Bennett and Royle ILCT Interview

1. What first prompted you to write this book?

A brief and perhaps overly cryptic answer might be: Margaret Thatcher. It was during the so-called Thatcher years when there were (as indeed there are again now) next to no new jobs in higher education in the UK: people looked for teaching posts elsewhere. Between 1989 and 1992 we found ourselves working at the University of Tampere, in Finland. Finland in the winter is rather cold and dark and you don’t want to be out and about much, so there was lots of time to read and write. We had in fact already collaborated on one book: Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel (1995) was also a product of long Finnish winters. So, we had discovered that we could write together. Having done it once (and found it in some ways very pleasurable, in others extremely trying, even to the point of a kind of madness), we felt up for another go.

As in the case of the secret recipe of Coca Cola we are not, of course, able to disclose the details of how (let alone why) we wrote. But the Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory began as a series of lectures written for undergraduates at Tampere. We wanted to introduce students to some of what we felt to be the most interesting, challenging and exciting ideas in the field of literary studies. We were aware that most of our students were listening to us in what was their third or fourth language (English came after Finnish, Swedish and often also German, at that time in Finland) and that many of them came to university with only limited experience of reading English literature. So we needed to talk about things in a way that was clear, intelligible and accessible, but also that wasn’t simplistic or reductive. We were driven by a shared fascination and passion for literature, as well as by a sense that there really was no book that successfully conveyed that fascination, and the strangeness of that passion. Fortunately there was also an editor in the UK at the time – Jackie Jones (then at Harvester Wheatsheaf) – who saw the potential of the project and encouraged us from the beginning.

2. Why do you think it has become such a popular undergraduate text?

We think that Bennett and Royle (as it has come to be called) is unique in the way it introduces students to basic ideas in literary criticism and theory. Other Introductions typically present a series of abstract literary theories – new criticism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, feminism, queer theory, ecocriticism, and so on – and then use examples from poems, plays and prose fiction to illustrate those ideas. We believe that such an approach often proves dry and uninspiring. More importantly, perhaps, it can seem to be a very long way from students’ actual experience of reading and talking about literary texts. Our book takes an entirely different approach. We think that students (and others – we like to think that the book is for the interested general reader, too!) read and study literature because of their fascination with and their passion for poems, plays and novels themselves. And that’s where we start: with the literary texts themselves, and with the passion for reading.

So Bennett and Royle is organised around readings of literary texts, and around thinking about the kinds of questions that might occur to you as you read a book or a poem. What makes Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales funny? How does a Henry James story produce narrative tension? In what ways is Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre engaged with questions of race and
racism and with issues of national and ethnic identity? Why do we take pleasure in reading a Katherine Mansfield story? What fascinates us about the murderous violence of Homer’s epic poem *The Iliad*? These are some of the question we explore. And rather than starting with ‘isms’, we start with topics: with monsters and ghosts, with desire and war, with puns and jokes, with metaphor and irony and ekphrasis, with love and telephones and the human body. We try to show how such questions and topics lead naturally to thinking about more abstract ‘theoretical’ questions that have engaged critics and theorists especially over the last fifty years or so. In so doing, we show how questions of the linguistic sign, narrative form, or ethnic and racial difference are in fact unavoidable – rather than being a somewhat dull ‘add-on’ that can conveniently be ignored once you have got to grips with, say, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand Saussure’s distinction between the signifier and the signified.

As it happens, we talk about Saussure’s notion of the sign by talking about hamburgers, and about *The Matrix*. And that’s something else that’s distinctive about our book: while we think that there is something special and particularly fascinating about literature, we don’t think that literature is essentially separate from the fantasy as well as the reality of what Freud calls ‘everyday life’, or therefore from other modes of cultural representation (TV, the movies, websites, computer games, rock music, and so on). So although we range very widely across literatures in English and other European languages (we talk about more than one hundred texts/authors) we also try to show how the kinds of questions that we ask about literary texts – about language and representation and about ethical and political and social issues – are also at work in, say, the cultural ‘phenomena’ of Elvis Presley and John Lennon, of Gothic film and detective fiction, of *Alien* and *Apocalypse Now*, of Bollywood movies and the internet. So perhaps that’s one of the reasons why students can relate to the book – because it doesn’t treat literature as a separate aspect of human experience and because we try to suggest that the kinds of ‘theoretical’ questions that necessarily engage you when you read a poem are not so different from what happens when you watch a film or listen to music – or even when you think about which burger to order at a fast food restaurant!

3. The new edition includes chapters on animals and the environment. Why did you decide to include these new topics in a discussion of literary theory?

We have never supposed for a moment that Bennett and Royle was complete. It’s like psychoanalysis in that sense: as Freud saw from early on his work, there is something necessarily interminable about it. We play around with things like that throughout the book. That’s part of the irony of having an opening chapter called ‘The Beginning’ and a final chapter called ‘The End’, while also insisting that the book can really be read starting with any chapter you care to pick. We knew with the first edition (in 1995) that the chapter headings might seem somehow haphazard: again, this was in keeping with our desire to avoid the merely predictable, and to undermine, insofar as this is possible, the supposition that there is a determinable number of ‘ideas in literature’ and that those are the only ones people need to know or think about. The first edition of our book actually came with the sub-title ‘key critical concepts’, but we decided by the time of the second edition in 1999 that this might give the wrong idea, so we dropped it out. One of the boring, even painful things about studying ‘theory’ (as it’s still sometimes called), especially in the form of a critical introduction or reader’s guide, is the idea that there are a specific array of different -isms that you need to be aware of and then you’re ready to go (leave college, get a life, etc). We want Bennett and Royle to retain a certain improvisatory, aleatory and spur-of-the-moment air, but also to fulfil the promise of being the Introduction it claims to be. Inevitably, then, we periodically discuss at some length the potential value and efficacy of
new chapters. With each new edition we have made what we regard as strategically desirable (and, we hope, enjoyable!) additions. For the second edition we included new chapters on ‘Monuments’, ‘Ghosts’, ‘Queer’ and ‘The Colony’. For the third edition in 2004 we added extra chapters on ‘Creative Writing’, ‘Moving Pictures’, ‘Mutant’ and ‘War’. The decision to write chapters on ‘Animals’ and ‘Eco’ for the fourth edition was based on a sense that these are perhaps the two ‘new’ areas of literary and cultural studies that are currently at the intellectual forefront and most urgently being debated. But questions about animals or animality, and about the environment and ecology are not, after all, so ‘new’: the former topic is already an explicit focus in several other chapters, including ‘Me’, ‘Racial Difference’ and ‘Mutant’; the latter topic is already explicitly at issue in our consistent focus on anthropocentrism and is implicit in everything we had earlier written about, for example, ‘text and world’ and ‘the uncanny’. We have over the years frequently talked about further chapters that we would like to add to the book. The internet has transformed things in significant respects: with the Bennett and Royle website we can now think about making other, perhaps different kinds of additions. That’s what has led us to offer the essays on ‘How to Read’ and ‘How to Write’ for the site. But we shall also go on fantasizing about possible new chapters for the book version and we’re always glad to hear from anyone who has a good suggestion they’d like to make. We might even decide to take up the suggestion!

4. Given the general trepidation with which students approach critical theory, do you enjoy teaching it?

Well, yes – but then we don’t see ‘teaching theory’ as separate from teaching literature, and for us teaching literature can be one of the most exciting and engaging aspects of our working lives. We might ask our students to read a ‘theory’ text – an essay by Roland Barthes, say, or by Homi Bhabha or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick – but we rarely do that in isolation from talking about literary texts. In that sense, reading theory doesn’t have to be any scarier than reading a play by Shakespeare or a poem by John Milton – in fact neither Shakespeare or Milton is particularly easy, and we believe that reading, say, Barthes’s The Pleasure of the Text is not a bad way to begin thinking about what happens in a play like Romeo and Juliet – or what happens to us when we read it or watch it on stage. One of the great pleasures of teaching literature, in fact, is helping students make connections between literary texts and more abstract philosophical or conceptual ideas – in short, with so-called ‘theory’. It’s often there, at that point, that something really interesting happens in a class – the point at which, say, a question about an allusion to Milton in a poem by John Keats begins to open a curiosity about questions of how poems get written, about the poet’s intention, literary tradition and language itself, and about what we think a poem is, and where it begins and where it ends.