

How to Disagree: Negotiate Difference in a Divided World, by Adam Ferner and Darren Chetty (2019). White Lion Publishing, London. ISBN 978 1 78131 934 5

In writing *How to Disagree*, Ferner and Chetty aim to bring to light those assumptions we make about the world, its structure and the lived reality of what we assume to be real, in order to see how these assumptions affect the ways we engage with each other. It is a fascinating endeavour and very well done through this thoughtful text. *How to Disagree* is part of the *Build and Become* series, a community of texts adopting a particular shared approach to enacting their commitment to 'building knowledge that helps you navigate your world'. The emphasis, as reiterated by the authors, is on finding enjoyment in thinking and talking about difference.

Following the instructive *How to Disagree* is the open invitation or direction or suggestion to *Negotiate Difference in a Divided World*. There is truth and risk in these statements. The authors make clear almost immediately that they do not suggest argument for its own sake, or envisage the reader as habitually seeking and pursuing an alternative stance, rather they encourage an interest in the other view, such that when we find ourselves at odds we engage. In engaging around an issue with an openminded attitude, recognising the potential for change in our own mind and the mind of others, disagreement can elicit questions we enjoy answering together.

The book is split into five chapters, and each chapter includes four content sections, so that there are twenty points of consideration on *How to Disagree*. It could be bitty, but it isn't. Each piece could stand alone, but they don't really, being instead enough to think about in one go. The chapters look into what underpins our sense of self, how our collective selves are structured, what we know about problems in our relations with each other, how we can come together or return to each other, and messy disagreeable topics, when to engage and when to walk away. As well as the four content sections mentioned previously, each chapter ends with a Toolkit and a Further Learning section. The Toolkit is a kind of review to steady the reader. I like that they are quite lean but not reductive, they don't do the thinking for the reader. Also, the Toolkits build from one section to the next, and the graphics nicely illustrate this in the form of sections of a fan, four more sections changing colour after each chapter. It's a clever way to illustrate to the reader that the ideas flow and stand alone. The sixth and final part of each chapter is the Further Learning piece. Here ideas are put forward for material to read, watch, listen and visit, to help the reader move up and outwards personally and in the world. It's a pity the visits are almost entirely UK-based, though nowadays these tours and festivals are probably possible to take part

in online. The suggested readings and resources are diverse and their varied nature inclusive, as is the bibliography at the end of the book. Great attention has clearly been placed on seeking and recognising contributions that are and are not 'go-to', including as wide a variety of voices as possible consistently throughout.

The style of the book and its central idea are that disagreement can be essential, worthwhile, enjoyable, necessary, if thoughtful and focussed on the issue. It models the approach it puts forward, noting that even the 'contents list is a result of deliberation and negotiation'. This mindset informs the writing structure, where concepts and assumptions are laid out and followed by questions which are expanded upon rather than answered by the authors. These questions ask to be thought about. The writing style is confident but warm, like an engaging educator who wants you to learn, understand and think for yourself.

The use of modern, colourful and largely abstract graphics throughout serve to brighten the text and introduce pause. The reader stops and looks, however briefly, and so there is a useful moment of not-reading in the reading experience. Graphics create a gap in the narrative, time to mull and create questions. Likewise, the quotations placed at the beginning of each section slow the reader down, stall them. The quotations are not an easy read, they call for consideration rather than acting as a signpost or an indicator of what is to follow. The structuring within the sections, and the short review pieces placed in the text (not later in the Toolkit) are further examples of smart ways to slow readers, making an effort to ward against complacency in the form of speed creeping in and working against them.

Which brings me on to who the reader might be. These well-placed pauses, in the form of quotations and questions in particular are pauses for thought and invite conversation. In a school context, the independent worker comes to mind immediately, a student who benefits from material tailored to them for whatever reason. While in no way saying this book is only relevant to the times we're in, it is uniquely useful for the independent learner. In the hubbub of class it's easy to forget that there are children who really like to find out more and are happy to do so by themselves, and now that students are out of the classroom more frequently due to COVID-19 restrictions, this would be an excellent resource to equip them with. It strikes a nice balance, neither overwhelming nor under-stimulating, so it has great potential to get reticent groups talking, a particular challenge online.

A source for project work, a jumping off point for discussions, or an introductory text that brings the reader somewhere and guides them beyond first acquaintance, *How to*

Disagree is a very useful book. It would be an excellent text for a group of any age or stage to come together around. As philosophy becomes more prominent and desirable in classrooms, educators can feel qualified to have a discussion but not qualified to call it philosophy. This text could give an educator material and ideas, and the confidence to use them. That's invaluable. I also think this would be a wonderful text for adult learners, for example a group returning to education or active retirees. A great deal is changing in the world in terms of how open we are in our discussions. If you have never been invited to think about the assumptions which underpin your norms, this would be a great place to start those discussions, to help older people feel less isolated in their own thoughts and ideas, more open to the prospect of thinking about long-held positions.

How to Disagree encourages us to see how engagement might be different, richer and more plentiful if our assumptions were clearly considered. The 'if we think about it' is foregrounded as the task in hand, identifying the 'it' rather than the who, so encouraging better informed mind-opening and mind-changing conversations. We would do well to follow the authors' invitation and make an effort to negotiate difference in a divided world, together. Their book is a great place to start.

Elizabeth O'Brien

elizabeth.obrien@ucdconnect.ie