



Margaret Meek Spencer 1925 ? 4 May 2020

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Created *May '20*

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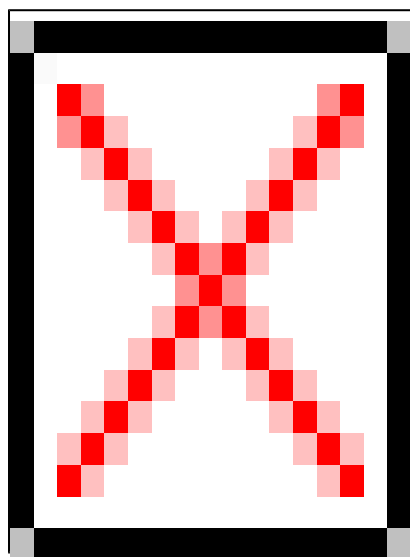
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Margaret Meek Spencer remembered by **Clive Barnes**

Clive Barnes remembers **Margaret Meek Spencer**



To be asked to write an obituary for Margaret Meek Spencer, brings on inevitable feelings of inadequacy, particularly as, to my shame, I do not possess a copy of her slim but oh so influential title, **How Texts Teach What Readers Learn** (1988). But plucking any books of criticism published in the closing decades of the last century from even my shameful shelves, her presence is inescapable. If it isn't in a contribution of her own, written in typical enthusiastic style peppered with questions that she challenged us to answer, then in the index, revealing her influence on anyone and everyone writing about the interaction of children and books at this time. When Chris Powling, as the then editor, published a best of **Books for Keeps** in 1994, it was Margaret Meek who provided the foreword.

Alongside Aidan and Nancy Chambers (Thimble Press, of course, published **How Texts Teach**) and Geoff Fox of **Children's Literature in Education**, Margaret Meek was of a generation of critics who were also, or had been, teachers and were as interested in the children as the books. They sought to discover and promote the best in children's literature, and also to understand through careful observation of children's interaction with books - and, groundbreakingly, other forms of the written word - how young readers responded to texts. Underpinned by a range of shifting theoretical approaches, this was an explorative and creative project in which those who sought to teach children to read, or encourage an appreciation of literature in young people, set out to determine how and why literature was essential to a child's development by listening to children themselves.

In a busy professional life, Meek taught student teachers at the **University of London School of Education** for over twenty years, remaining as Emeritus Reader in Education after her retirement from that role in 1980. She was the reviews editor of **The School Librarian** for many years and an early recipient of the **Eleanor Farjeon Award** for services to children's literature in 1971, when it might be said she had barely got into her stride. As one of the three editors of **The Cool Web** (1977) she kick-started a discussion about the relationship of literacy with literature: how the teaching of reading might relate to the child's experience of the world through reading. And this was a question whose ramifications preoccupied her for the rest of her career. With an international reputation, she was a frequent presence at literature and literacy conferences where children's writers and illustrators came together with teachers, librarians and other figures in the children's book world and was often called on for a keynote speech or, being quick on her feet, a summing up.

Her particular, but hardly exclusive, interest was in picture books and the acquisition of early literacy and, apart from **How Texts Teach** she wrote a number of other works whose titles reflect this, among them **On Being Literate** (1971), **Learning to Read** (1982) and **Language and Literacy** (1988). She also made many contributions to collections edited by others. She was an early advocate of the 'real books' approach to reading, her entire work predicated on the belief that learning to read was not merely a mechanical process: it was an entry into a relationship within the text with important psychological, social and cultural dimensions in which a reader, even a very young one, both drew on and grew in experience. Her interest was not confined to fiction. She examined information texts, too, and, more than twenty years ago, wondered what the growth of information gathering from CD Roms might mean 'when we know that books might be better for thinking than screens?'. What did she think of the present dominance of the internet in schools and home?

She was understandably convinced of the distinctive contribution of the book and protective of it, but recognised and celebrated that the book should take its place in a child's total world of experience. An internationalist, it is significant that one of her later contributions was the editing of **Children's Literature and National Identity** (2001), which she saw as a contribution to reducing ethnocentrism and breaking down the isolation of national cultures. Above all, in her work, I sense the legacy of Richard Hoggart's **The Uses of Literacy** (1957), a guiding democratic, inclusive, forward looking and activist spirit, which occasionally blazes out. Her contribution to the **Books for Keeps** collection mentioned above was an explanation of [why she didn't like Kenneth Grahame's Wind in the Willows](#) [3], which developed into a heartfelt denunciation of what she called this 'men's club' of a book: 'I knew what boys did in corners. They formed exclusive clubs, discussed girls whom they looked at sideways without turning round, and taught each other how to exploit the superiority they recognised as theirs by right.' She hated the book's 'excluding and exclusive' nostalgia. Nailing her colours firmly to the mast, she wrote, for children 'the excitement of reading is a dialogue with their future? But this [Grahame's] arcadian world is neither brave nor new; it has too few people in it.' You don't have to entirely agree with her about **Wind in the Willows** to, nevertheless, stand up and cheer.

Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

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