

SI NECESSE EST, IN ANULO BASIAS EI DAB UT DISCAT* : A REVIEW OF *LIVES ON THE BOUNDARY.*

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Mike Rose. *Lives on the Boundary* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 255 pp.

In the first chapter of *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose tells a story about what he did on his summer vacation, the one between the fifth and sixth grades. Among other endeavors that summer, he sold strawberries door to door, working with other neighborhood kids for a Chicano man named Frank. In his dilapidated pick-up truck, Frank would drive them and the strawberries into the “better neighborhoods” in their area, where the kids, working in pairs, would be dropped off a few blocks apart to sell their fruit. In the slow, dull wait between selling strawberries and being picked up again at some pre-assigned corner, it became Mike Rose’s job to tell stories to his co-workers, other street-wise kids from south L.A., to help pass the time. Here’s how Rose tells it:

There I was, a skinny bookworm drawing the attention of street kids who, in any other circumstances, would have had me for breakfast. Like an epic tale-teller, I developed the stories as I went along, relying on a flexible plot line and a repository of heroic events. I had a great time. I sketched out trajectories with my finger on Frank’s dusty truck bed.

And I stretched out each story's climax, creating cliffhangers like the ones I saw in the Saturday serials. These stories created for me a temporary community. (22)

Embedded in this little vignette is the source and certainly a good deal of the method of *Lives on the Boundary*, a book that tries to tell the epic tale of the tribe, our disputatious tribe, in order to transform it, if for only as long as it takes to read the book, into a community. It is a book of stories: the story of Mike Rose's own education, from impoverished home circumstances to the vocational track in high school to prestigious graduate study; the stories he tells of his students' struggle over many years with educational institutions, with language and culture; the stories of the programs and institutions—the Teacher Corps, Veterans Assistance Programs, the Writing Program at UCLA—that have attempted in one way or another to make literacy a viable educational goal for students and particularly for those who are on the outer edges of academic life. Along the way we meet heroes and villains, magical (almost) helpers and mythic ordeals told in tales as old as folklore and as contemporary as today's city streets. Although these stories are Mike Rose's, they will ring true to any teacher who has seriously attempted to bring students across those boundaries that separate them from power over written language.

Lives on the Boundary is, thus, part autobiography, part case study, part social history, part research study, and, when necessary, part hard hitting polemical argument. When the book first came out, I heard from various people who had read it that this was the book that would eloquently answer the persistent conservative charge that America's mind is closing and that we are in danger of losing our national identity because we are educating our students into cultural illiteracy. And indeed *Lives on the Boundary* does make a crucially important and eloquent statement in response to the "canonists"—Bloom, Hirsch, Bennett. Rose argues persuasively that the process of canonization tends to push much of our national literature to the margin and, furthermore, that a pedagogy dedicated to teaching a canonical literature overemphasizes what is to be learned at the expense of how students, from a variety of political, economic and social backgrounds, encounter texts. In its fervor for coherence and unity, the canonical orientation blinds itself to the real differences in our population, differences that demand analysis and understanding and ultimately

a pedagogy that embraces cultural diversity as a source of educational strength not weakness. One hopes Rose's hopeful argument will find the national and influential audience it deserves.

But perhaps equally as important but more likely to be overlooked in the discussions sure to emerge from the publication of this book is the argument Rose makes to those of us working in literacy education to continue on with our efforts, to see that there is not only a need for what we do but a lot of skill and fun and pleasure and hope in it as well. Reading *Lives on the Boundary*, one becomes aware that Rose is not only making an argument but presenting us with a new way to speak to each other, a new form of disclosure in composition and higher education based on what might be called the scholarship of imagination, the expression of research findings and scholarly analysis as it is given shape by forms of literary consciousness.

If Rose gets the impulse for story telling from his strawberry days, he derives his style of scholarly discourse from a more academic source, a paragraph in the "The Humanities in American Life," which he quotes in the last chapter of his book: "The humanities presume particular methods of expression and inquiry—language, dialogue, reflection, imagination, and metaphor . . . and remain dedicated to the disciplined development of verbal, perceptual, and imaginative skills needed to understand experience." This presumption of "particular methods of expression" dedicated to a humanistic enterprise opens up through *Lives on the Boundary* into new and tempting alternatives for how we might conceive of and report our research and how we represent ourselves to each other and the public.

In what ways new? First, Rose explores the potential of narrative as a scholarly form. *Lives on the Boundary* is constructed largely out of a series of interconnected autobiographical tales mixed together with case-study-like narratives and elaborate, detailed descriptions of students on the margins of academic, economic and social life in America. These narratives are forms of scholarship because they are presented as ways of discovering what we may have forgotten about ourselves and others or never known in the first place, and because Rose integrates the stories (or are they case studies?) into a developing thesis about culture, language, and identity.

The narratives that Rose fits together about himself and his family, his education, students, friends, professors are stories that

could not, in the first place, be told without the author's scholarly training, in his case in literature and in psychology. They are stories told with a scholar's interest in how things and theories go together. Our lives, our students' lives, the history of our institutions take on in Rose's writing a fictional reality that gives them substance and texture within a humanistic, scholarly context. Only imagination in cahoots with memory and research can satisfy the most rigorous and impersonal demands of great scholarship. One thinks, for instance, of Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* as in some ways a similar experiment. In *Lives on the Boundary*, Rose "blurs genres," in Clifford Geertz's terms. As a result his book is not only about the cultural and educational boundaries that students must cross; it is also about the literary boundaries that scholarship in composition can and should cross.

Take, for instance, Rose's rhetorical exploitation of dialogue and description. It is not only verisimilitude, an expectation of fiction, that demands that the dialogues and descriptions be convincingly rendered in the narratives of *Lives on the Boundary*, but the thesis of the book itself rides on the quality with which dialogue and setting rhetorically shape those lives on the boundary Rose describes. In social constructionist terms you are, and become, who you live with and what you speak. The creation of multiple vernaculars and environments is crucial in the book to understand the nature of the boundaries that mark off one community from another and the frequently treacherous routes one must take to effect a crossing.

Although there is not a lot of dialogue in *Lives on the Boundary*, what there is is effectively written, much better than what we are accustomed to reading in the few case studies that attempt it or in the occasional article or book that uses dialogue as a pedagogical tool. Here, for example, is how Rose renders a conversation between himself and a student, Suzette, in the Tutorial Center at UCLA. This dialogue is based, I assume, on memory, tape recorder and artistic creation.

'Okay,' I said, 'let's talk about fragments. Once your teacher put brackets around these two sentences, could you see that something was wrong?' 'I see that something's wrong now,' said Suzette, tapping her pencil against the table, 'but I didn't see anything wrong when I was writing them.'

'That's alright,' I continued, 'tell me more about what

you see when the brackets make you focus on those two sentences.'

'Well, see this sentence here?' (She pointed to 'She was the leader who organized . . . ,' the sentence that comes before the two fragments.) 'I didn't want to start talking about the same thing in another sentence . . . putting . . . you know, keep repeating myself.'

'Repeating yourself? That's interesting. Say some more. Tell me more about that.'

'What, this?' she said, pointing back to that first sentence. 'I didn't want to keep putting "she was, she was, she was."'

'You were trying to avoid that kind of repetition?'

'Yeah.'

'Why? How did it sound to you?'

'Well, it's just that's not the way people write essays in college. You just don't like to see your paper with "She . . . she . . . she . . ." You know, "I . . . I . . . I . . ." It doesn't sound very intelligent.'

'That makes sense.' (170-171)

Rose then goes on to explain that this snatch of tutorial conversation establishes that in at least some cases students' mechanical and grammatical errors are attributable more to their desire to "sound" right, i.e., like their professors, than to their ignorance of sentence boundaries and punctuation. They want to write to join in the conversation, to write the way an essay should be written "in college." They become, in a sense, victimized by their own ambitions.

I could easily have quoted a snazzier snippet of dialogue from the book (my favorite is a graduate student in English ragging on the faculty: "They could give a shit if you like this stuff. They could GIVE A SHIT."), but this tutorial excerpt shows most transparently the techniques Rose has used for transforming student speech (tape recorded speech?) into dialogue through the use of strategies borrowed from fiction and narrative: that pencil tapping against the side of the table, the rhythm in which dialogue is interspersed with exposition and with identifying the speakers—she said, I continued, etc.

My point here is not so much that *Lives on the Boundary* presents an accomplished novelistic persona talking about the teaching of writing but, rather, that it presents the persona of one

of us—a teacher of writing—adroitly using the tools of a novelist to make clear the educational implications of literacy education in America. In the process, Rose sets new standards and raises new possibilities for the way we represent ourselves and our students, but perhaps its most revolutionary quality lies in this: the stories told in *Lives on the Boundary* are fun to read.

In addition to the use of narrative, dialogue and description in *Lives on the Boundary*, a second contribution Rose makes toward an alternative academic discourse can be seen in the mixing of forms and types—case study, autobiography, straight ahead research, polemic, scholarly analysis—all strung along a “flexible plot line” that serves as his compositional method. Such a method could easily have resulted in a generic porridge and a self-indulgent and inappropriate literariness. Perhaps there are those who think it has. I do not. The genres are so skillfully interwoven and the narrative interest so strong that they blend into a powerful way of talking about education. I look at my shelf of “higher ed books” for paradigms—yes, I have a shelf of higher ed books, or maybe half a shelf—and find the straight-ahead exposition of *Higher Education* by Derek Bok, *College* by Ernest Boyer, *Higher Education and the American Resurgence* by Frank Newman. The stentorian *Closing of the American Mind*. I guarantee you that none of these authors talk about the experience of higher education, and particularly that part of it dealing with students’ confrontation with “academic discourse,” in the way Mike Rose does. I want to look in some detail at one specimen, the opening of the first chapter, “Our Schools and Our Children,” in order to show what I mean about the mixing of forms and types.

Her name is Laura, and she was born in the poor section of Tijuana, the Mexican border city directly south of San Diego. Her father was a food vendor, and her memories of him and his chipped white cart come back to her in easy recollections: the odor of frying meat, the feel of tortillas damp with grease, and the serpentine path across the city; rolling the cart through the dust, watching her father smile and haggle and curse—hawking burritos and sugar water to old women with armloads of blouses and figurines, to blond American teenagers, wild with freedom, drunk and loud and brawny. She came to the United States when she was six, and by dint of remarkable effort—on her parent’s part and hers—

she now sits in classes at UCLA among these blond apparitions.

The paragraph begins in unprepossessing case study language, objective specificity without detail: "Her name was Laura and she was born in Tijuana, the Mexican border city south of San Diego." Sentence two begins in much the same manner until it arrives, without fanfare, at that very significant "chipped white cart." Here we get our first hint that the discourse Mike Rose is taking us into is fresh and unexplored in our field. So much depends upon chipped white carts in border towns south of San Diego! Where did this cart come from? Perhaps it appears in the research. Rose apparently collects information on his students with the thoroughness and voraciousness of an FBI investigation. There must be file cabinets and cardboard boxes full of scribbled yellow legal pads in his office, his apartment, his car. And he must have a computer for a memory or take a lot of surreptitious notes or both. At one point late in the book he lets on that he has been tape recording interviews with his students. All these years? All those students? Who knows? Perhaps Laura mentioned that cart. Did she say to Rose "my father's chipped white cart"? It seems somehow doubtful. More likely the data, as it were, or the materials, perhaps, have been provided by Laura. But the rendering of the details—the serpentine path, the blond American teenagers, "wild with freedom"—these are the necessary inventions of a romancer, a maker of educational fables. Research in this book does not answer to the mandates of verifiability but to the demands of the imagination. The ambitious and successful (if illegal) syntax of the sentence itself, as serpentine as any path in Tijuana, subtly shifts our awareness from the expectations of case study talk to the literary possibilities of vignette and fiction. The paragraph concludes with a resonant click by positioning Laura, the immigrant, the poor and marginalized student, among the blond apparitions at blond UCLA, fact situated among fact.

When does a case study stop being a case study and become an imaginary construct? The answer does not depend on how one defines "imaginary." Instead, we are led to understand in this book that definition itself depends on the balance of one language against another, one literary expectation rubbing up next to another: the conventions of fiction vs. those of social science research, the vernacular of the street vs. the discourse of the academy, literary

talk vs. literacy talk. A case study is a case study when its language is rendered for the most part in the language of the research communities in the social and behavioral sciences. A case study stops being a case study and becomes a work of fiction when its language is primarily in the style we associate with literary story telling. *Lives on the Boundary* manages to combine both so that the veracity of the case study is enhanced by the rhetorical power of the literary style.

I have been talking about the boundaries that *Lives on the Boundary* crosses: scholarship as narration, description and dialogue; the mixed genres of fiction, case study, autobiography and argument. I want finally to point to a third kind of border crossing in the book: the crossing of disciplinary and cultural boundaries. This is a book that feels equally at home in the languages of cognitive and social psychology, poetry, literary theory, pedagogy, higher education, rock and roll, social constructionist theory, anthropology, the drug culture, and high art. Wallace Stevens and rap songs, Aime Cesaire and Karl Jaspers, Abraham Maslow and Martin Buber and James Berlin all find their way into this book, along with many, many others espousing histories, psychologies, pedagogies and poems. I don't mean to imply either erudition or cultural tourism—the book does not feel “learned” or trendy. Instead, the overall impression is one of synthesis, of one teacher putting a lot of disparate things together in his life in order, as he eloquently puts it, “to turn scholarship out onto human affairs.”

Boundary crossing can be and often is a dangerous business, and not only for students. There are many dangers lurking in the endeavor Rose has set for himself—to build an experimental form in a profession that is obsessed with gaining academic respectability. The predominant use of narrative privileges a different form of evidence in argument than what we have come to expect from reading *College English* or *CCC* or *JTW*, for that matter. And *Lives on the Boundary* must have presented its author with extraordinarily complex problems in composition: how to move to analysis in the midst of narrative; how to keep the unifying focus of the book—Mike Rose's consciousness—from overpowering or undervaluing the political and educational issues that his autobiographical and character sketches are composed to illustrate; how to integrate the past with the present in dynamic rather than

nostalgic terms, how to move from one discourse community to another without mistakes either in vernacular or nuance. That these problems are confronted in the first place makes *Lives on the Boundary* an unusual book in higher education; that they are resolved with such skill is testimony to the book's consistent and remarkable readability.

Mike Rose's success in this book powerfully legitimizes interdisciplinary and cross-cultural studies in the interests of literacy education. It opens up possibilities for all of us. *Lives on the Boundary* is an invitation. All that we need is the courage and the skill to cross our own boundaries.

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*"If I have to, I'll kiss their asses to make them learn." From *Lives on the Boundary*, 154.

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