

∞ READING ROUND ∞

Life-Changing Literature

Jonathan Edwards

WHEN I THINK of life-changing literature, I think of writing which didn't change me at all, but which made me more who I am. Growing up in the South Wales Valleys, and coming from a working-class background, I always thought writing was done by other people in other places, that the folks whose names were important enough to be printed there, on the spine of a book, didn't talk like me or have my experiences, but were rather people who were altogether more important. The most significant reading I've done in my life has been that which has shown me the power of being myself.

First was R. S. Thomas. I still remember reading his poem 'The Village' in secondary school — or having it read to me by a teacher. I didn't understand it all — the references to Plato and some of the things that were being discussed. But the poem felt like it was about *my* village, probably on a Sunday, nothing at all happening, a single dog wagging its tail, but at the same time the village being the centre of the entire world. The poem had lived the life I knew, and told me that it was important enough to write about.

Later, I encountered more writing like this. Poets like Gillian Clarke and Owen Sheers showed me how it's possible to write about the people, natural environment and history of South Wales, while also writing about everywhere. Writing like this is truly 'life-changing' in the sense that it alters not just how I see poetry, but how I see the world. Poems by these writers teach me to look at the world around me – these hillsides and

∞ READING ROUND ∞

neighbours, these rows of terraced roofs or these birds circling above them – in a new way, to see the richness of what’s really there, and to see its beauty with pride.

Of course, this doesn’t stop with poetry. In the fiction of writers like Rhys Davies and Rachel Trezise, I find characters I know from my village and situations that the people in my street are living now. The humour and tragedy, joy and difficulty, the togetherness of these lives — it’s all there, on these pages. Of course, I love the way that writing can allow us to travel through the world, broaden our horizons, jet off to Brazil or China or the seventeenth century without even leaving the living room. But how much more do I love that writing that tells me the specialness of where I am.

Once, in university, I had a writing teacher who did something wonderfully memorable in a workshop. As we were writing poems, he blew bubbles across the room, out of one of those little cartons of soap that children use. It was great, watching those bubbles float through the air and across the poems we were drafting. They were small and world-shaped and magical, and you could follow them like thoughts across the room. I loved watching the bubbles but I loved, too, the moment after they’d popped, and you were back in the room, with a renewed sense of how special it was. Writing that changes things keeps it the same, encourages me to look more closely at what’s always been there, empowers me with a sense of how great *this* is, right here, every day.