

Grounded literacies: the power of listening to, telling and performing community stories

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Abstract

This article offers an analysis of community arts to develop an argument about the power of vernacular literacies. We draw on Paul Willis' work about grounded aesthetics and everyday symbolic creativity in common culture, and Scollon and Scollon's notions of geosemiotics, to analyse a community play written and performed in a council estate in Nottingham, England. In particular, we argue that Scollon and Scollon's idea of the 'semiotic aggregate' offers a useful analytical tool for understanding and evaluating the significance of participation, recognition, representation and place in multimodal texts.

Key words: geosemiotics, community arts, grounded aesthetics, vernacular literacies

Introduction

This article is about the power of a text to engage a reluctant audience. The text in question – a community play – derived much of its power from being embedded in a particular place and time. Paradoxically, though, that same quality of 'embeddedness' can also be understood as circumscribing the text's power.

We explore these ideas through a close focus on one particular example, which we explain in some detail, because neither the text nor the context will be known to most readers. But, while this argument about the potential power of highly embedded texts is local, it is not intended to be parochial: we think our example raises important issues about text production, engagement, multimodality and representation. And although the example is from the field of community arts, we argue that the issues we discuss are also relevant to schools where, characteristically, context-dependent texts are routinely produced and discussed by communities of readers and viewers, and where the audience is also sometimes difficult to engage. In this particular article, space constraints require that we suggest, rather than develop, these connections to school literacy practices. Our focus here, then, is on the power and value of celebrating the local and vernacular through communal artistic practice.

We begin by explaining the context for our study and establishing a methodological and theoretical framework for the example we discuss. In the second part of the article we describe and analyse the text we have chosen, *The Road to Bilborough*, a play about a council estate in Nottingham written by Andy Barrett. (No attempts have been made to anonymise the work or the location.)

Looking at the local

The practical context for our study was a commission, in the autumn of 2008, from Hanby and Barrett, a small (two person) independent community arts company experienced in creating site-specific events. The commission came from the University of Nottingham through a small internal unit that had been established to oversee the university's sponsorship of a local Academy. The Academy was due to (and did) open in September 2009, replacing an existing secondary school in Bilborough. In the final year of the predecessor school, as the Academy was taking shape, the university was keen to signal the inclusive, community-oriented approach it intended to take towards the school, and its commitment to the area of Bilborough as a whole. It therefore engaged in a range of community-focused projects, which included commissioning the play.

Our own engagement with this aspect of the Academy sponsorship was as educational researchers with an interest in the impact and processes of the arts in different community settings. The two company members were interested in researching their own practice and, particularly, in finding out more about the impact of their work on different communities. We therefore agreed to set up a research collaboration.

This research collaboration was limited by the available resources of time and money, but strengthened by the interest of all concerned in understanding more, from their own differing perspectives, about how community arts work. We decided to adopt an ethnographic approach to data collection and we secured the services of a skilled ethnographic researcher, Susan Jones, who tracked *The Road to Bilborough*

project from its start to the final performances in April 2009. We shared and discussed field notes and associated datasets (audience questionnaires and transcribed interviews conducted with cast members) within this group. We regarded *The Road to Bilborough* project as the start of a research collaboration (as, indeed, it has turned out to be, because the five of us are continuing to develop the research together).

Our methodological decisions were rooted in admiration for the fine-grained insights into vernacular literacies revealed by classic ethnographic studies in the field: by, for example, Barton and Hamilton (1998), Purcell Gates (1995) and Brice Heath (1983). The approach draws upon Moll's and Gonzales' theorisation of "local funds of knowledge" (Gonzales and Moll, 2002; Gonzales et al., 2005; Moll, 1992), which we have written about elsewhere (see, e.g., Mottram and Hall, 2009; Thomson, 2002; Thomson and Hall, 2008). Moll's work provides an underpinning foundation for the kind of principled, respectful community engagement and educational enterprise we wished to promote through the Bilborough project.

However, this particular article about the value and power of the text draws specifically on Paul Willis' (1990) work on grounded aesthetics, and the analytical approach we adopted is derived from Scollon and Scollon's (2003) work on geosemiotics. So we move on now to discuss these works in more detail.

Grounded aesthetics and geosemiotic analysis

In his book *Common Culture*, Paul Willis points out that 'art' is more often a category of exclusion than inclusion. Many people feel disconnected from the institutions and genres of high (or even middlebrow) art, seeing them as "special and heightened, not ordinary and everyday". Willis argues passionately against this, insisting that "there is a vibrant symbolic life and symbolic creativity in everyday life, everyday activity and expression – even if it is sometimes invisible, looked down upon or spurned" (1990, p. 1).

For Willis, like Raymond Williams before him, 'common' culture is shared, inclusive, hardy; it deals with the ordinary (Williams, 1958; Willis, 1990). Symbolic work and creativity are central to this common culture: they produce individual identities; they place those identities in time and place and in networks of relationship; they develop and affirm a sense of "being able to apply power to the world to change it – however minutely" (1990, p. 12). Willis uses the term 'grounded aesthetics' to identify the dynamic of symbolic activity in everyday situations. He calls grounded aesthetics "the yeast of common culture", its concerns being with the "qualities of living symbolic activities rather than the qualities of things" (1990, p. 22). Grounded

aesthetics therefore emphasises people, processes and effects rather than the art object per se:

"The aesthetic effect is not in the text or artefact. It is part of the sensuous/emotive/cognitive creativities of human receivers, especially as they produce a stronger sense of emotional and cognitive identity as expanded capacity and power – even if only in the possibility of future recognitions of a similar kind" (Willis, 1990, p. 24, original emphasis).

Whereas high art and traditional aesthetics often encourage the reification of objects – the 'unlocking' of a literary text through close reading, for example, or of an abstract art work accessible only to those inducted into the codes of interpretation – the emphasis in grounded aesthetics is on mediation of the object or text to encourage change, engagement and individual or group agency. For Willis, grounded aesthetics is "a making specific . . . of the ways in which the received natural and social world is made human" to individuals and "made, to however small a degree (even if finally symbolic), controllable by them" (1990, p. 22).

We will argue that these ideas are pertinent to *The Road to Bilborough*.

Scollon and Scollon's geosemiotic approach is also centrally concerned with understanding the symbolism of everyday life and the ways in which meanings are layered and assembled to create significance and resonances. As linguists, the Scollons' primary concern is with language as a semiotic system; in *Discourses in Place* (2003), where the term 'geosemiotics' is introduced, their interest is in the significance of signs in the material world, "the ways in which language or discourse is part of a perennial weave of individual objects, time and space" (2003, p. 14). They use the term geosemiotics to refer to the social meanings of the material placement of signs (2003, p. 211), to "emphasize that indexicality, action, and identity are all anchored in the physical spaces and real times of our material world" (2003, p. 14). They identify four elements for geosemiotic analysis: the social actor; the 'interaction order' (derived from Erving Goffman's categorisation of the forms of social interaction people produce when they meet); the visual semiotics and the place semiotics. We refer to these elements in our analysis of *The Road to Bilborough*.

We also found Scollon and Scollon's (2003) notion of the 'semiotic aggregate' useful in thinking about the power of multimodal texts like the community play. The argument here is that different semiotic systems work together and in dialogue with one another to create meaning about a particular place and a particular time. The 'semiotic aggregate' is the composite meaning that these systems of signs and symbols create – a fuller meaning together than the individual elements yield separately (see Nichols et al., 2009, for

an excellent example of how semiotic aggregates work to construct the idea of a 'good' parent as one who is concerned to promote literacy learning). This in our view offers a way of thinking about the potential power and value of communal arts activities because it encourages a focus on the people, the place, the point in time, the processes and the visual and linguistic texts in combination with one another. It acknowledges the multimodality of current textual practices and an aesthetics that is located in people's responses and engagement rather than primarily in the artefacts or texts. We think, in these respects, that geosemiotic analysis has much to offer the evaluation of communal arts practices.

We turn now to a discussion of the context of the study and to the play itself.

The community context

Bilborough was not an immediately promising site for community arts activity. A large post-war council estate, built in part by the labour of German detainees, it was designed on garden suburb principles with curved cul de sacs that housed families who worked in the bicycle and cigarette factories and in the local mines. Nowadays, many of the council houses have been sold off to private buyers and many are in disrepair. The factories and mines have closed and the young post-war population has grown old; one of the estate's original secondary schools has already closed and Bilborough now has Nottingham's highest percentage of old people living alone. It is not the poorest estate in the city but it is in the poorest 10 percent nationally.

There was no obvious tradition of engagement in community arts events in Bilborough, and all the advice from professionals used to working in the area was that no one would participate. The field notes document a variety of warnings, about the low aspirations of the local residents, 'consultation fatigue' and the difficulty of getting people along to meetings or persuading them to respond to questionnaires. There were concerns that people would be negative about the project, or confused about the officialdom the artists would be seen as representing, or worried about the use of money or the university's role:

"[Community worker] is keen to warn of potential negativity from residents, who are used to making demands of the council, etc. and may expect that A and J have the power to change things. J says that they're aware of this response and are prepared: 'We can't do anything about dog muck, we're just going to put on a play'" (Field notes, 21 October 2008).

"There are issues raised by the involvement of the university, with suspicion over motives etc., as well as

cynicism about the justification for funding – 'how many kidney machines would that buy, then?'" (Field notes, 2 October 2008).

"An accusation of us being 'development workers' is levelled at us. 'Sat in the office ...'" (Field notes, 6 November 2008).

Professionals who knew the area advised that the company would not be able to recruit a cast of local volunteers and that, if they did, the show would play to empty houses. Bilborough residents were, according to these accounts, disconnected from and querulous about the arts.

The text: *The Road to Bilborough*

The Road to Bilborough is a fast moving social comedy. It has two main narrative strands, both concerned with government officials' views of the Bilborough estate. The main plot is set in the 1950s; it concerns a government agent on a mission to understand more about community life on the estates being built in the post-war housing boom. An idealist given to flights of purple prose, Agent P explains the mission to Nigel, one of his minions, at the start of the play:

"A new estate that's being built in Bilborough, though it's pretty much completed now. Hundreds upon hundreds of young families being moved in from Nottingham. Working class the lot of them. Arriving by bicycle, bus and corporation vans. Day by day they're walking up the half finished roads clutching keys to their brand new houses, away from the ties of family and friends that so many of them are used to. And we want to get in there. To find out what's going on. To see whether or not people can forge a new community. I want you to put together a crack team to see if there's anyone out there that we can use to help us gather information on what exactly they're all up to" (Barrett, 2009, p. 5).

Nigel tours the estate in an unobtrusive 1950s fish and chip van and finally recruits a family of four (code name: The Bilboroughs) who agree to act as spies on their neighbours, having been tempted by offers of unlimited access to tinned pink salmon. The main plot therefore furnishes numerous opportunities for information giving about community life in Bilborough in the 1950s; it also suggests 1950s domestic life through frequent return to the Bilboroughs' meal-time conversations about their social activities, schooling and work. Meanwhile, Agent P, posh and middle class with an absent wife and judgemental daughters, hankers after the warmth of Bilborough life revealed through his investigations. Eventually he defects:

"And so I crossed over the line. I parachuted into territory I should have been observing. I played table tennis at Old Park farm, watched the Catholic Church of St Hugh's

being opened, shopped at Marsdens and Farrons and Scoop, Appleyards and Purdeys, Pearce the chemist's and Fords. I got a job with Crossland Filters on the new industrial estate and would arrive with all the men and women, and talk to my fellow workers in the canteen and watch them kick a football around on the greens and sports fields there. I went to the talent nights at The Pelican and the yearly trips with the other men. And I was happy. So very, very happy ..." (Barrett, 2009, p. 39).

The second plot strand is set in the modern day; it concerns two think tank officials charged with improving social cohesion in Bilborough. They too have come across the 1950s material about community building; the narrator introduces them with this warning:

"... just as we have access to this material, so do They ... wonks who live in Think Tanks, wondering how to create a stronger sense of community in places such as these. Social cohesion is the word they use out there, in policy land. And this is the thing. They need somewhere to try out their ideas. And just as in the fifties Bilborough was seen as something of a human laboratory so it is to become again. How do we know this? Well we have acquired leaked information and it is quite shocking. We were not sure whether to divulge this as part of our show but ultimately felt that we have a duty to do so. What you are about to see is based on transcripts of secret discussions. All of the images and video material seen as part of this re-enactment are genuine" (Barrett, 2009, p. 22).

The audience then witnesses scenes of the policy wonks discussing, amongst other ideas, the reintroduction of maypoles, village greens and rhubarb growing competitions. As they are discussing the viability of turning Bilborough into a tourist attraction, a model 1950s estate, they receive a phone call telling them that "There are plans afoot to simply flatten the place and build a mega Tesco's" so they move off in search of their next frappuccino.

The Road to Bilborough is constructed in short scenes; it moves quickly between plot lines and between text types. The play begins with a spoof 1950s grainy and jerky black and white public information film, which uses maps and images from local archives and has a plummy voiceover and rousing music:

"... this is a new world. A post war world. A world where men are returning home from conflict. Where they want a better future for their children. Where the sacrifices they have made for the good of the nation must be repaid. Bilborough must ... become a beacon; of hope, of promise, of a better future for all, forging a new community where the working classes come together in the best houses that can be built utilising the most modern methods of the day ... Welcome to the future. Welcome to Bilborough" (Barrett, 2009, pp. 2–3).

The high tone of the opening is immediately punctuated by the narrator, who introduces the main plotline by explaining that the film is a piece of previously unseen propaganda. There are three other short films in the play. Two are in the same spoof 1950s 'documentary' style: one is about the Co-operative Women's Guild meetings, with an archly patronising commentary admiring the ladies' independence of spirit; the other shows schoolchildren in their vests and knickers doing keep fit exercises in formation on the field. The third film is a Monty Pythonesque parody about being a good neighbour with queues of Bilborough residents lending one another everything from cups of sugar to buckets of jelly.

The play also makes use of a large number of original photographs of local people, places and events. Some of these are doctored to include members of 'the Bilborough family' looking shifty as they engage in their espionage activities. There are also fictionalised diary entries recording, for example, a small earthquake in the area in 1957, and a series of personal testimonies derived from interviews with different individuals about their own stories of moving to Bilborough. These testimonies are presented as oral histories, spoken by four different actors who step up from the audience and speak from the floor rather than the stage. The screen at the back of the stage suggests the textual authenticity of these first person narratives by showing a typed fragment of the account we are hearing under the heading 'Case Study One (Two/Three/Four)'.

The play ends with an account of the families growing older, the young people flourishing but then leaving the area because there were no houses available for them on the estate. In the final speech of the play, the narrator returns to one of the recurrent images of community life – the bonfire parties – and, as the cast hand out raw potatoes to members of the audience, he adopts a mock heroic, elegiac tone:

"So take these home, these potatoes. Potatoes that used to be grown here, when Bilborough was a country village with farms and pigsties, a tithe barn and horse troughs and a little old church with an ivy laden tower ... Take them home, these symbols of those wonderful bonfire nights when the new families of the modern estate came together as one. Take them home, bake them in their jackets, give them to your neighbour and tell them what it represents. This place where you live, that must therefore be a part of you; this place that, like any other, can always be made better. And remember the things that have already been achieved and ask yourself what part you will play in the next chapter of this story".

The reception of the text

In the event, and despite the fears of Bilborough's professional community workers, nearly 400 local

residents jammed into the five different venues where *The Road to Bilborough* was staged in April 2009. On the night of the play, the local Baptist minister commented that she had not seen so many people in the church since the 1960s. The audience were vocal in their appreciation; they found the play amusing and interesting and they advised their friends and families to get along to see it. The 'Wigman Ladies', who had acted in the spoof about the Cooperative Women's Guild, said that one of their members had actually fallen off her chair laughing when she saw the film.

For local members of the cast, the experience of being in the play meant different things. A young woman who had taken an acting course at college had been encouraged to audition by her mother, who saw an advertisement about the play in the local newspaper. She felt the experience had given her confidence and she enjoyed finding out about Bilborough's history ("You never hear people talking about your area. It's interesting to hear about where you live"). Also the play had "caused a conversation between the family":

"Her granddad is very ill in hospital at the moment, but they were all talking about the play yesterday at the hospital, her granddad sharing his memories of Bilborough and X and her dad telling him some of the stories from the play" (Field note, March 2009).

Another local resident, a widow who said she liked to keep herself busy, had seen the notice in the doctor's surgery. Her work colleagues helped her learn her lines and came along to support her in the performance. A man in his 1950s was a member of the local writers' group; he had not done any performing before but was interested in "the writing side of things". A primary school-aged girl who lived on the outskirts of the area had sad memories of Bilborough because a close family member had died while she lived there; being in the play had helped her think differently about Bilborough and remember some happy memories.

The process of recruiting the cast had not been without difficulties. As the professional workers had predicted, there was an initial reluctance amongst local people to take on roles and some of the parts had to be rewritten to fit the volunteers available, or taken by people from outside Bilborough. Many, however, did agree to be filmed: 57 pupils and a teacher from the local primary school participated in the 'Keep Fit' film; 34 people participated in the 'Good Neighbour' film and 10 of the Wigman Ladies group appeared in the film about the Cooperative Women's Guild. In all, 115 people took part in the production and a further 14 individuals and seven institutions are thanked on the programme credits.

The range and number of people and institutions involved reflected the process that the community artists went through to create the play. Outsiders to Bilborough themselves, they spent a lot of time in the

area from October to December. The field notes chart the ways in which they followed leads and built up networks of relationships. They began in the local cafe by the market and introduced themselves at the library, the pub and the churches. They enlisted the support of the Police Community Support Officer, the doctor, the community workers, the chairs of the Local Action Group and the Education Improvement Partnership. They visited the schools, met the children on the School Council, went to the Scout and Guide groups, the mother and toddler groups and the drop-in sessions at the library and the community centre. They read the notices in the shop windows and went along to bingo, coffee mornings and to meet local councillors. They taught the pensioners in the sheltered housing how to use their new Nintendo Wii; they visited reading and writing groups, reminiscence groups in the residential home for the elderly and infirm, a service of remembrance at the church. They drank tea and listened to people, who were generally willing to tell them their stories of how and why they had come to Bilborough. They collected impressions, made notes and recorded stories which they transcribed and categorised alphabetically under the headings: arrival, bonfires, cinemas, dancing, doctors, gardening, local landscape, neighbours, other social activities, rats, shopping, work and youth activities.

Learning from the local

It is clear then that both the process of making *The Road to Bilborough* and the play itself celebrated common culture. The play values the symbolic and creative work of everyday life: the bonfires, the gardens and home-making. The process of researching the material for the play valued the cultural assets of Bilborough: the libraries, the clubs, the churches, people's crafts and hobbies and pastimes. The play is rich in everyday symbolism: the running gag of the tinned salmon with its connotations of snobbery and luxury; the acquiring of 'mod cons' in the form of a shared washing machine bought jointly by neighbours and wheeled backwards and forwards through the back garden hedge; the warmth of the bonfires; the plain but worthy potato left in the hands of the audience at the play's end.

There is evidence, from the interviews with the cast, referred to above, and from the willingness of larger numbers of Bilborough residents to participate in the production that followed *The Road to Bilborough*, that local people valued and appreciated the play and that, for some of them, the experience of being involved was powerful. For the community artists, the enthusiastic reception the play received was rewarding, the more so because the enterprise seemed risky and possibly doomed to failure at the beginning. Nevertheless, they, like us, were left with questions about the legacy and value of the work, the questions, in fact, that had led us to develop our initial research collaboration.

These questions relate, of course, to the grounded aesthetics which informed the project. The play is not, in this case, *The Thing*: its artistic and community values relate to the people who engage with it; it works principally as a mediating device with a powerful existence over a temporary time span but with no obvious legacy, other than a difficult-to-define impact on the cast, audience and other contributors to the process of creating it. The text of the play remains unpublished because its commercial value as a literary object is circumscribed and defined by the specific community it concerns. Yet the whole enterprise depends fundamentally on the power of the text, which in turn depends on the skill of the playwright and of the company in developing the text into a series of live performances. The original commission by the university acknowledges this relationship between the artists' labour and the desired symbolic and material outcomes – the symbolic signification of the university's concern for the community and the actual, if tentative, building of new community networks within Bilborough.

Looked at in terms of a geosemiotic analysis, the prime social actors in *The Road to Bilborough* were the community artists and the cast; the other social actors included the participants in the community research, the audience and, in the background, the university staff. Social actors bring with them their different histories and motivations, a degree of social agency through the roles they perform and a physical presence at different points in the process. *The Road to Bilborough* project brought together social actors of different ages and different professional and social class backgrounds. They came together in particular forms of interaction which can be generally characterised, in terms of this analysis, as 'withs', i.e. two or more individuals focusing their attention primarily on one another (Goffman, 1959). These interactions were mainly conversational encounters, meetings and 'celebrative occasions', social interactions which are tightly ritualised, where the actions of all participants are governed by prior scripts for performance (Scollon and Scollon, 2003, p. 208).

These interactions between the principal social actors were unusual, both within Bilborough and between the Bilborough residents and the outsiders. Within the community, any interactions between the participants were more likely to be 'contact' (i.e. fleeting acts of mutual recognition) or service encounters (related to work). Interaction between the outsiders and the Bilborough residents was relatively unlikely, particularly in the forms the play offered. Indeed, the play itself takes up the issue of social interaction, showing the separate worlds of the officials and the Bilborough residents, the difficulties of bridging the class divide (other than by 'defecting'), and the linguistic manifestations of this divide, in the past and in the present day. Countering this is the idealised 1950s Bilborough community, with its conversations and celebrations, which are themselves being recreated for the audience

through the performances and through the process of developing the play.

In terms of visual semiotics, photographs played an important role in both the creation of the play and in the final production. Many of the conversations between the community members and the artists in the development phase of the work were mediated by photographs of people, places and events. Personal photos were reinterpreted through the lens of social and cultural history and, as such, came to be valued in different, sometimes more abstract, ways. Many of the photographs were featured in the final performance of the play, sometimes within the documentary texts, as 'evidence', sometimes with photo-shopped additions for comic effect, and sometimes to create a particular mood or make a social observation. One man in the audience recognised himself (with pleasure) as the bridegroom in a wedding photo supplied by another Bilborough resident to illustrate the church. Other photos showed film stars of the 1950s coming out of local shops – John Wayne buying a kettle at Baxters, Elizabeth Taylor coming out of Greggs with a cheese and onion pasty and James Dean in the aisle of the Bilborough branch of Iceland, the frozen food store. Another set of photos played with the idea of a Monte Carlo-style race through Bilborough, but with mobility scooters, a notable feature of the area, in place of the racing cars.

This creative use of photography, for information, nostalgia, reminiscence, recognition and humour, has strong roots in popular cultural literacies. Similarly, the spoof films used in the play have connections to the carefully crafted homemade video parodies that are posted to YouTube and a sub-genre of television satires on early public service film-making (e.g. in the work of Harry Enfield and Armstrong and Miller on British television). The visual artefacts used in the creation of the play represent everyday acts of symbolic creativity; the references are to common, popular culture. By these means the visual semiotics of the work take up one of the play's main themes: how Bilborough is to be represented, both to its own residents and to the outside world.

Because the play is about Bilborough, the semiotics of place are foregrounded. The exclusivity of the focus on place which, as we have already commented, limits the currency of *The Road to Bilborough* as a work of art that will be published or performed elsewhere, paradoxically serves semiotically to intensify the value ascribed to Bilborough as a particular place worthy of artistic attention and collaborative endeavour. The care taken to ensure that performances took place in five different venues – the library, the Baptist church, the hall of the Church of England church and in two different community centres – was also significant. Choosing to perform in different places within such a small geographical area symbolically underlines the commitment to Bilborough as a place (rather than to the various institutions). It also signalled a willingness to

find creative solutions to staging and technical difficulties in order to acknowledge the symbolic importance to Bilborough of each of the venues.

As for the play itself, both the process of creating it and the final text offer rich examples of informal, vernacular literacies being unearthed, developed and celebrated in a community considered to be uninterested in the arts and judged unlikely to respond to what the professional artists had to offer. As other ethnographic approaches to community literacies have demonstrated, rich veins of local and vernacular artistic and cultural practices are available to be mined if the approach is open, respectful and genuinely inquiring.

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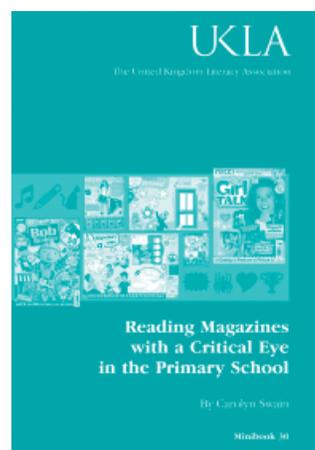
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