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## Learning to be a writer from early reading

Eileen John

### Abstract

The role of reading in educating a future writer is discussed through study of memoirs by writers including Janet Frame, James Baldwin, and Eudora Welty. The memoirs show reading books to have been a transformative way of melding forms of experience. The following features of childhood reading are examined: (1) the role of the physical book, (2) the cognitive-aesthetic-affective impact of letters, words and 'voices', (3) the partially unplanned and challenging path of children's exposure to texts, and (4) absorption of models that can be imitated and outgrown. The discussion links sympathetically to views in philosophy of education about the importance of content and beauty and of influences whose impact cannot be planned, measured or captured as generic skills. The autobiographical evidence considered here suggests that these influences can nonetheless be crucial to expanding learners' horizons and stimulating their educational and artistic progress.

**Keywords:** Childhood reading, Books, Imitation, Imagination, Independence, Joe Winston, Emma Williams

### Introduction

How does childhood reading contribute to the education of a future writer? In this essay I present ideas on this topic drawn from accounts writers have given of their early reading. I focus on accounts that strike me as particularly powerful and suggestive; this does not attempt to be an adequate survey of representative evidence.<sup>1</sup> My interest in these accounts is not strictly academic, in any case. These children grew up to be eloquent, funny, sharply observant writers, and they bring those talents to bear in remembering their lives as readers. I enjoy and am moved by these self-reflective accounts and hope to share some of that experience.

The ideas that emerge are interrelated, but for purposes of exposition I will somewhat artificially distinguish them. An overarching idea is indeed that early reading is educative because it melds forms of experience: tactile, visual, verbal, imaginative, intellectual, aesthetic, social, affective and simply pleasurable experiences coincide. This complex melding of experience can be transformative, and, as is especially clear in the cases of 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers Janet Frame and James Baldwin, it can open up the world for children who might otherwise see limited horizons. The distinct points contributing to this broad idea concern (1) the role of the physical book, (2) the cognitive-aesthetic-affective impact of letters, words and 'voices', (3) the partially unplanned and challenging path of children's exposure to texts, and (4) absorption of models that can be imitated and outgrown.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors I refer to were chosen for somewhat mixed reasons. Primarily it was because I found their writing about early reading to hold striking and interestingly related ideas. The three I draw on in most detail represent at least some diversity of background and experience, as well as all achieving professional success and recognition: Eudora Welty (1909-2001) was a U.S. fiction writer who grew up in a relatively privileged white family in Mississippi and wrote especially about life in the U.S. South; James Baldwin (1924-87) was a U.S. fiction writer and essayist who grew up in Harlem as a black child living with economic hardship and racial discrimination (and eventually as a gay man also facing discrimination); and Janet Frame (1924-2004) was a New Zealand fiction writer and poet who also grew up with economic hardship and whose autobiography documented in part her misdiagnosis with schizophrenia and consequent years of hospitalisation. This set is limited to broadly 20<sup>th</sup> century writers in English; this work would benefit from further research and reflection on the experiences of a more extensive and diverse set of writers.

Before turning to the writers' accounts, let me set the stage with a few claims from the philosophical tradition. I want to highlight conceptions of how the reading (and listening) self relates to and is influenced by what is read. Plato's *Republic*, especially in Book III, gives detailed attention to the educative impact of imitating and internalising another's speech, as dramatists do and as they lead their audiences to do. Plato's Socrates suggests a preference for third-person narration of stories, to discourage the poet and audience from entering directly into an imagined other's position: 'if the poet should conceal himself nowhere, then his entire poetizing and narration would have been accomplished without imitation' (Plato 393c). This concern for the form in which stories are told is based on appreciation of the power of imitation, but also its ability to roam widely and indiscriminately: a person cannot 'combine the practice of any worthy pursuit with the imitation of many things and the quality of a mimic', yet 'imitations, if continued from youth far into life, settle down into habits and second nature' (Plato 394e-395a, 395d). The suggestion is that it is at least better if stories inhibit direct internalisation of characters' perspectives. The phenomenologist Georges Poulet seems to make a rather Platonic claim about the strikingly intimate, mind-altering power of reading, but without expressing fears for its influence:

In reading I become aware of a rational being, a consciousness that is open to me, welcomes me, allows me to think what it thinks and feel what it feels ... The subjective principle which I call *I* is modified ... I am on loan to another, and this other thinks, feels, suffers and acts within me; I play a more humble role (Poulet, 1980, pp. 42, 45, 47).

For Poulet it seems that reading is a partial release from the ordinary self-oriented, self-moving path of conscious life, as my reading '*I*' submits to and follows the path of another consciousness. Poulet has more appreciation than Plato for the reader's positive role in bringing a literary work to life, by 'loaning' it consciousness.

Sigmund Freud makes a similarly non-judgemental but rather different claim about reading fiction, considering especially what we might call 'popular fiction'. For Freud, the pleasure of entering into the adventures of a hero or heroine centrally involves our self-orientation, as the story is a kind of disguised fantasy of the writer that readers also share: imagining ourselves triumphing over every adversity and being universally loved. 'Through this revealing ... invulnerability, we can immediately recognise His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every day-dream and of every story' (Freud, 2013, p. 10). On this view, the potential impact of reading such stories would not be the inculcation of problematic patterns of thought and feeling, since we already have the yearnings for invulnerability and love that play out in stories – the story lines are driven by what is already internal to the self. It seems rather, for Freud, that reading fiction offers a relatively safe and socially admissible immersion in egocentric fantasy.

One last idea, from Immanuel Kant, concerns the writer's development and the benefit of attention to previous writers' works.

There is no use of our powers ... which, if every subject had to begin entirely from the raw predisposition of his own nature, would not fall into mistaken attempts if others had not preceded him with their own, not in order to make their successors into mere imitators, but rather by means of their method to put others on the right path for seeking out the principles in themselves and thus for following their own, often better, course. (Kant, 2000, §32, pp. 163-4)

Kant in his aesthetic theory overall makes autonomy crucial to aesthetic judgement: he thinks that finding something beautiful needs to reflect one's own freely experienced pleasure in experiencing

that thing. If a person does not take pleasure in experiencing something, 'he does not allow approval to be internally imposed upon himself by a hundred voices who all praise it highly' (Kant, 2000, §33, p. 164). In the passage above, however, he speaks for the value of learning from the work of other writers. Avoid building solely on one's own 'raw predispositions', learn from what others have done, yet do not merely imitate them. Kant does not here explain how to do this; he simply affirms the possibility and value of learning from influential models that nonetheless allow for independent development.

This sampling of theorists' claims shows persistent awareness of reading as an influential stimulus for thought and feeling, with varying conceptions of how the self is vulnerable to or benefits from that influence.<sup>2</sup> Issues of submission, control, shared and independent experience are foregrounded in interestingly different ways. In the writers' autobiographical accounts, these issues come to the surface as well, but within the terms of their concrete memories. In these personal histories, the worries that Plato and Kant have about the risks of 'merely imitative' behaviour seem misplaced. These future writers spent significant stretches of attention in what looks like uncritical, pleasurable absorption of others' models of writing. This immersion encompassed imitation, incomprehension, and emotional attachment to books, words, voices and stories. Their susceptibility to the experience of reading seems to have helped them find a circuitous but life-changing path into their futures as writers.

### Books!

Salman Rushdie begins an essay on the value of freedom of imagination by noting that he grew up kissing books and bread. ... whenever anyone dropped a book or let fall a chapati or a 'slice', ... the fallen object was required not only to be picked up but also kissed, by way of apology for the act of clumsy disrespect. ... We kissed everything. We kissed dictionaries and atlases. We kissed Enid Blyton novels and Superman comics. If I'd ever dropped the telephone directory I'd probably have kissed that, too. (Rushdie, 1991, p. 415)

Rushdie here refers to bread and books as different kinds of sustenance, 'food for the body and food for the soul', and he focuses on the latter kind, expressing love – but not reverence – for the novel because it 'takes the "privileged arena" of conflicting discourses *right inside our heads*' (Rushdie, 1991, pp. 415, 426). I want to pause, however, over his memory of childhood respect and care for physical books and texts of all kinds. Rushdie remembers the array of printed texts in his home, from reference works to novels to comic books, indicating he had access to diverse reading materials in his childhood home. Further, as suggested by the bread-and-books kissing ritual, he was encouraged to think of books as precious, perhaps as nourishing. Other writers remember the physical presence and allure of books. Novelist Marilynne Robinson notes of her reading choices that, 'My reading was not indiscriminate. I preferred books that were old and thick and hard' (Robinson, 2012, p. 85). Eudora Welty, in her memoir *One Writer's Beginnings*, gives precise attention to the sensory and tactile qualities of the books in her home.

I came upon a worn old book without a back that had belonged to my father as a child. It was called *Sanford and Merton*. ... This book was lacking its front cover, the back held on by strips of pasted paper, now turned golden, in several layers, and the pages stained, flecked, and tattered around the edges; its garish illustrations had come unattached but were

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<sup>2</sup> See Worth (2017), especially Ch. 1 on the benefits of reading, for discussion of philosophical views and empirical research on reading.

preserved, laid in. I had the feeling even in my heedless childhood that this was the only book my father as a little boy had had of his own (Welty, 1983, p. 8).

She treasured the ten volumes of *Our Wonder World*, a gift she received once she could read for herself: 'These were beautifully made, heavy books I would lie down with on the floor', and as an adult she still has her favourite volume, 'as worn and backless and hanging apart as my father's poor *Sanford and Merton* (Welty, 1983, 9). Even before she could read,

It had been startling and disappointing to me to find out that story books had been written by *people*, that books were not natural wonders, coming up of themselves like grass. Yet regardless of where they came from, I cannot remember a time when I was not in love with them—with the books themselves, cover and binding and the paper they were printed on, with their smell and their weight and with their possession in my arms, captured and carried off to myself. Still illiterate, I was ready for them (Welty, 1983, p. 6).

The book is an object that a child can carry around or sit or lie down with, and it has a structure that a child can physically examine, whether able to read or not.

Welty, Robinson and Rushdie are remembering childhoods that provided relatively generous access to books; Janet Frame's autobiography speaks to the experience of a childhood in which bringing a book home was an exciting, important event. Like Welty, she remembers the physical qualities of books and the thrill when her father brings home notebooks from work: 'The railway notebooks ... had attractive marbled colours on the edges of the pages that set together formed a marbled pattern which fascinated me' (Frame, 1991, p. 66). The children are not allowed to touch their father's 'fly book with its leather cover salt-smelling and smeared with patches of fish scales, with the parchment pages, the bulk closed by an elastic band, each page filled with brilliantly coloured feather flies on hooks with beautiful names like Red-Tipped Governor' (Frame, 1991, p. 66). She continues, 'There were homemade books, too, which we laboriously sewed in place and covered with scraps of wallpaper from the wallpaper shop downtown' (Frame, 1991, pp. 66-7). Frame's one real childhood friend, apart from her siblings, 'asked me if I would like to borrow her special book that she kept in her washhouse among a clutter of treasures in an old beer barrel' (Frame, 1991, p. 43). The special book was *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, and the tales utterly delight Frame and her sisters. It 'became a treasured book to be returned and borrowed, again and again' (Frame, 1991, p. 44). Later on, when Frame wins a year's subscription to the local library, she found there '*Grimm's Fairy Tales*, the same kind of red-covered book with the thin pages packed with black print that I'd borrowed from Poppy' (Frame, 1991, p. 70). What comes across especially in Welty's and Frame's accounts is that a book can be a special object with unfolding power. When it cannot be read, it can still be held, handled, smelled, opened and closed, and looked at for pictures and patterns. Some of the kinds of labour that go into the making of a book can be seen. When a book can be read, it transforms further into an object able to hold all sorts of things: adventures, poems, history, science, religious and moral lessons, fishing fly instructions, song lyrics, true crime stories, et cetera. It is a physical thing that can be damaged, mended, lost and remembered for its physical presence, but it also has or opens up to an expansive 'inner life'.<sup>3</sup> Books seem to have struck these children as showing possible transformative relations between things and experiences, with the physical book being a crucial possession that can trigger such transformations.

### **Melding cognitive, aesthetic and affective impact**

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<sup>3</sup> Poulet says that books 'wait for someone to come and deliver them from their materiality, their immobility ... Made of paper and ink, they lie where they are put until the moment someone shows an interest in them' (Poulet, 1980, p. 41).

How does this opening up of experience occur in reading? These writers have memories of specific moments and periods in their reading lives that seem to have had a wonderfully combined cognitive, aesthetic and affective impact. They got more from a letter or a word than might seem possible. This experience of finding more than what was strictly before their eyes seems to have been a kind of unplanned-for boost in learning and appreciation of language. It is not that their accounts precisely explain why or how this occurred, but I think Welty and Frame in particular go some way toward articulating such experiences in a suggestive way. Welty describes her appreciation of letters as visual objects, aided by the fancifully drawn initial letters in illustrated story books:

My love for the alphabet, which endures, grew out of reciting it but, before that, out of seeing the letters on the page. In my own story books, before I could read them for myself, I fell in love with various winding, enchanted-looking initials drawn by Walter Crane at the heads of fairy tales. In "Once upon a time," an "O" had a rabbit running it as a treadmill, his feet upon flowers (Welty, 1993, p. 10).

The single initial can embody something else that a child might recognize, and it hints at imaginative possibilities, expanding the contribution of a first letter beyond its tiny, seemingly arbitrary role in communicating a story. Welty notes here that the alphabet she learned was also memorized as an auditory pattern, something to be recited in a slightly melodic way, and that combination of the visual and auditory of course builds up basic relations that we quickly take for granted – a letter that looks like this sounds like that, and the letters are ordered conventionally just so, making sure they are all accessible. Coming to grasp the small but remarkably complex fact that letters form words that mean things is evoked by Welty in the following passage:

In my sensory education I include my physical awareness of the *word*. Of a certain word, that is; the connection it has with what it stands for. I was standing by myself in our front yard waiting for supper, just at that hour in a late summer day when the sun is already below the horizon and the risen full moon in the visible sky stops being chalky and begins to take on light. There comes the moment, and I saw it then, when the moon goes from flat to round. For the first time it met my eyes as a globe. The word "moon" came into my mouth as though fed to me out of a silver spoon. Held in my mouth the moon became a word (Welty, 1983, p. 11).

She considers this a sensory event, in which her eyes and her mouth cooperate to get moon and 'moon' to converge. I am calling this 'learning a word' moment an experience that melds the cognitive with the aesthetic and affective, although Welty does not use particularly aesthetic or affective language. However, the memory is that of a specially personal event; it seems felt and pleurably appreciated, as something that moved her in an otherwise ordinary moment of childhood waiting. Feeling that word so fully seems to show the impulse to acknowledge experience adequately, where this is not merely the fact of the moon becoming visible. The word in her mouth allows her to bind together the surprise of the moon becoming round, seen from her spot on the earth, with its reality in the sky.

Janet Frame, describing a period somewhat later in the process of learning to read, focuses on another word.

That year I discovered the word *Island* ... In our silent reading class at school, when we chose one of the Whitcombes school readers, those thin, fawn-covered books with crude drawings on the cover and speckled pages, I found a story, *To the Island*, an adventure story that impressed me so much that I talked about it at home.

'I read a story, *To the Is-land*, about some children going to an Is-land.'

'It's I-land,' Myrtle corrected.

'It's not,' I said. 'It's Is-land. It says,' I spelled the letters, 'l-s-l-a-n-d. Is-land.'

'It's a silent letter,' Myrtle said. 'Like knee.'

In the end, reluctantly, I had to accept the ruling, although within myself I still thought of it as the Is-Land (Frame, 1991, p. 33).

She enjoyed how she could use the spelling to see the structure and meaningful parts of the word, and this notion – an Is-land – seems to have added to the allure of the story. The incident also marks the child's grudging acceptance that reading involves conformity to rules one does not make or understand, but Frame notes that she nonetheless preserved a sense of this word's possibility for the sound and meaning she had found in it.<sup>4</sup>

Frame discusses words that were offered to her at school, to help her learn explicitly about stories and writing:

Beside the word *adventure*, other words began to appear repeatedly in our learning and written expression, and although they were not, I felt, attractive words, they had a dramatic effect in their use. I remember learning to spell and use these three words: *decide*, *destination*, and *observation*, all of which worked closely with *adventure*. I was enthralled by their meaning and by the fact that all three seemed to be part of the construction of every story – everyone was *deciding*, having a *destination*, *observing* in order to decide and define the destination and know how to deal with the *adventures* along the way. (35)

These are rather abstract and even, as she says, unattractive words, yet learning to spell and use them, building a theory of what a story is, was exciting to her. The teacher asks them to observe what they see on their walks to and from school, and Frame takes up this task eagerly, realising that - though she had not thought her life held adventures – she can at least decide which route to take and can observe significantly different things on each route (Frame, 1991, pp. 33-36).

One last point about the complex, melding impact of reading involves the senses in which reading can offer an experience of voice. These readers find not just the meaningfulness of individual and connected words, but also the possibility of someone using words and 'speaking' to others with a range of qualities and purposes. Rushdie says of literature as an artistic form that it 'is the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear *voices talking about everything in every possible way*' (Rushdie, 1991, p. 429). Welty and Frame, in remembering their childhood reading, give this experience of voice a fairly concrete presence. Welty says that as a reader she always hears a voice: 'As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. It isn't my mother's voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own. It is human, but inward ... The sound of what falls on the page begins the process of testing it for truth, for me' (Welty, 1983, pp. 12-13). That there is a voice coming through the story or poem initiates, for Welty, the question of on what basis the voice speaks and whether it speaks truly.

Frame recounts again and again the absorbing experience of actual voices reading aloud, such as her own reading of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* to her sisters, their recitations of poems, and her teachers' readings at school.

[Our teacher] gave us a number of haunting poems to learn and recite, and although I objected to the singsong way she expected us to speak, some of that singing trapped me ... in a world that seemed to have no boundaries ... Miss Lindsay used to read for hours from

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<sup>4</sup> Frame named the first part of her autobiography *To the Is-Land*.

Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, as if it were her personal poem, and it was partly her absorption in it that compelled me ... I can still see her as she gazed toward the classroom door, as if toward a lake, saying, 'an arm rose up' ... as if she had experienced it, as if the jewelled sword Excalibur 'all the haft twinkled with diamond sparks ...' had been a part of her life that she, like Sir Bedevere, was reluctant to give up (Frame, 1991, p. 73).

Another teacher reads aloud the whole of Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' without any prefacing or concluding information.

... when in the last stanza Miss Bibson adopted her familiar preaching tone to read, 'He prayeth best who loveth best', I resented her intrusion and the intrusion of the land and the landscape and the reduction of the mariner ... from a man of mysterious grandeur even in guilt to a 'grey-beard loon'.

All that day I lived within the dream of the Ancient Mariner, a massive, inescapable dream that Miss Gibson had thrust upon us without explanation or apology, a 'pure' dream of that time on the sea in the embrace of weather that existed of itself without reference to people or creatures and their everyday lives of church, wedding guests, long-drawn-out tales (Frame, 1991, p. 102).

One further passage concerns Frame's teenage chance encounter with Poppy, the childhood friend who lent her the precious book and whom she was forced to stop seeing (for ill-founded reasons). Their educational paths have diverged, but Poppy is eager to say that she still has to learn some poetry. Poppy proceeds to recite Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale':

The inner noise and desperation of 'No hungry generations tread thee down' haunted me, though I scarcely understood it; the words swept out of Poppy like a cry of panic. Why? The poem seemed to be so unrelated to her, the 'commercial girl' with the shorthand-typing and double-entry book-keeping; yet she had proclaimed the poem and its contents to be her very own, as if it were a milestone in her own life (Frame, 1991, pp. 96-7).

I think the significance of these poems encountered at school, in their ability to compel and haunt these girls, is captured well in Joe Winston's argument for the importance of beauty in education. Citing his own and various writers' experiences, he emphasises that 'this sudden encounter with beauty was more than an experience isolated in time ... It also had a highly significant afterlife, with recurring moments of beauty and pleasure' (Winston, 2011, p. 44). Winston further makes a point of the power of students seeing that the teacher herself is 'responsive to the beauty in whatever it is she is teaching' (Winston, 2011, pp. 53-54). Frame's experience attests both to this long afterlife and to the impact of the teacher's personal absorption in the poetry. One might be tempted to say that these teachers seem a bit negligent, carried away by love of these poems, indulging in their sheer beauty. However, the view conveyed by Frame is that it was tremendously important to her that she witnessed for herself adults being carried away by poetry.

### **The miscellaneous, individual, challenging path of reading**

Winston makes another point that I want to complicate slightly. He says that taking beauty seriously in education requires attending to students' aesthetic sensibilities and their live prospects for connection with beauty.

The teacher must pay equal attention to the expressive capacities of the students in her class, which she therefore needs to be interested in and aware of. This goes beyond their

levels of literacy and includes their likes and dislikes, the aesthetic opportunities afforded by their gender, class and cultural backgrounds, their aesthetic interests and tastes both in and outside of school and so on. Secondly, she must have an ability to make the object of study match these expressive capacities as far as she can; in other words, she needs to find ways to make the object of beauty connect with the lives of her students (Winston, 2011, p. 53).

It would be ridiculous to deny that these kinds of attention, interest and connecting effort are valuable, but I want to add that the aim of meeting students where they are aesthetically and intellectually is not the only valuable project. The writers I am drawing on make explicit references to having had reading thrust upon them that they cannot understand and that seems to come from a remote place. They seem to celebrate what I am calling the ‘miscellaneousness’ of a reading life, such that each person bumps up against things that no one person could be perfectly prepared for or suited to reading. In particular, the teachers give them materials that are too difficult or are rooted in a context that the students cannot inhabit in a knowledgeable, fluent way.

We have already seen some of Frame’s memories of teachers thrusting Tennyson and Coleridge upon their students ‘without explanation or apology’. Here is Marilynne Robinson on her ‘miscellany’ as a child and teenage reader.

I was given odds and ends—Dido pining on her flaming couch, Lewis and Clark mapping the wilderness ... We were simply given these things with the assurance that they were valuable and important in no specific way. I imagine a pearl diver finding a piece of statuary under the Mediterranean, a figure immune to the crush of depth though up to its waist in sand and blue with cold, in tatters of seaweed, its eyes blank with astonishment, its lips parted to make a sound in some lost dialect, its hand lifted to a city long since lost beyond indifference.

The diver might feel pity at finding so human a thing in so cold a place. ... The things we learned were in the same way, merely given for us to make what meaning we could of them.

This extended metaphor comes to you courtesy of Mrs. Bloomsburg, my high-school Latin teacher, who ... taught us patience with that strange contraption called the epic simile, which, to compare great things with small, appears fairly constantly in my own prose, modified for my own purposes. It was also Mrs. Bloomsburg who trudged us through Cicero’s vast sentences, clause depending from clause, the whole cantilevered with subjunctives and weighted with a culminating irony. It was all over our heads. We were bored but dogged (Robinson, 2012, p. 87).

It is not obvious how Mrs. Bloomsburg could get her students to be bored and yet doggedly studious; there must be a ‘hook’ of some kind that keeps the students paying attention. Perhaps the strangeness of the material, obviously not made to ingratiate itself with high school students in another time and place, is itself an attraction. Winston further argues that pedagogy incorporating experience of beauty will embrace ‘the possibilities of surprise ... and the need to help students forget themselves through strategies that can loosen the tyranny of their everyday identities’ (Winston, 2011, p. 54). This seems relevant to how something like Cicero’s grammatical ambition could possibly hold the attention of teenagers anywhere; syntactic, subjunctive, ironic complexity in Latin could, it seems, represent a kind of free achievement – as an obsessive care for sentence structure seems unlikely to be in any way demanded by students’ ordinary identities. Exposure to different expressive achievements, sensibilities and concerns for beauty may be able to loosen certain tyrannies. They may even, as in the case of Robinson, lead to an eventual sharing of

sensibility with the initially strange model. Let me note that these mentions of Cicero, Tennyson and others are not being used here to argue for a 'classical' curriculum that would focus on traditionally valued works. The point I hope to be making is rather that it is very hard to say which reading materials will trigger interest and expansion of horizons, but it seems important that students encounter some works that come from culturally remote and challenging directions.

The impact of a teacher's willingness to ask 'too much' of a student, or to provide 'unsuitable' reading, is highlighted by James Baldwin in some of his autobiographical writing. As a child in 1930's New York, he had a very influential teacher: 'She gave me books to read and talked to me about the books, and about the world: about Spain, for example, and Ethiopia, and Italy, and the German Third Reich; and took me to see plays and films, plays and films to which no one else would have dreamed of taking a ten-year-old boy' (Baldwin, 1985, p. 558). Baldwin remembers, for instance, going with his white teacher to Orson Welles' 1936 production, with a black cast, of *Macbeth*. Baldwin in this period reads a book that his mother does not want him to read, Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. His mother resorts to hiding the book, 'on the highest shelf above the bathtub' (Baldwin, 1985, p. 565). But he finds it even there and reads it 'compulsively': 'I was trying to find out something, sensing something in the book of some immense importance for me; which, however, I knew I did not really understand' (Baldwin, 1985, p. 565). Similarly, he reads Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* repeatedly (and his teacher takes him to see the 1935 film version):

I had no idea what *Two Cities* was really about, any more than I knew what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was really about, which was why I had read them both so obsessively: they had something to tell me. It was this particular child's way of circling around the question of what it meant to be a nigger. It was the reason that I was reading Dostoevsky, a writer—or rather, for me, a messenger—whom I would have had to understand, obviously, even less: my relentless pursuit of *Crime and Punishment* made my father (vocally) and my mother (silently) consider the possibility of brain fever ... I did not believe in any of these people so much as I believed in their situation, which I suspected, dreadfully, to have something to do with my own (Baldwin, 1985, p. 562).

Baldwin's childhood reading contributed to a lifelong process of trying to understand the world and the place that seemed to be assigned to him as a black man. To develop into a writer who could reject and recast that world, it seems he needed to read things that would trouble and confuse him and that would hint at relations, meanings and possibilities he could not directly find or easily interpret in his own life. He says he did not understand Dickens' novel, but he does respond to it intimately: 'it had been Madame Defarge who most struck me. I recognized that unrelenting hatred, for it was all up and down my streets, and in my father's face and voice' (Baldwin, 1985, p. 563). What will follow from a child in 1930's Harlem feeling, albeit not deeply understanding, the emotional force of Madame Defarge? Perhaps nothing – Baldwin's reconstruction of his experience of reading this novel does not prove 'what he gained from it', as if the novel provided a recognisable building block for his later career. The explanatory insight to be found in such memories is elusive. Nonetheless, it is hard not to see the leap out of his own context into other experiences of hatred, conspiracy, loyalty and revolution as a horizon-changing influence that allowed him to consider himself in relation to a larger world.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dickens shows up repeatedly in Welty's and Frame's accounts. Welty's mother 'sank as a hedonist into novels. She read Dickens in the spirit in which she would have eloped with him' (Welty, 1983, p. 7). Frame brings Dickens home from the library for her mother, 'who had no time to read it but who touched it and

These records of miscellany and difficulty are, I think, in deep sympathy with Winston's larger argument against letting 'pre-determined objectives, performance indicators, measurable assessment criteria and visible levels of attainment' dominate pedagogical values (Winston, 2011, p. 5). In discussing Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys*, Winston speaks up for the value to education of the subjunctive mood, 'the mood of possibility, contingency and hypothesis, the mood of uncertainty' (Winston, 2011, p. 61). In offering students challenging works of beauty and intellectual interest, we can think of education more like a 'conversation between the learner of the present and the achievements of the past. Like all good conversations, its content cannot be entirely structured in advance, nor can it be expected to have easily defined objectives that will shape a pre-determined conclusion' (Winston, 2011, p. 60). The importance of embracing uncertainty and lack of fixed ends is developed by Emma Williams in relation to the very notion of thinking, as she argues against entrenching an overly rationalistic conception of thinking in teaching practice. Williams exposes the limitations of educational projects aimed at developing 'thinking skills' and 'critical thinking', where these are supposed to be 'generic ways of thinking through which we might bring a matter to a conclusion, reach an end point, and settle a problem' (Williams, 2016, p. 7). Such a conception of thinking tends to prioritise argument and the logical progress of arguments, and tends to de-prioritise the content of thinking, as it emphasises thinking that '*stands back* from the particular objects of what is being thought about, that takes it as "data" that can be quantified and conceptualised, and that can hence be manipulated by means of the application of a set of rules or criteria' (Williams, 2016, p. 18). Winston also worries about the focus on abstracted skills, 'defined as goods external to what is being taught' and that do not acknowledge the value of 'deep emotional connection between learners and what they are learning' (Winston, 2011, p. 56). The alternative conception of thinking that Williams develops involves a conception of language that takes words to have an 'unruly' quality and language overall to have 'the potentiality to forge connections that we do not and cannot foresee' (Williams, 2016, p. 184). Thinking, on this view, has a 'productive and disclosive fluidity' (Williams, 2016, p. 185). Without trying to build all the relevant bridges between these arguments and the writers' memoirs, I hope that it is apparent that these writers are speaking of experiences in which the input was not carefully planned or assessed for suitability, and in which the 'output' seems simultaneously very important and not easy to identify, measure and evaluate. The beautiful, strange, physically, temporally, linguistically fine-grained details of their reading lives accumulated for these children in unpredictable ways that mattered deeply to their futures. It seems to have helped that they encountered things that they were not well-prepared for. In reading things not specially designed for their comprehension and appreciation, they gained evidence of there being much more to the world and made surprising connections, relating their lives to remote others' problems and projects.

### **Conclusion: immersion, imitation and independence**

What can be said about how reading contributed to these writers learning to write? The autobiographical records offer some suggestive ideas. As we have seen, reading had a compelling experiential presence. In Baldwin's compulsive reading of Stowe, Dickens and Dostoevsky, or Frame spending a day absorbed in the dream of Coleridge's poem, we have testimony to something like Poulet's claim that when reading, another 'thinks, feels, suffers and acts within me' (Poulet, 1980, p. 47). Frame portrays a good deal of her reading as wonderfully escapist, as a route into exciting adventures and magical experiences that contrasted with difficult circumstances of poverty, social

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opened it and flipped the pages and read out striking descriptions, saying, "How wonderful, kiddies, Charles Dickens, born in poverty, growing up to be a great writer'" (Frame, 1991, p. 70).

isolation, illness and death (Frame, 1991, pp. 18, 33-4, 43, 73, 91, 127). On Plato's terms, such immersion could mean internalising problematic habits, learning to think and feel as another does. Frame's and Baldwin's accounts suggest they were not simply internalising other, possibly distorting or fantasy-driven forms of consciousness; they were always reading with an eagerness for the potential transformation of their own reality. Frame finds in *Grimm's Fairy Tales* 'everybody's story seen in a special way', and, reading poems after the death of her beloved sister, 'to my amazement I discovered that many of the poets knew about Myrtle's death ... in each day there was blankness, a Myrtle-missing part, and it was upon this blankness that the poets in Mount Helicon were writing the story of my feelings' (Frame, 1991, pp. 44, 88). 'I wanted an imagination that would inhabit a world of fact, descend like a shining light upon the ordinary life of Eden Street, and not force me to exist in an "elsewhere"' (Frame, 1991, p. 101). Baldwin, as an adult, writes searchingly and critically about both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and another crucial book from his young adult reading, Richard Wright's *Native Son*. He eventually reads these works as allied, in a desperately negative way, in their assumptions about race: 'when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle; the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses' (Baldwin, 1991, p. 33). It seems likely that the depth of his critique of these works, and his own drive to write differently about race, grew out of the depth of his early immersion in these novels. What Frame and Baldwin might say to Plato is that their immersion in works of fictional and poetic imagination was indeed disruptive of their senses of self and reality, but it was a way of finding more in their real lives than superficially appeared, something other than what they were expected to find there.

Kant's worry about a writer's immersion in the writing of others is that, while it is a route to learning that can avoid 'reinventing the wheel', it also risks leading to mere imitation. The imitative writer will not develop autonomous judgement and genuinely creative expression. The writers I have considered seem if anything rather blithely accepting of the need for repeated, deliberate imitation. We have seen Robinson cite the influence of dogged study, and presumably imitation, of ancient writers' epic similes. Frame is explicit about her imitative and repetitive attempts to write in a poetic manner. She notes that after a poem of hers using the word 'dream' wins a prize, 'in future poems I used the word *dream*, particularly as I now noticed most of the poets were using it', and she 'began to collect other words labelled "poetic" – *stars, grey, soft, deep, shadowy, little, flowers*' (Frame, 1991, p. 93). Welty points to early stories in which she tried to deal with content she thought was appropriate for fiction: one story is set in Paris (where she had never been)<sup>6</sup>, and in another, 'Acrobats in a Park', 'though I laid the story in my home town, I was writing about Europeans, acrobats, adultery, and the Roman Catholic Church ..., in all of which I was equally ignorant' (Welty, 1983, p. 93). Yet Welty says that even in these attempts to write about what she thought should be written about, her own concerns were at work, slowly coming into focus.

I must have seen "Acrobats in a Park" at the time I wrote the story as exotic, free of any experience as I knew it. And yet in the simplest way it isn't unrelated. The acrobats ... were a *family* ... Writing about the family act, I was writing about the family itself, its strength as a unit, testing its frailty under stress. I treated it in an artificial and oddly formal way ... But ... I've been writing about the structure of the family in stories and novels ever since (Welty, 1983, p. 94).

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<sup>6</sup> She quotes for her reader's amusement the first sentence of this story: "Monsieur Boule inserted a delicate dagger into Mademoiselle's left side and departed with a poised immediacy" (Welty, 1983, p. 93).

In a memorial essay for Richard Wright, Baldwin describes a kind of conflict-ridden debt to his fellow novelist, 'I had used his work as a kind of springboard into my own. His work was a road-block in my road, the sphinx ... whose riddles I had to answer before I could become myself' (Baldwin, 1991, p. 277). Perhaps the obvious thing to say is that phases of absorbing and imitating other writers' work are unlikely to be merely imitative.<sup>7</sup> These writers, in taking up assorted models, seem to have leapt across fairly big gaps in culture, history and experience. To the extent that they found ways to adopt distant writers' practices, within their own quite different contexts, it seems this would allow them to experience something new in their own writing – possibly something awkward and unpromising – but nonetheless it would be a vehicle for changing and assessing their own modes of expression.

These writers, in remembering their childhood reading, record what I take to be a number of extraordinary things happening rather unobtrusively. In handling, looking at and learning to read books, they found objects in which new experiences and meanings could unfold. The experiences were complex: sensory, affective and cognitive all at once. Books were powerful, treasured objects, especially for children living in difficult circumstances. The stories and poetry held in books could offer beautiful, magical, exciting escapes, but they also helped these children imagine their own reality differently. The paths of formal and informal education exposed them to a great miscellany of works that did not meet them 'where they lived', but which seem often to have been appreciated for that reason. The reading was evidence that there was a much wider world, and it put them into intimate contact with culturally celebrated objects—they did not need to be members of a cultural elite to take these works directly into their own experience. Reading further gave them models of writing to learn from. They absorbed and closely copied these models, but also adapted them, assessed and challenged them, and learned from them in growing into their own lives as writers.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Harold Bloom's 1973 argument concerning 'the anxiety of influence' is relevant here. The influence of predecessor writers' on these youthful writers is at least to some degree *not* marked by anxiety. These children and young adults learning to read and write seem in part simply eager to try out what they are absorbing as readers, with little concern for originality and potential overcoming of rivals.

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