

An Interview with Margaret Turner

Margaret Turner has been writing graded readers for Macmillan Education since the mid-nineteen-seventies. She has written over forty-four graded readers. Margaret, what got you into writing graded readers?

I was working in the Arabian Gulf and one of my colleagues had started writing for what was then Heinemann and they were scouting in the gulf for more authors and they suggested that I should try. And this was in the days of John Milne, the original editor.

And why do you feel now that you've written so many readers that they are very important to English teaching and English language learning?

For a variety of reasons. I think, first of all, literature is important, that it teaches us about what our lives are like and I think if we are learning a language with a different culture from our own, it's always important to find out something about that culture and realise that not only is it different but it's very very much like our own lives. I think this is something I would really like to stress that, if you are doing a Jane Austen or a Dickens, we shouldn't fall into the trap of thinking, 'this was the olden times, this was how they used to do it then.' The characters are the same, people are like that today.

You mean, what people feel and did then are the same things that they feel and do now?

Yes, yes, within the context of their own century, yes, and I think that is important.

And in terms of the characters and the stories, what kind of stories do you feel make a good reader?

Well you have to have one with a good storyline that's clear, and with good strong characters and also well written. I mean, I think the original book should be good English. Sometimes, some readers are not necessarily based on good originals.

You mean if the original book is not good then the reader cannot be good either?

It doesn't necessarily follow cause sometimes a poor book will make a good film and therefore, you know, a poorish book might make a good reader. But the re-writer has to be aware that there may – I mean this sounds arrogant – but there may be mistakes in the original book that have to be corrected because if you don't correct them, people will pick them up and accuse you of getting it wrong and the only writer who I can give a hundred percent to is Jane Austen because if she says 'a ball took place on the twenty-fourth of November and it was a Tuesday' and you look it up in *Whitaker*¹, it was a Tuesday. But other people tend to be a little bit vague about detail.

So you feel that accuracy with detail is very very important?

Very very important, and this happens quite often with modern readers, modern novels and if, as I say, if the re-writer doesn't find them and point them out, then the teachers will and they will accuse the re-writer of making mistakes.

And in terms of the students, how do you feel that the graded readers help them to improve their English? How important are they in terms of learning English?

Well it helps them to work by themselves. I mean, the teacher can read them in the class, they can do various things together, but basically reading is an individual accomplishment and it teaches them that they can use the skills they've learned in reading their own language – they can take those over into English, and they can read about interesting events, interesting things, widen their knowledge and it is essential that the re-write is written in really good English. There should be no attempt to somehow write a kind of 're-writer's English', which sometimes happens, I think. What you write should always be in English rhythms and if a re-write is read aloud or if it's on a CD, it should sound like English, not some sort of mixed-up language that doesn't really exist. And you read for pleasure. It's a case of not always studying the grammar and so forth but if you have it in your head, you can apply it and see how it's used in connected prose.

And when you're approaching writing a reader, what motivates you in terms of the approach?

Dr Johnson² said about himself, that no man but a blockhead writes for anything but money. But one does enjoy doing the re-writes; otherwise it would be impossible to do them. It's a challenge, each one is completely different and you have to apply yourself in a different way.

Have you ever given up on a reader? Have you ever found it too difficult to re-write?

In the middle of most of them, I think I can't do it. This is the one I can't do. Then I sort of give myself a kick and I go on and do it. Oh yes, there was always a point where you feel this is impossible.

Which was the most difficult one you've ever done?

They're difficult in different ways, I think. I think *David Copperfield* was actually because the storyline is not particularly exciting. It doesn't work itself up to a climax as most of the other Dickens do. It's a sort of casual life story of a rather casual young man. It was half-Dickens himself and I think it was quite difficult to get that over.

And what one have you most enjoyed writing would you say?

Well I don't like, I mean, they're all different. You can't really say that. I don't like making lists about things. Some of them are a greater challenge than others. Some of them are fairly straightforward. But on the whole I think you treat every one completely different.

And which genres do you prefer do you prefer to do? Do you prefer classics or moderns?

Again, I don't particularly mind. I like doing the classical writers because on the whole they write better. But I've got no objection to doing modern ones. I mean it's the modern writers that object themselves, I'm afraid, sometimes.

And how do you work within the limited word number? As we know, each level has a certain level of acceptable words. And how do you find that? How do you deal with that?

Well I sort of, by this time I... I sort of know by instinct and I know what I can do more or less, or what I can't do. And you work to the level and you know, it can be adjusted later. I mean, the word lists are very sort of malleable really; you can change them about quite a lot. So you just adapt yourself to what you're doing at a particular time I think.

And how do you decide which words to put in the glossary at the end of the books?

I'm not a hundred percent happy about glossaries really, because if you have a word with a little mark on it, it means, to the reader, 'Oh I stop here and I look up this word'. Whereas, if you're writing it properly, if it's a good re-write, you go to the next sentence, you'll find the answer. You will find that, in most cases, the new word has been gently introduced and you can deduce it. And that kind of deduction is very very important to reading. So I'm not too happy about glossaries, they can, they should, only be used for very difficult words that you can't make clear in any other way.

So you're writing *Hamlet* as your next story and what do you think the difficulties will be with that?

Well the obvious difficulty is that with Shakespeare, the language is the play, so if you're changing the language you're changing the play in many ways. And the best you can do is to try to understand what Shakespeare was trying to say and attempt to put it in words that wouldn't shame you or him by being so odd. It is difficult, I've always wanted to do a Shakespeare and I'm finding it very very interesting...But it is difficult of course. But you know the language is the essence of Shakespeare so this makes it almost impossible in many ways. But worth attempting all the same.

And how useful do you think that Shakespeare will be for the students to learn, to read and study?

I don't think 'useful' is the correct word. I think... I'm afraid that foreign language learners know a good deal more about English literature than English children do. At this moment, Shakespeare is being dropped in many cases from the National Curriculum or taught in a very absurd way with little snippets from the play. This is not necessary. Children can still appreciate Shakespeare whether it's as a native speaker or a non-native speaker because he said such important things and they're always relevant to the present day. I recently went to a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* at the Globe and most of the audience was made up of school children and they were absolutely wrapped by the whole thing. They followed it very very carefully and reacted in the right ways to everything and it was very gratifying to see that children can understand Shakespeare and I think, most of the time, especially with native speakers, English teachers think 'Oh, they can't understand Shakespeare' because they can't understand it or can't be bothered to understand it themselves and I think the standard of knowledge in non-native speakers is probably higher and they

know the name, they want to know about it, there have been films of various things – *Shakespeare in Love* and so forth, and everybody should know about Shakespeare. I mean they think they do, but they don't, but it's very important they should.

And finally the audio element of the readers, how important do you feel that the audio CDs are?

Well, they're useful in the sense that you have a native speaker reading it, so if there's any problem with the student's own teacher's pronunciation, that can be ironed out. For possibly a weaker student, they can follow the sound and look at the text at the same time. But I mean, I think that is taking things one step away from what we want to do. They're useful but I think the students reading by themselves is much better. You know, if they can sit down and sort of introduce themselves to a book and engage themselves in a story, I think that is what we're really aiming at.

And just in general, what are your favourite books and what do you like reading?

I read everything and anything.

What are you reading at the moment?

I usually read about four books at the same time. I've just finished a book on Iraq. I've just finished a travel book called *The Road to Oxiana*. I'm reading a book of family history about the Fitzwilliams and Wentworth Woodhouse. And I'm also re-reading for the tenth time, a Raymond Chandler thriller.

Thank you very much for your time Margaret. It's been lovely to speak to you.

¹ *Whitaker's Almanack* is a reference book and a source of information for many writers.

² Dr Samuel Johnson was a famous eighteenth-century writer and literary figure.