

# Literature Matters

*‘It may be sentimental and a delusion to see power in literature, but I’ll settle for that sentiment and delusion in preference to others’. From the Beano to Hamlet, Peter Thomas reflects on how he developed a passion for literature and language.*

My parents both left school at 14 and sought no other education for the rest of their lives. It’s not that they were against education – they just assumed they’d had enough for life and work. Consequently, my early years were in a book-free home. The bookshelf next to the fireplace did, I recall, have an ancient *Pears Encyclopaedia*, a *Home Doctor* containing illustrated symptoms and a straggle of my mother’s Georgette Heyer and Barbara Cartland borrowings. The only evidence of my father’s reading was a large-format *Home Decorating and Maintenance*.

I don’t know what my life would have been like if that was my only contact with books. I suppose I would have followed my parents as unskilled, hard-working, low-waged employees for whom holidays were unknown and neck of lamb stew and a glass of cider were the Sunday luxury. But books broke the grip of demographic prediction.

## From The Beano to The Famous Five

It started with comics. I preferred *The Beano* to *The Dandy*, because of Dennis the Menace and the Bash Street Kids. They were models of resistance to the power of adults at home and school. Not that I was rebellious. Far from it, but I enjoyed their zestful anarchy and opposition to dutiful conformity. And I understood that they sometimes triumphed and sometimes failed.

Then, prompted by the girl next door, came Enid Blyton: another world, and other models. Earnest, responsible, polite children had adventures and were approved by serious, besuited adults, and policemen who licked their pencils before laboriously inscribing details in a book. Graduating from the *Secret Seven* to *The Famous Five*, I got used to homes with maids, and uncles who owned cars, boats, islands and even libraries inside the house. It never occurred to me to compare these homes with the bathroom-less, unheated, rented terrace house I lived in. Perhaps that was the beginning of something more important than social mobility, accepting other means, mores and manners: cultural mobility.

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We don’t choose our parents or where we grow up, and that is either a fine equality of starting point or a gross inequality of inheritance and potential. I needed something to help me enter that different world, not as a visitor, in fiction, but as a traveller with a passport. That’s where language came in.

## Discovering language

I always found language interesting, including my father’s speech. He had a way of stamping attitude on things that precluded further discussion. Riding a bike was a waste of time: *‘working your legs to give your arse a ride’*. My distress at the death of a cat: *‘Worse things happen at sea’*. Sunday dinner: *‘Very nice, very tasty, very sweet’*. A despised colleague: *‘He wants a good kick up the arse, he does’*. Despite secretly practising some of these expressions, I never felt the certainty of my father’s grasp of anatomy or nautical calamity.

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School, and school assembly, offered something different. I learned by heart chunks of the familiar hymns. I liked the clarity of location and purpose in: *‘We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land’*. But not all the language of hymns was just satisfyingly literal. I loved the idea of the Almighty *‘pavilion’d in splendour and girded with praise’*. If you’re the Almighty, being magnificent comes with it, and I imagined the Lord of Hosts, legs casually outstretched, on the pavilion, in white flannels and a cable-stitched white v neck pullover, waiting to bat. It was some time later, reading *King Arthur’s Knights* in Classics Illustrated, I learned that a pavilion was a huge marquee, with ribbons, pennants and streaming flags. My awe of the Almighty grew instantly. Divine majesty was now a matter of medieval splendour, and the girding with

praise that had been a bit of a mystery became a weighty shoulder-to-hip accoutrement of medals, badges and tributes from the admiring multitudes.

I have no idea where these eclectic encounters would have got me but it all clicked when I discovered Richmael Crompton's *William*, 39 volumes published from 1922 until she died in the 1960s. The books combined the familiarly unfamiliar setting of a home with a gardener, cook and a father who worked 'in the city' with an attitude to adults, respectability and conformity that made *Dennis the Menace* and the *Bash Street Kids* beginners. They were full of characters who believed children trailed clouds of glory, only to be thwarted by William's grubby destruction of sentiment and ideal. William wanted to be a pirate, a gangster, a detective, an actor, a hero or a villain. Sometimes he succeeded and sometimes he failed, but he was dignified in failure, and understandably indignant that others could not see his merits or motives. This was not Blytonia. And the language! I learned that there was more to feeling than happy, sad or cross. There was elated, disillusioned, disconsolate – even nonchalant and meditative. Such words!

**“In fiction, as in life, we tend to want certainties, but they are usually a distraction. Literature matters in understanding self and others, and in developing tolerance and patience with whatever eludes the tyrannical fist and sword of certainty.”**

#### **First Aid in English**

One day our teacher said we had to write a story like a fable, using animals. A bit below me, I thought, but I liked writing stories. In my story I wrote “*Bless my whiskers! ejaculated the hare.*” It was a shameless borrowing from William, with a flourish of woodland idiom I thought rather smart. My teacher said ‘*What’s this word?*’ I told him. ‘*Where did you get that word?*’ I said I didn’t know. ‘*What does it mean?*’ Classmates were listening and I was feeling uncomfortable. ‘*Come with me*’ he said, taking my book, and I followed to the Headmaster’s office, where he asked the same questions. I had no idea what the fuss was about but I regretted using the offending word. Eventually, I was returned to the classroom and told to finish the story, which I did without enthusiasm. There was something dangerous about words, I thought. More to them than you expected. Watch out.

There was also more than I expected when English became dominated by an ominous event called 11+. Various exercises I completed without any sense of their importance resulted in a report home that I was unlikely to pass, and likely to be going to the secondary modern, not the grammar school. Following advice, Saturday mornings became devoted to private tuition, along with two others. Our retired teacher tutor fulfilled his mission with a blue volume called *First Aid in English* by Mr Ronald Ridout. Mr Ridout, it turned out, knew what I needed to know. Not that I had previously felt alarm at ignorance of the collective noun for larks or what a predicate was.

Unsurprisingly, relief from Ridout drove me to other reading. The impression I had formed of books was that there were two sorts: those whose characters were what

my Mum called ‘nice’ and the sort I should aspire to be, and those who were scruffy and more like me. Between these two poles of the ideal and the realistic, I veered as a reader for several years. I read loads of war stories and Westerns, both rich in rock-jawed triumphant heroes and dastardly Apaches, Nazis and Japs. I should have been set for life with certainties about Good and Bad, hero and villain.

#### **Discovering literature**

Despite Mr Ridout, I failed the 11+. Twice. Once in Chiswick, where I met a group of boys who made Bash Street kids look like amateurs, and later in Wales, my mother having discovered that they did it later there. So Secondary Modern it was to be. Not that I disliked it: my Chiswick Saturdays, nicking from sweet shops before the ‘flicks’ stood me well with the sort of boys my mother thought ‘rough’.

Two years later, the two schools became a comprehensive and I discovered that grammar school Masters and Mistresses wore gowns and my old Sec Mod teachers wore jackets and cardigans. After a while, I got moved up for English and found that it a hard choice between being top of the B band or bottom of the A band.

Whatever the merits, I found myself in the class of a gowned semi-mortal called Mr Payne who turned out to be the most influential person in my life. Over the next few years he made me want to share his enthusiasm for literature. He introduced me to Shakespeare, Donne, Hopkins, Wordsworth, Milton and Eliot. I repaid this privilege by enjoying these but enjoying snooker more, which is why I failed my A Level and had to do an extra year to get to university, and to justify Mr Payne’s diminished faith in me.

Thanks to him, I discovered in Hamlet a hero with a credible flaw of dither and doubt, and then Iago, a villain with an empathy-tugging resentment of being passed over for a fancy urban mathematician. I thought I had discovered Shakespeare’s unique greatness, but the same thing happened when I read Hardy, with worthy but dull Gabriel, and spirited but impressionable Bathsheba. And then the greatest villain of them all, on the religious face of it, Satan, proud fallen angel, far more exciting and believable than the crotchety old do-good Mr Perfect git who kicked him out for being bolshy.

#### **Literature matters**

Looking back on this literary pilgrim’s progress, I see a common thread, and one that has underpinned my life as teacher, lecturer, writer and examiner. In fiction as in life, we tend to want certainties, but they are usually a distraction and nearly always faulty. Dealing with imperfection, doubt and uncertainty takes more, but builds a warmer view of people and society. That’s why a man like Trump is such a moral, social, emotional and intellectual void. And that’s why literature matters in understanding self and others, and in developing tolerance and patience with whatever eludes the tyrannical fist and sword of certainty. At a time when it is easy to think the world is entering a dark phase when deceit, myth, greed and cynicism are in the ascendant, it may be sentimental and a delusion to see such power in literature, but I’ll settle for that sentiment and delusion in preference to others.

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