Editors' Introduction: Reading, Readers and English

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Every reading act is an event, or a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context. Instead of two fixed entities acting on one another, the reader and the text are two aspects of a dynamic situation.

(Rosenblatt 1994:1063)

Without a reader there is no text, without a text no reader.

(Hall 2009: 331)

There is a long-standing tradition of reader response theories connected to debate and discussion in English education. Although largely theory-driven, early work in the field (e.g. Richards 1929, Rosenblatt 1978) sought to integrate the literary and the educational in a practical context-driven concern with the relationship between the reader and a text. Alongside later manifestations, these reader response theories have influenced the practice of generations of English teachers by drawing attention to the importance of understanding the processes by which students, both individually and as part of a larger social network, make meaning in the classroom. The concept of 'the reader' remains central to curriculum documentation, where enjoyment is foregrounded as valuable (DfE 2013) and to practitioners who have championed the 'personal growth model' (DES/WO 1989) of teaching that presents literary fiction in developing individual imaginative, linguistic and social skills (Goodwyn 2016).

Within the field of literary studies more generally, the movement away from mid twentieth-century New Criticism and its text-centric practices has led to a more concentrated focus on the plurality of meaning and the various sites of interaction in which readers come together to interpret literature. In reader-oriented work, the reader is viewed as an active participant in the interpretative process, drawing on and shaping different forms of knowledge that can be shared and developed in further interpretations.

This reconfigured understanding of interpretation from fixed and singular to fluid and multiple has galvanised researchers to shift their focus from the theoretical to the empirical in recent years, reflected across a range of disciplines interested in the nature of readers and reading. This special issue offers a snapshot of empirically-oriented, cutting-edge work being undertaken that advances our understanding of just how readings are negotiated, legitimised or undermined in various educational spaces. The articles in this issue variously examine the influence of teachers, peers, culture and the learning environment itself on readers' responses, drawing on various theoretical stances and methodologies concerned with how texts are framed and experienced in the classroom context. Each therefore specifically showcases research

that addresses, discusses and exemplifies ways in which we might engage with Rosenblatt's notion of the 'dynamic situation'. Acknowledgement and scrutiny of the relationship between text and reader (student or teacher) is important and, we feel, current, due to the continuing performativity agenda in schools, the recent influence in classrooms in England, and elsewhere, of more transmissive pedagogies of literature teaching (see Mason and Giovanelli 2017 for discussion), and the associated issues of authority and discursive rights in the classroom when literary texts are discussed (Xerri 2013).

Ian Cushing's article examines poetry teaching from a cognitive linguistic perspective, building on the recent interest in the humanities in using findings from cognitive science to engage in the critical analysis of readers' personal and social interactions with texts. Using empirical data including lesson transcripts and student work and drawing on the cognitive discourse grammar Text World Theory, Cushing argues for a classroom space and activities which facilitate students' own responses to literature being properly legitimised. His research demonstrates how a text-worlds approach may encourage and support students to develop more confident and independent readings. Cushing also highlights that such an approach could helpfully build on students' prior linguistic knowledge as a way of connecting both language and literary study and Key Stage 2-Key Stage 3 transition. In outlining the parameters of the text-worlds model and showing how teachers and students responded to the affordances it provides, Cushing demonstrates an example of an innovative pedagogy that develops both personal response and meta-reflective skills.

John Gordon also engages with empirical data, here to critically explore practices surrounding teaching and reading in unseen poetry tasks (a practice which is still present in many English-speaking education systems). Focusing on knowledge and the recent rise in popularity of ideas around 'cultural literacy', Gordon argues that the nature of the unseen examination where meaning is conceptualised as existing simply within the text downplays how important it is for students to have crucial extra-textual knowledge to develop robust interpretative responses. By comparing two case studies involving the teaching of Yeats' poem 'Easter, 1916' in separate contexts (England and Northern Ireland), Gordon shows how teachers and students need to negotiate the various kinds of knowledge that are needed to access the poem. Gordon argues that a reading pedagogy founded on the principles of the self-contained unseen is problematic and instead urges practitioners to consider the complex nature, function and role of different kinds of knowledge in the literature classroom.

Margaret Merga, Michelle McRae and Leonie Rutherford broaden the focus to analyse motivation through an examination of the attitudes of young people towards reading. Their research reports on interviews undertaken with teenage readers from thirteen Australian schools that explored how and why students enjoyed discussing books at home and with their peers and, more generally, their reasons for reading literature. Their study suggests a number of reasons why young people see discussing

reading as both enjoyable and beneficial and further reports on some of the constraining factors that participants raised as barriers to motivation. The authors end with a specific set of implications for their findings for educators in supporting students to value reading.

Jane Coles and Theo Bryer's article draws on Rosenblatt's transactional theory in a study of beginning secondary teachers working with the Old English poem *Beowulf*. As the authors argue, the poem has a history of being reworked and adapted and therefore provides fertile ground for pedagogical practices that offer opportunities for cross-generic transformations. Coles and Bryer outline how beginning teachers sought to develop their own understanding and confidence in teaching literature through dramatic re-enactments that reconfigure the text from alternative narrative perspectives, digital film versions that represent gender in specific ways and game-authoring software that allows readers to construct their own fictional landscapes. Through their discussion, the authors highlight the creative and critical practices inherent in such transformational work as well as highlighting the importance of students' knowledge as part of the 'literary transaction'.

Finally, Margaret Glover provides a survey of a number of ways in which different researchers have theorised interpretation and the reading process. Glover provides a narrative that covers paradigms from New Criticism and structuralism to Michael Benton's work on reading and secondary worlds, to Stanley Fish and Aidan Chambers on the importance of readers in narrative comprehension and Jonathan Culler on literary competence. Ending with a discussion of the work of Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser, Glover demonstrates that although the reader response narrative may be a complex one, there is much to be gained by a teacher engaging with reader response theories as a way of directly addressing the relationship between author, text and reader in the classroom.

This special issue also contains reviews of two books that focus on texts that might broadly be described as belonging to popular culture. In the first, John Hodgson reviews *Children's literacy preferences and practices: Harry Potter and beyond* by Jane Sunderland, Steven Dempster and Joanne Thistlethwaite. The authors of this book examine out-of-school experiences of reading the Harry Potter series, reminding us that there are many fruitful connections to be made between different types and contexts of reading. In the second, Marcello Giovanelli reviews Kristy Beers Fägersten's *Watching TV with a linguist* highlighting how the creative use of resources, in this instance popular television programmes, can both act as a vehicle for exploring complex linguistic concepts and phenomena and draw attention to how contemporary media from students' own personal interests can develop critical linguistic awareness.

We believe that the articles in this special issue both stress the importance of researchers and practitioners engaging with established thinking in the field of reader

response as well as forging new avenues for exploration. We also believe that the articles remind us of the richness of the literature classroom, the wealth of knowledge and attitudes young people bring to reading, and to the various ways that teachers can support rather than stultify personal response and interpretation.

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