

Satips

Support and training in Prep,
Primary and Senior Schools

English

We Are All Writers

I often ask new classes, particularly at the beginning of a new academic year, to put their hands up if they are a writer. Cue lots of alarmed looks; cue someone brave enough to say, 'I did once try to write a book', otherwise, no show of hands. In the minds of our pupils, 'real' writers are those people who have books, poems or plays published; personalities, whom everyone recognises; thus, William Shakespeare is a 'real' writer and J.K. Rowling is a 'real' writer, but they themselves are not, 'real' writers; how could they be? Changing tack, I ask them if they do in fact write a lot; in fact, daily, aren't they writing something - stories, essays, poems, playscripts, annotations? Don't they draft extended pieces of writing and edit them? Doesn't their writing have an audience - a public? Doesn't their writing go on show? Don't they write for a reader? 'Yes' is the response, so I ask them again, 'Is anyone here a writer?' and generally, confidently now, up go the hands.

So, the English department thinks of all the writing it does for its pupils and asks for them to see it as 'real', having both a real audience and a real purpose. But when I was recently described as a writer, after an article I wrote about feminism was published online, the first thing I did was scroll through my contacts for the phone number of the magazine to correct the mistake. I am an English teacher, not a writer. People will think...I didn't want to think about what people would think. A conversation with my favourite librarian puts me right: 'You're not famous and you're not published in the sense the children understand it, but you do write, you write daily, you are a writer.' And she listed the things I write.

Later I thought, so I am a writer, and then, so too are we all writers, in our English department homes (shades of Mark Anthony here) and the knowledge excited me all over again for the new young writers to come, this academic year. I thought then about producing a list of books about the inspiration to write, and there are some wonderful titles (Year 8 might enjoy *A Gathering Light* by Jennifer Donnelly) but I decided instead to offer the article I wrote about feminism, which isn't about feminism, that contains some nice references to etymology and which comes with a book list of its own. Happy 2018-2019.

The Equalists

In Romain Gary's wartime novel, *The Kites*, the young female protagonist Lila is often heard saying, 'I want to do something with my life.' She toys with the idea of making her name in the dramatic arts, then medicine or architecture and, at one point in the novel, feminism. Her brother has given her the 'History of the Feminist Struggle' by Mary Stanfield to read, but 'the word feminist displeased her', the narrator tells us; 'We need to come up with something without an ist' she says. In her pursuit of an identity apart from her aristocratic family, she identifies with many groups and many ideologies, but that of feminist is emphatically rejected.

For my generation, not old enough at the time to appreciate the thinking behind 'The Female Eunuch', but later, too occupied with earning a living and bringing up families for the 'Beauty Myth' to seem relevant to the lives we were grinding out, I understand Lila's instinctive shrinking from the term, but when recently I was described by a pupil as 'a feminist', there was a moment when I wondered if this was a good thing (I know it was intended as a compliment); was I leading my pupils down, not so much a blind alley, but an unhelpfully 'cis-normative' one? Have 'cisgender' and 'gender normative' replaced discussion about women's rights and is penitence for our cisgender privileges now more important than trying to achieve the goal of feminism, that of political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes?

Now, unlike Lila, however, I really do like an 'ist', for with 'ist' comes a truly interesting etymology. The suffix exists in some form in almost all languages; in Romanian it can be declined, and in German it has both masculine and feminine forms. 'ist' is, variously, 'one who has a certain political tendency' (pacifist), 'a person who holds bigoted, partial views' (sexist), someone who owns or manages something (industrialist), as well as one who 'subscribes to a particular theological doctrine or religious denomination (Creationist). It is a person who uses a technological device of some kind (in this category, 'zitherist' seems particularly pleasing) and, more in my line, it is a person with a creative or academic role, such as artist or psychiatrist. But etymology, while interesting, only blurs my original enquiry, much as the many notions of gender distort the original goal of feminism.

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If you are regularly in the Twitter-sphere, you will know that there is hot debate there on how the new gender boundaries are effectively silencing the feminist voice, with so much being invested in not defining a woman, that the risk is to lose ourselves altogether as a separate species from men. For teachers, what does this mean for what we tell girls? How do we maintain the concept of 'woman' in the classroom; how allow girls to celebrate the part of them that is female, more importantly, the parts of them that are simply, 'human'.

The answer lies, as it always does, in the behaviour we model in the classroom, the books we read, the authors we choose, the poetry we write and the dialogue we encourage – firstly, about what it means to be human; secondly, what it means to be a woman.

If I had to choose one piece of writing (I could never choose), to sum up what being female means, my longlist would include all the books which I have listed below; many, many more if space allowed. All are written by and about women, but all explore the narratives of human, rather than simply 'feminine' emotion, which debates about gender don't always acknowledge.

In Joan Chase's novel 'During the Reign of the Queen of Persia', the 'femininity' on show is sometimes downright ugly, certainly the aggression between the sisters, but it is a healthy sort of rage, often quickly extinguished, a way of experiencing emotion we often ascribe to men. In 'The Life of Rebecca Jones', ultimately it is her 'pride', (as well as her 'hesitancy' and 'fear') which prevents Rebecca from pursuing an intimate relationship, settling instead for spinsterhood, albeit not altogether an unhappy one: how often is 'excess pride' a criticism levelled at men and how rarely do we see it as 'female' on the spectrum of emotions; how clearly the novel demonstrates the narrowness of that thinking. The novella 'Beside the Sea', portrays a mother on the verge of a mental collapse who sacrifices her children in the belief that death at her hands is better than the life she can offer them. We know the necessity and ease with which decisive, often violent, tragic acts are committed in the name of expediency, political or other, and many have the blood of children on their hands; few, however, in the quiet and ordinary circumstances of a seaside day out.

Doris Lessing captures the profound complexity of human longing in her novel 'The Grass is Singing'; acknowledging that whilst it is women who are caught in that very particular triad of duty, moral uprightness and the practical details of the household, desire has no gender.

Back then to Feminism 2018 – a helpful tag or not in the current struggle to win the identity game? In my opinion the appellation has become altogether too confining; whilst we must attain political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes, better we don't risk making this our singular identity; better for all our daughters to be equalists and let genuine talent be recognized and let others recognize it in return – no quotas. Better to teach girls that all emotion is human emotion, much better for their future that they identify themselves with many groups, not one; better by far that girls read their way to understanding the nuances of being human.

Books for Young Equalists

Night Flying by Rita Murphy

A Face Like Glass by Frances Hardinge

The Secret Hen House Theatre by Helen Peters

In the Shadow of the Ark by Anne Provoost

Daddy Long Legs by Jean Webster

The Diary of a Young Girl by Anne Frank

Code Name: Butterfly by Ahlam Bsharat

Books for Advanced Equalists

During the Reign of the Queen of Persia by Joan Chase

The Life of Rebecca Jones by Angharad Price

The Librarians of Alexandria by Alessandra Lavagnino

The Door by Magda Szabo

The Winter Vault by Anne Michaels

After the Divorce by Grazzia Deledda

Beside the Sea by Veronique Olmi

The Grass is Singing by Doris Lessing

The Fountainhead by Ayn Rand

The Mandarins by Simone de Beauvoir

Possession by A.S. Byatt

The End of Days by Jenny Erpenbeck

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