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Book review

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Chan, L. et al. 2002. Budapest Open Access Initiative. New York: Open Society Institute. Available at: <http://www.soros.org/openaccess/read.shtml> [Accessed: 18 November 2015].

McNicol, S. ed. 2016. *Critical literacy for information professionals*. London: Facet. 172pp. 978-1-78330-082-2. £59.95. Pbk.

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Critical literacy is possibly one of the lesser known facets of literacy theory, even for information professionals. However as an area of growing importance it needs to be addressed by those working in academic libraries in particular, and this book provides a solid base to start exploring the approach. The introduction to McNicol's edited collection effectively outlines the concept even as it acknowledges the lack of a concrete definition. Critical literacy theory states that as a text is not created in a vacuum it should not be read as such, and the reader should always maintain an awareness of any external factors which may have influenced its production. Given that this implied criticism is always in the forefront of a reader's mind when looking at books about critical literacy it is perhaps not surprising that there have been limited previous attempts to address the concept in terms of libraries.

This slim collection of short essays brings together a range of researchers and practitioners to discuss critical literacy in detail. Contributing authors are drawn from around the world but with an Anglo-American focus. Given that this work is about maintaining a critical awareness it would be remiss not to highlight that these authors may give the book a bias, either conscious or unconscious.

The introduction provides a detailed outline of the contents of each chapter, enabling the reader to focus on the sections likely to be of most relevance to their needs. It also makes clear the dual aims of the book: to reflect on the significance of critical literacy for libraries and demonstrate the practical ways it can be incorporated into practice. The structure of the book reflects these aims by being split into two equal parts, one focusing on theory and one on real world case studies. As the concept is most applicable to academic and school libraries this is reflected in the case studies represented but given the importance of the topic it would have been good to see other sectors covered. The introduction then dips into the argument about the usefulness of theory to practitioners but makes a compelling case for its inclusion. Certainly many of the case studies would be difficult to contextualise without a working knowledge of the theory behind them. Aiming for a target audience of information professionals with little or no knowledge of critical literacy the book sets itself quite a task. Fortunately the balance of theory and practical advice means that the book is suitable for anyone from student to seasoned practitioner.

The first set of chapters focus on various theoretical concepts associated with critical literacy. Various approaches such as radical information literacy are discussed along with their strengths and weaknesses. A good mixture of new and traditional concepts are highlighted which should appeal to a broad range of people. If readers are familiar with the basics they can move straight to the case study section and dip in as needed but for those new to the topic, this section is a must-read to build up knowledge. It also serves as a refresher on some approaches and is particularly useful for those looking to compare and contrast theories. Although the section proves quite dense with a lot of ground to cover the authors do their best to explain a complex concept in an accessible way. Inevitably some succeed more than others but this is to be expected with multi-author collaborations.

In contrast the second half, which looks at the practical application of critical literacy, feels much more appropriate to multiple authors. A case study approach is used to illustrate how readers can take the concepts discussed and apply them in their own workplace. This section of the book is likely to be of the most use as setting theory into context is often a more effective way to demonstrate its potential. As noted however it would have been good to have seen a wider range of sectors represented more strongly in this section to reinforce the point that critical literacy skills are valuable for all sectors of the profession.

As always with collaborations the writing style can vary between chapters which can give the book an inconsistent feel if read cover to cover, especially as authors often begin by covering the same ground. Given the complex nature of the topic some chapters have a lot of information to cover in a short space meaning that they can be a hard read. However this is preferable to the alternative of glossing over vital information. As expected a full list of references is found at the end of each chapter which enables the reader to follow up on any information that they have found useful. The book also includes a comprehensive annotated bibliography of both online and print resources which is organised by concept. With such a complex subject this guided annotation is a welcome addition and is one of the highlights of the book.

One thing missing is a conclusion which draws all of the threads mentioned together. Although the book is designed for the reader to be able to dip into as needed it would have been helpful to see a summary of the main issues discussed. I would recommend this book to those with a knowledge of information literacy who are looking for ways to explore the topic from a new perspective. In her introduction McNicol states that she wants the book to be the start of a journey where information professionals work to adapt their own practices to include more critical literacy approaches and readers could do a lot worse than using this collection as their roadmap.