

## The books that inspired Sue Currell: “Alice Walker’s ‘The Color Purple’ was the book that led me back into academia after I had dropped out of an English degree.”

Aug 26 2012

*Sue Currell is Senior Lecturer in American Literature at the University of Sussex. Here she discusses her turbulent years as a student at university the first time around, and how Alice Walker’s work made an enormous impact, having come across **The Color Purple** on a course surveying women writers. Sue also notes how American Studies, which takes in history, politics, popular culture, film and art, suits those with eclectic interests and anyone who strives to understand the whole picture.*

I always loved reading but grew up in a house where books were borrowed from the local library rather than owned or bought. My parents, who had no further education, inspired my love of reading by taking me each week to get the next four books, an act that encouraged me to believe that I was entitled to an unending wealth of books for free. At the time I had no perception of the hierarchy or snobbery surrounding books, I didn’t really differentiate between those that particularly appealed to me, from the English classics by Austen, Bronte and Hardy, to detective stories and historical fiction – the latter of which were dubbed “hysterical” by my appalled English teacher, who shamed me in class for my trash interest when we were asked to tell him what we had read that week. Maybe that’s why my research interests have often followed the fine line between high art and mass culture. At the time I also fancied myself a poet and read all of the Romantics. Due to hanging out with older students from a nearby art college, I moved on to European modernism and fell for Camus and Kafka in particular. I was soaking up Gogol and Chekov too, enough to spur me to start learning Russian. Looking back it amazes me that I never came across any of these writers at school – “English” was very narrowly English then. Likewise, the only American book we ever looked at was Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. I don’t think any of us, at 13 or so, had any idea what we were reading about as we had no context for it.

I think I was the only one from my comprehensive school class

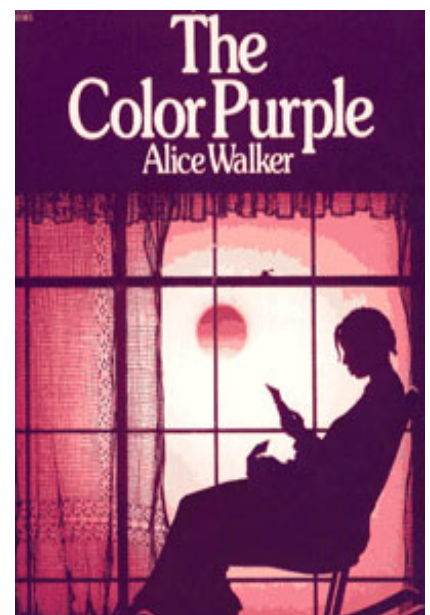
I think I was the only one from my comprehensive school class who ended up going to university and I was hopelessly unprepared, despite all my reading. I had no Latin so Old English was a particular challenge even though I had fared well with Chaucer at school. I'm not saying that reciting Beowulf from the original doesn't have merit, but I had imagined university as a community of creative scholars and intellectuals, developing new ideas, poetry and philosophies. Before leaving for university I read Simone de Beauvoir's autobiography *The Prime of Life* to get some idea of what intellectual life might be like, so I was sorely disillusioned. I found instead, distant ossified professors, stolid reading lists and students mostly there for the hormone and alcohol rush. Having discovered that the only female author I would study was long dead, I dropped out.



Simone de Beauvoir

While working I continued to read, study and take evening classes and it was at the Polytechnic of Central London (now University of Westminster) that I encountered *The Color Purple* on a course surveying women writers. It worked a revolution on my mind that had become so habituated to the white European voice. I had loved reading Virginia Woolf's essays and novels but Walker made her seem an anachronism. Immediately I wanted to know more about the author, her context, the history that had produced such a work of fiction. I decided that I would study whatever degree that put this book on a reading list, which turned out to be American Studies at Sussex. Finding American Studies was akin to personally discovering a new intellectual world. The degree was suited to my eclectic background and allowed me to pursue a multitude of other interests in history and politics, in popular culture, film and art. I had found my calling, quite by surprise to myself, and it's a great satisfaction and pride to me that I am now a senior lecturer for that degree.

While it's a long time since I read *The Color Purple*, and the Spielberg film somewhat ruined it for me with its schmaltzy sentimentalism, I still think of it as the catalyst that made me return to university to study. Set in the 1930s (which later became my predominant research interest), the elliptical use of letters and vernacular dialogue incorporated the economy of modernism with the drama, emotion and politics of classical literature. In it, Walker conveyed social deprivation, violence, and cruelty and yet also showed love, joy and pleasure. It's an incredible statement of humanity in a dehumanized environment. It's also an immensely skillful examination of silences: a dissertation on the literacy of illiteracy. Although I never returned to the novel for teaching or research, it showed me that there was a whole new seam of



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brilliant art and ideas to discover. For me, the term “English Literature” can’t quite capture the breadth and depth of it.

I’ve read many excellent books in my field in the past five years but Joshua Miller’s [Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism](#) (2011) has stood out to me. It’s a model study for my subject: meticulous archival research, interdisciplinary, politically engaged and theoretically informed while clearly articulated. The book examines American modernist literature’s engagement with notions of colonizing monolingual American English to show the oppositional politics manifested by linguistic experiments in literature. He shows how accented literary voices contiguously explore and express loss, sorrow and trauma, while managing to advance resistance to the framework of totalizing hegemonic linguistic practices. Looking back, this was exactly the iconoclastic trope and arc of resistant hope that appealed to me in Walker’s novel as well.

I’m still quite whimsical in my spare time reading. I’ve just been reading lots of American pulp fiction for a new course that I’ll be teaching but I like to relax with non-fiction, histories, journalism and biographies unrelated to my work: Alison Light’s [Mrs. Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life in Bloomsbury](#) (2008) riveted me, as my grandmother had been a scullery maid in Sussex during that period. Thanks to state-funded libraries, comprehensive education and free university education, I was given a key to the world of books, whereas my grandmother could only peep through the keyhole.

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