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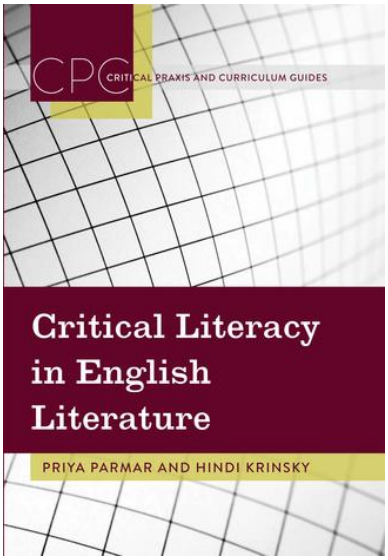
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Parmar, Priya & Krinsky, Hindi. (2013). *Critical Literacy in English Literature*. NY: Peter Lang.

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Critical Literacy in English Literature is part of the Critical Praxis and Curriculum Guides series edited by Shirley R. Steinberg and Priya Parmar. This text fits well into this series as it provides accessible introductions to literacy, cultural studies, and the critical perspective through overviews of critical the theory and its manifestations in literacy and pedagogy. In addition to this, the text includes impressively developed critical units that pair commonly taught pieces of literature with more contemporary works and highlight critical themes. *Critical Literacy in English Literature* is a text that should be a reference in every middle and high school English department and required reading for

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undergraduate (and possibly graduate) students earning their teaching endorsement in middle and/or high school English and language arts.

Chapter one, "Introduction: The War on Public Schools and Literacy" makes the case that the status quo in education does a disservice to both students as individuals and to the nation as a whole. Individually, students reared in the current educational environment of stringent standards and checks for accountability will be unable to compete for twenty-first-century jobs that require more than mere compliance. Further, these students will have neither the critical consciousness nor the skills to be active citizens in the democracy. These consequences are not newly named in this text, but rather, are explained for those new to education or new to the critical perspective in education. Vivid descriptions of "mundane, test-driven, rule-bound, and mechanistic routines" demonstrate how apathy is grown in students and curricula get reduced to "decontextualized content" that is "meaningless and boring" (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p. 2). While this may be an intent (conscious or unconsciously) of standards driven reform movements, critical educators must recognize and resist this ongoing assault on students.

Although the relevance of some of the facts and concepts presented in this chapter may be challenged, the message is clear and convincing, and a path forward is outlined that plausible from my perspective as both a teacher educator and practicing high school English teacher. As the authors state, the text is intended to give readers "pedagogical tools with which to operate in a high-stakes environment while being an agent of change and en effective teacher" (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p. 18). This approach of working from within to change the system not only gives practicing and pre-service teachers hope, but also models for the students in those classes that even when systemic change is needed, local level change is possible to begin the process.

Chapter two, "Counter-War Approach: Critical Literacy," opens with a poignant poem titled "Mis-educated" written by a tenth grade student from Brookly, NJ. The student asks tough questions about the White-washed history taught to students in school. Opening with "What is it that they are trying to keep from us?" (Janaisha in Parmar &

Krinski, 2013, p. 21), the student directly raises an important point about the narrow and biased education of students related to the racial history of the country. This question, however, has more broad implications. It speaks to the power imbalance between those who select and deliver curricula and those who engage with it. This student understands that someone or a group of people decide what gets taught and what is left out; she further seems to understand that there is something deliberate in the choices made about what is not taught in schools. While critical educators are aware of these facts, it is vitally important to notice that students, too, are aware. Although there are many reasons to convince teachers to be more critical in their curricula and instruction, this should help to sway those teachers who are not yet convinced.

Springing off that poem, the chapter goes on to provide a solid, albeit a bit cursory, introduction to literacy, cultural studies, and critical theory, thereby building the foundational knowledge needed to understand the connections among critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and cultural literacy. The authors begin by defining traditional ideas of literacy and label those notions and their related practices as *schooling*, which they argue "push[es] forward hegemonic, technocratic practices that produce passive and complying citizens" (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p. 24). They distinguish this from *education*, which they suggest is critical as well as "transformative, life-changing, liberating, and revolutionary" and, therefore, necessitates critical pedagogy (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p. 24). This leads into sections on each of the following: cultural studies, critical theory (inclusive of some biographical details about Paulo Freire), critical pedagogy, critical literacy, cultural literacy, critical media literacy. The authors suggest that "understanding the theoretical underpinnings that drive any style of pedagogy and teaching philosophy is important" (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p. 24), and I believe the summaries provided in these sections give readers both working knowledge of these concepts and also references for deeper study.

"The War on Youth Culture" (chapter three) paints a graphic picture of the texts with which most students engage, and few are print texts. Instead, students "interact with a multitude of media" (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p.

47). All are texts sending our students messages, and yet, we do not teach our students how to navigate those texts as we do with print text in school. This not only devalues their experience and interest, but also renders students defenseless to discern the ideologies of those texts. Rather than ignoring (or worse, deliberately disparaging) youth literacy practices, Parmar and Krinski demonstrate that these texts (which include weblogs, videogames, YouTube videos, and many other multimedia texts) "can be used in a number of transformative ways, even when working within a standards-based framework" (2013, p. 55). As they do in the introduction, the authors encourage readers to think about transforming education while working within the existing system. And more than asking readers to think about engaging in this transformation, the authors give concrete ideas of how to do it.

The near nation-wide adoption of the Common Core State Standards is not lost in this text. Their potential to fill in some of the gaps that a basic-skills approach to education leaves is noted; however, the authors also note that because these standards are not yet "tested in schools, . . . it is not yet known how they impact student learning" (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p. 56). For that reason and so many others, *Critical Literacy in English Literature* (Parmar & Krinski, 2013) sees itself as providing a "gentle push for teachers to supplement their standardized curriculum for the perspective of critical pedagogy using critical literacy" (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p. 57). Whether the Common Core State Standards begin to fill in the gaps left by basic-skills style education or not, supplementing a curriculum based on those (or any) standards using critical literacy will serve to further enhance students' abilities to analyze, think about, and problem solve complex real world issues.

The remaining four chapters of the text are critical unit plans pairing *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1959) with *Push* (Sapphire, 1996), *A Step from Heaven* (Na, 2001) with *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007), *The Complete Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2007) with *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1991), and *The Complete Maus: A Survivors Tale* (Spiegelman, 1996) with *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 1953). The authors explain that the structure for each unit

> Includes an introduction to the unit, guidelines for how to use the unit, and a general outline. Each text is accompanied by a brief summary, a pre-reading activity, discussion topics, review questions, learning activities, and a post-reading activity. Each unit also contains numerous ideas on how to take the lessons a step further to expand on the activities and differentiate instruction.
>
> Many activities are also accompanied by a printable guide found in the Appendix. (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p. 59)

In addition to that stated structure, each unit contains some guidance for dealing with the critical questions of the unit and there is also a "'Critical Literacy/Critical Textual Analysis' guide found at the end of the Appendix" (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p. 59). General instructional strategies for differentiation, working with students who are ELL, and meeting standards are also given.

Though brief, this introduction to the units is quite helpful in a number of ways. Like the introductory chapters to the text as a whole (chapters 1-3), it provides readers with language to use in support of this work. It also lists a number of strategies that can be used with not only the texts lists but also others that may exists in teachers' curricula. However, given the pervasiveness of the Common Core State Standards, I believe the unit frameworks should include explicit alignment to them. Instructors using this text in methods classes might consider assigning students to align the work in each unit to the various standards for the English Language Arts.

The first unit uses *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1959) with *Push* (Sapphire, 1996) to present the theme of class war. Each of these texts can also be used to study other critical issues, but the authors focus here on class. As they note, *Lord of the Flies* is frequently taught in schools, but *Push* is not. (Parmar and Krinski offer several suggestions for how to use *Push* in some form if getting permission is problematic.) Some of the topics of discussion in this unit include "Micro- vs. Macro-Societies" (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p. 72), "Dealing with Pain" (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p. 84), and "Different Agendas" (Parmar & Krinski,

2013, p. 88). Like each of the units included in the book, there are questions to assess student comprehension of the text, questions to guide students to think about the critical theme in relation to the text, and questions to illicit students' own connections to the texts.

Unit two considers racial conflict with *A Step from Heaven* (Na, 2001) and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007). It begins with the assumption that much of what is taught or portrayed about race in this country is myth. The authors tell us that the unit "attempts to address racial inequalities through the lens of identity" (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p. 93). Following a pre-reading activity where students brainstorm their own visions of America, they are challenged to think about stereotypes associated with gender roles, language use, and values. This unit challenges students to consider their own identity and those elements they choose to portray over others. In addition to the two core texts, the unit plan suggests use of *The Arrival* (Tan, 2007), a graphic novel, as part of the culminating activities.

The Complete Persepolis (Satrapi, 2007) and *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1991) are the text vehicles for a unit focused on gender issues. Each of these texts is told from a young female's perspective, which creates a different challenge for teaching this unit. Aware of this, the authors suggest strategies for keeping male students involved throughout. Of course, gender is just one part of an individual's experience with the male and female constructs that shape life. For this reason, the unit also opens up discussion related to how "growth, maturity, and sexualty" influence gender roles (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p. 123). As is the case with critical themes, it is important to understand the overlapping spheres of influence that shape an individual. Culture and religion are two other critical themes that can be explored using the texts of this unit.

The final unit explores power wars through *The Complete Maus: A Survivors Tale* (Spiegelman, 1996) and *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 1953). While addressing the pervasive and varied forms of power, the authors use this unit to "remind us that blind prejudice, absolute power, and social indifference can never be tolerated" (Parmar & Krinski, 2013, p. 142). Each text demonstrates characters

who refuse to succumb to the oppressive power that attempts to silence them. In a fitting end, the unit concludes by asking students to take action by applying the themes to their own lives.

Critical Literacy in English Literature (Parmar & Krinski, 2013) is an excellent text for a variety of audiences. It introduces the complex but important theory underpinning critical pedagogy and provides solid support for the use of critical pedagogy in schools. More importantly, the text does this in a non-dogmatic manner. It recognizes and addresses the challenges related to incorporating critical themes into the already crowded and basic-skills driven school systems. The authors clearly discuss the obstacles facing teachers today and provide both practicing and pre-service teachers with tools to think about and revise existing curricula to not only meet the needs of students but also begin needed social transformation.

About the Reviewer

Heather Hickman is an adjunct instructor of education at Lewis University (IL) and a full-time high school English teacher. Among other courses, she teaches reading and literacy methods, the history of American education, and multiculturalism in education for Lewis University. At both the university and secondary levels, Heather's teaching critically examines the status quo and addresses issues of marginalization. Heather has also presented and published on heteronormativity and critical theory in education.

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