

Transcript

Helen Finch, Associate Professor, German Literature

How do you make sure your students can relate to your subject?

A lot of the time, I throw that question back to them: 'What interests *you*? What do you find exciting? What questions provoke you?' and as I was saying about Wedekind, I think often when you understand your students and you understand their concerns, it's quite easy to help them draw out links between the texts of literature and their own concerns. So, just for example, if you think of Kafka, the word 'Kafkaesque' turns up all the time in the news to describe bureaucracies, to describe how confusing it can be to be a person faced with these bureaucracies, alienation. Alienation is the key experience of being a teenager, so once you can have a student realise that, or you can point to stories in the news such as the Spy Affair, if you think about the story of *Der Hungerkünstler* (*The Hunger Artist*), which is about issues about hunger, eating, the public display of thinness, that resonates of course with teenagers. If you think about a novel like Uwe Timm, *Am Beispiel meines Bruders*, (*In My Brother's Shadow*), which is a novel, or a memoir really, about him trying to seek for his brother's traces. His brother fought on the Eastern front during the Nazi period. Relate that to people's own family stories and how sometimes the darker side of family histories aren't explored, and what does that mean when you've a dark side to your family history? So I think German literature brings up so many big and small questions that it's quite easy to find a contemporary resonance and a resonance in people's lives. But I also think it's important not to diminish the thrill of saying: 'This is completely different'. This is something you'll never encounter somewhere else. Let's just explore it and discover it for what it is, in its own terms as well as in your own terms.



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Which area do you most enjoy teaching?

I'm passionate about teaching literature: I think it's enormously fun and exciting. One of the things that I like teaching most is literature of modernism, which I suppose is a hundred years old now so not so modern, but really looking at how German literature responds to all those tumultuous changes that happened between about 1870 and 1945, how it plays with established ideas of what novels can do, what poems can do, and really confronts our expectations. Here I suppose I'd really focus in on the figure of the writer Kafka, who's been the subject of some radio programmes recently on Radio 4. I think Kafka's a really exciting writer because he deals with big, difficult themes like the fate of the individual in a big alienating society. You can also read him quite easily as a Jewish writer who's trying to find out about his identity in a very swiftly changing Czech-Austrian world. He's also really funny and his language is really beautiful, and it's very accessible. It's quite readable for students as well as for scholars, so he's somebody who can be read on so many different levels, and it's drawing out those levels and seeing students engage with them that I find really, really exciting.



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What personally excites you about teaching your subject?

It's the engagement with another culture and by that I don't only mean getting to know languages, turns of phrases and literature, film, history that is new, exciting and different, that real thrill of discovering something new that you never knew before, but it's also about transforming yourself, I think. That's what's really thrilling about studying languages: that you start to become more open. When you travel in foreign countries and start to speak another language, you realise the limits of your own language, the limits of your culture and you become a slightly different version of yourself, more open, more communicative and you see the world in a more relational way and that's what really excites me about teaching language. It's watching my students engage with the world and becoming slightly more transformed as a result.



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What is the biggest challenge you encounter when teaching your subject?

I think the biggest challenge I encounter is that students are scared of the word 'literature' and it's really breaking down that fear and helping students to realise that they do have the skills to read literature and that if they don't have the skills they can learn them, that there's nothing magic or inherently difficult about literature, that it's something that is fun and also something that can be richly important for learning the language, for understanding the culture and also for talking about questions that are really relevant to young people. I suppose I'm slightly sceptical sometimes about using the words 'relevant' and 'fun': it's also important to think it's an intellectual challenge, it's something that brings students beyond that mechanical level of learning a language and passing grammar tests and really starting to stretch them as scholars. So that's something that I think students get excited by. There are lots and lots of different ways to work with texts to make them less monolithic, less intimidating. So for example if you think of a modernist text that I might recommend, Frank Wedekind's *Frühlings Erwachen*, or *Spring Awakening* in English, it's been made into a musical recently, it recently did a tour of Britain in a modern version so there are ways of engaging with this play, which is all about sexuality in adolescence, very topical. You can get students to stage various aspects of the play and say 'Well, how would you bring this up to date?' You can get them to engage with the English musical version, which you can find online and say 'What's the gap between that and the German text that we're looking at?' or in a theatre workshop we did here at Leeds, you can get students to explore the emotions in the play in acting them out, what does it mean to feel this frustration, this rage at the parents? How can you translate the structures of the school system described in 1894 to



contemporary schools in 2015? So it's getting students to engage with the context but also really to think about 'what does it mean to read an old piece of literature in our present day context?'

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Why do you think the study of literature is integral to the study of German?

Well, I think that literature and culture and language are integral parts of each other. Language is culture so studying grammar isn't just a matter of rules or learning vocab but language develops in a certain culture, so you can't understand a language without understanding the culture that it interacts with. In particular, I think German literature has a special role in German culture because traditionally German literature has been a place where people can discuss things that, in Germany's tumultuous history, can't always be discussed in the 'normal' spheres of politics or the newspapers. So questions like: 'What does it mean to be German?', 'How can Germany come to terms with its difficult past or with the traumatic events that are unfolding during the 20th century?', 'How can women find a voice within what's traditionally been a very patriarchal language?', 'How can different minority cultures, such as Jewish cultures or Russian immigrants, engage with the German language and German culture?'. So German literature has traditionally posed a challenge to big political discourses, sometimes repressive institutions like fascism or sometimes just complacent institutions like the politics of 1950s Germany when people didn't want to think about the past, people just wanted to have a very traditional society. German literature has challenged that. And also it's important for us to challenge it and go: 'Is German literature really a little pompous?'. If you think of the writer Günter Grass, who died recently, people thought 'Well, he's actually possibly taken himself a little too seriously'. So we need to challenge German literature's inflated sense of itself, as well as realising the important role it plays.

