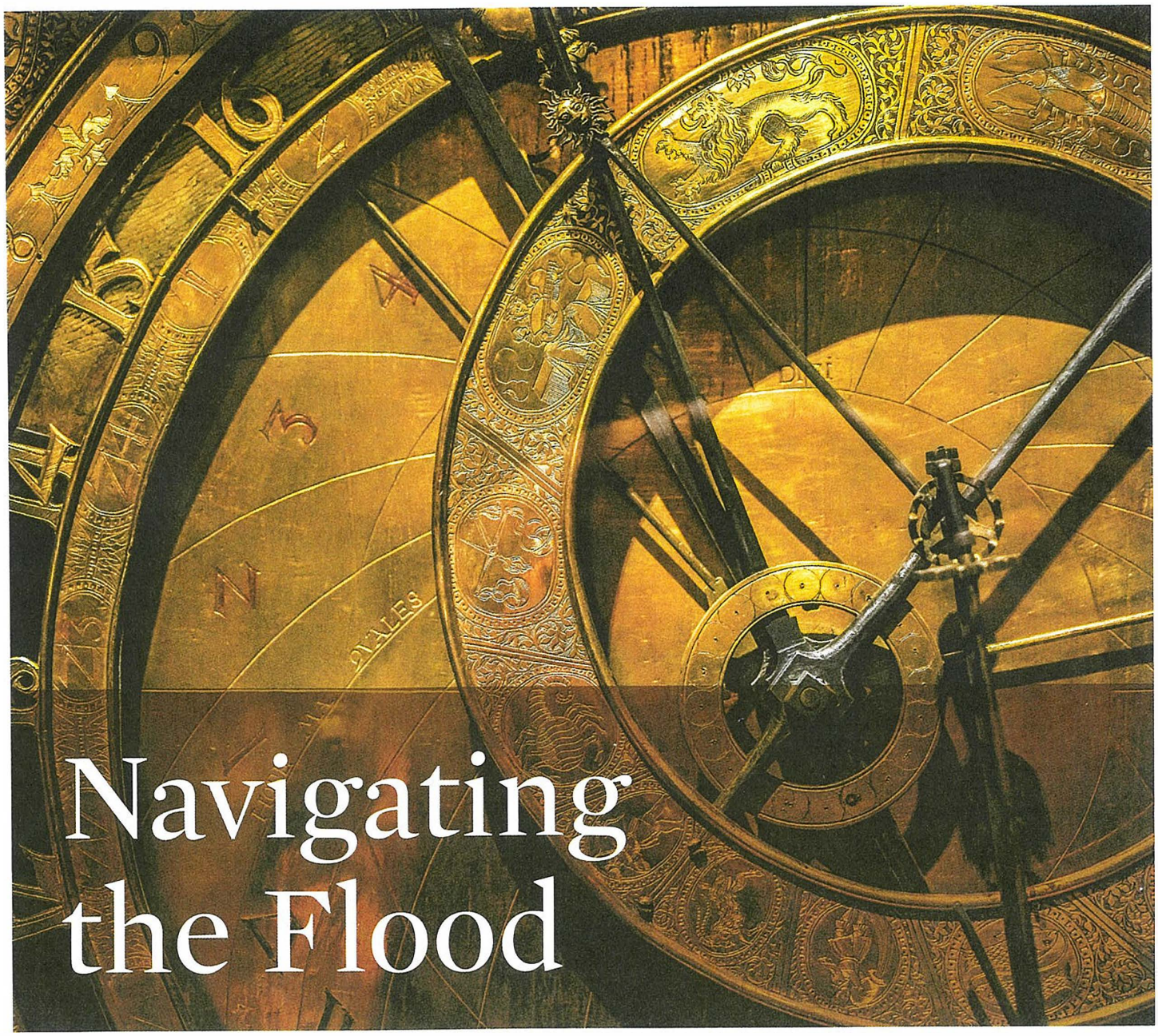


Navigating the Flood

Equipping Students with a Golden Compass for the Post-PEE Apocalypse

What English teachers have to learn from *The Book of Dust*

Philip Pullman has argued powerfully against the reductive tendencies of literature examinations, but, argues **Beth Cooper**, the alethiometer – as used by Malcolm in *The Book of Dust* – provides the perfect metaphor for helping students to read and analyse language creatively *and* critically.

"This little room was where he felt how big the world could be"

"What a stupid exercise! ... Words belong in contexts, not pegged out like biological specimens"

(from *La Belle Sauvage* (*The Book of Dust*, Vol 1), Philip Pullman, 2017)

While adults in Philip Pullman's imagined worlds rely on '*the books of reading*' to interpret an alethiometer, Lyra has an intuitive relationship with the golden compass. She possesses an innate gift to recognise the interpretive depth of the alethiometer's symbols. The message that our young people should not be underestimated, and that our youngest (and therefore most powerless) members of society may have strengths and abilities far beyond our own, is not new. Pullman (once a teacher himself) has been a fierce and vocal critic of reductionist approaches to reading as well as, '*The management-driven and politics-corrupted and jargon-clotted rubbish that so deforms the true work of schools*' (Pullman, 2005). This is a message that Pullman has foregrounded through Lyra in the 'Dark Materials' trilogy, and we can see it once again through the character of Malcolm in the emerging *Book of Dust* series.

"In his weekly meetings with Dr Relf, we see her facilitate questions which allow Malcolm to come his own conclusions, rather than simply digesting her adult interpretation of reality."

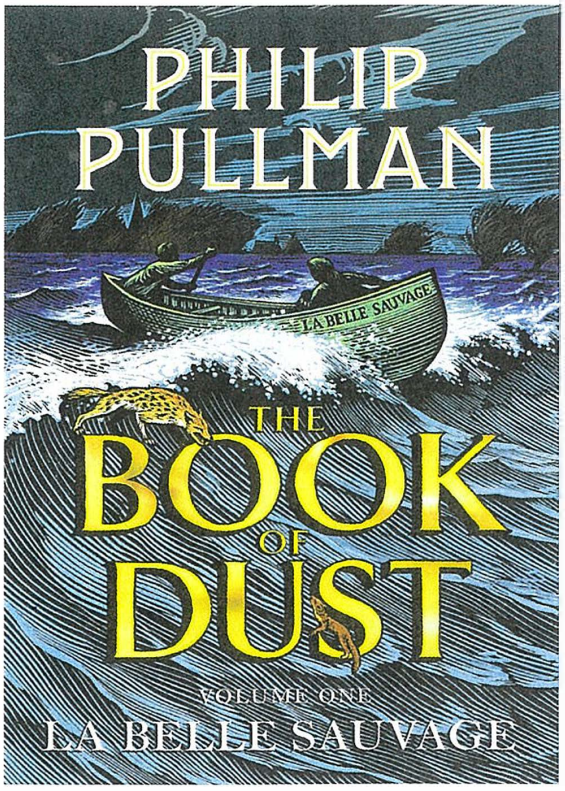
Pullman's choice to reinforce this message in *The Book of Dust* is, however, particularly timely. In the current context of the shift towards linear exams and concerns about a mental health 'epidemic', this is a pertinent moment to be reminded of the resilience and common-sense intelligence that young people are capable of. Malcolm courageously traverses the near-Biblical flood in *The Book of Dust* with ferocity and the ability to suppress his fears when the need for bravery arises. An archaic show of masculine bravado? Not at all. He is a hero capable of transcending gender stereotypes (as illustrated by his protective and emotional connection with the baby Lyra) as well as being a dab hand with a canoe.

So he's not a snowflake then?

Pullman's novel prompts educators to question the assumptions being made about generation z's ability to be resilient in a world that has dubbed them 'snowflakes'. Malcolm's strength in adversity is a real elbow-in-the-ribs for English teachers in particular. Malcolm is given the opportunity to fail. He makes decisions that shape his identity. He is courageous because he has to be. This is an apt juncture then, to reflect on the ways we allow (and enable) our students to fail, to be decisive, and to show courage in our classrooms.

The alethiometer as an allegory for reading

It's very easy to plan a lesson which culminates in a PEE paragraph. But, for a moment, let's imagine that we have the privilege of time and patience which allows Dr Hannah Relf to be such a wonderful teacher for Malcolm.



In his weekly meetings with Dr Relf, we see her facilitate questions which allow Malcolm to come his own conclusions, rather than simply digesting her adult interpretation of reality. This culminates in that moment of clarity and discovery that hopefully some of us have had the pleasure of witnessing in the classroom, that expansive moment to which the buzzword 'progress' doesn't really do justice: '*this little room was where he felt how big the world could be*'. Dr Relf allows Malcolm to steer the conversation and think independently (or, for those of us who need this translated into jargon, she *differentiates* for her pupil) and together, they examine the nature of interpreting the symbols of the alethiometer – a device which, when used correctly, can answer questions (a little like an analogue version of Google).

In using the alethiometer, the reader has to think carefully about the symbols in order to understand the layers of meaning available to them: both in terms of posing effective questions, and in terms of understanding which symbols are given to them in the alethiometer's response:

> *"...Now let's take one of the alethiometer symbols. Take the hive, for example, surrounded by bees. One of its meanings is sweetness, and another is light. Can you see why?"*
>
> *"Honey for the sweetness. And..."*
>
> *"What are candles made of?"*
>
> *"Wax! Beeswax!"*

Dr Relf and Malcolm discuss the way that symbols have a delicate relationship with contexts:

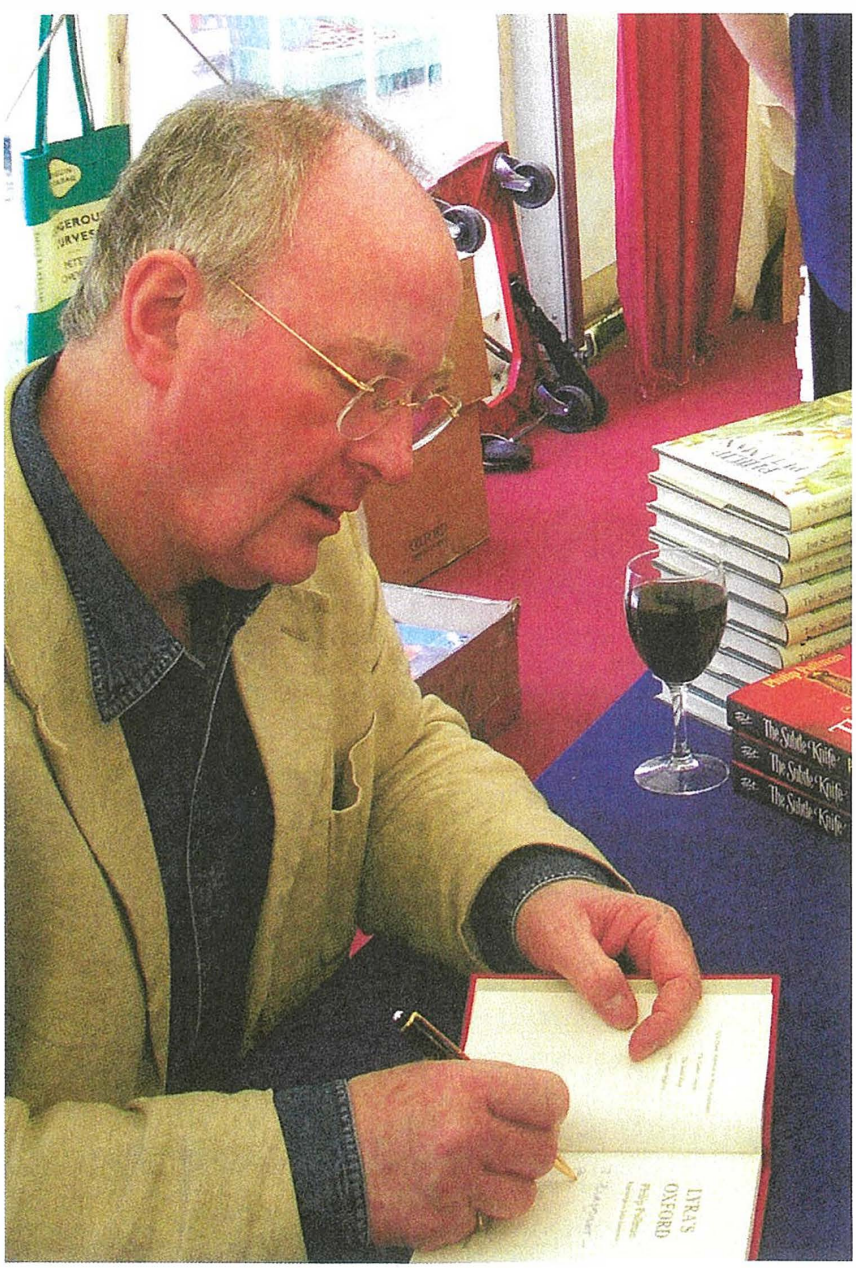
> *"Suppose the person who made the alethiometer was looking for a symbol to express the ideas of sweetness and light. Could they have chosen just anything? Could they have chosen a sword, for example, or a dolphin?"*
>
> *Malcolm tried to work it out. "Not really," he said. "You could twist it a lot and make them similar, but..."*

"Pullman has been a vocal critic of reductionist approaches to reading. This is a message that Pullman has foregrounded through Lyra in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, and we can see it once again through the character of Malcolm in the emerging *Book of Dust* series."

The way that the symbols of the alethiometer have to be 'read' or interpreted in order to be able to answer important questions about the world can be taken as an allegory for the act of reading any fiction. By spending time thinking deeply about books, we can find 'answers' about the world we live in. Sometimes it's a personal, therapeutic 'answer', and at other times, we feel as though we're knocking on the door of a 'universal truth'.

Reading and interpreting the alethiometer is, however (like any good book) dependent upon context. Any reader of the alethiometer has to filter through all the possible layers of meaning for that symbol to find the one which is most appropriate.

"The way that the symbols of the alethiometer have to be 'read' or interpreted in order to be able to answer important questions about the world can be taken as an allegory for the act of reading any fiction."



Dr Relf alludes to the frustration that many of us may feel in terms of guiding students towards the skills necessary to interpret language in this way:

> *Then it started to rain, so she went inside and made some coffee and did what she had never done in her life: tried the newspaper crossword.*
>
> *"What a stupid exercise," said her daemon after five minutes, "Words belong in contexts, not pegged out like biological specimens"*

This demonstrates the risk we face when asking students to zoom in and examine the connotations of individual words and phrases. The danger of a PEE paragraph is the danger that a student feels like they're 'zooming in' on words just to keep their teacher happy.

Possible meanings

As teachers, navigating the possible meanings of a text are our daily bread-and-butter. But how *well* do we do it? And (as Pullman would insist we ask) *why* do we do it? For the benefit of our students and their enjoyment of texts? Or for the benefit of the exam boards? This is where we need to be thoughtful and reflective practitioners and recognise our roles in the classroom as gatekeepers to both the joy of learning and the mysterious realms of exam success.

For instance, as gatekeepers to exam success, we know that exam boards want students to discuss the author's intention. So we ask our students 'What does Pullman want the reader to feel?' or 'what do you think Pullman means here?'. These are important questions for our students, because it helps them to see texts as (to borrow AQA's wording from the GCSE mark scheme) 'conscious constructs' which have symbolic significance. Pages become ripe with meaning and relevance to 'real' life, rather than simply escapism and fantasy.

This is, however, perhaps exactly the kind of approach which Pullman has criticised. In our relentless insistence on authorial intent and learning outcomes, it is the joy of learning which Pullman claims we have *'forgotten'*:

> *.... to have completely forgotten the true purpose of literature, the everyday, humble, generous intention that lies behind every book, every story, every poem: to delight or to console, to help us enjoy life or endure it. That's the true reason we should be giving books to children. The false reason is to make them analyse, review, comment and so on.* (Pullman, 2003)

I disagree that analysis is a 'false' reason to approach any text. In my classroom, I see it as my moral duty to encourage analysis for two reasons. Firstly, I see the need to light a fire within my students which gives them the determination to succeed in their exams as my role within the larger engine of social mobility. If I can appeal to my students' sense of competitiveness and self-pride to achieve the best that they are capable of, and to understand the value of good grades, then I feel that I have fulfilled my role in forming citizens who will always strive to be hard-working and who understand the role of education in creating a fair, meritocratic society. Secondly, it is my moral duty to allow students to be critical consumers of knowledge. By 'analysing', 'reviewing' and 'commenting' on texts, I am providing them with the tools they need to navigate a world of advertising, omnipresent and increasingly omniscient

media and social media and 'fake news'. But Pullman is right. For any of this to happen, we have to create a little bit of space for enjoyment and delight so that the curiosity necessary for meaningful critique can take place.

This tension between enjoyment and exam success is perfectly illustrated by a dilemma faced by all English teachers who have, at one time or another found themselves saying, 'there is no wrong answer here'. No wonder we have such 'flakey' flurries of confusion being stirred up in our classrooms! The notion that there are 'no wrong answers' in English is a troubled one. Such a *carte blanche* can be intimidating and exposing for students in a school environment where there is often an otherwise emphatically binary relationship between right and wrong.

The idea of there being 'no wrong answers' is, however, a little nudge of encouragement to take a risk: to assert opinions, engage in debate and to feel a little frisson of freedom which the opportunity to be creative can unleash. Pullman describes his own experiences of the rewards that responsible risk-taking can yield:

> *Of all the things I did and failed to do when I was a teacher, the things I'm least ashamed of are the occasions when, for some reason, a child in my class discovered that he or she could catch a fish like that; could take a risk and write something true and meaningful.* (Pullman, 2003)

In *The Book of Dust*, Malcolm provides the 'no-such-thing-as-a-wrong-answer' advocates with a word of caution: '*You could twist it a lot and make them similar, but ....*'. He is concerned that, in seeking to understand the alethiometer's symbols we may inadvertently 'twist' or manipulate the connotations of an image to suit our own interpretation. Here, then, we find yet another perfect and impossible balance for English teachers to strike: whilst rampant postmodern, relativistic approaches may lend themselves to a sad, nihilistic rudderlessness, just a little pinch of this can lead to playfulness and a useful sort of rule breaking. By using such 'responsible risks' perhaps we can find something that may just pique a teenagers' interest.

Through the alethiometer, Pullman appears to represent a number of fears and dangers for students and teachers to consider in English teaching today: how interpretation must be a delicate balance of the personal and the contextual; how we must equip our students for exams without compromising their enjoyment of texts; and how we must allow our students to take risks in their reading without leaving them adrift in a flood of meanings.

How to navigate the flood: evaluation and enjoyment

PEE paragraphs have been the life-raft to which students and teachers alike have clung for some time now. There are two ways forward from this that I have found helpful.

First: remembering that PEE is a scaffold. In my experience, both teachers and students alike can forget that a scaffold is built to be taken away.

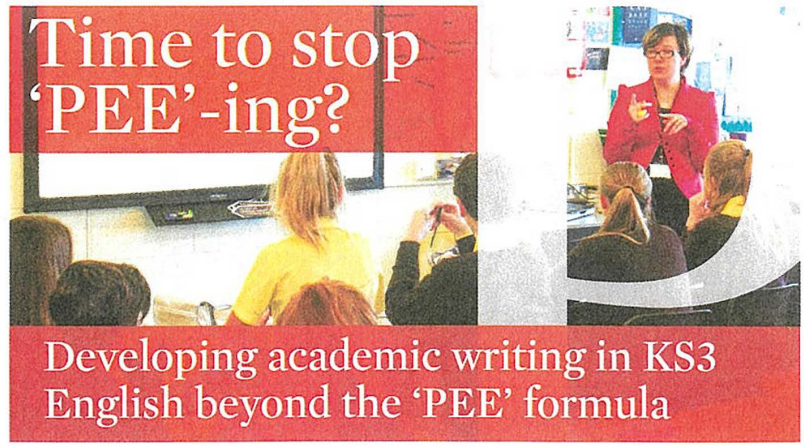
Second: finding alternative ways to scaffold students of various abilities. There are some wonderful alternative approaches explored by Andy Tharby in his blog: **https://reflectingenglish.wordpress.com/2014/06/21/beyond-pee-reuniting-reading-and-writing/** (June 2014).

In this post, he brings together a number of skills which signpost students towards reading for meaning. He places the emphasis on using routine to establish and embed these skills, rather than depending on an acronym. Similarly, Louisa Enstone has written an article for NATE in which presents her research for more sophisticated essay writing (see Issue 13 of *Teaching English*, 2017).

Beyond PEE: reuniting reading and writing

Posted on June 21, 2014 by Andy Tharby

"Interpretation must be a delicate balance of the personal and the contextual; we must equip our students for exams without compromising their enjoyment of texts; and we must allow our students to take risks in their reading without leaving them adrift in a flood of meanings."



Louisa Enstone explains what she learnt when she decided to abandon the 'Point, Evidence, Explanation' formula.

Photo of Louisa teaching an English class by M. Utton

Finally, the English and Media Centre highlights the importance of live modelling as a way to foreground the meta-thinking that students require to be good essay writers in Kate Oliver's blogpost: **https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/blog/pee-peal-petal** (October, 2017).

These practical tools may equate to the physical canoe and oars necessary to navigate the 'flood'. To operate these tools effectively, however, we need to learn more from Malcolm. It's his gumption which I want to bottle and prescribe to English teachers. If we want our students to take responsible risks and find that nirvana where delight in texts coexists with exam success, then we have to be the umbrella which shelters our students and to find the courage not to buckle under the pressures of our local contexts or the wider political landscape.

"Some students may need a scaffold. But for those students who are ready to face the flood, we should let them find their own canoe and embark on a journey which both demonstrates and defines them as individuals."

The discovery-invention tension

As well as this pedagogical perspective, Pullman's discussion between Malcolm and Dr Relf also resonates with literary theory. The nature of interpreting symbols is, as Malcolm realises, a tricky business. One of his first questions, for instance, is whether or not the act of reading the alethiometer's symbols is a discovery or an act of invention.

Malcolm's discovery-invention dilemma is an important one. Have those answers been planted by the author like a breadcrumb trail for us – sitting, waiting for us to unearth them? Or is the text a key – unlocking the answers that were in us (the reader) all along?

There's no formula or scaffold which elicits this moment of understanding. It's the relationship, the trust and mutual respect between Malcolm and Dr Relf which matters here. Malcolm is given the freedom and the space to tussle over impossible problems. He isn't able to fully answer his initial questions about the alethiometer. Instead, he reaches a troubled two-sided conclusion: that the act of reading the alethiometer's symbols is *both* an act of invention, as well as an act of discovery.

Malcolm's evaluation of the alethiometer's symbols here shows more maturity than many adult academics would be capable of, for the tension between reading as an act of 'invention' or 'discovery' is one which has been tussled over by many a scholastic genius. Barthes is famous for his assertion that reading is an inventive, creative act. The 'death' of the author necessitates the reader's creative involvement: our unique contexts and perspectives beat the pulse of the text. Sontag, however, is 'Against Interpretation'. She reminds us that *'elaborate systems of hermeneutics, aggressive and impious theories of interpretation'* can goad readers into chasing down a *'true meaning'* in the text. If we're not careful, we may stumble into that (rather arrogant) habit of assigning allegorical meanings to art which describe ourselves more than the art we're looking at. Malcolm, in other words, engages with the age old problem of reader-response theories versus authorial intention.

I like the way that, in *The Book of Dust*, Malcolm is the one who is able to make sense of all of the madness of this mark-scheme-laden-lingo. The author's intention is a good route into a text. The idea of 'discovering' something in a text is an exciting and important one. And yet, the importance of having a personal and unique response to the text (Malcolm's decision that *"We're sort of mixed up in things ourselves"*) mustn't be forgotten.

Using your alethiometer

It's Pullman's description of this context-boundedness which makes the alethiometer such a powerful tool for us: the contexts of the texts we read; the context of English teaching today; the local contexts we operate in as practitioners; the context of our individual classrooms.

In terms of our teaching of PEE paragraphs, we are reminded to adapt to all of these contexts and not to be unduly prescriptive in the ways we advise students to meet assessment criteria. Some students may need a scaffold. But for those students who are ready to face the flood, we should let them find their own canoe and embark on a journey which both demonstrates and defines them as individuals. If we assume that our young people are snowflakes, then we create a culture which allows them to be snowflakes of the worst sort.

I love Malcolm's excitement for the puzzle of the alethiometer. And that's what I want for my students. With a PEE paragraph, I feel the dread of an assessment or a GCSE on the horizon and the terror and confusion of whether 3 or 4 sentences for my explanation is enough. With an alethiometer, I feel like reading can help me answer impossible questions.

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