In the Middle: New Understanding about Writing, Reading and Learning

by NANCIE ATWELL
$32.50; 546 pages

Reviewed by CHRIS STREET

Chris Street is a teacher consultant with the Central Texas Writing Project.

The long-awaited second edition of Atwell’s immensely popular and influential book (the first edition was published in 1987) again shows Atwell’s reflection on her experiences as a middle-school teacher and writer. The book reads like a story but informs like a textbook. The narrative sense of the book draws readers in while the practical suggestions and concrete examples enable readers to share Atwell’s vision.

In the Middle focuses on the workshop format for the teaching of reading and writing, two subjects that Atwell claims cannot be separated. Atwell’s workshop is “student-centered in the sense that individuals’ rigorous pursuit of their ideas is the primary content of the course” (p. 71). Atwell’s curriculum evolves with the aid of her students as she probes her students with questions that matter: “What do you care about? What do you know? What do you know that others don’t” (p. 14)? The answers to these questions point students toward real writing situations, real opportunities for individualized learning, and real reasons for writers to attend to their meanings. Atwell provides the structure needed by adolescent learners while honoring them as their “mentor of writing, a mediator of writing strategies, and a model of a writer at work” (p. 21).

The first of the three sections of the book, appropriately called “Always Beginning,” is a narrative, tracing Atwell’s journey as a reader, writer, and teacher, always learning from her students. It is her students’ experiences that inform the next section of the book.

The second section of the book—“Writing and Reading Workshop”—begins with a quote by Henry David Thoreau: “It is not enough to be busy; the question is, what are we busy about?” Atwell’s students are in the processes of learning things that matter to them. Atwell models writing on subjects that are important to them. In these “territories,” as she calls them, Atwell writes about topics as diverse as her dog, chocolate, motherhood, and dreams. These examples prompt her students to examine their own interests and desires as they name their own “territories.” We witness how skillfully Atwell weaves the concerns of everyday life with her curriculum.

One of the pleasures of reading Atwell is her thoroughness. All of the elements needed to establish a workshop are here, complete with suggested times and order of activities. Built into this structured workshop setting is time for important teaching—something Atwell accomplishes through her use of mini lessons. The mini lessons come not from an outdated text or rhetorical grammar book but from Atwell’s “analysis of what students need to know next, based on what’s happening in their writing and reading, and from [her] experience of the kinds of information needed by this age group” (p. 151). For example, if her students need a refresher covering the power of using precise, active verbs, Atwell shows them how in a short, directed mini-lesson.

Atwell’s approach to student reports on books that they read is a fine example of her overall emphasis on engaging students in the meaningful work of real writers:

The book report is a school genre contrived for school purposes: make kids read, make them prove they read, make them practice a
The Rise and Fall of English

by Robert Scholes

$20.00; 192 pages

Reviewed by Pat Fox

Pat Fox is director on leave from the Coastal Georgia Writing Project.

The son of first generation Irish and Italian Roman Catholic parents, Brown University professor Robert Scholes followed their dream for him to Yale University, “that bastion of Capitalism and Protestantism,” where, as a student in the 1940s, he experienced a religious conversion: “I was thoroughly indoctrinated into the religion of literature. That is, I came to believe, with others of my generation, that reading literature and criticizing it were the best things a human being could do with life. . . .”

The Rise and Fall of English is at heart Scholes’ confession of a loss of faith in the religion of literature and in what he sees as a “system of assumptions about teaching that are so out of touch with our real situation as to be both ludicrous and dangerous.” Asserting that “academic fields are not permanent” and that English “has not always been taught and studied in the forms we are accustomed to and sometimes believe to be eternal,” Scholes explains that the central place of an English literary canon as we know it is a relatively recent development in the history of English studies—having replaced the study of Latin and Greek texts on the one hand and classical rhetoric and oratory on the other only at the turn of the twentieth century. What’s more, he notes, the belief in the value of an English literary canon was based upon cultural assumptions that are now outdated; to wit, that such texts are “the scripture of modern civilization” and that, as such, they continue to be intellectually and spiritually at the center of the lives of those who study them.

Extending the project he began a dozen years ago in Textual Power, Scholes poses the question “How can English studies help students become fit for life in a world like ours?” and argues that the time has come again for us to reconceive English as a discipline focused, not narrowly upon the critique of an exclusive literary canon, but broadly upon the thoughtful production and critical consumption of texts. Asserting that “English teachers from kindergarten to graduate school [are] engaged in the same process of helping students learn how to understand texts more fully and