



Trinity College Dublin

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath

The University of Dublin

Interview with Dr Amanda Piesse

Dr. Amanda Piesse joined the School of English in 1994. A specialist in early modern literature, Amanda also introduced the teaching of children's literature in the School and was instrumental in the founding of the MPhil in Children's Literature in 2011.

This interview took place in July 2018 between Head of School Dr Aileen Douglas and Dr Amanda Piesse. An excerpt from the interview was printed in the 2017/2018 School of English Alumni Newsletter.

AD: You served as a College Tutor and as Dean of Students and were particularly noted as a proponent of student welfare. What do you think are the most pressing issues facing university students today?

AP: I was so proud to be part of a College, and particularly a School, that took its students' welfare so seriously, and worked so hard to enable equality of access and support, genuinely invested in working with its students to provide every single one of them with the opportunity to achieve their best potential. Latterly as Dean of Students I was offered real opportunities to work with all of the student services, students' unions, and clubs and societies, and my opposite numbers in the other Irish universities, to facilitate useful exchanges about students' experiences of College life and to be continually aware of how needs are changing all the time. Increasing openness, articulation and education around diversity and inclusion, and working for best practice around mental health and gender identification means, I hope, that there is no conversation that students and staff cannot have around whatever it is that needs to be discussed. That ongoing communication, and really listening to students' voices on student experiences, is I think the single most important challenge for the people making decisions about student life. I hope the College will continue to develop these provisions and particularly to be aware of the effect that a difficult financial climate can have on students having equal opportunities to focus on their studies.

AD: What are the most significant changes that you observed during your time in the School of English?

Within the School there was a significant shift (upwards) in the number of taught Masters courses. Across the Faculty and indeed the College there was a real drive to think and collaborate in an interdisciplinary way, largely, I think, because of the advent of the Trinity Long Room Hub. Administrative changes meant that we moved from the three-term structure to semesters, a very different rhythm to the year, with an attendant curriculum review. These changes led to greater diversification of the School at every level, and some great conversations around texts and contexts and ways of learning and teaching and

examining that we might not otherwise have had. College's move towards research themes across disciplines, while always leaving space for the individual researcher, prompted some extraordinary opportunities: the Irish-Scottish Academic initiative, for example; a evening lecture series on Science and Literature and historians, gender studies specialists, neuroscientists, engineers, sociologists and literary studies people coming together to collaborate on the ageing theme, with some really rich conference and teaching collaborations emerging out of those encounters. I never did quite get reconciled to semesterisation; I missed the sense of the year beginning to wrap up, and reflecting on what had gone before, in the six weeks we used to have after Easter and before the summer exams.

AD: You introduced the teaching of Children's Literature in the School of English. Could you say something about the particular challenges of teaching Children's literature? And the benefits?

AP: I've always been struck by five challenges around teaching children's literature. The first is to dispatch, immediately, the notion that this is somehow an easy option (it isn't). Children, at least as much as any other human being, are rich and complex creatures, and a literature that serves them appropriately in addressing and communicating their condition, a literature which, in Margaret Meek's terms, 'addresses the condition of immaturity as part of inclusive consciousness', is equally rich and complex. The second challenge is how on earth to choose what to put on the syllabus from such an extraordinarily rich and varied canon. The third is that it is a multimodal area, so for a lot of people, including me, there's a steep learning curve where learning the languages of picture books, illustrated books, graphic novels, film adaptations and particular forms of poetry are concerned. The fourth is that a broad sweep of both general and (children's) socio-historical context needs to be assimilated very quickly, as any approach beyond a single-author approach is likely to take in texts from at least the seventeenth-century to the present day. And the fifth is to pay enough methodological attention, but not too much, to the question of what actually constitutes children's literature. This last can be really tricky, but it's also what makes it such an interesting area. There's a number of perennial questions around the issue: in John Rowe Townsend's terms, are we reading as 'book people', with all the focus on the literary qualities of the text, irrespective of implied readership, or as 'child people', always with a weather eye on an implied child reader? (I'm a book person). Is Jacqueline Rose right to declare 'the impossibility of children's fiction' because it is almost always written by adults? (In my view, she's not). What's the relationship between literature for children and fantasy fiction that has become crossover fiction- sold for and read by a juvenile and adult audience alike? When does a juvenile reader become an adult reader? Last but not least, I've always been surprised at how often I've had to point out (sometimes even on appointing committees) that literature *about* children is not necessarily literature *for* children, any more than literature about women is necessarily women's literature, and that children's literature is not a subset of popular literature because so much of it addresses that immensely complex 'condition of immaturity as part of inclusive consciousness'.

As you can see, then, children's lit is not an easy option. And if you're still not convinced, then I'd challenge you to try writing a comprehensive analysis of, say, Burningham's *Granpa*, or Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*, or Wynne-Jones' *The Game*, or Garner's *The Stone Book*, or Tan's *The Arrival*, in anything less than a five-thousand word essay. The truly wonderful thing is that so very many students over the last twenty-five years have been willing to give it a go, and so much has been learned by all of us in the process. We're also blessed at Trinity, of course, with children's literature specialist librarians and collections in Early Printed Books and with the collaborative work on the collections being done by Padraic Whyte and Jane Carroll.

AD: Is there any advice you would offer today's students?

AP: I think there are three things we should all bear in mind. The first is that your four years as an undergraduate, or your year as a taught Masters student, or your three or four as a PhD student, are each clearly defined gifts of time in which to work on the thing that matters most to you academically and intellectually. Choose the subject you feel most drawn to, the one that will have you out of bed and up at the desk in the morning, or unable to tear yourself away late at night because you just don't want to stop. The second thing is, if it does go a little bit wrong, or something unavoidable in life does get in the way, don't be afraid to seek advice and take that short-term step back if that seems to be the most practical thing to do. A year's break or a repeat year is not the end of the world if it means you get to complete successfully. And the third thing is that while every single person sitting in the lecture hall or in the seat in the library or at the examination desk has absolutely earned the right to be there, and deserves all congratulations for that, don't ever forget that your occupying that seat means that someone else who really wanted to be there didn't get to be there. So value the privilege of that position, and love it for what it is.