

My Turning Point Story
JMR by Tony Horitz

I was sixteen. O Level exams done. Not particularly well. But passed. I wanted to do English A Level, because I got a buzz from writing stories. I still do. But this particular story is about what happened after I made this discovery. Actually, it's about my A Level English teacher, J.M. Ramage. I'd never been in his class before, but heard he had a cruel streak. He'd once mocked my elder brother for failing to pronounce 'Prime Minister' clearly – asking him exactly what a 'minister of prying' would do? As well as being a master of sarcasm, he was also reputedly a crack shot with chalk, once flicking a lump so forcefully it bounced in and out of a garrulous schoolboy's open mouth.

So I was nervous for my first Literature class. There we were, pens in hand, ready to copy down what the Master told us, to note the lists of critical texts we had to read around the subject. JMR sat down and amazed me by putting his brogued feet up on the desk. But what surprised me even more was what he said after outlining the seemingly endless list of classic and modern texts we were to encounter on the course. 'I don't want you to read any critical works about this literature. You're too young to have sufficient judgment to deal with the critics critically'. When we looked bemused he added: 'you'll just write down what they say – and what will you learn? No, you have to learn to think for yourselves first. So read all the literature, then read it again, and we'll talk about it together in class. That's how you learn. The critics are banned!'

So began our two years of English Literature with JMR. No chalk was thrown, nor in my memory, much sarcasm uttered. Instead, I recall long, long hours reading Shakespeare, Milton, Forster, Hardy and Chekhov and talking about them in class. JMR listened to us in a way no teacher – nor indeed any other adult – ever had, sometimes agreeing with us, sometimes not, before urging us to think more deeply. This activity soon became equally pleasurable to creative writing.

I did come to discover the 'critics' at university and have had my reading enriched by their erudition and scholarship in many ways since. But I shall always be grateful for JMR, for making me learn that learning isn't about copying down facts or experts' opinions, but about forming your own judgments, based on thinking things out and talking about them in a group. And that's the approach I've always used in my own teaching work for 30 years.

I recently found out that JMR had died quite young, after suffering cancer. While saddened to hear this, I was pleased to learn that he was immortalized in a poem by his friend and colleague U.A. Fanthorpe.

(488 words)