

- Osler, A., and H. Starkey. 2005. *Changing citizenship: Democracy and inclusion in education*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Smith, A.D. 1996. Civic and ethnic nationalism revisited: Analysis and ideology. *ASEN Bulletin* 12, 1996/1997.
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Reading circles, novels and adult reading development, by Sam Duncan, London, Continuum, 2012, 220 pp., £75.00 (hardback), ISBN-10 1441173153, ISBN-13 978-1441173157

Scholarly discussion of reading as a practice amongst adult learners is uncommon. There are a few well known accounts of literacy in adult lives – the work of Deborah Brandt, David Barton and Mary Hamilton comes to mind – but these and other writers tend to treat of a broad range of literacy practices embodied in both reading and writing. There are a few, a highly select few, accounts which look only at reading – Elizabeth Long and Jenny Hartley are two of the authors that Duncan singles out – but those who choose to write extensively about reading circles are rare indeed. The decision to examine reading circles, novels and adult reading development is, therefore, just one of several characteristics that distinguish this welcome, forthright and immensely readable new book by Sam Duncan.

The book is built around Duncan's research on reading circles, including an exploration of when, why and how they were formed (they are not a new development, as Long demonstrates, in her account of sixteenth century French village gatherings). She also examines the variety of what reading circles can offer to adults: not only, as might be expected, developing vocabulary, powers of comprehension and interpretation; but also improving confidence, as learners, students and members of groups, and – equally important – the prospect of companionship, friendship and the opening up of new horizons.

Duncan discusses the informal, peer-led reading circle she and her adult literacy students formed, and how, when this became the subject of her research, the participants came to conceive of reading as not simply amounting to 'following a plot' (though this itself involves much more than meets the eye), but also taking in acts that are at once educational, cognitive, communicative, imaginative and affective. Numerous themes are found to emerge: our reading identities, how to read (understand and decode) words; how a 'story' is built up through individual and group cognition; the relationship between fiction, truth and learning; and the many and sometimes surprising benefits of reading as a group. All these and more are consistently treated with insight and sensitivity, as they are in relation to the pre-occupations, fears and aspirations of adult learners.

The primary argument is that reading circles should be used 'in and as adult learning provision', and it is an argument well made: not only are they already a significant and common reading practice, they also provide means to develop learner autonomy, peer-teaching and peer-assessment; they offer up model examples of open-ended pedagogy and negotiated syllabi; and they can model and scaffold the interpretative aspects of novel reading. And

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there is something else besides: 'the strongest argument for using a reading circle approach within adult literacy provision comes from the fact that reading circles are a distinctly *adult* approach to learning, participant-led and self-managed.'

Besides a scholarly treatment of the origin, meaning and development of reading circles we are offered accounts of numerous disciplinary takes on reading and literacy – including psychology, neuroscience and social history; on reading in adult lives, both present and past; and on the relationship between literature and literacy development. There is plenty on pedagogy too: on reading circles as offering collaborative learning, negotiated syllabi and open ended pedagogy, and on how reading aloud can develop phonic decoding skills. And politics is present, more or less throughout, which is as it should be, since literacy includes practices, aspirations and ideals that are closely related to movements for enfranchisement, self-determination and civic and political participation.

Throughout, the writing is commendably clear and a pleasure to read; the introductions, summaries and suggestions for further reading included in each chapter are helpful, as is the extensive glossary. Painstaking research went into the writing of this book, as is evident in its impressive reach and the notably wide range of references, but the learning is worn lightly and there is not a trace of pretentiousness, obscurantism or unhelpful technicality.

Has the author taken on more than she should? I am not referring to her work on reading circles as such, neither their history and development, nor Duncan's invaluable research on the circles that she was herself a part of. But along with this we have accounts of how reading is the subject of research in disparate fields, with four pages given over to neuroscience and three to literacy theory; and one chapter each on 'reading and adult life', 'how we learnt to read' and 'literature and literacy development'. There might be some temptation to suggest that this is too much; that the history of how we learned to read is not something advisably written up in the space of a few pages. But this would be to misunderstand one of the purposes of the book, which is to offer, besides a rich, detailed and scholarly account of reading circles, an introductory treatment of some of the numerous disciplinary perspectives that can be brought to bear in understanding the acts, practices and processes of reading. This does not subtract but adds a great deal to what the book offers the general reader.

A few minor quibbles. There are points at which the writing can appear a trifle overblown, as perhaps, with the penultimate sentence in the book: 'Any example of literacy is at once functional *and* metaphysical, individual *and* communal, transformative *and* transfiguring'. (I would be pleasantly surprised if many readers of this review find it worth meriting that last description.) I have commended the book's range, but this brings with it a few risks: not all its philosophical notes are well struck, and the political discussions, which are certainly apposite, are sometimes too sanguine for this reader: 'Reading novels and taking part in reading circles ... are acutely political acts because they educate us in the lives of others, thereby developing that often underrated by-product of empathy: compassion.' And just occasionally there is a lapse in style: 'a reading circle ... could provide a much-needed reminder that the only adult literacy curriculum is what literacy means to each learner.'

That little said, this is an impressive, readable and thought-provoking book. The small and still embryonic field of research in adult reading has a valuable new addition, for literacy practitioners and anyone interested in the place and importance of reading in adult's lives.

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