

From the Kitchen

1 February 2012



Writing is a secret pleasure indulged in by dreamers and visionaries, as well as those who have a burning desire to proclaim their insights and wisdom to the world. Reading is also a private pleasure, with the individual questing, searching, drinking in whatever nourishment and flavour the words may offer up.

As personal as the words were in the writing of them, so they are personal in the reading of them, in hundreds or thousands or more different ways. In this sense, earnest discussion about what the writer meant with the words (or what the words meant to the writer) are irrelevant, perhaps irreverent.

If a writer chooses to disseminate her words, she gives up any control over them (outside constraints of copyright). Others may use those words to support their own thoughts and prejudices and to attack those of others. Meanings will be ascribed to those words and those meanings may bear no relationship to the author's intentions.

There are many examples of written words being used in this way. The words of the *Bible*, the *Talmud* and the *Koran* are used by people with many disparate beliefs to support, whatever their arguments may be. Similarly the works of Marx and Engels, Freud and Jung, Spong and Davies.

Many writers intend their published words to be the basis for further discussion and debate, yet find readers taking the words as blueprints for action and behaviour. Such was the response to the words of Dr Benjamin Spock¹, whose message was that 'if you go forth and multiply, this is how you should bring up the resulting offspring.' (My paraphrasing.) Parents, by the millions, treated his books as the manuals that should have automatically come with their babies at birth. Spock later recanted many of his ideas, to the consternation of several generations.

I find myself tending not to read books which I understand to espouse ideas or positions with which I don't agree. I tell myself that there is no point, as I won't agree with the author anyway and it would, therefore, be a waste of time. Am I afraid of having my (entrenched) ideas challenged? What a preposterous suggestion – I pride myself on my balance of open-mindedness and healthy scepticism.

While there are many writers whose output is designed to continually present a set point of view and to convince others of that view, there are also those who put out into the world a stream of consciousness, an ever-changing bubbling of ideas. The latter is not designed to convince anyone of anything and seems more to be for the writer's own satisfaction. Alain de Botton comes to mind.

Unfortunately, such 'free' writers are often attacked for the inconsistencies readers discover in their serial works. The writer seems to contradict himself from one book to the next. However, as the writer may not be trying to expound the 'truth' but only to examine the possibility of it, inconsistency and contradiction are irrelevant labels. In formal debating, those speaking for or against the subject of a debate may not believe their own arguments or

may be arguing against beliefs they hold. The exercise is one of thinking and testing the product of that thinking.

For a writer whose output is a result of her own thought and, perhaps, designed to stimulate thoughts in others, the modern tool of blogging brings a new means of engagement. Ten years ago, such writers may appear before audiences and answer questions after giving a talk or being interviewed. While this still happens, they may now also put those ideas before a potential audience of millions and see some of the results of that stimulation. The writing and the reading thus move from the private to the public sphere and the very (once well-defined) roles of writer and reader can and do become mutable.

It is a shame that on so many blogs the interchange frequently moves away from the free ebb and flow of ideas to the incursion of fixed positions and attacks on those who offer up their thoughts generously.

This is an exciting time in that the until recently fairly fixed world of printed books and journals and solitary reading is melting and it is not clear whether the amalgam will set soon or remain fluid for some time. Whichever, I hope that it will continue to encourage the free exchange of challenging ideas and even enhance such exchange.

1. Not the Dr Spock (from *Star Trek*) who said that speaking his mind would be unwise.
 - The design depicted in the photo at the top is by Melissa Lee.