How Texts Teach What Readers Learn
Margaret Meek (1988)

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Twenty-two years ago, when How Texts Teach What Readers Learn was first published, we lived in a rather different literacy climate. For one thing, Literacy, as a school subject, hadn’t yet been invented. Pupils in primary schools mostly did ‘Language’, although that was soon to turn into ‘English’ as the Great Education Reform Act of the same year began to take effect. The reading wars, which had raged on and off for a decade already, continued. By now, the battle lines were clearly drawn. On one side, like the troops of Midian, prowled the Teach ’Em Skills brigade. They argued that phonics and reading schemes were both necessary and desirable. These, they said, provided the solid base upon which all children needed to build in order to learn to read. On the other side were Gideon’s brave trumpeters, the ‘Real Books’ crew, who, with Frank Smith, believed that people learned to read by reading, not by practising with decontextualised exercises. Margaret Meek belonged (and still belongs) to the latter group. How Texts Teach What Readers Learn was one of her contributions to the fray.

It would be a mistake, though, to dismiss How Text Teach as a minor skirmish in an ancient war; for despite its age and slightness (only 48 pages), this is a book of intellectual substance which continues to shape the way some of us think about reading and teaching reading today.

The achievement of How Texts Teach is that it positions texts - that is, the books children read, at the very centre of the process of learning to be a reader. While other advocates of ‘real books’ were happy to argue that commercially published texts were more interesting, more engaging, more motivating to learners than scheme books, Meek went much further: she argued that the very best texts actually taught children to behave and to think like readers. To this end, she showed how sharing Rosie’s Walk with a child planted the seed of an early understanding of irony; how Each Peach Pear Plum helped young readers connect one text with another and so join the company of readers for whom reading was never a one off event, but a continuing process, an interweaving exploration of variation in plot, character and idea; how The Jolly Postman enabled them to enjoy text as language as well as content, to relish the formality of the solicitor’s letter (from Meeny, Miny and Mo and Co) and the delight in the ambiguity of the colour options for witches’ boots in the catalogue (jet black, coal black, bat black etc.)

And so on. Throughout the book, Meek traces the development of children as readers from the early stages of dependence in reading, to near adult competence, showing with close textual reference, how particular texts help children to learn that words mean more than they say, how they help children to tolerate uncertainty, how they recruit children into confronting the ‘world as it might be’ and how they help them to encounter the ‘intertext…(their own) unconscious’ and so grow in self awareness and reading reflexivity. She does this adroitly and concisely, employing an unusual partnership of supporting material: the evidence of the responses of real child readers and the ideas of contemporary literary theorists. Together they substantiate and convince, one source grounding the thinking in the classroom, the other positioning it securely in current academic thinking. When it was published, this was a book to be taken seriously by the literary establishment as well as by the teachers it addressed. It still is.

continues over
And so to the present day. One might ask how a text written so long ago, and about particular texts can be relevant to the needs of teachers and students in 2011. I have two answers to this:

**Though texts go out of fashion: ways of thinking sustain.**

The texts Meek used in 1988 to illustrate her ideas were well established in classrooms in those days, and well known. Although the Ahlbergs’ work continues to be very popular today, I think *Rosie’s Walk* and *Mr Gumby’s Outing*, for example, are less widely used. This does not matter. The point that we must take from Meek is not that *Rosie’s Walk* teaches children to see irony, but that the best texts teach lessons *such as* this. The good classroom teacher will look at the books currently available and ask ‘What does this text teach and what do my children need to know?’ Lauren Child, Emily Gravett, Jez Alborough and a host of other excellent contemporary children’s writers all provide multitudinous lessons in reading for the children in our classrooms. Teachers who have taken on the ways of thinking about texts that Meek introduces in this book will be able to find them.

**Real reading matters.**

Perhaps more than ever in the current political climate (in England especially), we need to remember that it is texts, not the ability to decode made up words, that make children readers. *How Texts Teach* provides the best justification I know for putting texts at the centre of reading lessons: it shows the complexity, the subtlety and the richness that is the purpose and the joy of reading. Many readers know this, but few can articulate it so well as Meek. This book should be compulsory reading for all student teachers entering primary education and all politicians. I urge you to read it.

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