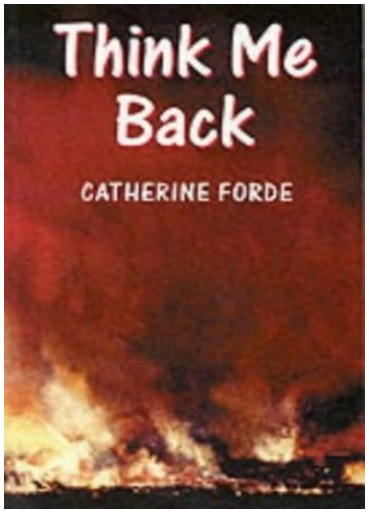
“Miss, is this a real book?”

By Maureen Farrell



The title of this article is taken from a conversation that took place in an English classroom in a school in the east end of Glasgow a few years ago. The context was that the S1 class had been reading the novel, *Think Me Back* (Forde, 2001). The novel is a supernatural mystery based on the Clydebank Blitz and the reason the question was asked was that the young man concerned had never before read a book that was set in a place near where he lived or where some of the characters spoke the same way he did. Consequently he believed that the teacher might have perpetrated an elaborate fraud in order to get him to ‘engage with a book’. Sadly this experience, even today, is not an isolated one. Large numbers of adult Scots have emerged from school believing that literature was not written by or about people like them. Some of our well-known and respected authors, such as Theresa Breslin and Andrew O’Hagan have spoken and written about this topic and about the impact this had on their motivation to write.

According to important educational documents and initiatives, the situation described above really should have been quite unusual since all recent documents about the teaching of English in Scotland have strongly advocated the use of Scottish Literature in the classroom. In 1976 the Scottish Education Department’s Central Committee on English, stated that, ‘Scottish Literature should be an essential ingredient […] throughout primary and secondary education.’ And again, the 1981 Scottish Consultative Council for the Curriculum (SCCC) Primary Language Arts document stated that: ‘the child’s Scottish voice with its idioms and dialect words must be worthy of respect.’ By 1991 and the publication of the English Language 5–14 document the following advice was being given:

> Pupils should be allowed to use their mother tongue throughout the school. Given that language and identity are inextricably linked, it is often through literature in the Scots language that culture is transmitted … Scottish writing and writing about Scotland should permeate the curriculum and be introduced from an early stage, taking its place beside English literature. The objective of this is to value and examine critically the ideas, beliefs and emotions of Scottish writers, and to set them against the different insights and perspectives of writers from other places and other times. Scottish texts should be actively sought and used in classrooms … Teachers should help pupils to recognize themselves, and be able to look at themselves as Scots in a detached and self-aware manner.[1]

With such clear and direct advice over at least thirty years, why should my young first-year pupil have been so surprised at encountering and studying a Scottish young adult novel? The answer is simple: despite these clear directives, Scottish language, literature and culture does not permeate the curriculum and in some cases only makes an appearance twice a year at Burns' Day or St Andrew's Day. If they are lucky, some pupils experience a 'Scottish week'. Which leads one to wonder what they experience the rest of the year? Sadly, the recognition and impact of a diet of mainly English literature on pupils' sense of identity is relatively unexamined.

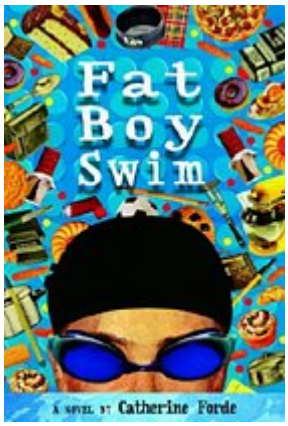
The latest curriculum development initiative, *A Curriculum for Excellence: Purpose and Principles for the Curriculum 3-18* (2004) continues this positive advocacy for Scots language, literature and culture commenting that the curriculum:

> Provid(es) a locus for valuing and building upon the languages that children bring to school. The Language and Literature of Scotland are valuable sources of learning about culture, identity and language.[2]

Given the Establishment's seemingly strong support for Scottish Literature in the curriculum, it is worth considering more precisely what the benefits are for pupils and teachers and even for the wider Scottish community in the use of Scottish texts in schools.

Children learn to read their culture right from the start of their education, and discover quickly how reading overlaps with their lives. Literature is central to this development, but if the only texts they have access to do not include Scottish

material then this overlap may not occur. Young Scottish readers need to be aware of texts' absences; the ideas or assumptions they take for granted and therefore do not explicitly assert. If the only literature that is available is that which is labelled English, rather even than British, then this becomes even more important. Consider the popular series books of the 1950s and 1960s: Elinor M Brent-Dyer's *Chalet School* series (Brent-Dyer, 1925–1970), Enid Blyton's prodigious oeuvre or any of the so-called 'classic' children's books such as *Swallows and Amazons* (Ransome, 1930) or *The Secret Garden* (Hodgson-Burnett, 1911). Readers would be hard pressed to identify any but token Scottish characters and any that do exist seem only to confirm the stereotypical depiction. The question must be asked whether any characters from minority groups in these books, such as the Scots, only achieve success by giving up their distinctiveness and adopting the values and lifestyles of the mainstream society, or whether they manage to succeed while keeping sight of, and remaining true to their heritage? Do the Scottish characters solve their own problems and make their own decisions or are they helped by people from the mainstream? If the Scottish voice is absent or subordinate then there is no likelihood of change or influence with the 'other' and change is all one-sided: a form of colonisation.



It is in the stories written for and told to children that a culture confirms and reproduces itself. In order to understand the way a culture envisions itself we need look no further than the stories adults tell and re-tell their children. Literary reading begins where the reader is and goes on from there. Unless the reader finds him or herself in a book they will have a hard time finding anyone else. Children and young people are in the process of learning to become members of the adult community they have been born into. To join that community they must learn its values—become the kind of people who can live within it by accepting and negotiating its particular visions of what kind of people they should be. To be shaped by one's culture is merely to be human, and Children's Literature is inevitably part of that which does the shaping.

In turn, children's fiction, far from comprising a mere afterthought in Scotland's creative psyche, plays a fundamental role in the shaping of that collectively imagined space known as Scottish Literature and the culture it seeks to represent. If it is true that in some sense children and young people become what

they read about, then the narratives that they are exposed to can play an important part in making them who they believe themselves to be. In offering subject positions, fictional texts for children work to construct their readers' subjectivity. They do this by encouraging real readers to become implied readers, to identify with specific characters and points of view through which a text is focalised. Readers can therefore be manipulated; inexperienced readers perhaps more than most. Knowing how to read against a text therefore can become a significant skill. That makes it all the more important in terms of the existence of Scottish culture, that there should be an identifiable Scottish Literature in which Scottish children are represented and where readers can both recognise and question the images, points of view, experiences and characters presented.

If the children's books from Scotland reveal significant elements of the national character, or illustrate the ways that Scottish Literature constructs recognisable views of reality for their home audience, then these distinctions will only become apparent if the books are explored against books of different national literatures, examining the way in which they take up similar themes, evaluate similar characters or use the same narrative styles. What distinguishes one culture from another is the unique way of structuring common elements or experiences. The values presented in children's and young adults' books are bound to have an effect on them. They can effectively amount to a hidden curriculum, offering a view of the world that readers may absorb without even realising it.

There are implications then for Scottish Literature if the protagonists are clearly distinctive, atypical because of their racial identity and the racial assumptions of their authors. Some texts may incline towards essentialism, assuming that there is something identifiable as a Scottish character shared by all members of the group. Other texts that accurately reflect national and ethnic differences rooted in cultural expression, tend to reveal the ongoing process of what cultural theorists call hybridisation.[3] This is the process by which the values and attitudes of minority groups and members of the dominant group are influenced and changed by their dealings with one another. It is perhaps for this reason more than any other that the case for Scottish Literature must be argued, and also that its hitherto absence, or at the very least, low profile in schools, must be deplored.

As novels become more self-aware, they introduce a subtle commentary on problems of identity and development. The range of recent Scottish children's

fiction includes experiments with new narrative strategies and linguistic inventiveness, for example, Matthew Fitt's and James Robertson's Scots translations of *The Twits*, *George's Marvellous Medicine* and *The Fantastic Mr Fox – The Eejits*, *Geordie's Mingin Medicine* and *The Sleekit Mr Tod* – and the hugely successful graphic novel version of *Kidnapped*, *Kidnappit*. (For additional texts see Jim Alison's article also in this issue of *The Bottle Imp*.) Contemporary Scottish children's fiction insists on the writer's right to reclaim and reshape language to speak for those previously neglected. No longer does the Scottish child have to be 'diglossic' and have one language for school and school literature and another language for home and only sparse literature available in the language of home. New visions of Scotland can be expressed in vibrant modern language that is, nonetheless, distinctively Scottish. Contemporary Scottish literature is dynamic and adventurous and distinguished by its willingness to see an inclusive rather than an exclusive variety of Scotlands.

Nations and societies are in a perpetual process of change—as are children and young people—and books can provide imaginative resources from which perceptions of what is typical in society can be constructed. At the opposite end of the spectrum from extreme jingoism lies the enveloping, but intangible, mood of localised atmosphere, an aspect that is a feature in almost all Scottish Literature whether for children or adults. In Scottish books, young readers can recognise a familiar landscape, hear familiar voices and language; they encounter themselves *as* themselves and not as the voice of the marginal or repressed 'other' in English Children's Literature. The value of the local, the familial and the domestic has never been underestimated within Scottish Literature and, indeed, these elements have often formed key preoccupations for Scottish writers. In books for children and young people these concepts are frequently central to the story, even more than in adult literature. It has been argued by some that Scottish Literature is a literature that has, by and large, resisted simplified notions of colonialism in favour of a much more dynamic, intelligent and even humorous engagement with larger linguistic, artistic and political forces; the canon is not 'closed'. It will inevitably be open to innovation brought about by natural cultural development, processes which are, necessarily, powerfully reflected in the national literature. Even then the dual nature of

Scottish Literature is likely to rear its head. For the texts in question are both Scottish *and* British—and therein lies part of the continuing challenge for Scotland's Literature.

Identity clearly plays a part in responding to texts—but, institutionally, Scottish Literature has not, and is not actively being promoted solely for this purpose. Yet, the highly charged 'debate' about the use of compulsory Scottish texts in the next generation of national qualifications in English continues to rage, with fervent advocates on both sides of the divide. With the contradictions between educational discourse and classroom practice, education might, as a consequence, be considered to have failed in its crucial role as disseminator of Scottish history, literature and culture, failing to tell us of our history and our achievements (or, indeed, confronting us with our failings). Even some of our Scottish universities, until comparatively recently, virtually ignored Scottish Literature, leaving generations of teachers ill-equipped to introduce children to the local and national writers in whom they might see themselves and their society validated by, or refracted through, a tradition.

Both educational discourse and common sense tells us that it is reasonable to expect Scottish literature to form a significant part of the Scottish school curriculum and for Scotland's pupils to have access to it. The recently published Goring Report (2010) calls literature 'one of Scotland's finest indigenous arts', going on to say that 'a thriving literary culture is an important element in the well-being of the nation'. The report also suggests that:

> Education is arguably the single most important element in nurturing and sustaining an intelligent and avid readership for Scottish Literature (and indeed all literature) … Reading for pleasure is every pupil's right, giving them an insight to their cultural heritage, allowing them to hear voices from their own background—or different—who convey Scotland's distinctive history, outlook and values.[4]

Scotland is in the middle of one of its greatest periods of literary and cultural achievement. But in order to appreciate it we need to provide new directions, new curricula and re-enthused teaching at all levels of education. By this strategy we will give new generations the real kind of confidence to believe that their accents, their dialects, their varieties of English and their sheer imaginative sense of having their own fit place in Britain and in Europe are valid and unique. Children

and young people living in all parts of Scotland have the right to require their teachers to be able to tell them who their region's most able writers are, and to be allowed to explore, question and identify with those writers' views of their own country and society in their own reading. If we manage to achieve that, then the question of whether a Scottish text is a 'real' book should never arise again for pupils.

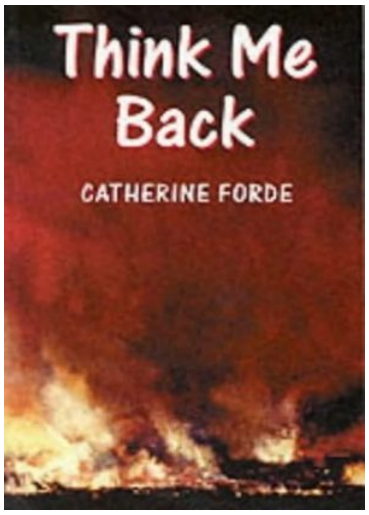
References & Further Information

[1] SOED (1991) *National Guidelines 5–14: English Language*. Edinburgh, HMSO.

[2] Scottish Executive (2004) *A Curriculum for Excellence*. Edinburgh, Crown copyright.

[3] Nodelman, P. and M. Reimer (2003) *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, Boston, Allyn and Bacon.

[4] Goring, R. (2010) *Literature Working Group Policy*. Edinburgh, Crown.



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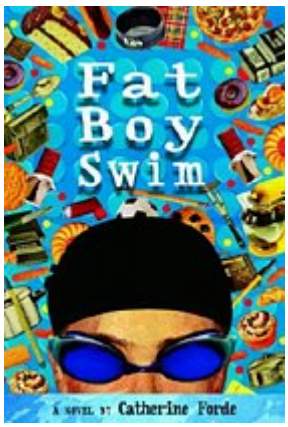

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