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Over the wall ...

Alan Maley has
some suggestions for
reading about reading.

Given that this series of articles is about the kinds of reading teachers can do outside their professional interests, it seems appropriate to review a few titles which touch on the nature of reading itself. I will discuss five non-fiction books, one memoir and two novels, all of which have reading as a central theme.

Non-fiction

Alberto Manguel's monumental *A History of Reading* is a must for anyone interested in how reading evolved. He deploys an impressively encyclopaedic knowledge with elegant eloquence. Virtually all aspects of the history of reading are covered: how it moved from reading aloud to silent reading, from the elite to the masses, from orality to text, from scholastic to individual, from literal to allegorical/interpretative. *A History of Reading* ranges over the physical shapes of books, the places people have read in and how, the power of scribes, the role of libraries, censorship, the author as public reader, the translator as reader, and much more. The opening chapter, 'The Last Page', is a highly evocative account of the author's own reading history. Altogether, this is a wonderful book, packed with fascinating anecdotes and reflections – and beautifully illustrated.

Daniel Pennac's *The Rights of the Reader*, in a seamless translation from French and wittily illustrated by Quentin Blake, is a humorous yet serious attack on the negative effects of institutional (mis)education, which condemns kids to a hatred for books. It is a passionate plea for restoring pleasure to reading without the paraphernalia of set texts, questions, tests, mandatory discussion, etc, and is a celebration of the love of books which good teachers can offer their students. Pennac sets out ten 'reader's rights': the right not to read, to skip, not to finish a book, to read it again, to read anything, to mistake a book for real life, to read anywhere, to dip in, to read out loud and to be quiet.

It is full of quotable quotes and relentless common sense: an iconoclastic delight.

The Power of Reading by Stephen Krashen describes the research which unequivocally supports the central role for Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) in L1 and L2 language acquisition. It goes on to suggest ways in which this can be done: through better access at home and in libraries, reading aloud, strong reading experiences ('home-run' books!), through offering models, time and encouragement. In the final chapter, he deals with the reading-writing connection, and dismisses the fear that TV will eradicate reading.

On a more autobiographical note, and echoing some of the concerns of Pennac, Nancie Atwell describes how she gets seventh and eighth graders in Maine hooked on reading. *The Reading Zone* is a wise and compassionate book, full of unpretentious, practical advice on how to engage kids with books. As she says, '*The processes of story reading are so subtle, so fantastic, so quicksilver and simultaneous, that we can't account for them, measure them, test them, or teach them. We can only give kids great books and time to get lost in them, then be grateful ...*'

The most recent of these books, Maryanne Wolf's *Proust and the Squid*, opens with the words '*We were never born to read*'. It is divided into three parts. In the first, she investigates the history of writing systems as ways of encoding phonetic, graphic and semantic information, along with the ways existing brain functions had to adapt to the complexity of the interconnected processes involved in reading by creating new neural pathways. In the second, she takes us through the stages a child goes through in learning to read, the 'natural history' of reading, from the emerging pre-reader, to the novice reader, to the de-coding reader, to the fluent comprehending reader and finally to the expert reader. This is both an informative and a deeply moving account, bringing

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▶▶▶ together detailed explanations of neural connections in the brain with sensitive quotations from literature which express something of the mysterious and wonder-full nature of the reading process. In the third part, she explores what is happening when the brain does not learn to read. Her detailed analysis of the multiple sources of dyslexia is both compassionate and clear.

One of Wolf's preoccupations is the effect of internet culture on reading: 'What is being lost and what is being gained for so many young people who have largely replaced books with the multidimensional "continuous partial attention" culture of the internet? What are the implications of seemingly limitless information for the evolution of the reading brain and for us as a species? Does the rapid, almost instantaneous presentation of expansive information threaten the more time-demanding formation of in-depth knowledge?' She quotes Edward Tenner: 'it would be a shame if brilliant technology were to end up threatening the kind of intellect that produced it'. This is not to say that she is hostile to the internet but her questions, like those of Socrates when he condemned the transfer from oral to written culture, are of great significance. This is a truly marvellous book, combining the 'how' of science with the 'wow' of wonder and delight of an aesthetic appreciation of the miracle of reading.

Memoir

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi recounts her experiences in the Tehran of 1995–97. She has resigned her post at the university in protest against the enforcement of the strict Islamic dress code. For those two years, seven of her students meet in her flat every Thursday to discuss English literature and the way it intersects with their lives under a

totalitarian, fundamentalist theocracy. They discuss *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Daisy Miller* and *The Ambassadors*, and Jane Austen, and in doing so form a confederacy of readers who find in books consolation from the humiliations they suffer, courage to resist and subvert the pressures they are under, and hope in the face of the despair that surrounds them. Nafisi's comments on women's rights, politics and education are an inspiration. 'A good novel is one that shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough space for all those characters to have a voice: in this way a novel is called democratic – not that it advocates democracy but that by nature it is so.'

'... one book led to another, doors kept opening wherever she turned and the days weren't long enough for the reading she wanted to do'



Fiction

The Reader by Bernard Schlink is perhaps better known in its Oscar-winning film version, but the book is, if anything, even more powerful. The love affair between the 15-year-old Michael and the 30-ish Hanna includes the ritual of him reading aloud to her before their love-making. It is only years later, when he sees Hanna on trial for Nazi atrocities, that Michael realises she is illiterate. Rather than admit this, she takes responsibility for the war crimes and goes to prison. There can be few more telling cases for the power of literacy, or its lack, than this book.

Alan Bennett's *The Uncommon Reader* is a whimsical fantasy in which the Queen of England accidentally discovers the joys of reading. Bennett uses the Queen to scatter some pearls of wisdom about reading. For example:

'What she was finding was how one book led to another, doors kept opening wherever she turned and the days weren't long enough for the reading she wanted to do.'

'... but briefing is not reading. Briefing is terse, factual and to the point. Reading

is untidy, discursive and perceptually inviting. Briefing closes down a subject, reading opens it up.'

'Pass the time?' said the Queen. 'Books are not about passing the time. They're about other lives. Other worlds. Far from wanting time to pass ... one just wishes one had more of it.'

'A book is a device to ignite the imagination.'

Bennett's writing is gently satirical and sometimes wildly funny. I wonder if the Queen found it as entertaining as I did! There is a delicious sting in the tail, which I will not reveal, as the Queen decides to progress from being a reader to becoming a writer ...

'I wonder ... whether as professor of creative writing you would agree that if reading softens one up, writing does the reverse. To write you have to be tough, do you not?'



Just to round off, if you want to share your reading with others, try www.bookcrossing.com, a way of passing on books you have enjoyed to other people. Also relevant is www.erfoundation.org for information on Extensive Reading. Enjoy your book! 

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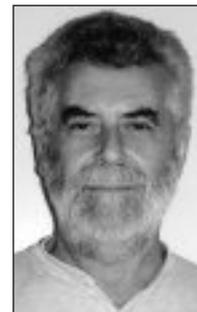
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