

Margaret Meek

An obituary

Judith Graham

Margaret Meek, who died on 4 May 2020, was well-known to teachers and scholars for her books and other writing on reading – that is on literacy but also, and importantly, on the books that children read, the role of narrative, the process of reading itself and the control of literacy by government.

Her output was phenomenal. From her earliest days as a secondary school teacher and well into her seventies, she never lost her interest in literacy. She authored five books herself, co-authored another, edited and co-edited several others, wrote many chapters for others' books, and contributed countless articles, reviews and commentaries to journals. She lectured all over the world, and many journals reprinted these lectures for wider audiences.

Her first lecture, in 1954, to members of the London Association of the Teachers of English, argued for a wider range of examination texts to be offered and for more credit to be given to personal responses to reading. She also made an early case for all syllabi to take cultural diversity in society into account.

At this point in her life, she was undertaking serious reading in two different fields. Firstly, she was reading eminent philosophers, psychologists and writers (Langer, Hardy, Harding, Britton, Polyani, Kelly, Piaget, Bruner, Vygotsky and Winnicott). All of these and others, she brought together in *The Cool Web*, her first (co-edited) book (1977). The thinking of these scholars informed her work for the rest of her life and *The Cool Web* has been influencing others ever since. Secondly, she was reading books written for children. As a teacher, she was a close observer of her pupils and wanted to find books that would engage them more significantly than the set authors of the time (mostly male, mostly white, mostly nineteenth century). She started sending reviews to *The School Librarian*, eventually becoming their reviews editor. She continued to review children's books for the rest of her life, particularly focusing on language (William Mayne's language, she felt, was 'almost Keatsian in its richness'), on the sin of stereotypical characters and on the importance of books for teenagers that mirrored the target readers' rites of passage.

It was not only novels she examined. She reviewed poetry and was for many years a judge for the Signal Poetry Award, prefacing her comments with wise words about poetry in general. She also became extremely captivated by picture books, writing perhaps her most loved title, *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn* (1988) that had picture books at its heart. Towards the end of her career, she was convinced that we needed to know about how it was that children learned or failed to learn from information books and she wrote several short

pieces, including *Information and Book Learning* (1996) that explored this area, using her observations in classrooms as a basis. In one memorable article (1998), written when she was over seventy, she observes herself as she unravels how she learned about phylloxera by reading a book on the great wine blight which devastated French vineyards at the end of the nineteenth century. She shares her experience of the reading and illuminates how she 'came to know' in ways that she believed could not be all that different for children.

She also started to unpick her own reading process in several reviews. She might take an academic book she really liked and document how she anticipated developments, tolerated uncertainty, filled gaps, and appreciated coherence. She might also review, in the same meticulous way, a book she did not care for, probably (certainly in one known case) leaving the author chastened. But her reviews – often very long – always took the writer's work seriously.

Her major books on literacy – starting with *Learning to Read* (1982), continuing with *Achieving Literacy* (1983) and ending with *On Being Literate* (1991), were all well received and are still in print and influential. These three books had slightly different audiences in mind: the first was addressed to parents; the second to teachers; and the third to everybody but, as it was her most political book, she must have hoped that political figures (whose ignorance of the real situation in classrooms was breath-taking) might encounter it too. In fact, all three books have had a very wide impact throughout education.

Margaret was right at the centre of the debate surrounding the teaching of reading which raged (not too strong a word) throughout the 1980s and 1990s. She hated the 'tyranny' of government directives and wrote several articles which were remarkably restrained and non-defensive in the circumstances. Her strategy to deal with uninformed government interference and the idiocy that was making headlines in the press of the time about the results (later discredited) of research was four-fold.

Firstly, she took a historical approach, recognising that widespread anxiety about literacy standards always arose when society, its technologies and literacy changed. From her frequent visits to classrooms, she observed that conventional reading was being supplemented in all sorts of new ways.

Secondly, she avoided entering the debate about reading methods, knowing perfectly well that some children learned without a teacher whilst others learned despite a 'method'. For Margaret there were vastly more important facets to becoming a reader than 'phonics', which she always believed was learned through writing, altogether a slower process where there is time to think about what makes a difference. She was not keen on reading schemes either which could not, she believed, teach the literary excitements of 'real' books. ('Real' was not a term Margaret often used. She might say a text such as Pat Hutchins' *Rosie's Walk*, which she explored so thoughtfully in *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn* (1988), was polysemic.)

Thirdly, she was always aware of how easily teachers were disheartened by the

unthinking tirades that issued from high places. She knew that teachers were 'sick of opening the newspapers and finding someone saying how awful I am' (1987, p3). She let them know that she was on their side.

Lastly, she wanted to reassure those teachers that they were where the evidence lay as far as children's literacy was concerned. She had always applauded those case studies which were based on close observation. She was a great supporter of the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE)'s *Primary Language Record*, an observation-based way of recording progress which moved right away from the reductive testing that government policies promoted. She noted, as a curious irony, that the *PLR*, 'an instrument so skilfully adapted to understanding children's language development, has comparatively little official acknowledgement in its country of origin' (1998). She was probably not really surprised.

There is a great deal more to say about Margaret. I close with words from Margaret's children, from the obituary they wrote this year in *The Parish Paper of All Saints Church*, the church where Margaret worshipped when she lived in London and where, it is expected, a memorial service will be held in due course. 'After her move to Cambridge', they wrote, 'she was visited by academic pilgrims on their visits to the grandee of the teaching of reading'.

'Pilgrims', 'grandee' – the words are not inappropriate.

References

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Judith Graham was initially Margaret's student and later her colleague in the English department at the Institute of Education, London. She was also one of the group of four teachers who worked with Margaret looking at adolescent struggling readers which was recounted in *Achieving Literacy*. Judith Graham has written 'Margaret Meek – A Literate Life', her appreciation of Margaret Meek's professional life and work and a comprehensive survey of Meek's published writing, which will be published as an e-book by *FORUM*.