This collection of eight essays, four by each coauthor, focuses on a complex and familiar concern for literature teachers at the secondary and post-secondary levels: how we can clarify and expand the role students play in classroom discussions about literature. All too often, the traditional role for the teacher has been to articulate his or her interpretation of a literary work to influence or even replace a student’s independent reading of a text. Rabinowitz and Smith propose that “the questions that most touch on the lives of our students—including risky questions about culturally-charged issues—ought to be at the heart of our pedagogical practice” (152), then authorial reading offers educators the best way to elicit and educate student responses to what they read.

The format of this book allows each coauthor to write an alternating chapter, establishing a “conversation” or dialogue between them which balances their individual strengths and interests. Rabinowitz primarily concentrates on the theoretical framework for defining authorial and narrative audiences, while Smith discusses the impact of these roles that take “students and their interpretive practices seriously” (2). While their essays define their boundaries and symbiosis between theory and practice, the authors also defend their particular and not always harmonious perspectives on the crucial questions posed by Wayne Booth in his forward: “Why teach literature in the first place?” and “How can you do it not just effectively in the sense of winning converts to your view of things, but in the sense of producing full ethical and intellectual development in students?” (xi).

Throughout the book, Rabinowitz and Smith confront these questions by determining the positions a reader takes while reading and the types of activities readers engage in. They identify the authorial audience as certain readers an author has in mind when writing: readers perceived as capable of responding to the literary text based on particular cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic sensibilities. Such readers respond to and appreciate literature based on “publicly available social practices” (8) rather than private associations. However, Rabinowitz acknowledges that “joining the authorial audience . . . is a provisional testing, not a permanent adopting, of a perspective” (14).

Students also function as a narrative audience for fiction and poetry by identifying with and understanding the speaker or character’s perspective and purpose in the work. The coauthors provide numerous examples and models from their own classroom experiences to illustrate how this role helps students develop interpretive strategies for grasping verbal and situational irony, or for gauging the reliability of the narrator.

Through these capacities as authorial and narrative audiences, according to Rabinowitz and Smith, students acquire sufficient skills and knowledge to respect, and at times resist, the interpretations submitted by those in the privileged positions of author and teacher. In this atmosphere, the teacher also focuses on “rehabilitating authors as essential participants in literary conversation” (47). Although these expectations may appear somewhat idealistic given the pressures imposed on many teachers and students to fulfill mandated curricular objectives, literature teachers can agree at least in principle with the desirability of creating an environment where “students and teacher can engage, if not as equals, then certainly as partners in a democratic inquiry” (20) about the substance and significance of literature.

By concentrating on pivotal issues in classroom practice, the coauthors of Authorizing Readers provide both beginning and experienced teachers with a stimulating blend of literary theory and sensible pedagogy. Although Peter Rabinowitz occasionally lapses into stilted, pedantic language, his meticulous research establishes a useful framework supporting the progressive teaching practices advocated by Michael Smith. Of course, those of us who teach literature are reluctant to abandon our cherished desire articulated by Rabinowitz and Smith to “seek a balance between honoring a student’s experience and educating it” (111). With that aspiration in mind, these authors challenge our assumptions about the capabilities of students to read intelligently and responsibly while prompting us to reassess the causes and consequences for the way we teach literature.

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