

Over the wall ...

Alan Maley
ponders what it means
to be a teacher.

In this article I shall be looking at some books which attempt to convey the essence of what it is to be a teacher.

Not a language teacher, but a teacher focused on the bond between teacher and taught – that magical relationship that the best teachers manage somehow, in the face of every kind of obstacle, to create. These are all highly personal accounts of how an individual found a key to opening up his or her learners. I will not be dealing with the highly influential contributions of people like Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, John Dewey, etc. What I want to focus on is not educational theory with a big T. Rather, I wish to revisit accounts of lived experience in sometimes difficult circumstances.



Teacher

One of the best examples is Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Teacher*. This book documents the author's experiences working with underprivileged, mainly Maori, children in a small primary school in rural New Zealand in the 1950s. It is an unruly, loosely-organised book, yet it overflows with the

exuberance of the kids and the passion of the teacher who took the trouble to let them learn. Part 1, *Creative Teaching*, recounts how she discovered what she calls 'organic learning' – starting from what is real and important to the child. '... these first books ... must be made out of the stuff of the child itself. I reach a hand into the mind of the child, bring out a handful of the stuff I find there, and use that as our first working material. Whether it's good or bad stuff, violent or placid stuff, coloured or dun ... within the security of it, the Maori finds that words have intense meaning for him, from which cannot help but arise a love of reading.' The key vocabulary she works with comes from the words the children find significant: *cried, hit, fight, kiss, ghost* and the like. The readers they use are a far cry from the anodyne offerings in the 'Janet and John' series with which many UK readers of a certain age will be familiar. She engages the children in writing, stories, movement (dance and sport), nature walks and art. It looks chaotic but, as she says: 'I like unpredictability and I like gaiety; I like peace in the world and I like interesting people, and all this means that I like life in its organic shape, and that's just what you get in an infant room where the creative vent widens.' In Part 2, *Life*

in a Maori School, she draws on her diary to give an even more personal account of the life of the school, including some wonderful extracts of verbal exchanges and written work. There are some striking black and white photographs throughout the book, too, which help convey the flavour of her teaching. A final quote: 'But there are two kinds of order, and which is the one we wish for? Is it the conscious order that ends up as respectability? Or is it the unconscious order that looks like chaos ...?'



An Experiment in Education

Sybil Marshall's *An Experiment in Education* describes her 17 years in a rural primary school in deepest Essex, UK, in the 1940s and 1950s. There are many resonances with *Teacher* – the mixed ages, backgrounds and levels of the children, the small but close rural community, and the teacher's search for a way of opening the children to the world and the world to the children. Marshall starts off with art, and gradually comes to



incorporate poetry, music, dance, puppetry and all the expressive arts into what she terms 'a symphonic' approach. She roots the whole of her curriculum in the reality of the village community, weaving the subjects – history, geography, maths, biology, English, and so on – into a seamless cloth. She, like Ashton-Warner, has to find her own way, 'not having had one single minute's training to uphold me in facing a class of thirty-odd children ...'. She rails against those 'who worship at the shrine of the fixed and dependable, of the scheme, the record, the timetable'. The book is full of radical insights, and is generously illustrated with samples of the children's writing and artwork. Most striking is her own openness to learning: 'I was being educated all over again by the children I was supposed to be teaching.' Would that we were all so open!



Teacher Man

Anyone who has read Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* will be prepared for the iconoclastic, unconventional and humorous way he tells of his life as a teacher in New York in *Teacher Man*. The book is a mixture of autobiographical incidents relating to both his life as a teacher and his marriage, and some highly insightful and hard-headed observations about what it is to be a teacher. In Part 1, *It's a Long Road to Pedagogy*, he describes his fight to survive in the rough environment of a series of deadbeat New York schools, where 'All the ingredients of difficulty were wrapped up in this one group: gender clash, generation clash, racial clash'. He is faced by a variety of different characters in every class: 'the complainer, the clown, the goody-goody, the beauty queen, the volunteer for everything, the jock, the intellectual, the momma's boy, the mystic, the sissy, the lover, the critic, the jerk, the religious

fanatic who sees sin everywhere, the brooding one who sits in the back staring at the desk, the happy one, the saint who finds good in all creatures ...'. His own role is no less varied: 'I was more than a teacher. And less. In the high school classroom you are a drill sergeant, a rabbi, a shoulder to cry on, a disciplinarian, a singer, a low-level scholar, a clerk, a referee, a clown, a counsellor, a dress-code enforcer, a conductor, an apologist, a philosopher ...'. He concludes: 'You have to find yourself. You have to develop your own style, your own techniques. You have to tell the truth or you'll be found out ... it isn't a matter of virtue or high morality.' He survives by sheer tenacity and native wit, and by finding ways of turning happenings to his advantage. There is the hilarious opening scene where he takes the wind out of the sails of a boy who has thrown a baloney sandwich – by the simple expedient of eating it himself! 'I ate the sandwich. It was my first act of classroom management.' He turns the plethora of forged excuse notes into a new genre of creative writing. While his students resisted any kind of writing in class, they were geniuses when it came to writing excuse notes. 'Here was American high school writing at its best – raw, real, urgent, lucid, brief, lying.' He opens up poetry by having his students perform recipes as raps and songs. He takes risks. He knows that what he is doing is important – yet will soon be forgotten.



School Blues

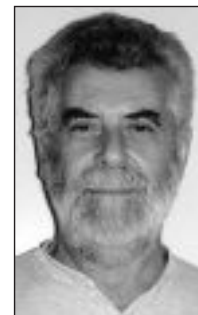
School Blues, brilliantly translated from French by Sarah Ardizzone, is about educational failure and how to transform failures into success stories. Daniel Pennac, whose book *The Rights of the Reader* has also been reviewed here, was himself a 'cancre' – a dunce, an educational failure – so he comes at the problem of failure from the inside. He takes us through his own experience of hopelessness to becoming a teacher himself, dedicated to rescuing other potential dropouts. The story is full of anecdotes with the sometimes bitter ring of truth. He shows how vital the actions of a teacher can be. 'All it takes is one teacher – just one – to save us from

ourselves and make us forget all the others.' His saviour teachers never gave up on him, and they had 'style'. Along the way, he treats us to some of the ways he managed to interest demotivated students – ranging from memorisation of texts (yes, memorisation!) and questioning taken-for-granted bits of language to introduce grammar. He is scathing in his criticism of 'Granny Marketing', which reduces students 'to the same childish state of perpetual craving'. The essence of his message is: 'You spend your time hiding behind methods when deep down you know perfectly well that no method is sufficient. No, what's missing is something else.' And that something else is love: caring enough about what you are doing. After reading this fabulous book, I wished that I had had Pennac as my teacher!



All these books offer reflection and revelation, and provide both inspiration and consolation. They are an indispensable complement to the more technical aspects of teaching. **ETP**

Ashton-Warner, *S Teacher* Penguin 1966
 McCourt, *F Teacher Man* Scribners 2005
 Marshall, *S An Experiment in Education* CUP 1970
 Pennac, *D School Blues* Maclehorse Press 2010



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