

THE USE OF ENGLISH

The English Association Journal for Teachers of English

Editorial

What is the Use of Literature?: **Adrian Barlow**

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Pamela Bickley

Reviews

these should enable teachers to build what Sadler calls 'guild knowledge' (p.26) or Wiliam develops into a 'community of interpreters' capable of 'construct referencing' (p.27). Her chapter detailing APP may be a little laborious for those of us who navigate it every day, but it is an excellent example of the difficulty of achieving accurate assessments.

Marshall's style is engaging and her English teacher habit of proffering close textual analysis of educational terminology will resonate with many readers. It is a slight shame that her editor has not corrected several typographical errors (a few GSCEs, for example) but, as all English teachers know, these do not affect Marshall's overall excellent grade.

Tara Hanley

Real Reads Jane Austen, retold by Gill Tavner.
Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility Pride and Prejudice, Emma,
Mansfield Park, Persuasion
Six-book boxed set (Real Reads, £24.99)

At university, in a week when I had to read both *Villette* and *The Professor*, I thought I'd bluff my way through the supervision by reading an abridged version of *Jane Eyre*. I only realised too late that the abridgement was in fact a retelling. Part of the problem, and something that should have alerted me to the inadequacies of my text much earlier, was the simplicity of the language. The vocabulary was limited and facile, the dialogue and narration straightforward. It was a childish and rather saccharine version of the story, and I still fail to understand how I can have attributed the quite poor-quality prose to the writer of *Villette*.

The distinction between retelling and abridgement is an important one, then. A retelling takes the original plot and characters, and reshapes it for a different audience and purpose. I probably could have bluffed my way through with an abridgement; the child's version of *Jane Eyre*, I suspect, did not have as its intended audience an English undergraduate writing an essay about Charlotte Bronte's heroines.

Real Reads are very clear about their audience: firstly, for 'intelligent young readers' they will provide a bridge to the full texts, and secondly for those who are 'unlikely ever to read the original versions' they give access

to literary classics. The books are attractive, with fine illustrations by Ann Kronheimer that serve both to make them approachable and support the narrative. As such, they seem ideal as low ability key stage 3 class readers and something of a salve to teachers tasked with teaching pre-1914 fiction to those working below NC level 4, as well as texts for independent reading among more fluent readers. The claim is that the texts honour the context and structure of the original and that they 'retain much of the author's vocabulary, style and tone'. This is certainly true of the Austens.

Indeed, Gill Tavner's language in the *Jane Austen Real Reads* is neither facile nor simplistic, and one of the benefits of using these texts as class readers, as opposed to, say, a modern children's novel, is that the vocabulary is difficult. This is appealing, because a class reader shouldn't be easy – it should be above what pupils can easily manage independently. Willoughby, for example, is 'uncommonly handsome, with a masculine gracefulness' and Elizabeth Bennett's 'delicacy abandoned her.' By the same token, the complexity militates against pupils feeling patronised by content intended for a much younger audience, or stigmatised by the fact that they are not reading an adult text. There is something of the original flavour of Jane Austen retained too. We do read, for example, that a 'single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife,' albeit courtesy of Mrs Bennett. Lucy Steele has 'sharp little eyes' and Emma's rudeness to Miss Bates was 'badly done'.

Where we must infer much of the characters' feelings in the original text, the retellings are more transparent. The first section of each text provides a précis of each character, so for example, not only are we told that Lady Russell 'loves Anne like a daughter' in *Persuasion*, but also asked whether she is wise, and whether 'her persuasive powers once again lead Anne towards heartbreak' which leads the reader to treat her advice to Anne with a degree of circumspection from the outset. The first thing a reader of the original novel is told is that Lady Russell 'was a woman of sound rather than quick abilities'; this might lead a reader to trust her judgement, were it not for her 'prejudices on the side of ancestry'. The characters are rendered in less complexity than the original, and a certain amount of interpretation has been done for us. Fanny Price is a 'lonely, frightened guest in her uncle's stately home', and arguably a much more sympathetic character than in the original *Mansfield Park*. Lucy Steele's face in the retelling of *Sense and Sensibility* is described as 'deceitful and ill-natured', which is an interpretation of her 'thorough want of delicacy, of rectitude, and integrity of mind', and her confidence to Elinor is rendered as much more deliberately upsetting than we find in the original novel. Mr Darcy's emerging admiration for Elizabeth, and her misreading of it, is a much more explicit episode: 'What Elizabeth took for cold contempt was in fact

fascination with the spirit that sparkled in her eyes.' The characters, though, do have integrity in the context of the retellings, and we could not expect the ambiguity of the original to be sustained in such a reduced version.

Condensing novels that exceed 400 pages in their original form into just 64 pages brings with it significant streamlining of the plot. Given the complexity of the vocabulary, though, this is perhaps quite an appealing thing for the teacher of low ability readers. The texts go some way to redressing this through a 'Taking things further' section at the back of the book. One part is entitled 'Filling in the Spaces', and this highlights where significant omissions and changes have been made to the original plot, so the fact that Frank Churchill has repeatedly postponed visits to his father, for example, gives us some sense of his somewhat capricious character that is not altogether apparent from the retelling. There is also some useful contextualising of events in the novel in this section: the fact, for example, that Catherine Morland's 'father is a clergyman, which helps to explain why her family has only a moderate income', and in *Persuasion* that 'Wealth and titles could not normally be inherited by daughters,' with the result that William Elliot is set to inherit Kellynch.

While a significant degree of intrigue and interest is inevitably lost, the novels are reshaped in such a way as to try and create new interest: *Sense and Sensibility* is a recollection through the eyes of Margaret; *Pride and Prejudice* opens with Darcy's first proposal and then recounts the events before the proposal followed by those after the proposal; *Persuasion* opens with Sir William and Lady Russell persuading Anne against marriage to Captain Wentworth. Perhaps less successful is the device of using Jane's letters to Cassandra as a means of commenting on the 'puzzles' that the plot of *Emma* presents. From a teacher's perspective, they end up feeling rather like the questions one might ask a class, and disrupt rather than contribute to the fluency of the retelling.

That said, there is a very useful part in the 'Taking things further' section at the back that seems explicitly designed to support the teaching of these texts. There are references to books about Jane Austen and the Regency period, links to websites such as the 'enthusiastic' www.pemberley.com, details of film versions of the novels, and *Food for thought* that offers a range of questions that could help shape classroom discussion or independent further study in the areas of character, theme and style. Themes to consider in *Emma*, for example, are friendship, the relationship between wealth, social status and marriage, women in society and social respect and politeness.

At the lower end of the price range for class readers, the excellent and durable quality of the books presents a good investment at £4.99 RRP for individual texts, perhaps a more practical purchase for departments than the Jane Austen 6-book boxed set at £24.99 RRP.

Jane Campion

WJEC GCSE English, English Language and English Literature

**WJEC GCSE English and English Language: Higher .
(Heinemann £12.99)**

**WJEC GCSE English and English Language Active Teach CD-ROM
– Higher. (Heinemann £349.00)**

WJEC GCSE English Literature. (Heinemann £11.00)

WJEC GCSE Poetry Collection. (Heinemann £11.99)

Those with long memories may recall the troubled introduction of the Key Stage 3 English SAT in the early 1990s. One of the objections was that national testing at 14 would have an adverse effect on the Year 9 English curriculum, with English departments feeling the need to spend a significant part of the year preparing pupils for the test rather than teaching them English. During those early years, there were dark mutterings of schools that were unscrupulously 'teaching to the test', narrowly focusing on test results at the expense of the wider subject. It was not long, however, before we were all at it. English departments learnt at their peril the need to do everything possible to attain test success.

Testing at Key Stage 3 may have gone, but the pressures of pass rates and targets remain at GCSE. The importance to schools of the proportion of pupils gaining five good passes including English and mathematics – soon to be a minimum of 50% for all schools – means that the teaching of English is becoming evermore precisely focused on the requirements of the examination papers, on ways of squeezing out those few extra marks from the reading question or writing task, focusing on the characteristics of Grade A* or Grade C answers. To this end, Heinemann has linked up with the WJEC to provide a tailor-made suite of resources specifically linked to the WJEC GCSE English, English Language and English Literature specifications. Comprising students' books, teachers' books, a