

Foreword to “Literacy: Reading, writing, and children’s literature”¹

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There have been many books published on literacy and almost as many published on children’s literature. However, there are far fewer that attempt to cover both literacy and literature, and even fewer that remember to include writing as part of literacy. But one might still ask, “why another book on literacy?” The short answer is that there is still much to learn about literacy and the way it is used and developed as part of life. I want to congratulate the authors of this significant book for the scope, quality and freshness of their work.

I have known the work of the writers for many years. Indeed, I have been part of the same community of literacy scholars as the authors for almost 30 years. I worked with Marcelle Holiday on literacy curriculum reform in the late 1970s. I first encountered Gordon Winch’s work at the same time and have been an active participant with all the authors in a range of professional and scholarly organizations throughout this period.

I feel quite privileged to have shared this period of growth in our understanding of literacy and the development of the Children’s Literature field in Australia. This has been a significant time. In the 1960s the word literacy was hardly mentioned in curriculum documents, textbooks and professional organizations. We spoke of reading, spelling, writing, handwriting, speaking, listening and literature as if they were separate unrelated entities. Literacy was defined much more narrowly than today, and was seen as the combined skills of reading and writing. These ‘sub-skills’ in turn were seen as sets of cognitive skills to be mastered. This was a very narrow view of all that we now recognise as literacy.

Reading was dominated by a concern for the development of word recognition skills, comprehension, and study and reference skills, as if each were separate sets of abilities to be mastered. Writing was often seen simply as ‘composition’ and received little attention beyond the teaching of surface features and grammar within the framework of narrative discourse. In fact, it was not until the mid 1970s that writing became a serious research pursuit and gained the interest from educators that it deserved. The explosion of ‘process writing’ under the bold and zealous leadership of scholars like Bob Walshe in Australia and Donald Graves² in the USA, was one of a number of key events that changed the way we viewed the primary and secondary English curriculum in Australia.

When one considers the last 40 years it is possible to identify broad phases or themes in the teaching and research literature as well as in curriculum. In the 60s the emphasis was on reading and writing as skills. The 1970s saw the

¹ Cairney, T.H. (2006). Foreword to G. Winch, R.R. Johnston, M. Holliday, L. Ljungdahl & P. March (Eds). *Literacy: Reading, writing, and children’s literature*. 3rd Edition, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, pp xvi-xix

² See Walshe (1981) *Every child can write! Learning and teaching written expression in the 1980s*. Sydney: Primary English Teaching Association for an insight into this work.

emergence of process and meaning as twin concerns within the fields of writing and reading respectively, and an emergence in the latter stages of the decade of a concern for literacy as an integrated practice. In the 1980s we saw a strong concern amongst teachers and researchers to reconsider literacy as a linguistic phenomenon, a desire to make language form and structure more explicit to students, and the emergence of profiles and global assessment of literacy. The 1990s saw a concern for the sociocultural nature of literacy, and a desire to consider literacy not as a unitary skill, but as multiple literacies, and finally, national action on literacy assessment and curriculum development became a reality. Throughout these four decades children's literature continued to develop and grow in its own way with an explosion of new literary genres, new authors, excursions into reader response theory, the first multi media texts and so on. Non-fiction emerged as an even more exciting genre with the boundaries between literature and factual genres being blurred. Indeed, the division between the traditional school reader and literature also began to break down, with literature finding its way increasingly into instructional programs. These were exciting times! Today, the buzzword is multiliteracies as we consider how reading and writing relate to other sign systems. While the interest has been primarily with digital multimedia, it is interesting to contemplate that the picture book was exploiting multimodality long before computers were invented.

This book is a product of its times. The opening pages provide a definition of literacy that recognises that literacy is seen differently than it was 40 years ago - an integrated set of practices that require literacy users to draw on multiple sign systems to make meaning. The pages that follow provide a detailed overview of many of the key developments that have shaped literacy research and practice to the present day and a wealth of practical ideas for teachers.

The challenge for all of us as teachers and students of literacy is to expand our literacy horizons. As a literacy researcher I have found that the more I have learned about literacy, the more questions this has posed for me. As a practising cognitive psychologist in the 1970s I tried desperately to understand how the mind constructed meaning. As I developed greater precision in 'getting at' the cognitive processes that represented reading, I discovered linguistic complexity that made my quest more elusive. As I increasingly explored sociolinguistic aspects of literacy I began to see a social and cultural complexity to literacy that I hadn't recognised before. In the last 10 years as I have explored the sociocultural dimensions of literacy I have continued to be amazed by new facets of literacy practices that previously had not been visible to me. I have come to see that while it is important to understand the cognitive processes that allow us to engage in literacy, that this cannot be done in isolation from literacy's role as a set of social practices that have the potential to empower or exclude, and indeed to shape the very human relationships which are the essence of our being. I have also come to appreciate that literacy offers the power to inform or deceive, to express love or hate - to have an impact on the human condition.

But being positive, literacy has the potential to open up 'other worlds' (Cairney, 1991). In the last 6 years I have also been struck by the enormous impact that cyber text and multimedia texts are having on the way we experience and use literacy in our world. The next decade will be one in which literacy will ever

increasingly be characterised by the use of multiple sign systems to make meaning. The boundaries between written, visual and real word texts will blur as we seek to make sense of our worlds utilising all that we have available to us. And yet, as I conclude my comments, I'm reminded that there is something inherently basic about literacy that will not change - the power of story. This is something which Harold Rosen constantly brought to our attention. Much of human experience and existence is lived out through narrative. There is immense power in 'story' to teach, to share, and to express all human emotions. This is indeed timeless.

In his wonderful story "The Stone Book", Allan Garner (1976) tells the story of his English ancestors. In this brilliant tale, Mary expresses to her father the desire to have a book - a prayer book, to carry to chapel. This was a significant request to make of her stonemason father - not a man of letters, but of stone. Her wish was indeed granted, her father presenting her with the book she wanted. Garner tells it this way:

"There," said Father. "That'll do."

He gave Mary a prayer book bound in blue-black calf skin, tooled, stitched and decorated. It was only by the weight that she could tell it was stone and not leather.

"It's better than a book you can open," said Father. "A book has only one story. And tomorrow I'll cut you a brass cross and let it in the front with some dabs of lead, and then I'll guarantee you'd think it was Lord Stanley's, if it's held right."

Garner continues: "And Mary sat by the fire and read the stone book that had in it all the stories of the world and the flowers of the flood".

In a profound way, the old stonemason had learned something that it has taken literacy scholars and teachers many years to learn. Books have the power to be used to tell but a single story, and yet all the stories of the world are at our fingertips in the multiple signs that fill our world.

I want to thank the authors for asking me to write the foreword to this book. I trust that it will enrich readers' understanding of what literacy is and how it is nurtured and used as we relate one to another.

References

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