsumes and integrates the accomplishments that each of the lower levels made possible” (p. 17).

One implication of this statement is that teachers need to feel comfortable with their own and their students’ developmental stages. A second is that, once “through” a stage, that role is now available as a way of reading if it is secure. I would argue that this allows us to enjoy that role when we wish to use it, although it might be used more when engaging in other textual activity like watching film or television. We may not do this consciously. What we may be doing is relaxing the mind by adopting a much easier reading role with simpler and more immediate pleasures. My feeling would be that this is essentially of psychological benefit and perhaps especially to English teachers who may need to switch off their endlessly demanding critical faculty!

In returning to this period of development in the narratives, what is noticeable as a very strong pattern is that this is the first moment at which the writers become more self-conscious about what this “reveals” about them as a reader. One writer signals the end of this period very dramatically: “When I got my coveted place at grammar school I threw away all my Enid Blyton Books, I remember actually ripping them to pieces because now I had to read more grown up books.” Their tone is often apologetic “I have ignominiously

subtitled this section the “lazy phase”. They now consider this period perhaps a waste of time; the implication is already that they should have been deep into more worthy books.

For the book lovers this is their first expression of guilt, although there are often others at later stages. This prime worry about “worthiness” is very significant. They seem to feel that now that – in the chronology of their reading history – they have become established as readers then, given who they are *now*, they should have known “better”. One feels the presence of Leavis like a ghost (or perhaps Jiminy Cricket). And here I consider there may be a real issue for them as emergent professionals. They are somewhat dismissive of serial reading, missing its developmental point and this guilt factor means they may want worthiness to feature as soon as possible in children’s reading (“I am ashamed to admit that I actually followed my female peer group by reading some books by Danielle Steele and Jackie Collins!!”) and much too early for the children themselves. They may miss the need to teach reading at this stage as opposed to “enjoying” a more complex and complete text.

This strong pattern is complemented by three other interwoven elements. First they can clearly recall devoting much early teenage energy to “teen” magazines and to the social world of friends who read them together or swapped them. “I discovered a whole new world of make-up, pop-stars, fashion, love stories and how to get/keep your-man. – *Jackie* influenced me considerably; everything that concerned me in life was in it.” It must be said that this is a very strong female orientation; it is a weak finding amongst the men (who are of course a tiny minority in the sample but statistically normative for the English teaching profession). For both sexes the second factor involves reading far less in every sense – for some of the males, stopping altogether or just reading “trash”. “I just entered a really trashy stage”. Again this worries them retrospectively almost as though they had an illness but later “recovered”. “During my early teenage years I was an avid reader of magazines like *My Guy* and *Jackie* – these seriously warped my mind and I’m probably still recovering from the damage now!” Such negative feelings may also colour their teaching and make them overreact to what we can see is a normative tendency amongst adolescents. The third element often described as if self-revelatory is that the books read at school were either very dull or they cannot recall them at all. “I have few distinct memories of anything I read at this time, even of the set books.” School was not inspiring them to read. “My love of reading has very little to do with my school experience of books. I did not enjoy my class readers and by my fifth year did not bother to read them.” This period seems relatively hard to recall as a reader. As suggested above, for most, reading had become a relatively low priority and coping with the volume of schoolwork across many subjects was enough in itself. The magazine reading suggests that for the girls this kind of reading was helpful in their socialisation and gender formation. For the boys the same needs were being addressed but in different ways; they were either out being boyish or reading about sport.

## THE READER AS EMERGENT INTELLECTUAL

Appleyard (1990) identifies the adolescent reader as “thinker”, a questioning individual looking for some meaning in the mess of life, some truth and some authenticity (p. 14). For our readers this seems to be a supremely important development. Their identification with this concept is a very strong finding. For some it happens chiefly at home; for some directly because of school; but for most it is a combination. Having passed through the hero/heroine stage and then, it seems, almost “drifted” for a time, they interact with a text and almost suddenly it is qualitatively a different experience. “A profound influence was *Catcher in the*

*Rye* --- it stirred up a myriad of emotions; frustration, injustice, compassion, laughter and sadness. It left me with a sense of the absurdness of life itself.” Texts now offer challenge and complexity and require effort, but effort that is worth giving. After this experience, reading can never be quite the same, at least for a very long time. A part of this “awakening” may be about “English”. For some it is the 14-16 age, at which English becomes the subject; others are not so sure, but by 16-18 they are committed. This leaves a few who then took a different degree but whose “love of reading” brings them back into the fold during the PGCE.

During this 14-18 period a very important figure emerges as a vivid character, *the English teacher*, that is *the one* – the one who inspired them and whose mentoring presence is still powerfully present. Other English teachers are often contrasted very negatively with this guru. “Then I met the second great influence in my life, the Head of English; he was always willing to listen to my views on what I had read and offer suggestions for what I might read next.” Much of this inspiration is defined as about *how to read* and *what to read*. In the English system most students who specialise in English at the 16-18 stage are now exclusively studying literature and this is one subject<sup>2</sup> amongst *only two others*. The teachers in question then are very much part of the defining community of readers. “My real love for ‘English’ arose during my ‘A’-level studies. One of my teachers encouraged my self-reliance, stimulated my interest and gave me a lot of support.” Even the group who do not go on to take the conventional English degree nevertheless have this defining A-level experience, so almost every narrative has something about this period and its teachers. I suspect its influence on people becoming teachers is the most persistently powerful – not surprising as our writers are aspiring to be school, not university, teachers. These characters are the truly defining role models, in some cases still exerting a literal influence although now more as friends.

There is also a strong finding in this period of an encounter with that other *one* – the life-changing text. “I remember being profoundly affected by Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*. I was drawn to the themes of human suffering and endurance.” For most of these readers there is at least one vividly powerful memory of reading a text whose effect is so great that things are changed. “The book which changed the way I read was *To Kill a Mocking Bird* – I felt I had achieved a great feat – it gave me something to think about.” The specific memory itself often has very physical associations. They can describe the book as an object, their immediate surroundings, even down to the chair they were occupying. The experience is recalled and described as transforming. The depth and intensity of the encounter are remarkable still. “I firmly believe – that an experience such as I went through when reading *Lord of the Rings* is so personal and so significant that it always stays with the reader.” But here I do not think the analogy is love exactly and it is not the metaphor they choose. The experience is also more profoundly disturbing and uncomfortable. The intellectual dimension is often the most significant; the text demands that they think again, that they change, even that they must try to effect change in the world. For some it is less an individual book and more a new type of book, in relation to which the first few experiences produce a similar life-changing effect.

I suggest that for some this profound experience is connected to their desire to teach, to help others experience such a moment or series of moments. They tend not to reflect on the point

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<sup>2</sup> Recent reforms to this system, bringing in more subjects and introduced in 2000 have yet to impact on the data.



that most of these experiences happened outside school and with texts that they selected themselves, some times almost accidentally. I suspect, however, that this personal element is in itself fundamentally important; it signifies a huge change in them in becoming a “real” reader. I also consider that this experience may set them apart from most of their students. I am sure that research would show that many readers who did not go on to take English have nevertheless had such powerful experiences. But for English teachers such an experience may have a much more direct connection with their professional identity in a community of readers. I would argue that they need to think through both the benefit and possible distorting effect of such an experience on their approach as a teacher.

### **READER AS INTERPRETER – THE CRITICAL “TURN”**

It seems to me much of what happens at this time is helpfully explained by Appleyard’s fourth role, the reader as interpreter (1990. p. 14). This is the reader “who studies literature systematically”. Advanced level in England is about an apprenticeship to such study and the assessment system focuses on selecting out the emergent literary critics. It has almost no emphasis on the creative or the personal<sup>3</sup> even if many of its teachers are both in their teaching. A very strong pattern at this time is a description of this phase as characterised by excitement, a sense of rapid intellectual growth, the discovery of authors. “The next phase was my author phase, I would read everything and anything the author had written.” Writers become personally significant. This “discovery” is what leads the vast majority to take English at university and then to perform very well at Advanced and degree level. “I truly became a book addict and decided that I would like to study for an English degree when I was doing my ‘A’ level.” The university period is something of a blur of books and authors and for those recalling it from a distance of years rather a strange blur at that; having spent three years “just reading books” does seem rather odd. They gain the broad sweep of literary history and of criticism although they have very little love of the latter.

So despite being highly skilled readers as interpreters, very few become in any self-conscious way “critics”. They continue to enjoy reading but they begin to react against the dead hand of theory. They never seem to discover Marxism or Postmodernism with the relish with which they earlier named favourite books. The tone is of putting up with the zealotry of university lecturers and critical theory courses whose usefulness is some times grudgingly acknowledged. For example, university teachers are very rarely mentioned as any kind of role model (for anything). There are excitements but they are related to genres, “new” areas that are opened up for them. They may comment on their own dissertation or special project as part of this sense of enlightenment. Perhaps not surprisingly, women’s writing is often mentioned in this way as a discovery, but feminism is not.

Another key point here is that their experience of theory in English is to some extent disjointed. They recognise it as a set of intellectual tools but do not seem to acknowledge any profound influences at the conscious level; they do not “take ownership” of theory. For example, I do not find that they draw on theory explicitly when working with Advanced-level students, and they do not discuss it in the community of readers, that is, the English teachers in school. I would argue that the perceived professional pressure to be “practical” and to survive in the classroom have much to do with this. I suspect they would feel ridiculous planning an explicitly feminist lesson although quite comfortable with a plan

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<sup>3</sup> There have been brief periods, for example, the late 1980s early 1990s when such elements were present.

looking at Sylvia Plath's life in relation to her poetry. Ultimately I would argue that their striving for a school teacher identity almost demands that they be like their earlier school mentor and therefore unlike university tutors. And this seeking after a secure identity seems to me also related to the insecurity of much of university academic life. Much time is spent in isolation reading books and writing essays. Most university tutors appear at best uninterested in students and not at all interested in teaching. However fair or unfair, this is the students' perception; and it is powerful. I am arguing that they do not feel they wish to belong to the community of critics. "An English degree is designed to destroy any pleasure to be had from books, with syllabuses carefully constructed to dispirit the student." In fact, for some this is a conscious choice when their academic success offers opportunity for Masters or PhD work. They feel they would rather "do something useful". Others make this choice having pursued further study and, at that point, become dissatisfied with the critic's life.

All this raises an interesting question. Are most English teachers in some way "failed" critical readers? Not failed in terms of their degrees; they passed those. My view is that they are not failed but actually *ambivalent* critical readers. They *know* how to do it. But they also recognise what this practice has *done to them*. Having experienced three years of such reading in an exclusive way is quite enough. They feel a sense of alienation at this point. If the critical faculty has been most definitely gained, then some of the earlier reading roles have been utterly suppressed.

A legacy of an Arts degree – seems to be that now I find it difficult to read books that wouldn't necessarily be termed "literature". Not because I think I have turned into a snob but because I feel guilty about not reading something "mind-improving". Having said that I am ashamed to admit that I did succumb to temptation of Jilly Cooper as a form of release after my Finals.

Part of this might be termed "reading fatigue". Some claim not to have read a novel for a very long time after their degree. "After my degree I did not read for a year" and then "only for pleasure" – an interestingly significant statement.

Some articulate a powerful need to get away from books and to plunge into the ordinary and more real world of work. This sentiment reminds me irresistibly of the comment in *Rasselas* to "commit yourself again to the current of the world."<sup>4</sup> The discussion has focused on the loss of a loved one and on how to overcome this loss. And I think there is some mourning and some loss. The reader as interpreter, if trapped in that role, is principally an unfeeling intellectual, forever deconstructing texts and never putting them back together. A number of the narratives make that exact point about the essentially reductive nature of

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<sup>44</sup> In *Rasselas*, Imlac reflects on human loss. "The state of a mind oppressed with a sudden calamity," said Imlac, "is like that of the fabulous inhabitants of the new-created earth, who, when the first night came upon them, supposed that day would never return. When the clouds of sorrow gather over us, we see nothing beyond them, nor can imagine how they will be dispelled; yet a new day succeeded to the night, and sorrow is never long without a dawn of ease. But they who restrain themselves from receiving comfort do as the savages would have done had they put out their eyes when it was dark. Our minds, like our bodies, are in continual flux; something is hourly lost, and something acquired. To lose much at once is inconvenient to either, but while the vital power remains uninjured, nature will find the means of reparation. Distance has the same effect on the mind as on the eye; and while we glide along the stream of time, whatever we leave behind us is always lessening, and that which we approach increasing in magnitude. Do not suffer life to stagnate: it will grow muddy for want of motion; commit yourself again to the current of the world; Pekuah will vanish by degrees; you will meet in your way some other favourite, or learn to diffuse yourself in general conversation" (Johnson, in Froude (Ed.). [1885].).

criticism. In their own reading lives they therefore need other things to provide them with a more comfortable position, perhaps more like the secure environment of their earliest experiences. But equally this sense of loss seems related to the need to achieve Appleyard's ideal of integrating all the roles. The simple pleasure of the hero and heroine stage and the personal excitement of the thinker are clearly very satisfying stages. The interpreter questions everything and is therefore dissatisfied; critical theories of literature are paradoxically uninterested in mere readers. Certainly in English universities, reader response theory is not a feature of the English department's syllabus. Therefore, for many future English teachers (not future critics), there is a strong urge to break the critical grip after three years in its intensive grasp and this leads to a longing for a return to reading as a personal engagement. The more mature students who took their degrees at a later stage seem to have much less trouble with this issue. They are perhaps already more "integrated" and have Appleyard's final ingredient – a robust pragmatism.

These complex and interrelated factors may help to explain why Advanced-Level English Literature is a peculiarly atheoretical territory. Compared, for example, to Media Studies, it would appear to offer students no conceptual base at all; just lots of "close" reading. There is no space to develop this point here and it would need extensive research to support it. I will simply speculate that the narratives reveal a circularity in which existing English teachers induct their A-level students into a form of literary engagement, part personal, part critical, that then *survives and resists* and is unchanged by the degree that those students subsequently undertake. This also helps to explain why the "other" minority group – those student teachers who did a very different degree – *know* that they want to teach English. Their aspiration is based on their personal "love of reading" which, they will point out very self-consciously, they have sustained throughout their adult lives. For the majority this is complemented by their experiences in the A-level period and that fondly remembered, special teacher.

## THE PRAGMATIC READER

The pragmatic reader is Appleyard's broadest category, subsuming the previous four: "The adult reader may read in several ways, which mimic, though with appropriate differences, the characteristic responses of each of the previous roles." He argues that, "What seems to be common to these responses is that adult readers now much more consciously and pragmatically choose the uses they make of reading" (1990, p. 15). In the chapter in which he discusses this role he also examines this very adult phase and notions of maturity and psychological development.

The writers of these narratives vary significantly in age. None are less than 22; the oldest is typically in her late 40s and has had a family of her own children to reflect on as readers. So whereas up to this point all have reflected on their development up to the age of 22 or so, this ultimate phase is more differentiated. I am, of course, accepting that their reading/life experiences up to whatever point in their lives will have influenced the whole narrative. However, for the purposes of this article, I shall only very briefly discuss this phase, aware as I am that most practising teachers tell me they have no time to read for themselves except in the blissfully indulgent summer holiday. (In fact I might propose a sub-category within Appleyard's final role, which would be the *professional reader*, but I have no space here to elaborate the point.) The narratives suggest that these readers now seek to be "balanced" both in terms of the range of reading that they do and their view of what children should be

encouraged to do. The reader as interpreter is seen as only one role and the dominance of fiction is considered an issue. Here I would argue that the assignment as an activity has had some value.

## CONCLUSIONS

These highly experienced readers and skilful writers have a sense of an ending; they like *to conclude* and to acknowledge their audience quite self-consciously as they seek for an ending in a process that is still in flux. This may be partly traced to their training in the humanist essay form where the conclusion in a “good” essay provides a satisfactory resolution, however artificial in its reconciliation of conflicting experiences or ideas. It is certainly a very strong finding that they consider the activity itself to have been valuable and revealing and appropriately reflective; there is some tautology in all of this but it has an inevitable rhetorical dimension that must be accepted. Equally strong is the pattern of comments that suggest how they will use this reflection to deepen their own awareness of children’s interests and to be sensitive to the range of those interests, even recognising that disliking reading is not actually a crime.

But in my ending is my beginning; the most typical comment is something like: “And I hope to pass on to my pupils that love of reading which has been so important to me.” Of course all teachers of all subjects might say something aspirational and idealistic at this stage in their career. However, I suspect historians say “love of History”, scientists “love of Science”. These English teachers do not say “love of writing”. Of course this is partly constructed by my assignment that does not even ask them about writing as something one practises and which also has a life history. Though I feel very confident that if asked about their writing lives they would have little self-image as writers. (I suspect this might be quite different for some teachers in other cultures, perhaps in North America, where writing courses are part of the formal education system.) However, there is a very small, divergent group who comment on their development as writers, but rarely extensively.

I suspect that to some extent the assignment exacerbates one problem because it *does* reveal just how important reading has been for almost all of them, perhaps reinforcing their “instinctive” feeling that reading fiction is good for you in every sense. They have also intuited that they are entering a community of readers, albeit a “lapsed” one, because serving teachers have so little time; so wearing their reading badge lets them “join”. It is likely that some of these narratives do consciously disguise a much more ambivalent relationship with reading. It is also probable that some are retrospective realignments and so rather more unconsciously construct a love of reading from what was in reality a less “passionate” relationship.

In terms of helping English teachers to do their job well, I believe the narratives as a corpus enables us to see and define a problem. That is that deeply held values about reading can be a great source of personal and professional strength, but only if understood as a potentially distorting influence. Their students need to be taught to read and interpret all kinds of texts, not just fiction. They also need to be given opportunities to become life-long writers and communicators. These two statements are crudely obvious and all English teachers would unhesitatingly argue that they enact them in their practice. I would argue that it may be in their actual classroom discourse and their embodiment in the classroom that their deep

feelings about reading become evident and exert a powerful influence on pupils' perceptions of what really matters in English.

There is a strong body of evidence that English is perceived by its students to be a female domain; much of the research about boys in English would tend to corroborate this point. To be factual, the great majority of teachers in primary and secondary school are female, the great majority of its students in higher education are female, and the teaching of reading at home is still predominantly undertaken by mothers. The reading of fiction is more popular with girls and women than with boys and men. The male narratives in the study, although inflected with "masculinity" especially at the adolescent stage, do not reveal significant differences in reading "values". The construction therefore of the identity of the "good" English student is partly revealed in these reading histories and it is one that potentially limits the construction of other and equally productive identities, particularly, I would suggest, of male readers of non-fiction.

Finally therefore, it might be argued, teachers will need to be careful how they make judgements about individual readers' development, for example, by recognising serial reading as a useful stage and not a problem. They will also need to reflect on what messages they send out, for example, about writing. Are the messages actually promoting the attitudes they are encouraging pupils to form? In essence they need to distinguish between their own private love affairs with fiction and their professional relationship with the teaching of reading. This distinction will need stimulus to become a reality. Student teachers with a fragile professional identity must be supported if they are even to enter the profession; one can only challenge their thinking to a degree. It is much more reasonable to challenge the well-established teacher, one ready to critique her practice from a confident base. Therefore the PGCE assignment – examining one's reading history – does have a useful role. But it is only the beginning of a much longer process.

## REFERENCES

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Jo did a few different things before she struck upon the idea of writing children's books. She worked as a researcher and bilingual secretary for Amnesty International and as an English teacher in Portugal. The idea for the Harry Potter novels came from nowhere while she was on a train to London. She said, "The characters and situations came flooding into my head". Seven Potter novels later and Rowling is one of the richest women in the world. In fact, she is the first novelist ever to become a billionaire from writing. Her rags to riches story is a fantasy story in itself. She was on government Graded reading. Read stories and articles for your level of English. Elementary. Intermediate. Do you know why we dream? How can we interpret the meaning of our dreams? Read about dreams and what we can learn from them. 4. Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: book review " level 2. Unrequited love or just a misunderstanding? Will Deshi's story have a happy ending? English texts for beginners to practice reading and comprehension online and for free. Practicing your comprehension of written English will both improve your vocabulary and understanding of grammar and word order. The texts below are designed to help you develop while giving you an instant evaluation of your progress. go directly to 40 texts. Prepared by experienced English teachers, the texts, articles and conversations are brief and appropriate to your level of proficiency. Take the multiple-choice quiz following each text, and you'll get the results immediately. You will feel both cha Do we read to show off? What do you read when you are on the bus or train? Some people might hold a copy of a classic novel to impress other commuters. Neil and Alice discuss people's reading habits. Alice Well that's good to hear. Neil And that's the end of today's 6 Minute English. Please do join us again soon. Alice And keep reading books in English. Highbrow classics or a light read " it doesn't matter. Neil It doesn't matter at all. Giving up beer, wine and spirits is a challenge many people include in their New Year's resolutions. The decline of the apostrophe. Episode 200109 / 09 Jan 2020. Did you read anything in English this past week? How much of it did you understand? "Reading comprehension" refers to how much you understand of what you read. Even if you read an English book every week, it doesn't help your learning much if you don't know what the words on the pages are saying. We will help you learn English reading with smart strategies. You'll discover exactly how to read English books in a way that will actually improve your skills. Download: This blog post is available as a convenient and portable PDF that you can take anywhere. Click here to get a copy. (Download). Try FluentU for FREE! If you liked this post, something tells me that you'll love FluentU, the best way to learn English with real-world videos. Experience English immersion online!