

Writing About Reading

Mike Torbe
Coventry Local Education Authority
Coventry, England

There is reading; and there is writing. There is writing about reading, and whatever is written has been, and will be, read by someone, even if it is only the writer. The print in a book is the product of one person's imprinting blank paper with meanings that echo in a reader's mind in unpredictable ways; and one effect of that encounter between written word and mind may be that the reader wants to write something, too. Not always *write*, of course. Very often, *talk* is enough. Clayton, a 9 year-old-boy is talking to his teachers:

I'll always read story books. I'll never finish the story book, cos (sic) over the past 6 years I've read 700 books different, all different books, and about 300 all the same book over and over again . . . I still read Watership Down. I read it last night . . . At the beginning it seems ever so exciting, but when you get to the last page (of the first chapter) it seems all sad and horrible because of all the poison and all that . . .

Clayton couldn't have written that: He had to talk it. Asked to write he could only do this:

I have read Watership Down. It is a good book, it is exciting.

The demand to write kills the easy flow of language so obvious in his talk. But writing about reading need not be like that.

The interaction between reading and writing is mysterious, but if we recognize what spontaneous language uses follow from our reading, then we can see what kinds of writing may enable readers to tap their responses to reading. In order to do so, I want (1) to explore five types of inevitable processes of reading and understanding — *rehearsal*, *commentary*, *associative anecdotes*, *thinking aloud*, *enacting consciousness* — and (2) to look at the writing that may go alongside them.

Leigh, a 13 year-old-girl, shows us the most typical and familiar kind of writing about books, which is also representative of the most basic process — *rehearsal*. She does what we all do after an experience — she relives it by retelling it, partly for herself, enjoying the good bits. Her entry in her work diary for her teacher (and for herself) begins like this (Fry 1981):

I've recently read a book called The Lotus Caves by — I think his name was John Christopher. It's about two boys who live on the moon in a confined bubble and

they decide to go and explore first base where the living quarters are, and they find a diary of a man who had disappeared . . .

She continues by outlining the peak episodes of the story — rehearsing it and thus enjoying it again.

Paul, who is also 13, seems at first to be doing the same thing in his writing which is also a diary entry; but he is doing something more. He is offering a *commentary* on his reactions, capturing fleeting thoughts, and his language is, so to speak, transparent: One is conscious of what he is saying, not of how he is saying it.

Today we finished The Island of the Blue Dolphins, and for me it was a relief that she had got off the island. I thought the book was over detailed. Every little movement Karana made was logged and spelled out. The book also lacked much action and I don't think I would have given it the Newberry Medal (Torbe, 1980).

Paul's diary entry seems recognizable to us as a child's writing. But here is a mature, highly sophisticated university lecturer, musing on his own reading in precisely the same way, suggesting that the process of reflecting on response and trying to account for it, is basic to all readers. He has read Rosemary Stucliff's *Song for a Dark Queen*.

Now this is frightening. The book won the Other Award. Why? Boudicca is a victim — raped, humiliated or insulted somehow by Romans who, being patriarchs, don't recognize her as Queen rather than widowed consort of Iceni — but her suffering makes her wicked . . . I saw it as frightening portent of British civil unrest . . .

If we stay with another adult for a moment, we can see another characteristic response, in which what one reads subtly affects and controls what one writes, and **why** one might write. Kath is a mature student and has been reading Hemingway. Her log book has begun with general comments, but gathers intensity as the reading bites deep into her personal memories. Finally, she seems to forget the book, but in fact writes a cluster of *associative anecdotes* as a direct consequence of her reading, and as a way of testing the novel against her own life.

I first read The Sun Also Rises when I was 17 (1949) and on the fringes of a similar group in Brighton, the most marked difference being their lack of money.

My involvement began quite simply by being picked up. A girl friend and I were waiting for our dates in the bar of the Pavilion Hotel one evening

These first kinds of writing — *rehearsal*, *commentary*, and *associative anecdote* — are all reflective. The writing serves to sort out thoughts, associations, and responses, and organize them for the reader. But there are other kinds of writing, much more enactive, writing which follows closely the contours of the mind, echoing the processes of understanding at the point of encounter with a text. An example is the *thinking aloud* that Meriel, who is 17, shows us here. She is faced with a Blake poem, “**The Garden of Love,**” which she has never seen before, invited to read it, and whenever she stopped or paused in her reading, to write down precisely what was in her mind at that moment. She numbers what she writes each time she stops. She wrote eight comments: I quote only the first five:

1. *I find that I do not really understand the poem properly. If I read it again, it might help.*
2. *It's a very imaginative piece of writing. But I still cannot quite figure it out. My thoughts at the moment are all very confused.*
3. *This is the first time I have ever written my thoughts aloud quite like this.*
4. *I've been thinking what on earth I'm going to write about this poem.*
5. *I like the way it is written and the sort of words it uses. I find the whole poem a bit of a mystery and though I hate to say it a bit boring. That is probably because I can't tell what the author is trying to put over to me.*

The writing is serving Meriel as a way in which she can learn about her response. The act of writing helps her to see what her response actually *is*. Here is a similar technique, explored further. Cowper's poem “**The Poplar Field**” was presented to fourteen-year-old students piece by piece, first the opening two lines, then the whole of the first verse, the first two verses, and so on. The students were instructed: “Write down what you think that bit of the poem means, and anything the poem makes you think of. If you want to

ask questions, write them down as well.” Here is the opening verse.

*The poplars are fell'd: farewell to the shade,
And the whispering sound of the cool colonnade!
The winds play no longer and sing in the leaves,
Nor Ouse on his bosom their image receives.*

Here is what Stephanie wrote. Her writing gathers intensity as the meaning of the poem seeps in to her *consciousness*: she is not able fully to articulate that meaning, but she is enacting consciousness in her own way. I cite her first two pages only, for brevity's sake. She is not too sure at first what a “poplar” is, and in fact when she worked it out (on her page 5) went back over what she had written. Her second thoughts are printed in bold-face.

1. *What does poplar mean?
The scenery is brightening up, the sun's coming out, and in the background the sound of the breeze. Reminds me when a heavy shower has slowly withdrawn and the sun is starting to peer through shining on the ground, making shadows fall away.*
2. *The air is silent, motionless, like a picture taken when everything is still. The river reflects the scenes of the trees, like a clear mirror. **But now the trees are felled there is no image reflecting in the river.***

These two kinds of writing about reading — the reflective and the enactive — are basic because they represent, I believe, basic processes in reading and understanding. They are things we do anyway, although generally we do them either in talk, or in that silent talk inside the head which is one kind of thought. When we tap them for our students, they discover that not only are they able to write in ways they didn't know they were capable of, but also that their writing has an effect on the way they read, deepening and extending their response and understanding.

All these examples involve the reading of literature. Similar processes, and similar uses of writing can be applied to the reading of non-fiction. But that is perhaps another essay altogether.