2. A CONVERSATIONAL INQUIRY

Renske: Everything comes back to that, yes, the bad view he has on the world. Of his past, especially. Because in his past, he was used to being less important and stuff. That’s why he is now … well, sad.

Danique: Yes, he thinks the world is bad and that everything goes wrong.

Aike: Like with that friend of his or something, what’s his name … The time they biked home and he would say: nothing wrong? So that kind of shows that he thinks everybody is that way, in a way. Everybody’s boring and … come on, what’s that word?

Danique: A little like self-pity (‘zelfmedelijken’)

Aike: Yes, there is no fun really. Or when he describes that party. He’s kind of saying that the party was no fun at all either.

Anne Wil: Mariah Carey being played all the time …

(Literature Classroom, Nijmegen, the Netherlands)

Fiona: [The writing] shows he knows oddities about her … her back door is described as ‘solid’, ‘open’. Could be a metaphor for herself? Vulnerable? She seems like an independent woman, but the man comes in and she breaks down … she becomes a detail in the house as inanimate and lifeless as the doors and the lightshades. Nameless. This is just why he only does it once.’

Liz: He doesn’t need to connect with her


(Literature Classroom, Melbourne, Australia)

Teachers listen attentively to the classroom conversations in which their students engage. This often involves delicate judgments about whether to stay silent or intervene. Should I move the discussion along by asking a question or making a comment? Or would it be better to allow the conversation to continue, however awkwardly the students might be expressing their insights? Awkward or not, there is value in providing opportunities for young people to find the words they need in order to converse with one another in classroom settings, building on each other’s sentences in an effort to jointly construct meaning and reach understanding.

Talk is an especially vital medium for learning in literature classrooms, where the focus is likely to be on words and what they mean. The snippets of classroom dialogue above, involving students from secondary schools in the Netherlands and...
Australia, each turn on the meaning of particular words. Aike struggles to find the right word to capture her personal impressions of a character’s attitudes and values (“… come on, what’s that word?”), while Fiona ponders the words the author has chosen to convey a certain tone or mood (“her back door is described as “solid”, “open””). These conversations – recorded in classrooms at opposite ends of the world – show young people self-consciously selecting words and weighing up their meaning amongst the range of possible meanings those words might contain. Such reflexivity is arguably a key disposition that interpretive discussions of this type are designed to cultivate in literature students.

As editors of this collection, also living at opposite ends of the world, we read such classroom conversations and appreciate anew how we all live within language. Indeed, we are reminded how our sense of life’s potential (for both good and evil) is enhanced when we (teachers, academics and students) can trace the ways words mediate our exchanges and relationships with one another.

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This book enacts a ‘conversational inquiry’ in much the same spirit as the interpretive discussions in which these young people are engaging. Our focus is on the teaching of literature in secondary education as it is practised and understood by teachers and academics in a range of settings around the world. We have invited educators in the Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, England and the United States to reflect on the value of a literary education within their respective cultural settings. We have specifically asked them to write ‘essays’ about literature teaching, using the word ‘essay’ as Montaigne first coined the term, namely as a vehicle by which they could each ‘trial’ or inquire into aspects of their practice as teachers of literature or as teacher educators and researchers who are committed to the value of a literature education (cf. Cohen, 1958/1970). We have been less interested in assembling a collection of papers that reported on research on the teaching of literature within their national settings (though such research constitutes an important reference point for each contribution) than in conducting an inquiry by bringing these voices together. Our aim has been to capture the learning that we have all experienced by participating in the conversation presented in this book. Rather than working toward a set of conclusions, we have tried to stage a conversation that remains open, one which readers will be able to take up in their own local settings in their own conversations with colleagues and other people interested in the teaching of literature.

At the core of the book, as we have indicated in our prefatory remarks, are conversations between literature teachers from Australia and the Netherlands: Prue, Bella, Mies and Ramon. The snippets of classroom talk at the start of this chapter were recorded as part of the classroom-based inquiry originally conducted in both Australia and the Netherlands, when teachers in each of these settings invited critical friends to observe their lessons and then talk with them afterwards about their teaching. The purpose of these visits was to construct richly specific accounts of literature teaching in each country in order to better understand literature.