



The Writers Who Inspire Me

Paul Dowswell

I DON'T KNOW IF THIS IS COMMON among people who write for a living, but sometimes I feel like an imposter. When I'm reading something by someone who is on top of their game I think to myself 'Blimey — they make me look like an amateur'. Sally Rooney's *Normal People* just drips with gentle sadness and empathy. Donna Tart's *The Secret History* plays out like a movie in your head, her high-handed characters repulsing and fascinating in equal measure. Hunter S. Thompson's *Hell's Angels* bristles with an energetic electrical charge — although I do feel obliged to say it's also dated and morally unacceptable in its *laissez-faire* acceptance of the motorcycle outlaws' predatory sexual marauding.

I have already written for the Royal Literary Fund about the lucidity of George Orwell, and the harmonious flowing prose of the King James Bible, but producing strings of beautifully put-together words is not the only thing that makes an inspiring writer. Some of the writers I admire the most are the ones who are able to write simultaneously to different levels. Sally Prue is one of them. Her book *Song Hunter* is set in Neolithic times, its lead character a bright pre-teen girl called Mica who lives with a tribe of Neanderthals Prue calls 'The Stonemen'. Although the readership is intended to be late primary, the subject is nothing less than the dawning of human consciousness. She writes:

The stonemen neither knew nor cared about anything unless they could eat or use it... 'It's nothing,' her mother would say, spitting disgustedly, even if Mica had brought a shell worn



pale and luminous as the moon to show her. But how could it be nothing if she could hold it in her hand?

The book moves me every time I read it, and Prue's simple prose delves deep into profundity. Even pre-school picture books, such as Helen Cooper's *Pumpkin Soup* – in which a cat, a squirrel and a baby duck cooperate together to make their tea – can do this too. I was surprised and delighted to hear one of my writing students tell me she uses *Pumpkin Soup* to promote discussion with her sixth-form Philosophy pupils.

I also love writers who can explain hugely complex subjects in a way that makes them accessible to the lay reader. Max Hastings's and Antony Beevor's deservedly popular war books have done this magnificently, as did Piers Brendon's *The Dark Valley* — his authoritative account of the nineteen-twenties and thirties.

So, in short, the writers who inspire me are the ones who can engage with a broad readership and introduce complexity without you even noticing.