

**Book review: Roche, M. (2014).
*Developing children's critical thinking
through picturebooks*. London and New
York: Routledge.**

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Mary Roche is a senior lecturer in education in an Irish college writing for other teacher-educators, early-years and primary-school teachers and those developing their own and other people's abilities to think, read and dialogue critically, which makes this book of interest to Living Theory researchers in other fields of practice. Mary was awarded a Ph.D. for her Living Theory thesis, 'Towards a living theory of caring pedagogy: interrogating my practice to nurture a critical, emancipatory and just community of enquiry', by the University of Limerick in 2007 (Roche, 2007). Since then Mary has continued to research her practice with her values of democracy at the heart of what she has been doing, and has led to the development of Critical Thinking (CT) and Book Talk (BT). You can watch her introducing CT & BT in a video accessible from <https://vimeo.com/61112532>. This book provides a more extended and informative explanation.

The book has two key tenets. The first arises from Mary's experiences as a child of family-approbation for her emerging competence as a reader and of the pleasures of reading, which opened for her worlds of imagination where, '... reading a good book means being transported to another time and place, completely oblivious to all else' (p. 1). The second arises from her quest to improve her professional educational practice '... animated by a humanitarian love of democratic practices and by democracy itself – conceptual frameworks that are located in values of hope, care, freedom and social justice' (p. 1). Mary shows how she has fostered a love of reading and enhanced the ability of children and herself to think critically through the medium of picturebooks using an approach she has developed called Critical Thinking and Book Talk. She provides the theoretical underpinnings and advice on how this approach could be used with young children.

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The book is divided into two sections. The first primarily addresses theoretical and conceptual frameworks, the second primarily addresses practical aspects of 'doing CT & BT'. Snippets of actual classroom and home practice are drawn on throughout to exemplify points, which brings the text to life. The layout of the book allows a reader to dip in and out or read from front to back. The consistent touchstone throughout is Mary's concern to 'create a democratic educational experience' (p. 6) for learners which by necessity includes adults as well as children. Each chapter ends with a summary and recommended readings, and the resource is extended with picturebooks helpfully arranged at the end by topic and also by the chapter in which they appear.

The argument and practical advice are clearly laid out. In chapter 1, 'the rationale for doing Critical Thinking and Book Talk' is provided together with an overview of the approach. A persuasive argument is offered for the relevance of bringing CT & BT into classrooms in the light of the current influence of approaches to accountability being pursued in many countries, which reduces literacy to a limited range of measurable skills. Chapter 2 looks at the meaning of literacy, visual literacy and the use of picturebooks. Chapter 3 focuses on dialogue, 'interactive readalouds' and preparation and planning for CT&BT before dedicating chapter 4 to issues concerned with language development. The theoretically-orientated section of the book is concluded with the introduction of some underpinning theories and distinguishing features of picturebooks in chapter 5. Chapters 6 and 7 address practical use and issues and setting up CT & BT in the classroom and pedagogical framing. Chapter 8 brings the book to a conclusion with a return to the democratising values that are at the heart of Mary's practice and expressed in CT & BT.

Mary shows in the section where theoretical issues are particularly addressed, that what she does as a practitioner in the classroom is influenced by her relentless concern with researching to improve her professional educational practice from her values of democratising education. These are values that she embodied and which contribute to the flourishing of humanity. For instance, she writes:

'If children can be thus positioned as different kinds of literate beings by the pedagogies they encounter, what about the teachers? ...In my own case I saw how such programmes can contribute to reducing teachers to mere technicians delivering other people's ideas.

... As one who used picturebooks for enjoyment and as a springboard for discussion, I saw how a whole classroom could be animated in sharing ideas and learning from each other... I could see the learning taking place... I could take advantage of such 'light bulb moments – teaching moments. And often I could see myself learning too, about the book, yes, but also about the people who populated my classrooms and whom I got to know and love as individuals through hearing them think out loud. It was what led me to develop *Critical Thinking and Book Talk*'. (pp. 7-8)

She lays out the underpinning assumptions and values of the teaching-approach she has developed:

- values about 'the other';
- values about knowledge;
- values about professional development or teacher-as-learner (p. 19)

and, as she does throughout the book, she maintains a connection with the living meaning of her values and the continual struggle for a teacher to recognise and resolve contradictions and to treat with children humanely as living individuals rather than as a category – learners/pupils - to be trained to become ‘readers’. For instance, she writes, ‘It is difficult not to coerce children into your way of thinking but such coercion can be resisted...’(p. 24), and, ‘Then there is the very important area of pleasure’ (p. 25).

Mary presents the difficult questions often avoided in books about classroom-practice and encourages the reader to engage with her book as critical thinkers developing their book talk:

...‘Why educate? What’s education *for*?’ and ‘Why teach people to be literate? What’s literacy *for*?’ and when I pare back my values to the essence, my answers have something to do with ‘living a fulfilling life in a just world’. Other approaches appear to be more neutral. Yet, unpacked, they have strong values-bases too – be they pragmatic or functional or political. Keep these ideas in the background as you read on. (p. 26)

The pressures of working in a system dominated by tests and performance is not ignored so the reader is helped to see how the contradictions that confront them might be worked with creatively and productively. For instance with the drive for raising standards:

As well as, not *instead of*, teaching knowledge and skills, we are trying to develop habits of mind and attitudes/values/dispositions. These are complex and abstract and personal and unique to each knower, and very difficult to define or itemise as box-tickable ‘learning outcomes’. (p.3 1)

And similarly for improving teacher ‘performance’:

... also missing from the report [RRSG (2002)], in my opinion, is any discussion about how the *passion* of an enthusiastic and committed teacher can have a positive educative influence in the engagement of a group of learners. Teachers are mentioned, but not their passion and enthusiasm for critical thinking and their love of reading, unless in the ‘panoply of practices’ mentioned [in RRSg, 2002, p. 42].

... I am certain this passion and enthusiasm influences [Miller’s] children far more than the books she recommends to them. Yet when research on literacy is cited as ‘evidence-based’, the stories of people like Donalyn rarely feature. (pp. 32-33)

Mary’s book goes some way to begin to redress this imbalance. She provides ample examples of how practitioners might provide evidence of their educational influence in the learning of children and adults, as they progressively become more sophisticated learners, thinkers, readers and contributors to their own, and other people’s, learning.

This book brings together into one voice the best of an academic, scholar and educational practitioner working to develop the quality of the educational experience for children in circumstances where values of humanity often seem to be, at best ignored, and at worst felt to be violating contradictions. Although I do not teach in schools I learned a great deal that helps me with my research into improving my educational practice and learning. I will conclude with Mary’s words:

Why discuss picturebooks? Why bother doing this kind of critical literacy work? The answer lies in the values we hold about life, society and our place in it. I believe that, unless we are deeply misanthropic and dystopian, we all want to do what we can to create a better, a more just, a more equitable and fairer world and an approach like CT&BT may provide us with a framework for beginning to set about trying to make a difference for good. (p. 146)

Afterword: This book has recently been highly commended by the panel considering the overall winner for the UKLA Academic Book Award 2015. In its citation, the panel commented that, 'The voices of children and teachers, richly engaged with picturebooks, resound enthrallingly in this enthusiastic, thoughtful and superbly well-informed account of productive classroom practice.' (http://www.ukla.org/awards/ukla_academic_book_award_-_1/).

References

- Roche, M. (2014). *Developing Children's Critical Thinking through Picturebooks: A guide for primary and early years students and teachers*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Roche, M. (2007). *Towards a living theory of caring pedagogy: interrogating my practice to nurture a critical, emancipatory and just community of enquiry*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Limerick, 2007). Accessed June 6, 2015, from <http://www.eari.ie/Mary%20Roche/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20Mary%20Roche%20PhD%20Thesis.pdf>