



Review: Let's Give Them Something to Talk (And Think) about: Using Literary Theory to Enliven Our Classrooms

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Reviewed work(s): Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents by Deborah Appleman , Authorizing Readers: Resistance and Respect in the Teaching of Literature by Peter J. Rabinowitz ; Michael W. Smith

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LITERARY THEORY, RE-CREATIONS, AND POETRY IN THE CLASSROOM

The books reviewed in this column focus on how literary texts are approached in the classroom and how all users of language can become creators and re-creators when they are active readers of texts and of the world. The books are about sound—the sound of the voices of readers and authors, the sound patterns of language as heard in prose and poetry, and the sound of silence that finds a voice in poetry. There is much to appreciate in these books, because each one gives us provocative and useful ideas to broaden our thinking about classroom possibilities.

Let's Give Them Something to Talk (and Think) About: Using Literary Theory to Enliven Our Classrooms

Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents

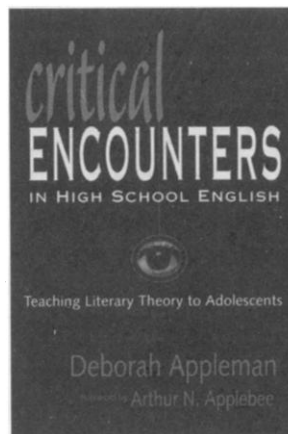
Deborah Appleman. New York: Teachers College Press/NCTE, 2000. 216 pp. \$19.95. ISBN 1-8077-3974-X.

Authorizing Readers: Resistance and Respect in the Teaching of Literature

Peter J. Rabinowitz and Michael W. Smith. New York: Teachers College Press/NCTE, 1998. 174 pp. \$21.95. ISBN 0-8077-3689-9.

Reviewed by Jeffrey D. Wilhelm
University of Maine, Orono

"English is about *nothing!*" A high school student with whom I worked recently ranted on and on: "English is about reading poems, telling about rhythm. English is about commas, for God's sake! It's about *nothing!*" He clearly did not think it was about anything important, personally relevant, or socially significant. For him, and others like him, literary theory can make English about *something*,



transforming texts from artifacts into something vitally social, interesting, significant.

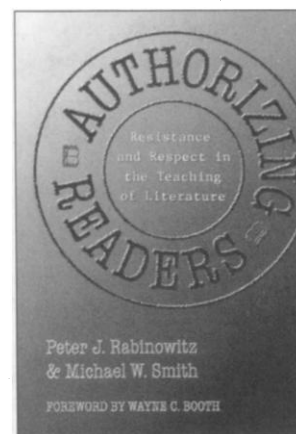
The two best books I know for informing teachers about how to use literary theory to enliven their teaching are Deborah Appleman's *Critical Encounters* and Peter Rabinowitz and Michael

Smith's *Authorizing Readers*. Both are "must reads" for language arts teachers and teacher educators. When I recently used both texts in my preservice methods classes and in a graduate course, my students were highly engaged and provoked by the ideas. All the undergraduate students cited the literary theory assignment as their favorite piece of work for the semester and the one that was most successful during student teaching. Quite a recommendation!

When I asked my students why they found literary theory so compelling, they listed the following reasons:

- It emphasizes the social nature of reading, politicizes reading and the work reading can do in the world.
- It highlights the importance of literature as being about common human concerns of great significance, the importance of literature as conversation and as an ethical act in which we can choose ourselves as ethical beings.
- It provides stances and lenses for responding to texts and abets a reader's response in ways that can enliven, shock, and even transform the way we think about the text and about the world.

Appleman's book is an excellent introduction to literary theory as a field, to particular literary theories of use to teachers, and to ways of using literary theory in various school contexts. She uses the metaphor



of a lens throughout to show how students, through the use of theory, are given new ways of seeing the world and their potential places in it. Beginning with a strong case for using critical theories in the classroom, Appleman cites Bonnycastle, who argues that using theory “means that no authority can impose a truth on you in a dogmatic way” (3), a comment that presages much of what is most powerful in her book and in the Rabinowitz and Smith text.

Appleman focuses on how literary theory is not only engaging to students because it helps them to see the world in a new way and to wield power in that world, but because it helps them and us enter into and understand positions other than our own in a diverse and complex world. Subsequent chapters focus on psychoanalytic theory, different forms of reader response (which are examined and critiqued in enlightening ways), and political theories like feminism and Marxism as ways to help students read texts and the world. The chapters about deconstruction and post-structuralism helped my students understand the theories, no small accomplishment, and how to use them with their students, an even bigger accomplishment.

The assignments highlighted throughout the book, and also offered in an appendix, are worth the book’s price. They are creative and profound at the same time and serve as models of how to use theory in ways that are accessible and exciting to students. Most impressive is how these assignments have helped students insert their voices and passions into classroom conversations; Appleman’s use of literary theory helps students question authoritative readings at the same time as they are helped to assert their own authority. The voices of students crowd the pages, lending vitality and the authority of classroom practice to the book. But the number of student voices is both a strength and a weakness, as they occasionally crowd out the personable and sage voice of the author. I found myself sometimes wishing for a bit more of her insightful commentary and analysis. But I cavil. This book, an excellent introduction to literary theory, was fun to read, clear, illuminating, and inspirational in the best way, helping me and my students see how literary theory could work for us and give us a map showing the paved roads and potholes.

Whereas Appleman reviews important theoretical movements, Rabinowitz and Smith provide the groundwork for a new position. Most specifically, they talk about playing the role of the authorial au-

dience, an important first step in reading any text. Assuming such a stance means the reader provisionally adopts the knowledge and sensibilities of the audience for whom the text seems to have been written. This approach is a radical challenge to New Criticism and Reader Response theories, the two that most inform practice. The authors then explore the implications of this theoretical position: it democratizes the classroom by making conversations with authors central. Authorial reading also decenters the teacher as authority on textual meaning, but at the same time the teacher is foregrounded as an expert on the conventionality of how texts work and how to read them—a wonderful way of helping teachers assist students to procedural versus declarative understandings. It also foregrounds how texts are constructed by “an intelligence behind the text” who wishes to communicate about essential issues and with whom we might agree, disagree, or even resist. It puts the author back into the reading equation by studying how texts are made to create meaning. Since the text is the creation of an author and the tool we use to mediate our conversation with the author, this stance moves us away from the potential solipsism of reader response but is achieved without restoring the hegemony of a single best reading.

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In *Authorizing Readers*, Rabinowitz and Smith challenge two orthodoxies—treating authors as mythic figures when readers must figure out what the text means, a New Critical approach, and a subjective reader response that privileges any kind of personal response about what the text means to the individual. Readers may be as convinced as I am by this cogently argued challenge. Even if not, this is a book and a theory with which we English teachers must contend. It is too important, well conceived, and has too much positive potential to be ignored.

Authorial reading asks instead, What does this text mean to the audience for whom it was written,

and how do I feel about that? The first part of the question requires readers to grant the author and the text respect. We must figure out how the text was coded and what those conventional codings mean to the authorial audience. As Rabinowitz points out, readers may not be part of the authorial audience because they do not have the cultural or literary knowledge to play that part. The second half of the question asks the reader to converse with the author and decide to what degree they wish to agree or resist. I have found that using authorial reading enlivens my classroom because it centralizes agreement or resistance to authors.

This fine collaboration connects
theory to practice as well as any
book I've ever read.

An interesting feature of *Authorizing Readers* is that it is an unusual collaboration. The chapters constitute a conversation in which each author takes up and sometimes disagrees with the other. Rabinowitz is a renowned literary theorist and cuts concepts like genre and audience so finely that his writing may give you heart palpitations from the thrill of his intellectual dexterity. On the other hand, some of my students found his distinctions too arcane. Smith, however, does a fine job of connecting Rabinowitz's ideas to the concerns of working teachers and their students. This fine collaboration connects theory to practice as well as any book I've ever read.

Literary theory should be a part of every teacher's repertoire as a set of tools with which to think and teach. Reading these books will profoundly affect your thinking and your teaching.

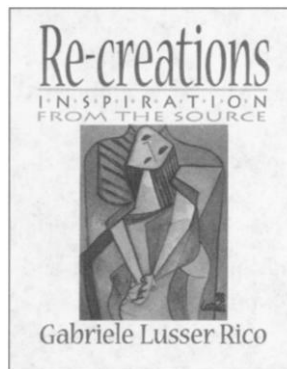
Beyond Response: Participating in Making Meaning through Re-Creation

Re-Creations: Inspiration from the Source

Gabriele Lusser Rico. Spring, TX: Absey & Co., 2000. 141 pp. \$28.95. ISBN 1-888842-21-0.

Reviewed by Kate Evans
San José State University, California

For some time, educators have been aware of the idea that learners construct meaning: reading is



seen as an active process in which reader interacts with text, not a passive absorption of words; writing is a recursive process of discovery and revision, not a direct transcription of what already exists in the mind. Learning is a complicated social process

that involves an amalgamation of new and prior knowledge, not a depositing of discrete facts into an empty vessel. Gabriele Rico takes the idea of constructing meaning to a profound level: the deepest, most meaningful learning is participatory, “an *entering into* process, not an *observing* process” (57, original italics).

Well-known for encouraging and celebrating all people as writers in her best-selling *Writing the Natural Way* (J. P. Tarcher, 1983; 15th Anniversary Expanded Edition, J. P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), Rico expands on this constructivist—and fundamentally equitable and democratic—principle that everyone can be not just a respondent but also a creator of language and ideas. Rico wants to give all students “the knowledge that they can write in living, breathing, meaningful language” (6). She explicitly states that “creative acts do not belong only to the very few” (4). Re-creation that fosters dynamic language-making is the book's centerpiece. A re-creation is a writing experience where students hear a poem or a piece of prose read aloud twice. The first time they “simply listen, [are] receptive, enjoy the melody of it” (16). The second time the listeners cluster: they jot down words and phrases they may hear, along with whatever else comes to mind. Afterwards, they have three minutes to write a poem, a paragraph, a vignette of any type. The results (and student examples are scattered throughout the book) are a unique combination of response and creation—patterns of meaning-making visible on the page.

As the book demonstrates, Rico has experimented with re-creations in a multitude of teaching arenas with many different types of students. The focus is for them to be “participants in their own configuration of meaning” (80), creating (yet transcending) a “bricolage of what came before” (82). This engaging, messy, improvisational process honors the “diversity of the human mind” (2). In