

Reading: 'The Heart of English'

An Interview

This extract from Anne Fairhall's interview with me in the NATE EnglishDramaMedia Magazine, February 2011, begins with some reflections on leaving teaching to become a full-time writer, and my first steps towards writing for teenagers when there was little precedent for such writing.

AF: Did you hanker after going back into teaching?

AC: I enjoyed teaching immensely but I didn't miss the bureaucracy. When I left, it was a huge risk because I got married at the same time, and I wasn't publishing enough to keep us. I was producing a good deal of journalism and editing Topliners for Macmillan Education. Topliners was a paperback series of original novels, which I'd started because I was arguing publicly about the need for that kind of book for the kids I was teaching. I was founding editor of the list and stayed with it for 15 years. In that time the commercial publishers saw there was a market – which they'd said there wasn't when I was touting the idea – and started publishing that kind of book themselves, paying better royalties than I could get from Macmillan. So I knew that was the end of that.

It was then that I had an experience I've heard another writer

talk about. Ivan Southall, the Australian writer, tells a similar story about himself. He'd produced a lot of Biggles-type books, based on his experience as a flying officer in the war. He got up one morning and couldn't write another word of his next book. He realized he was totally bored by it, so he got worried and made himself write down the first words that came into his head. That became the first literary book he wrote – the first of 'his' books, so to speak.

Exactly the same thing happened to me. I'd written plays, I'd written two books which were like Topliners but which Heinemann had published, I'd edited anthologies – all for kids like the ones I'd taught. But by this time I was seven years away from full-time teaching and I was no longer in contact with them. I got up one morning (it was 1975, a lovely summer), sat down to work on a book I'd contracted – and couldn't write a word. Total panic. I just could not do it. Eight days went by. In desperation I made myself sit in a chair I didn't normally sit in; I made myself take a pencil and pad – I'd normally typed – and write down the first words that came into my head and go on until I told myself to stop (like an irate teacher!). I went on for an hour and twenty minutes. (I wrote the times down.) I was writing about two boys talking and I had no notion what they were talking about or why. So I stopped – and still nothing happened. After a few days I thought I'd better go on with it – and I started writing a scene in which the central character in the book was masturbating. And as I started writing it (it was expressionist – it was all there), I began to shake, felt very weak, thought *What on earth am I doing?* When I'd finished it, I put the pencil down and thought I couldn't go on with it, there must be something wrong with me.

I went downstairs. In those days my wife, Nancy, was still working in the house, before she moved into an office of her

own. She looked at me and said, ‘What on earth is the matter? You’re as white as a sheet.’ I said, ‘I’ve just written a scene I can’t believe I’ve written. There must be something wrong with me, I’ve got to stop.’ She looked at me; she knew I was doing something different but didn’t know what – I wouldn’t tell her. She knew I was worried, that I was in trouble, but she didn’t know why. She said, ‘I think you’d better tell me what you’re doing.’ And I said, ‘I’ve just written a scene in which a boy masturbates.’ I expected her to be shocked and horrified, but she said, ‘You *will* finish this book’. If she hadn’t said that, I would have stopped. As it was it took me three months to work out what I thought was happening – what was going on between the boys. What the damned book was about! I thought I had it, and wrote what turned out to be the second third of the book before I realized I still didn’t know and stopped again. I was writing from beginning to end, as I always do, but I didn’t know what was going on; each time I thought I did I realised I didn’t, the book was doing something else.

After the last third I understood exactly what was going on, and then rewrote the book twice more to get it right. And that’s what always happens – that’s exactly the pattern I still follow, even now. I said to Nancy, ‘No one will publish this book. Not only does it have masturbation, there’s an explicit sex scene between a boy and a girl.’ Written in three different ways, you have to read the passage three times. No one had ever published something like that for young readers. I finished it [*Breaktime*] in 1977.

I sent it to Heinemann, who published me at the time, but they turned it down within two weeks. I remember the letter distinctly – it said, ‘We do not know what the boys are talking about.’ I was an editor myself and knew what that meant: they needed a reason

for turning the book down but didn't want to give the real reason, which was the sex of course. And so I sent it to Bodley Head for two reasons: I admired their list tremendously and I knew the editors, Judy Taylor and Margaret Clark. Also, because of the arguments some of us had been putting forward, Bodley Head had started a separate part of their list called 'New Adult Books' to separate them from the children's list. So I sent it to them, and forty-eight hours later – the only time this has ever happened to me – Judy Taylor rang and said, 'We want to publish your book.' And I thought, 'My God . . . I know what they're going to say . . . they're going to say "If . . ."' Judy Taylor said that Margaret Clark would be in touch with me and she was, next day, having read the book (no publisher ever does this so quickly now) and said 'I'd like to meet you, come up and have dinner.' On the way to Paddington I thought 'I know what she's going to say. "We'll do it but we want you to take out the masturbation scene"'. And I thought, 'What am I going to say?' I knew that if I agreed, I'd never respect myself again. I knew I'd have to say 'No'.

Usually at meals with publishers you have to wait until coffee before you talk business. I was so nervous by the time we got into the restaurant – which was very noisy – I thought, 'I'm not waiting until coffee', so we ordered and I said to Margaret, 'I know what you're going to say, and the answer's No.' She said, 'Oh? – What am I going to say?' I said, 'You're going to say you'll publish it if I take out the masturbation scene.' She said, 'No – I think that's very good, I don't want you to take it out. I have two things I want to ask you to do.' I said, 'Oh, what are they?' She said, 'Well in the masturbation scene it ends with the boy describing the smell – I want you to take that sentence out.' I said 'Why that one sentence?' She said. 'It's very strange, I don't know why, but people react very oddly to indications of smell. If

you leave it in, we'll lose fifty percent of the sales.' I said, 'What's the other thing?' She said, 'The book begins "'Literature is crap,' said Morgan.'" I want you to move it onto the second page.' I said, 'That's ridiculous. You want me to write a new opening so that I can move one line onto the second page! Why?' She said, 'Librarians [who were the main buyers of young people's books then] are very interesting . . . They can't read all the books, they haven't got time. So what they do is look at the first page, they look at the back and flip through, and then if it's OK they buy it. But if they see the word "crap" on the first page we'll lose fifty percent of sales. If the word is on the second page, they either won't mind or they won't notice.'

So I did as she asked. The only thing I regret is taking the smell out – I should have kept it in. But at that time she was right. Margaret was an extraordinary editor, and you know what – she was tutored by Jim Osborn, who taught me English too! We only discovered this when she read *Dance on My Grave* in which he's actually named and there's a portrait of him. When I sent her the book, she rang me up and said, 'Aidan, this teacher Jim Osborn, is that his real name?' I said, 'Yes, yes it is.' She said, 'I was tutored by Jim Osborn in Darlington to get into Oxford – is he the same man?' So that was extraordinary – we understood exactly how each other was thinking because of Jim – think of that. She was a wonderful editor.

This was 1978? Since the turn of this century the media have made a big issue of 'crossover fiction' as though it were brand new – which it isn't of course.

It's a marketing invention. It doesn't exist. There are no poetics to it. Leon Garfield, who also had a wide reader-ship, used to try

and get around whether it was a children's book or not by reverting to what he said was the Victorian term – which was 'family books'. So he used to suggest he didn't write only for children but for families.

But what does interest me, and I'm busy with now, is the confusion that exists between what I call youth novels and children's books – as though they are part of the same thing but just happen to have different ages of readership. I don't believe that. A lot has been written about what makes a children's book a children's book, but there has been no attempt to write the poetics of 'youth literature', if such a thing exists. I think it does, perhaps more in the sense of it being potential rather than actual. So I'm writing a book in which I'm trying to identify what the poetics of youth literature is. And I find it a fascinating topic because each of the six books which I've written as youth novels could have been written as adult books – but they're not. So what is it that makes them not 'adult' but something else? And they're certainly not children's books. I know what it is, so far as my own books are concerned. I want to try and articulate what I think it is and where I can find that in other novels.

For instance, it seemed to me an obvious idea that there are books which were written by people when they were teenagers, and which have become classics. One of them is Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*, which was written when she was eighteen. Even more interesting is Raymond Radiguet, the French author who wrote *The Devil in the Flesh* when he was only sixteen – classically famous in France, filmed several times, it's an extraordinary book. The question is, Given that they were teenagers, can you identify elements that contribute to a poetics and that are determined by the fact that the authors happened to be in their teens? I decided that the only way to answer that was

by taking a novel which is thought to be totally of ‘youth’ – the central character is a youth and the narration doesn’t stray outside that conception – which was written by an adult and compare it with one of the novels written by a teenager. Of course *Catcher in the Rye* is the obvious example. Salinger was thirty-six when he finished it. When you compare Sagan’s novel with *Catcher*, it’s absolutely fascinating what you find. Even more so with Radiguet. There are other examples. Mary Shelley was only eighteen when she wrote *Frankenstein*. There are one or two others, including Anne Frank’s *Diary* – she was thirteen to fifteen when she wrote it.

So that’s occupying me a lot at the moment – it’s going to take me a long time to do it.

Current Writing: ‘Flash Fiction’

In the next extract Aidan talks about his recent interest in ‘flash fiction’ and his shortly to be published collection of short stories The Kissing Game.

I think The Kissing Game is fairly unusual – a nicely shaped collection of flash fictions and short stories, specifically for a young adult readership and by a single author.

Thinking of it as a teacher, one of the reasons I was interested in flash fictions – it’s a very modern form – is that it fits a Blackberry, an iPhone, an iPad and an e-book reader. A lot of contemporary authors – people like Italo Calvino – have been saying for ages that the novel, although it’s not dead, needs refreshment – it needs new energy. We’re producing this stuff,

which – I’m sorry to say this – is very much encouraged by creative writing schools, masses of it coming out: and it’s as dead as a doornail. It’s all right, and lots of people read it, but it’s not where literature is any more. Flash fiction is a very interesting form aesthetically. If I was teaching, it’s exactly what teenage kids write: all they need is some models. A friend said to me, ‘Have you noticed that teachers set kids stories to write, and give them the hardest form of all, the short story? And most of them don’t write a short story at all, they write the first chapter of a novel: the short story is incredibly difficult.’

Flash fiction is a very odd form – it is and it is not a short story, interesting because it’s a cell. It’s of itself and not just an episode belonging to something else. It’s a miniature. And you can not only write it quickly but, because it is less than a thousand words long, you can see it whole on a page, which means you can design it better – you can see what you’ve done.

It’s more akin to poetry in that way.

Yes. What’s interesting is that flash fiction crosses various boundaries. Many Americans have written about what they call the aesthetics of the form. They say it’s not a genre because you can have a memory, a piece of description, a piece of journalism, a report, a letter, you can have what-ever you like, but it must be less than a thousand words, roughly. And also it has to have a shape – it can’t just be the beginning or ending of something else. I put together a collection of flash fictions, though some of the authors at the time of writing, Hemingway, Kafka, for example, hadn’t thought of them like that. But no educational publisher would touch it – they just couldn’t understand why it was exactly what teachers and teenage students need.

And yet teachers would love it for the same reason that many find they love to teach poetry – because poetry is classroom-shaped. Did the concept of flash fictions arise through writing for the internet?

No. It came out of American magazines during the last thirty years or so. There are now hundreds of them on the internet, free! Some are dreadful of course, but that's true of all writing. My first understanding of it came from a particular anthology, in which the stories were not called flash fictions; they were first called 'short shorts' – two thousand-word stories. It was an anthology in which a number of the contributing writers explained what they thought they had done. Three anthologies like that were published in the USA and then one called 'flash fiction', in which the editors said that what they were discovering was a form within a form which was less than a thousand words, which works in a similar way to short shorts but has more rigour to it, a difference. And there are a few writers in America who are consciously producing it, who think of themselves as flash fiction writers [. . .]

Italo Calvino, in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* – which was published about 1998, I think – says that in the future – the millennium we're in now – the novel will be composed of very short passages in very long books. What then happened, which he couldn't have predicted at that time, was the way the mobile phone worked. And last year or the year before, in Japan – where this is a highly developed form and actually always has been – think of Kawabata's *Palm in the Hand* stories – of the five best selling novels, three were written on mobile phones. One of them, a teenage love story, was written by an old nun and sold

millions. The story is composed so that each passage fits onto a mobile phone screen. So they started writing novels in which the chapters were that length, and they were made accessible by mobile phones. These became hugely popular with teenage readers, the publishers saw what was happening and produced them as books, which sold even more – over two million copies. That is historically what happens with new technology. It seems to take over but then the old technology tends to use it and it revives the old – keeps it going. So the idea that one is killing the other is not necessarily true, although we're in early days yet. [. . .]

Now you have a screen on a tablet like the iPad. You can get about two hundred to three hundred words on it easily – that's the perfect size. Now if the kids work with that, they have a highly contemporary form, a little computer which they know exactly how to use, they can transmit it to each other – they love all that, it's natural to them, like tweeting – but they can produce something in an aesthetic form. That's a gift! You can't ask for anything better in an English classroom than that. It's absolutely fascinating.

And so this form is just sitting there and most teachers haven't caught up. The problem is there is no body of books being published in *this* country like that – although you can see some writers moving that way. I'm a great admirer of John Berger. For years he's been working in that way – some of his best work. The book of his I love the most is called *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* – a short but fascinating book made of quite short passages; it's about time and space – a novel but not a novel, a memoir but not a memoir, little observations but not only observations – it's crossing all the boundaries. That is exactly what is happening now at the high literary end of writing, with

the people who feel the novel is tired and are trying to find a way to refresh it: where should we go, what should we be doing? It's exactly the kind of problem that existed in the early 1900s, and the result was Joyce's *Ulysses*, the novels of Lawrence and Woolf. It's happened in all the arts. And I suspect the same thing is happening now to literature at the beginning of a new century.

The Reading Environment

In the final extract Aidan talks about his work in promoting children's literature and reading, and about the current situation in the teaching of reading in schools.

How did you really get into commentating on children's fiction?

Around 1970, after I stopped teaching, when I was really only just scraping through financially, I got a call from Bristol University's Further Professional Studies unit – part of the School of Education. They said, 'We are getting a lot of requests from teachers about courses on children's books and we don't know anyone who knows about it. Someone mentioned you. Would you think of doing a course for us?' I taught ten-week courses for them for ten years – we covered the whole of the three counties around Bristol. They were courses out of which came *The Reading Environment*, *Tell Me*, and the critical essays I've written. Teachers on the courses were not just from primary schools; at one point they were half and half from primary and secondary. These eventually became one-year courses which were hugely successful and they did raise awareness. I don't think it was the only area in the country where this was happening at that time. I enjoyed it because it was evening work

and fitted well with my writing routine – and it gave me a bit of extra income. I'd started giving talks about reading and literature when I was teaching full time at Archway School in Stroud; I was asked to give a talk at the SLA conference one year because of what I was doing with the library. I started reviewing and writing in the *TES* and so on – so I was known in that way as well.

The peak was when I gave over two hundred talks in one year. I was going all over the place – I was out two or three nights a week. I loved it and everything was going for it then – the idea that you should give early years children real books to read, not just reading schemes. Picturebooks were innovating like mad. Then I realised that the problem was at the teacher training stage. If you could train teachers in the training institutions, giving them a knowledge of the books and how to bring them to children, they would be ready when they went out to their first jobs. As luck would have it, a teacher on one of the Bristol courses happened to be the wife of the principal of Westminster College, Oxford, a teacher training institution. She asked me to dinner and during the evening I said to the Principal, 'What do you do about children's books?' He said 'Nothing.' I said, 'How can you turn out primary teachers who know nothing about literature for children?' He said, 'We've got no one to do it.' I said, 'But you're the principal.' He said, 'OK, come and do it.' I said, 'But I don't want a job as a lecturer.' He said: 'Just come for one day for a term and tell us what we should do and I'll do it.'

So I went once a week for a term and ended up there for ten years. Mary Sutcliffe, who I helped appoint, is still teaching those courses. [Mary retired in 2011.] Every year the courses had to be defended. It's an extraordinary thing. Why is it that university-educated people who work in education and train

teachers, cannot understand that ‘children’s books’ as a subject is not only about the books? It’s a philosophical conception of what reading is, what it is good for, what literature is, what teaching is, how you do it, how you think about what you’re reading, how you write about it. And all this is focused through what teachers do – or should do – with children. It’s a perfect form for the study of education and sophisticated literacy.

Generally what do you think of political and educational trends in relation to children’s literature? How do you view the current political scene in relation to English teaching?

With horror. But I’m now an old man, so I would naturally think things were better before . . . although in fact I don’t think they were better before but I do think that since Thatcher, through Blair and on to now, government interference in what should be taught and how it should be taught is anti-British – let’s say English because the Scottish education system is different. The English system always used to be that the government provided buildings and resources and state education free, but that politicians did not dictate what was taught or how it was taught. (Any more than they dictate to surgeons how to perform operations or lawyers how to apply the law.) Thatcher overturned that, advised by non-elected people who had no experience as teachers or educators and a prejudice against what was then called ‘child-centred’ education, which involved learning to read what were then called ‘real’ books rather than only reading schemes. They were chronically prejudiced against that and have gone on being so . . . And then they instituted factory-style testing, which actually only tests children going through certain hoops. The hoops leave out the very elements that are the essence

of the business.

So I am distressed . . . because I belong to the generation which grew up after the war, naively believing that we were on the edge of being able to educate the whole of the our people in a literary, musical and craft culture, which respected everybody but which had at its heart the idea that story – the telling of it, the reading of it, the writing of it, and the enacting of it – is the heart of education. Anthropologists looking at so-called primitive cultures found the very same thing going on . . . And we thought that any legitimate education system would have to have that at its heart. Sophisticated reading in our culture is absolutely essential, and schools are the places that have to engender it, because it isn't in sixty percent of families in this country. And we believed we were on the edge of achieving that. I can remember NATE meetings in the early 1960s which were hugely energetic because we believed we were there . . . we could now do it.

*Where would you like to see English education going now?
Especially in terms of reading?*

I think where reading is concerned – which to me is the heart of English anyway – I'm wedded to the idea that you create a reading community by having someone within it who is both passionate about reading and literature and is knowledgeable about it. Someone who is a reader – the teacher – who makes of the learning space something that is conducive to reading, not antagonistic towards it. This requires the kind of planning of dedicated space akin to that which science has. It requires the presence of and easy access to literature both in book and, now, electronic forms. It's a case of creating what I've always called

the reading environment – a place where readers want to be and where reading happens.

However, reading is not a function wholly dependent on passing the eyes over the page. Nor in the case of children is it a solitary activity. It's communal as well. And the essence of it is what is said among the readers about what they've read. This is where reading education happens. The idea that – a crude analogy – if you put lots of poor readers in an attractive space with lots of books, they will become keen readers doesn't work, any more than if you put me in a gymnasium I would become a sportsman – I won't. It's something you become by being with people who do it well, and it happens in the talk that goes on about what you've read [. . .]

This is not a short-time, one-year thing. It's rare that teachers can make readers overnight. It's a continuing process – you have to begin at the beginning when children are first in school. And it's a mistake to think that once they leave primary school you can behave as if these things don't matter – that's not true . . . So to me it's a recipe, it's a complex of elements which good teachers manage to create, especially in primary schools, and these days, often against the imposed system. But the system should encourage it and want it to happen. For example, the disbanding of the school library service as a legal requirement was horrendously injurious. When I was a teacher and didn't have the money to buy all the books I needed for the library, I was allowed to borrow temporary collections from the county schools library service. It was a huge resource.

I know there are under-used library services for schools in many city libraries . . .

Because you have to buy into them. If a school has a head teacher who is not keen on it, it isn't going to happen. It shouldn't be a choice, it should be a requirement.

That said, there's a new element we have to take into account – the electronic delivery of print. In one way it actually makes the job easier because kids love it – it's where they are. And there are interesting discussions to be held as to whether what you're reading on the screen is like reading a traditional book, whether it's as aesthetically enjoyable to read a book on a screen as in a printed book.

These are interesting questions, but the fact is electronic means of delivery are here to stay and in my view have huge potential, which is not being tapped at the moment. We need research groups of teachers considering these questions and how the electronic systems can be used for *literary* education, not merely for populism or mere entertainment.

What is more, and it's always been key, is the question of discrimination. All reading is an act of interpretation, which means also it is an act of discrimination, choosing between one book and another and why – there's no way around that. But then your whole life is about discrimination . . . What to eat, what to wear, what to watch on TV, where to go and who with. We choose all the time. And yet people talk about discrimination in reading as if it is a bad thing. Why, they ask, do you want to tell readers to read this and not that? As though it was a harmful thing to do. But that's nonsense, because that's how all learning is done. There are bad things to do when you're pregnant and good things – and you want to know, you want people who know about it, who have experienced it, to help by telling you.

The discriminating mind is the key to sophisticated reading. I've known teachers who have produced discriminating readers

in primary schools – who discuss the differences between picturebooks and their qualities in the most extraordinary ways. Traditionally people have thought that teachers and librarians know what to read and what not to read and that it is their professional job to help us find what we want – and need. *How* we receive what we read and what we say about it – that’s what we need to learn. If that is transferred by teachers into an understanding of how to do it with children, you produce very skilled reading, and understanding and interpretation of texts that are not only perceptive but enjoyable because of the way it is done. In other words, it’s not the fact that we discriminate between good and bad, it’s how you do it that matters.

The problem is it takes time – so I would want the curriculum looked at to see where the time is spent. At the moment far too much time is spent on things that don’t need that amount of time, and not enough on things that need more time. I don’t see any of that going into the thinking the government is doing or any of the government’s favourite advisers. They are all fixated on a factory system.

It’s still about knowledge, isn’t it?

Yes, it’s the wrong model. You see in a strange way all the principles have been known since writing and reading got going five thousand years ago. We have known about this and the cultured well-off have always done it. They’ve had libraries in their houses, they’ve read aloud to each other – had reading times together. Virginia Woolf went all through her childhood without ever going to school. Her parents were modelling how reading is done . . .

