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"The great secrets of reading": Margaret Meek Spencer, reading process and children's mystery and detective fiction

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Meek Spencer's writings on literacy evoke reading and storymaking as processes of inquiring; of searching into mystery. This paper considers how Meek's preoccupations with reading process; genre literacy; and text-image dialogism resonate deeply with the genre of young people's mystery and detective fiction. Drawing on Meek's seminal works, Learning to Read (1982); How Texts Teach What Readers Learn (1988), and On Being Literate (1991), the paper applies key concepts from these texts to a group of children's mystery stories. The paper shows how the genre offers a resonant context in which to "take her work on" and to observe the mirroring of certain of her insights in storied form. Moreover, the aptness and theoretical richness of Meek's concepts in relation to the genre is illustrated, not least when her ideas are considered alongside the work (suggestively cited briefly by Meek herself) of Bakhtin, Bruner, and Barthes.

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Introduction: Reading as detective work

Margaret Meek Spencer's writings on literacy are replete with evocations of reading and storymaking as processes of inquiring; of searching into mystery. Stories, she suggests, address 'our deep need to understand the nature of events and our part in them' (1991, 105); texts teach 'a process of discovery for readers' (1988, 19–20); and the secrets that emerge can even rebound upon the reader: "texts reveal what we think we have successfully concealed even from ourselves" (1988, 35). Given this abiding interest in the "great secrets of reading" (1991, 41), it is interesting that Meek Spencer's work touches only rarely on a genre of children's writing whose character and form somewhat exemplifies and amplifies certain of her insights – children's mystery and detective fiction. Where references to this genre do occur in Meek Spencer's work, they tend to suggest a view of such material as very much light reading where the developing reader at best treads water rather than makes progress: "Know that Agatha Christie is the teenagers" Enid Blyton. They will move on again' (1982, 213), she writes.

Yet prompted by Meek Spencer's evocations of reading as mystery or code, her observation on the popularity of "detective stories, horror tales and love stories" amongst adult readers (1982, 135), her humorous portrait of a "well read detective" (1988, 20); and

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her brief reflection on the qualities of "a good modern detective novel" (1991, 41), this paper seeks to show the value of bringing her reading insights into dialogue with the genre by focusing on a selection of children's mystery stories from the eighty-year period 1934–2014. Approaching the texts with reference to Meek Spencer's concepts of reading processes; genre literacy; and text-image dialogism, we hope to demonstrate how many of her insights into reading processes and practices resonate in relation to the genre. Works of detective fiction in many senses play with and even collapse epistemological and ontological boundaries, suggesting that the the work of reading is fundamentally detectional.

'Reading secrets'[1]: mystery and detective fiction and Meek Spencer's views of reading process

Early in *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn*, Meek Spencer observes how: "The reading process has always to be described in terms of texts and contexts" (1988, 6). Any attempt to separate the text from the wider world and its meaning-making potential deprives readers of an essential repertoire of cues, and indeed clues, that will help them towards the interpretations they might form. In this, Meek Spencer's work references other great thinkers about reading and the functioning of text and explicitly and presciently aligns their theorised notions of text with processes of literacy. For Bruner (1986) it is such broadening perspectives that provide the "subjunctivising space", the provisional domain in which readers can engage in creative acts of meaning-building; for Bakhtin (1981) reading is at its most politically powerful when literary texts are brought into disruptive or playful dialogic relation with the extratextual; and for Barthes the possibility for writerly engagement in the text is what signifies the demand for readers to participate.

The genre of mystery and detection has perhaps proven so enduringly popular to younger and older readers alike because of its insistence as a form in engaging with precisely this mysterious process of making sense of the world, as reflected in the microcosm of the literary text. Detectives, be they the child sleuths of children's stories or the Holmeses and Poirots of adult crime fiction, are involved in processes of "reading" and interpreting the events, scenes and characters that they encounter. On the basis of these "readings" the sleuth protagonist is expected to weigh and appraise competing perspectives and versions of events and ultimately to create an ultimate meaning or solution.

In engaging and re-engaging with the detective form, young readers become initiated into the ways in which this particular "game" of reading works and find a comparable learning process played out before them by their child sleuth counterparts. In the earliest of our selected texts for example, R.J. McGregor's *The Young Detectives* (1934), the young children of the Mackie family transition from their own imagined adventures – staging a play featuring "a ghost", "a sliding panel" and a heroine "rescued in the very moment of her despair" (51) – to investigating the genuine intrigue of a smuggler's plot centred upon their coastal holiday home. Comparably, Maria, the eponymous warden's niece of Gillian Avery's 1954 novel, leaves behind an unhappy early schooling to live with her bookish uncle, Warden of an Oxford College, where she will become inspired to undertake her own scholarly enquiry, engaging in some documentary and munimental historical research which her eminent uncle deems worthy to be presented in a paper: "I should

think few scholars have so many obstacles thrown in the way of their research", he observes, "And it makes an exceedingly interesting history" (205). Included by Meek Spencer in her list of recommended "books before fifteen" (1982, 247), *The Warden's Niece* presents child reader as active enquirer. Maria, in the course of her quest to solve a historical mystery, gamely ventures into the scholarly hush of the Bodleian, risking the wrath of the antifeminist librarian. Other scenes depict her ensconced in her uncle's library where she "pored over the books that were too heavy to take into the garden to read during the day" (1954, 198). The very image of the child reader, Maria externalises the reading process and related pedagogical implications described by Meek Spencer early in *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn*, "achieve[ing] mastery by practice, pleasure and persistence" (1988, 3). It is surely not coincidental that one of Spencer's favourite books, Eric Kästner's *Emil and the Detectives* of 1929, is a detective novel for children embodying these very characteristics.

Meek Spencer is equally interested in the processes that underpin reading, and in this further connections suggest themselves in relation to mystery and detective fiction. In *On Being Literate* she observes:

> Reading a story is, for a child as for an adult, a way of discussing what might happen; to ask what if, in the open dialogue of speech, or the concealed dialogue of the imagination. Reading and writing create a mental space for thinking, the space that children inhabit early in their play. (1991, 45)

This mental space for thinking is in many ways played out in mystery and detection stories by the work of the child sleuth/s and is susceptible to fruitful analysis variously in relation to notions of play (Huizinga 1995), Brunerian subjunctivity (1986), Bakhtinian dialogue (1981) and Barthes (1974) notions of readerly and writerly text. The discursive dynamic of detective fiction, rather than providing a series of answers, becomes in effect a tissue of questions with which readers must actively engage if they are to become effective textual participants. Indeed, detective fiction is built upon what Gulddal (2016) calls a hermeneutics of suspicion; a philosophical assumption that everything readers encounter in the text must be considered somehow subject to doubt. Readers of detective fiction are thus placed in continually interrogative alignment with the texts they are reading and from which they seek to shape meanings. Again, this process can be found embodied or enacted in the child sleuths of mystery and detective fiction, who might plausibly be regarded as storied versions of their readers, in their active interrogation of the mysterious settings in which they are placed.

Meek Spencer's work, in terms congruent with the recent work of Eaglestone (2021), thus explores the interrelationship between the "big picture" of the text and its function (genre knowledge) and the "detail" (the component parts of the text) is central to reading and interpretation; genre knowledge and its components are partners in shaping readers' capacity to create meaning. The inherently "suspicious" dynamic thus established between readers and texts suggests a recursive hermeneutic circularity. Readers, like the detectives whose processes they are following, need constantly to be bringing the details of the text they encounter into the orbit of the larger tale that is unfolding before them and their own experiences. As Meek Spencer identifies in *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn*, citing among other examples, a child's engagement with the picturebook *Rosie's Walk*, when we consider processes for reading, we engage on a number of planes

the idea of how readers "come to know" (Meek 1988, 6). Mystery and detective fiction, like the act of reading itself, is profoundly about how humans engage with the world and draw meaning from it.

"Clubs, networks and spies": detective fiction and Meek Spencer's views of genre literacy

A second strand of Meek Spencer's thinking which resonates with the genre of children's mystery and detection is her perspective on genre literacy – readers' understanding of the ways in which a specific genre functions. In terms which align somewhat with those of Robert Scholes, whose *Textual Power*, (1985) considers the body of extratextual knowledge that readers bring to bear on meaning-making, including their knowledge of particular literary forms and the ways in which they function as texts in their own right, Meek Spencer's *On Being Literate* (1991) describes the process of "Confident Knowing". Confident younger readers, she shows, "understand the constructedness of texts" (1991, 162) and gain confidence in their reading experiences by recognising motifs, topoi and generic markers in the different literary forms they encounter. Repeated engagement with the same literary forms and genres thus represents a form of genre literacy and supplies one of Meek Spencer's keys to learning to read successfully: "How do we come to know the character in a story whose fortunes we are to follow? Is it not in the repeated encounter on each page with the recognizable object or person?" (1988, 8). Such repeated encounters nurture a sense of belonging in the community of readers as the genre literacy of the young reader brings a gratifying sense of affirmation of their primary literacy: "to be at home in a literate society is a feeling as well as a fact" (1991, 3).

The appositeness of children's mystery and detective fiction to these notions is again patent, particularly in those stories which are conceived as part of a series and which feature a recurring sleuth or group of investigators.[2] Such series detective stories nurture Meek Spencer's sense of the reader being "at home" (1991, 3) in the storied world, where a set of shared classic tropes is anticipated and delivered in line with expectations – secret rooms, coded messages, lonely smugglers' inns – and where any novel and idiosyncratic features of the presenting mystery are offset by these genre motifs and by the familiarity of the recurring characters: "The reader enjoys both the security of the familiar and the shock of novelty" (1988, 14).

The Witchmaster's Key (1976), a late entry in the long-running Hardy Boys series, offers helpful illustration of this notion. In a picaresque tale that takes them far from their stateside home in "Bayport", the young sleuths travel to London, East Anglia, Dublin and even Stonehenge in the course of investigating a series of thefts of historic artefacts. Amidst all this novelty, the young reader is reminded at the outset that this text forms part of a series (the very first text *The Tower Treasure* and the most recent predecessor, *The Mysterious Caravan*, are referenced as early as page 2), while in the chapter titled "A Happy Reunion", the sleuthing pair happen to bump into their hometown peers and best friends Chet Morton and Phil Cohen who intermit their own entirely independent travels to take part in the conclusion of the Hardys' adventure. Whilst at the moment of unexpected meeting, Chet exclaims: "What in the world are the famous Bayport detectives doing so far away from home?" (1976, 139), readers and sleuths alike are instead very much "at home" in the landscape of the story, even as its novelty and mystery unfolds.

This combination of the novel and the familiar is a signature of the mystery and detection genre for both child and adult readers, contributing a certain comfort or even "cosiness" to the reading experience. Meek Spencer observes of younger readers that "Children read the stories they like over and over again" (1988, 36). This is in a sense precisely what readers are doing when they take up a mystery and detection story that is conceived as an entry in a long-running series and thus the serial nature of much detective fiction offers helpful illustration, albeit in a genre of modest literary merit, of the aptness of Meek Spencer's views on the importance of genre knowledge and genre literacy in the reading experience.

Indeed, in the genre of mystery and detection, this kind of genre literacy is often actively foregrounded and reflected upon in the explicit musings and reasonings of the protagonist. The central detective character (or characters) acts a hermeneutic guide for the reader, pronouncing on how the rules of the genre operate and how plots of this kind tend to unfold. Significantly, serial detective figures can assist young readers as they seek to make their own meanings at an age where they are learning that meanings are not always clear or foregrounded. Routledge observes that works of detective fiction, especially those involving groups of detectives (such as The Famous Five, The Three Investigators or The Hardy Boys) "present to young readers the possibility of sharing the detectives" challenges and successes' (Routledge, C. 2010: 8–9). They are offered, in effect, the chance to become by extension a part of the detective group and afforded "a corporate identity" (Rudd 2001, 87) – a socio-literary function of such texts that implies their important role in young people's reading practices, quite apart from questions of their limited literary merit.

"How the book works": detective fiction and Meek Spencer's views on text-image dialogism

The third aspect of Meek Spencer's work that we find particularly apposite for children's mystery and detective fiction is her views on text-image dialogism. The presence of images as part of written text is central to Meek Spencer's conception of how children learn to read, where picture books play a central role in the formation of reading habits, practices and rituals. Indeed in *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn* she explicitly invokes "the importance of images" (1988, 25) in texts ranging from picture books to popular comics and later observes how "Children's growth in literacy is tightly bound up with how they learn to look and what they expect to see" (1991, 115).

Likewise, all of the texts we have selected for this paper use images in some form. *The Young Detectives, The Warden's Niece*, and *The Witchmaster's Key* all include conventional textual illustrations, depicting key locations and scenes within the unfolding tales: a derelict cottage; the Warden's library; a Gothic castle, to give three respective examples. Such line-drawn textual illustrations stand in clear relation to the main body of the text and offer, in some senses, an interpretation of it. When looking at these illustrations, readers are given a visual interpretation of the words or the places or the characters to which they relate. In Phillip Pullman's *The Ruby in the Smoke* (1985) and Robin Stevens' *Murder Most Unladylike* (2014), however, the authors employ images of a different sort. These images play a more active role in the shaping of meaning in the text itself, mirroring aspects of the process Meek Spencer describes in younger readers' engagement with

picturebooks such as Janet and Allan Ahlberg's *The Jolly Postman*. Such images emerge from the unfolding detective narrative and proceed to shape the on-going investigation. In *The Ruby in the Smoke*, a mysterious letter received by one character early in the text is rendered in typographically distinct form in the body of the text, as if hand written on a torn fragment of paper. The words are unevenly spaced and written in a poorly formed hand in block capitals. The lines of writing are not straight and the letters appear as if they have been pressed hard into the paper:

SALI BEWARE OF THE SEVEN BLESSINGS
MARCHBANKS WILL HELP
CHATTUM
BWARE DARLING

(From *The Ruby in the Smoke*, 13)

Here the insertion of the textual fragment and its rendering as typographically distinct, serve a greater function than the words simply relayed in the text would do. The use of handwritten block letters, the lack of punctuation, the misspellings and the cues that this is a torn piece of paper all contribute to making this not just text, but also artefact. Reading this fragment, the reader of the book, as much as the reader within the text, becomes an active interpreter of the writer's character, emotion and haste. It is much more, in other words, than the sum of its words; it is a textual intervention intended, in narrative terms, to coerce a reaction from both characters and readers.

Comparably, in Robin Stevens' recent *Murder Most Unladylike*, readers are provided with reproductions of protagonist Daisy Wells' notebook jottings. The detective's note-book is, of course, a well-established trope of the detective fiction genre. In Stevens' novel, however, pages listing and exploring the issues Daisy and her friend and fellow sleuth Hazel Wong encounter in the course of their developing investigation are made part of the detective narrative itself:

SUSPECT LIST

(1) Miss Parker. MOTIVE: Jealous rage.

ALIBI: None yet between 5.20 and 5.45 p.m.
NOTES: Was seen arguing with the victim
at 4.20 on the day of the murder and at 5.20
observed alone in New Wing form room (near
Gym) by Kitty Freebody.
(From *Murder Most Unladylike*, 78)

(2) Miss Hopkins. MOTIVE: Getting rid of a love rival.

ALIBI: Good. Up in Pavilionat time of murder. RULED OUT.

As readers engage with this image, they are provided with essential information relating to the two key dimensions of detective narrative as distinguished by Todorov (1977): the emerging facts as they appertain to the story of the crime; and the outworking of the story of the detection. The image provides a textual nexus where both dimensions of the detective narrative meet. Not only do we have here a list of issues Daisy identifies to follow up in the course of the investigation; we also see her emerging thinking as Miss Hopkins finds herself both literally and metaphorically ruled out of the investigation.

The image becomes a powerful visual-textual moment at which both Daisy and readers are enabled to shape and control the emerging narrative of the crime. The image has become, in effect, an exercise in "plotting". This kind of documentary evidence serves both to help shape the solution of the case and to "add verisimilitude to the narrative" (Miskimmin 2019, 96).

Such textual images and devices, then, offer readers the opportunity (perhaps even require them) to participate in the detection process, placing them as potential detectives in their own right. By extrapolating Meek Spencer's exploration of the connection between words and images, we can see how for young adult (and indeed adult) readers, images can serve alongside or as part of the content of the written text. They allow readers to test for themselves the possibilities of the emerging narrative and to consider for themselves, in Barthesian writerly fashion, the detective's evolving investigation and proposed solutions.

Such images have a central role to play in many works of detective fiction for adults also. We might think of the famous plan of the Calais Coach in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* or the map of an Oxbridge college in Michael Innes' *Death at the President's Lodgings*. Such maps and plans are one of the ways in which writers of detective fiction seek to establish the parameters of their fictional spaces. This also relates to Turchi's metaphor of "the world of the story" (2004, 14). As Miskimmin (2019) notes, this assists with readers' (including the detective's) "navigation, location and demarcation". Ržepka (2005, 157) goes further, identifying not only maps, but also facsimiles of writing fragments, drawings or notebooks as textual devices that are used to release "metonymic possibilities for ongoing invention" as readers engage with them and seek to make sense of the role they play in unfolding the mystery they face. Such devices are, in other words, part of the creative apparatus of the textual space and must be "read" as part of the textual evidence available to readers. Such devices, then, are key dialogic elements of text, and are to be tested against or used in combination with the written word. Sometimes they are left to speak for themselves, but often they are explicitly discussed.

Conclusions

Thus, although in Meek Spencer's list of recommended texts for young readers in *Learning to Read*, the specific genres of mystery and detection feature sparingly (*The Thirty-Nine Ste*ps, and the *Adventures of Sherlock Holme*s being two examples), it is clear that Meek Spencer's abiding preoccupation with reading "secrets" opens quite naturally onto ideas integral to that genre, especially in relation to her views on reading process; genre literacy; and text-image dialogism. Meek Spencer's observations on early readers' natural curiosity about the world as manifested in their engagement in picture books, can be "taken on" or elaborated in relation to young readers of detective fiction and the ways in which they engage with their reading and find themselves reflected in the child sleuths of the genre who vicariously investigate their fictional environments on the reader's behalf. Her observations on the value for literacy of the repeated encounter with the same kind of text illuminates the appeal of children's mystery and detection stories, accounting for the continued reading of Blyton's *Secret Seven* and *Famous Five* stories (despite the growing reservations about some of the values and assumptions inscribed in Blyton's writing), and the

contemporary success of examples such as the *Murder Most Unladylike* series. Finally, her account of the dialogic dynamics of text-image interplay in children's picture books proves remarkably congruent with the ways in which graphic or typographically distinct representations of texts can be seen to inter-relate with their context in mystery and detective stories.

Of our selection of texts for discussion in this paper, only *The Warden's Niece* is included in Meek Spencer's aforementioned list of recommendations – perhaps because its element of mystery is confined to Maria's enterprising and scholarly enquiry into a historical riddle, and any supernatural or more outré events are ruled out of scope. Some of the other examples of the genre considered here would perhaps more likely be grouped with the kinds of text that Meek Spencer characterises in *Learning to Read*, as books to "move on" from (213) in time. Yet in the same discussion, as elsewhere in her work, Meek Spencer equally stresses the importance of the reader returning to the familiar text throughout the stages of reading development: "When readers take steps forward to meet new kinds of reading they also make tracks back to what they have enjoyed and to where they feel secure" (213). What is asserted here of the adolescent reader, proves equally true of the adult reader, who across the course of a lifetime of reading practice, will often return to a favourite genre, demonstrating again the breadth of impact of Spencer's work. Perhaps mystery and detective fiction, often redolent of holiday book reading and the literature of leisure time, endures as a popular reading choice for both young and adult readers precisely because it stands distinct from what Meek Spencer calls "the plodding textual grind of some school reading" (1991, 150). The genre remains elusive, playful, mysterious – keeping us ever mindful of those great secrets of reading that her writings so deftly expound.

Notes

1. Our three subheading quotations, "Reading secrets", "Clubs, Networks and Spies", and "How the book works" are each drawn from *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn* (1988; 15; 20; 7).
2. In addition to the series detective texts considered in this paper, famous examples include Enid Blyton's *Secret Seven and Famous Five* series and the *Three Investigators* series (spuriously associated with Alfred Hitchcock).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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