

Claire Earnshaw

›Joining the Conversation‹: Literature Matters

- Eaglestone, Robert, *Literature: Why It Matters*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019. 123 S. [Preis: EUR 11,15] ISBN 978-1-5095-3232-2.

Even though the lamentation that the humanities are underfunded, understaffed and underappreciated is probably as old as the discipline itself, most humanist faculties would probably agree that these are still pressing issues – and the faculty of English literature would certainly not protest to be the exception. Robert Eaglestone's *Literature: why it matters* therefore seems an important addition to the Polity ›why it matters‹ series (tellingly all the contributions so far are subjects from the humanities). In his book, Eaglestone shows that he too is aware of the ongoing debates and anticipates that some readers might need persuading that their time and energy are well invested in fictional stories.

One common concern literary studies are regularly faced with is voiced through the fictional character of Mr Gradgrind from Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, who insists that »facts alone are wanted in life« – an argument that is certainly still brought forward in current discourses. Indeed some might ask what good fictional stories can do in times in which truth has become a contested concept and fact and fiction are increasingly hard to separate. Luckily, Eaglestone has some excellent answers for all the Mr Gradgrinds out there, making his book a passionate and persuasive plea that reading and studying literature is not only a pleasurable but also a valuable endeavour.

Literature – why it matters is divided into four short chapters, and even though they are all part of the larger argument, they can also be read separately, depending on the specific interest of the reader. Throughout his book, Eaglestone distinguishes between reading and studying literature, comparing the latter to an »intensified version« (24) of what we all engage in on a daily basis when we tell and receive stories. This distinction is helpful in that it opens up two strands of discussion and therefore includes and targets different audiences. There are those who can be categorised as what Virginia Woolf has called ›the common reader‹ (or those who are inspired to become one after reading this book), who may gain a new perspective on how reading is not just a pleasurable pastime but also has powerful effects even if one has never thought about or come across structuralist or poststructuralist ways of interpreting a text. While there are already a number of studies that highlight the positive effects of reading literature, e.g. for the generation of empathy, Eaglestone puts special emphasis on the communal aspect of reading and meaning-making, giving practical examples from the Reader project, which brings people together to share the experience of literature. Drawing on these practical examples not only circumvents the theoretical problems that arise when trying to talk about 'the' reader and possible reader responses, but it also gives a hands-on approach to literature that can easily be transferred to other contexts and does not rely on academic structures.

Secondly, Eaglestone shows what can be gained if we engage in the study of literature, arguing that what we learn is far more than the knowledge about literary periods and central texts. Rather he emphasises that students of literature are in high demand in the world of work as they bring skills that allow them to quickly and flexibly adapt to new situations or familiarise themselves with complex subject matters. Moreover, as one possible answer to Mr Gradgrind, he shows that understanding how fictional texts work, how they achieve certain effects is absolutely essential if one wants to comprehend non-fictional discourses; after all, how media can

manipulate us or how even seemingly objective facts can be twisted in order to reach a certain goal can be studied *par excellence* in fictional narratives.

The underlying premise of Eaglestone's book is his notion of literature as a »living conversation« (6) – a metaphor that comes up in all chapters and holds the argument together. To explain why this metaphor is so fitting, Eaglestone first shows the limits of more traditional approaches (he for example refers to historical or etymological ways of defining literature) and concludes that literature should not be wedged into pre-existing formulas but be treated »more like a verb than a noun« (5). The metaphor of the living conversation proves to be an excellent choice, as it offers a new perspective on literary studies and makes this book such an interesting and refreshing read.

The ramifications of Eaglestone's dynamic and open approach to literature will briefly be discussed in the following. Firstly, it highlights that literature does not mean the mere accumulation of facts. As pointed out by Eaglestone, knowing the publication date of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is of little or no worth if the reader has no connection to this particular story and is not included in the conversation about what this text means to him/her. This is directly linked to the second point, namely the question about how we teach literature. Again, Eaglestone draws on his notion of a living conversation to highlight that teaching should not mean heaping as much information as possible on one's students but that teaching literature means a dialogue in which all participants have an equal say in negotiating the meaning of a text. Lastly, and maybe most importantly, literature as a living conversation does away with the notion that reading is a solitary act, i.e. the reader is not pictured as a detached figure sitting in an ivory tower but rather seen as being part of and participating in what Stanley Fish has called an interpretative community. This places literature and literary scholars at the very centre of social and cultural concerns, assigning both readers and scholars an essential role in joining and shaping »the conversation of our species« (84).

The only point of criticism one might bring forward to this excellent book concerns the question whom Eaglestone's work is trying to persuade (this, I assume, has a lot to do with the format of the ›why it matters‹ series). As mentioned above, Eaglestone includes both sections on reading and studying literature, and despite the many advantages of this approach, the distinction in parts also creates different levels of complexity that at times appear hard to conciliate. If Eaglestone's aim is to persuade those people who happily claim to have never read a novel, then his book might have benefited from more textual examples, as it may be hard to understand why Tennyson's poem can move people to tears if one has no idea what this poem looks like. If, on the other hand, his hope for the text is to encourage students and prospective students to (further) pursue literature as a field of research then some parts of the book could have explored in more detail the interesting questions posed especially in the introduction.

All in all, this book takes the reader seriously, it does not shy away from theoretical excursions but still firmly grounds literary studies in the every-day, it provides plenty of food for further thought and suggestions for future research – in short, it succeeds in initiating the very living conversation that Eaglestone rightly names as the very core of our discipline.

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