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Bayard, Pierre. (2007). *How To Talk About Books You Haven't Read* (Jeffery Mehlman, Trans.). New York: Bloomsbury.

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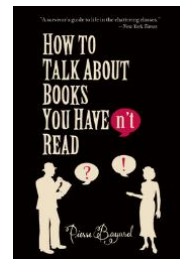
May 10, 2008

“There is no such thing as an isolated book.” ~Pierre Bayard

How To Talk About Books You Haven't Read by Pierre Bayard offers readers various anecdotal and textual references suggesting a litany of strategies for coping with multiple social contexts associated with being called upon to share comments about books one has not read or worse - books one vaguely remembers reading years ago. However, the heart of this book is far from a simple remedy for escaping potentially awkward conversations about classic and popular novels. In a deftly composed meditation on what it means to truly read a book, Bayard questions the very existence of stable and enduring texts while simultaneously suggesting that educators might prosper from understanding readers and the reading process from a different perspective.

As I situate my review of this book, I am reminded of my experiences teaching novels to high school students. True to my conventional role as a language arts teacher, I expected my students to have read the assigned pages each evening before class the next day. Without students having read the required pages, I pondered, how could we build a cohesive, intelligent discussion about the novel's plot and characters? Moreover, how could students expect to earn passing marks on quizzes, tests, and projects unless they made a commitment to read the book cover to cover?

This English teacher's preoccupation with total consumption of the text, however, has been troubled over the years. On several occasions after completing a teaching unit on a novel with a class, students have confided that they indeed did not read the book in the traditional sense of reading novels in schools. Yet to my surprise, they were capable not only of participating comfortably in class discussions about a book's narrative but were able to earn commendable marks on assessments. Furthermore, on an academic and social level, I have engaged colleagues and friends in conversations about books that they admittedly had not read in their entirety, or perhaps at all, and they, like my student readers, were able to communicate a convincing rendering



of the text. How was all of this possible? How can readers be knowledgeable about the content of a text without engaging in the time-honored tradition of thoroughly reading the novel?

Bayard destabilizes our obsession as English language arts teachers with the content of the text by acknowledging our precarious reliance on memory when recounting what we claim we have read. We all come to the reading situation with what Bayard dubs our "inner libraries," our own personalized collection of experiences with past books that inform and contribute to our comprehension of newer books (pp. 72-73). This inner library, like individual texts and individual readers, is not a monolithic entity; rather, it shifts and shapes as more experiences with books are added to the virtual shelves. In fact, memories of books fade and change over time "to the extent to which our memory of books, most particularly those that matter to the point where they become a part of us, is endlessly reorganized by the unconscious stakes of our present circumstances" (p. 45).



Pierre Bayard

Bayard expends great energy in his book illustrating his notions about how to talk about the content of a book and its location in relation to other books. Typically, language arts teachers privilege the content of the book and shun the art of skimming just as I did. We expect students to memorize, study, and comprehend nuanced characters, plot twists, and foreign settings embedded within novels. My teacherly obsession with books as meaningful 'in themselves' apart from the social contexts of reading blinded me to the nuances of my students' actual reading experience. Bayard troubles such a view of reading by arguing that trivial facts and figures from our experiences with reading novels are ephemeral at best and recede into oblivion soon after we finish reading a book. By the same token, he claims that our orientation to novels, how we classify them by time period, geography, author, and, yes, other novels, constitutes a legitimate and important component of the reading process. When students are able to locate *The Scarlet Letter* – a notoriously unread book by high school students – among other nineteenth century American novels and connect its themes of guilt, greed, and hypocrisy to

previous texts they have encountered or by skimming the text itself, the content becomes less important than the student's ability to make more global connections to similar themes and concepts. Bayard illustrates this perspective toward reading by articulating that "the interior of the book is less important than its exterior, or, if you prefer, the interior of the book is its exterior, since what counts in a book is the books alongside it" (p. 11), suggesting our orientation to texts, culturally and socially, supersedes the necessity to possess complete comprehension of their interior. Rather than committing the details of a story to memory, the social experiences with other readers and previously read texts are ultimately more representative of a reader's knowledge about a particular book.

Each time we engage with a text, even a text we have previously read, we approach this phenomena with the accoutrements of stored up memories and experiences, and current life situations will continuously alter our interpretations of the book. With this understanding of readers as constantly changing agents in the reading process, Bayard contends that the meaning of texts is largely contingent on a host of factors not usually acknowledged by literary critics and that this dynamic encourages uniquely additive experiences made possible by transactions with books. In other words, the nature of making sense of a text depends upon the numerous social, local, and temporal arrangements in which we find ourselves as readers, supporting the notion that each reader infuses a text with vastly layered and diverse meanings.

Ultimately, Bayard insists that we can no longer see the delineation between reading and non-reading as an either/or dichotomy and that "we must profoundly transform our relationship to books" (p. 181) to allow for the various experiential possibilities located in the pages of and on the periphery of books. In order for this transformative process to begin, educators might benefit from an exploration of why and how they privilege books in classroom contexts, joining their students

as co-creators of textual knowledge and meaning. If Bayard is right, books are not to be perceived as immobile mechanisms for delivering messages and symbols, transmitting the same signals and codes to each reader. This approach likewise calls for some reconceptualization of students as reading subjects. Rather than as homogeneous readers devoid of prior textual knowledge, student readers ought to be understood as individuals and social groups with a wealth of diverse previous experiences with books informing their sense-making of newer books. By opening up our stationary definitions of reading, argues Bayard, we allow students to engage in the social element of reading and to become agents in their own creative reading process.

About the Reviewer

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Michael D. Boatright is a graduate student in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia. Drawing from his experiences as a college ESOL instructor, a high school ESOL teacher and department chair, and a Reading First external evaluator for UGA, Boatright researches issues related to literacy policy, practice, and privilege.

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