On Being Literate
Margaret Meek (1991)

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When I first read this book in 1991 I thought that no-one would ever need to write a book about literacy again. On Being Literate said it all. Twenty years later, as I revisit it, I'm pretty much of the same mind. In that time much has happened to change the face of literacy and the ways it is taught in school but quite frankly, Margaret Meek’s wisdom is as timely as it was then. Just sample some of her thoughts and see what you think:

Each child’s progress towards literacy is more complex than the test results show. (p. 8)

and

One thing is certain: we shall make no difference to the education of a single child by complaining that literacy isn’t what it used to be. Indeed it is not, and therein lies our need to acknowledge the complexity of our subject and to face the fact that most of what we have to discover about literacy is embedded in the social practices for which we use it and in ways which, if we are not careful, we may use it to divide rather than to unite us. (p. 11)

I am writing this review just before the 2011 Education Bill is to be read in parliament - a Bill that, if passed unamended, is likely to create divisions for many years to come. A Bill that takes no account of the complexity of literacy and literacy learning. A Bill that aims to recreate a style of literacy teaching that is based on a narrow and unhelpful view of ‘what literacy used to be’. It would be so easy to be completely dispirited by such a prospect. Yet Margaret Meek’s wisdom has some comfort to offer even in these grim times:

Some say there is a literacy ‘crisis’, but this is just our modern way of drawing attention to what we think is important. (p. 9)

She is right. If ‘Gove-ment’ is so keen to put literacy (or reading) to the forefront of this ideologically driven Bill, then it highlights what is important. If educationists rally to resist the proposals for once more tightening the screws on teaching reading, then it is because they know just how important it is. And, of course it is critically important - as Margaret Meek recognised in On Being Literate:

My belief is that, until most, indeed all, children in school have access to and are empowered by critical literacy, including the understanding that reading and writing are more than simply useful, then we are failing to educate the next generation properly. (p.10)

The fact that all of these wise words are drawn from the introduction suggests just what the wealth of the book as a whole offers. Just read pages 157-162 for a succinct, informed run-down on teaching reading or the section on ‘New Ways of Talking’ or the enlightened and, in some ways, tough, advice on supporting those who struggle with literacy in ‘What Hinders: What Helps’.

As I began to re-read the book, I did wonder whether perhaps it would not adequately address the preocupations of the ‘new text landscape’. I needn’t have been concerned. The final section of the book is devoted to New Literacies and although she could not have known at the time just what was to be available with the development of digital technology; once again, Margaret Meek has thought it through, reminding the reader that ‘There’s more to new literacies than the technologies that represent them’ (p. 208). Discussing the potential of ‘sophisticated screenery’ (wonderful expression!) she reminds us that ‘the skills of reading against the texts of power will have to be a particularly important new literacy’ (p. 211). How very true.

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On Being Literate is such an important book, particularly now. It is also a reminder to those who have had the pleasure of hearing Margaret Meek speak that she is never anodyne, never complacent and always sharply insightful. The elegant clarity of her writing encourages the reader to think - not just to agree or accept:

To be literate we have to be confident that the world of signs and print, in all the different mixtures and modes of meaning that surround us, is a world we can cope with, be at home in, contribute to, and play with. If it is simply mysterious, threatening, unreliable or hostile, then we feel at a disadvantage, victimized, inadequate. There is no guarantee that literacy makes the world a more benign place, but it helps everyone to consider how it might be different. (p. 238)

Margaret Meek certainly reminds us that there are no easy answers, but above all, she offers ways of looking at literacy and its place in the world that give us renewed hope and vigour in continuing to assert what we think being literate is all about.

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