

Cutting the classics down to size



James Priory
(Portsmouth Grammar School)
interviews Jolyon Connell,
founder of *The Week* and finds
out why less can be more.

Jolyon Connell is not a man who likes to sit still. I catch him on his mobile phone as he travels by taxi through Knightsbridge to the offices of *The Week*, the highly successful news digest magazine he founded in 1995. The traffic is proving a distraction.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Connell turns his attention to the driver. “Look, we’ve been sitting here for hours. Isn’t there another route you could take?” Whether it’s the volume of 24-hour news media or slow-moving traffic, Connell, is determined to find the elegant short cut.

“It’s what drove *The Week*,” he explains, no pun intended. “People are getting busier and busier. Their attention span is shorter. Time is of the essence.”

I have contacted the former deputy editor of the *Sunday Telegraph* to find out more about his latest foray into digest publishing, the Connell Guides – a rapidly expanding collection of literary guides launched two years ago.

Temporarily forgetting the traffic jam, Connell explains how the idea came about: “My daughter Flora was seventeen at the time. She was doing quite well academically but she got a B in her AS paper on *The Tempest*. I dug out my old lecture notes from St Andrews University and I wrote her a note summarising some of the most interesting issues and themes in the play. To my delight, she got an A. I realised there must be lots of other people in the same position as Flora and thought what am I going to do about that?”

The answer was to turn to a former teacher at university, Graham Bradshaw, and to commission him to write 20,000 words on



Jolyon Connell

The Tempest. “I asked him if he could deal with very simple questions, essentially telling us what the play is about.”

A concerned father using his bookish knowledge to protect his daughter: had Connell ever pictured himself as Prospero coming to Miranda’s aid?

He laughs. “I’ve never thought of it like that before. But yes, I suppose it’s true. I am the magician!”

I ask Connell what changes he has noticed in the way people study literature. “Forty years ago people were given huge reading

lists. They didn’t have much else to do. Now it’s hard to get people to read. To be awfully honest, many of the novels taught in schools now tend to be very short. You don’t see *Bleak House* being set that often.

“Some writers have disappeared from view entirely, like D H Lawrence, which surprises me given that today’s generation is so obsessed with sex. Does nobody teach Lawrence any more?” I suppress for a moment awkward memories of teaching *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Connell reads my mind. “I guess his writing is just a bit too dated now.”

Is Connell a supporter, then, of Michael Gove’s forced march back to the literary canon taught in schools when he was a pupil?

“Gove is certainly a big fan of what we are doing.” But isn’t there an irony in encouraging readers to rely on short-cuts to the classics? “Yes, they’re a short cut, but they are an intelligent short-cut. They are full of profound thoughts, and if you want more they point you in the right direction.”

If people generally have less time available now, does this mean that the next generation of critics is going to be less well read?

“No, there are some brilliant young scholars like Simon Palfrey at Brasenose College, Oxford who has written a guide for me about *Romeo and Juliet*.

There are clever critics coming along, in some ways better, more believable. In the eighties you had to have some fancy theory to have credibility. There were new historicists, cultural materialists and so on. These kind of distractions are falling away to be replaced by close attention to the text. In some ways criticism is in a healthier place now than thirty years ago.”

The list of forthcoming guides is impressive – *The Wasteland*, *Canterbury Tales*, *Hard Times*, *Hamlet*, *Far From the Madding Crowd* – but there must be some texts which resist summary and which will not sit easily on the shelf of Connell Guides?

“*Ulysses* will be a tricky one to do. The *Merchant of Venice* is a difficult play to write about well because it can be seen in two diametrically opposing ways: a sophisticated play ahead of its time or the opposite. It’s true that some texts are more straightforward than others.”

Connell also founded *MoneyWeek*, the UK’s best-selling financial magazine, just over a decade ago. Does he see the Connell Guides attracting this kind of interest and possibly even a market overseas?

“The international market is coming slowly. Always with a new business it’s like rolling a stone along; you have to get the momentum going.”

From his answer, I can sense Connell’s attention turning back to the stationary taxi. There is time only for a few more questions before the entrepreneur becomes back-seat driver again.

Digital age

Given the enormous technological change taking place in the digital age, does Connell believe that print has a future?

“I’m not as gloomy as some,” he replies after a moment’s thought. “But it’s fair to say that there is a process of slow disappearance. The same was said about offices some years ago, but it hasn’t happened yet. They still exist because they are useful: they are where you go to meet people and to exchange ideas face to face. Reading a book on a Kindle just isn’t the same for me. I find it much more fun to have a book in my hand. Connell Guides started as a purely print proposition and is now a hybrid. We are going to have shorter guides on-line, fortnightly essays and a critics’ corner on the website for subscribing schools. But we will still be printing books and making them as scholarly and aesthetically pleasing as possible.”

And what does he think of the idea behind HMC’s new magazine? “Trust your instincts. It’s good and brave that you are producing HMC *Insight* in print and on-line. People still like holding magazines. More people buy *The Week* in hard copy than currently subscribe on-line. I wish you every success with it.”

And with that the magician disappears, plotting his way through London traffic with the enthusiasm of someone who knows exactly where he wants to get to even if the route he has to choose will be a happy and creative surprise. ■

“Given the enormous technological change taking place in the digital age, does Connell believe that print has a future?”



Connell Guides is launching a subscription plan for schools to give exclusive online content to complement the published guides. It includes:

- A full set of the 18 guides currently in print and a copy of each new published guide (at least 6 titles a year)
- A subscriber discount on all guides
- Online access to Connell Shorts - specially commissioned 5,000 word guides
- A monthly quiz set by Professor John Sutherland
- An annual essay competition judged by novelist William Boyd and open to all sixth form students, with a prize of £1,000

Further details are available at www.connellguides.com