

**Review of Susan Ellsmore, *Carry On, Teachers!*
Representations of the Teaching Profession in Screen Culture,
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There is a strong and continuing tradition of cinematic representations of the work of educators, some of it memorable and inspiring. The most recent of these viewed by the reviewers was Julie Walters' superlative performance in the television film *Ahead of the Class* (ITV, 2005). Walters portrayed Dame Marie Stubbs, who came out of retirement to lead St George's Roman Catholic Secondary School in London, at whose gates a previous headteacher had been murdered and which was threatened with closure by the English Office for Standards in Education. Partly by dint of her powerful personality and partly through the enforcement of what some might see as traditional behaviour such as courtesy and punctuality, she succeeded in taking the school from having been threatened with closure to being lauded as a national example of good pedagogical practice.

In *Carry On, Teachers! Representations of the Teaching Profession in Screen Culture*, Susan Ellsmore, a sixth form teacher and university lecturer from Bournemouth in the United Kingdom, explores in considerable depth the character and significance of cinematic performances such as Julie Walters'. Her analysis is based on 16 films and three television series, which were viewed by and discussed with two groups of volunteer teachers, with 17 teachers in one group watching six films and 13 teachers in the other group watching episodes from the Channel 4 series *Teachers*. Ellsmore combines interpretation of the participants' responses to the selected cinematic texts with her own emotional and intellectual engagement with those texts, from which she elaborates what she terms "a four-fold typology of the charismatic teacher film" (p. xv).

Chapter One of the book provides an historical overview of changes to the British teaching profession between the mid 1940s and the mid 1990s, encapsulated in what Ellsmore considers the two most significant Education Acts in Britain in the 20th century: those implemented by Rab Butler in 1944 and by Kenneth Baker in 1988. The chapter also identifies the first of the four types elaborated by the author – "[e]ccentric charismatic teachers" (p. 19) – as portrayed in films like *Carry On Teacher* (1959) and *Clockwise* (1986).

In Chapter Two, Ellsmore traces changes to the British teaching profession under the New Labour government of Tony Blair, juxtaposed with commentary on three television drama series of that period: *Hearts and Minds*, *Hope and Glory* and *Teachers*. Chapter Three outlines the second type identified by Ellsmore – “the enduring charismatic teacher film” (p. 39) – as demonstrated by Mr Chipping in *Goodbye, Mr Chips* (1939) and Mr Holland in *Mr Holland’s Opus* (1995).

Chapter Four discusses 10 films about charismatic teachers from the second half of the 20th century, beginning with *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and finishing with *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003). In Chapter Five, Ellsmore draws on her interviews with the first group of teachers to delineate the third type – “resilient charismatic teachers” (p. 85) – as seen in the leading characters from four of those films: Jaime Escalante in *Stand and Deliver* (1988); Mark Thackeray in *To Sir with Love* (1967/1996); Richard Dadier in *Blackboard Jungle* (1955); and LouAnne Johnson in *Dangerous Minds* (1995).

Chapter Six introduces the last of the four types – “romantic charismatic teachers” (p. 109) – as represented through the actions of John Keating in *Dead Poets Society* (1989), Jean Brodie in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969) and Simon Casey in the television series *Teachers*. The conclusion to the book takes up the author’s interviews with the second group of teachers about that series and ends with the assertion: “In an age when the visual is pre-eminent, charismatic teacher films and television series will arguably have an increasing – and enduring – influence on successive generations of teachers” (p. 133).

The minor quibble of the absence of a table of contents aside, *Carry On, Teachers!* presents a credible and grounded account of cinematic portrayals of teachers’ work and identities. The four-fold typology has both the benefits and the limitations of any such model: it helps to highlight and analyse selected elements of the phenomenon under discussion while tending to elide aspects that fall ‘between categories’ and to prompt broader questions about both the constructedness and the situatedness of the typology. The participating teachers’ voices are lively and varied, and the author’s own commentary is engaged and engaging.

The information that Lady Stubbs is evidently to be involved in a new Channel 4 television series called *The School Fixer* (retrieved August 19, 2006, from http://blogs.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/ianwylie/2006/08/ahead_of_the_class.html) – a kind of school equivalent of Super Nanny – suggests that she combines elements of the second and third of Ellsmore’s typology: enduring and resilient charismatic teacher. While there are undoubtedly concerns about some aspects of this cinematic genre, the ‘real/reel’ life success of Marie Stubbs and her filmic counterparts does evoke feelings of optimism and confidence about such a challenging and crucial profession.