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Poetry of Place: A Review Essay

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Abstract

Our Terry Hermsen's *Poetry of Place: Helping Students Write Their Worlds* is a remarkable book—one of the most engaging and hopeful books about teaching poetry that I know. Hermsen offers: thoughtful discussions of practice informed by theory as well as theory informed by practice; a well-conceived and carefully conducted research project; creative lessons for enthusing lively encounters in classrooms; and, engaging poetry by both well-known writers and student writers. He offers an abundance of gifts, all in one book.

Terry Hermsen's *Poetry of Place: Helping Students Write Their Worlds* is a remarkable book—one of the most engaging and hopeful books about teaching poetry that I know. I begin this review with enthusiastic praise because Hermsen deserves to be celebrated for a book that represents a long, long commitment to poetry, both as a writer and a teacher. Like a juggler, Hermsen deftly and eloquently represents three major commitments. He is a poet, and he is also a teacher, but what distinguishes his book is that he is also a researcher. As Hermsen explains, the book has grown “out of twenty-five years of trial and error, lessons spun out of necessity and curiosity, as I roved around the state of Ohio, conducting residencies for the Ohio Art Council's Artists in Education program” (p. xv). So, as a poet, teacher, and researcher, Hermsen brings these three roles together in a book that honors the possibilities of poetry, as well as teaching and learning, and careful inquiry into the pedagogy and practice of poetry in classrooms. In turn, the reader is invited into an adventure that includes evocative poetry by well-known poets, as well as startling poetry by students, and inventive strategies for teaching poetry, and a well-conceived research project that is a source of substantial encouragement for all of us involved in promoting poetry with young writers.

Above all, Hermsen has written the book out of his “evolving conviction ... that students often barely know how to look at where they live” (p. xv). At the beginning of his book, Hermsen asks, “How can poetry help students find meaning; that is, how can it help them reengage who they are, where they are, and how they see the world? Second, how can we teach poetry in a more comprehensive way, a way in which each lesson, while self-contained and fresh, also links to a wider strategy of interlocking conceptual and perceptual skills?” (p. xv) He then proceeds to respond to his questions with thirty specific lessons with titles like: *Metaphoric Being*; *Metaphor and the Body: Sports Riddles*; *A Voice in the Painting*; *Supposing*; and, *Remapping the Town*. All the lessons are clearly expressed and bear the stamp of long practice. Hermsen's lesson ideas can be adapted for any grade or age level. For example, he provides “an annotated list of various places” (p. 77) he has taken students on field trips including: the science fair, the furnace room, a factory, restored theaters, the art museum, the historical society, downtown streets, caves, and the zoo. Going on field trips is an integral part of the experiences of many students. Inviting them to write poetry could be a new way to open up possibilities for perceiving the experiences with a heightened sense of wonder. If the book contained just the thirty lessons, it would be an indispensable resource for teachers, but Hermsen's book is much more than another collection of teaching ideas.

While *Poetry of Place: Helping Students Write Their Worlds* is abundantly practice-based and pedagogical, and therefore immensely valuable for the kind of practical and pragmatic professional development that all of us as educators are constantly seeking, the book is also accessibly academic with thoughtful references to a wide range of scholars, including Mark Johnson, George Lakoff, Hughes Mearns, Michel Foucault, Roman Jakobson, Mieke Bal,

Viktor Shklovsky, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and David Orr. Hermsen has read widely and engaged in lively conversations with other significant writers, and he invites his readers to join in the conversations. Hermsen focuses on “four interlocking theories: metaphor, physicality, visualization, and play” (p. xix) and in order to investigate these theories, he “went to philosophers, linguists, cognitive scientists and poets themselves” (p. xix). Hermsen wants to “bring the metaphoric, playful, physical, and visual sides of the mind and the child ... into more productive functioning within the school environment?” (p. 44) He develops the four interlocking theories of “metaphor, physicality, visualization, and play” in thoughtful and provocative ways throughout the book, and I cannot summarize in this brief review the attention that he gives to each theory as a way to focus attention on the craft and experience of reading and writing poetry, but I will linger with these four theories a little longer in order to highlight the intricate ways that Hermsen holds all the parts of this book in balance.

Like a complex work of art, the parts all connect to one another, and thereby, all together compose an experience that is satisfyingly whole. So, in Hermsen’s discussion of metaphor as a conceptual way of perceiving and being, he promotes the need to attend to “our experience of the world” (p. 27) with “a deep grappling with how images are created, with how they affect us” (p. 36). I especially admire the way that Hermsen attends to art and the visual in his book. The use of art by Bruegel, Klee, Klimt, Magritte, and O’Keeffe to discuss imagery and metaphor and perception is delightfully inspiring. And in a similarly effective way, Hermsen promotes play as “essential to the teaching and writing of poetry” (p. 53). He presents a nuanced notion of play that includes playing with language—“opening it up after all the daily stuff we do with words to close them in and make them stale” (p. 120)—as a way to learn again how to play with mystery.

In Part 2 of the book which focuses on a case study titled “The Mt. Gilead Project: A Semester with Poetry,” Hermsen narrates how he asked, “What would happen if we took the principles I’d been exploring somewhat randomly over the years and applied them more deliberately? I came back to Mt. Gilead to find out” (p. 99). Hermsen then collaborated with Jill Grubb, and visited two of her “tenth-grade English classes over the course of a semester” (p. 99). For many reasons, this case study is the core of the book, but especially because the students’ poems are marvelous. Hermsen explains: “For more than theory, more than lesson plans, more than a narrative of one poet’s journey through the schools, this book celebrates an array of student poems—and a way of *reading* student poems—which I hope can invite us all to reconsider what poetry can do, and what our students can teach *us* about rediscovering the world” (p. xxi).

By way of illustration, I include the following three examples of students' poetry that I particularly enjoyed:

I watched the man who stole the sun
I watched him fold it into his pocket
Wrapping it gently into a gift

I watched him walk carefully through
the darkness
I watched as only the street lamps
lit his way (p. 69)

Beth

Small waves lick my toes
like fire to a log
consuming me as tides rise ... (p. 116)

Sarah S.

Suppose a paper clip began speaking,
Laughing as it was brushing its teeth (p. 123)

Erin

But Hermsen does not nurture this kind of poetry without bringing a rigorous approach to responding to the students' poetry. He does not offer praise of the students' writing without evaluative judgement. For example, regarding one student's poem, he notes that "there was no kind way to tell Heather how bored I was by this poem" (p. 197). Hermsen takes poetry seriously!

In turn, because Hermsen takes poetry seriously, his pedagogy is eminently hopeful. Following a discussion of a lesson that was not as successful as he anticipated, he recognizes how important it is for a teacher "to keep taking risks" (p. 200). Near the end of the book he acknowledges a kind of wisdom that I think every teacher needs to attend to: "In the end, maybe what matters most is what our students have to teach *us* about the nature of poetry. We can present them with all the material, examples, and principles we can muster, but they will let us know, through their responses and their poems, what really gets through. Finishing a class with a group that's engaged, I often feel I've discovered the immense, intriguing, and

open field of poetry all over again” (p. 201). With all his years of teaching, Hermsen holds fast to a heartfelt credo: “I believe poetry offers students one of the main resources to transform their lives” (p. 201). So, he asks, “Can poetry be one of the forces working to resettle humanity, allowing us to hear each other and allowing us to reconnect with the places where we live?” (p. 201) This is Hermsen’s conviction, eloquently expressed: “I want students to learn, through poetry, to listen better to each other as well as to all that came before us and all that will arise. I want them to *suppose* that language is vibrant, that life is out there to be discovered, and that the pen and the poem are vessels of wonder, ready to take them anywhere” (pp. 201-202).

Above all, Hermsen is committed to guiding students in their reengaging the world. His pedagogy is focused on “learning how to look ... with fresh eyes; learning to hear language; learning to visualize on the page...; learning to take on other voices...; learning to dwell in moments, in textures, in tones...; and learning to feel the words as they *turn* down the page, pulling us along” (p. 201). Hermsen explains clearly his process and attends carefully to his students. He performs an exemplary pedagogy. Hermsen confesses: “I would hesitate to make anything here into a set formula, a lock-step process to fit every classroom” (p. xvi). And this is again part of the value of the book. Hermsen is not providing formulae for lessons or plans that can be photocopied for insertion into a lesson here or there. Hermsen is providing a coherent, comprehensive, and creative approach to teaching poetry that can inspire other teachers.

Hermsen knows and honors poetry: “For nearly every poetry lesson, I recommend the use of model poems” (p. 10). So, he includes wonderful poems as exemplars, including poems by Levertov, Neruda, Oliver, Rilke, Simic, Snyder, Stafford, Szymborska, and Wright. I am also glad that he includes some of his own poetry. Hermsen knows the heart of poetry from wide reading of both poets and theorists, but he particularly understands the heart of poetry because he is a poet. Out of his lifetime experience with poetry, he writes with confident authority. So, the book is a treat to read for the poetry that is included.

Hermsen understands that poetry is a significant way for exploring our experiences and emotions in the world. Poetry provides a location for first attending to our own bodies, our own sense of subjective and embodied presence, in specific geographical locations so that we can begin to connect with others through conversation and sharing, so we can reach beyond the specific and local places we linger in and understand our ecological connections to others. For Hermsen poetry “is a way for students to regain a sense of wonder about the world” (p. 19). As he explains, “the whole thrust of this book is to give them practice in making compelling leaps between all that is around them—the rain, the trees, the chalk, the grind of

motors, the stretch of wires down a city block, the dance of a field out toward a hillside—into their own reengagement of the world” (p. 19).

In *Poetry of Place: Helping Students Write Their Worlds*, Terry Hermsen offers: thoughtful discussions of practice informed by theory as well as theory informed by practice; a well-conceived and carefully conducted research project; creative lessons for enthusing lively encounters in classrooms; and, engaging poetry by both well-known writers and student writers. He offers an abundance of gifts, all in one book. As a poet, researcher, and teacher, I am glad and grateful.

About the Author:

Carl Leggo is a poet and professor in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia where he teaches courses in English Education, writing, and narrative research. His poetry and fiction and scholarly essays have been published in many journals in North America and around the world. He is the author of three collections of poems: *Growing Up Perpendicular on the Side of a Hill, View from My Mother's House* (Killick Press, St. John's), and *Come-By-Chance* (Breakwater Books, St. John's), as well as a book about reading and teaching poetry: *Teaching to Wonder: Responding to Poetry in the Secondary Classroom* (Pacific Educational Press, Vancouver). With Erika Hasebe-Ludt and Cynthia Chambers, he recently published *Life Writing and Literary Métissage as an Ethos for Our Times* (Peter Lang, New York). Also, he is a co-editor (with Stephanie Springgay, Rita L. Irwin, and Peter Gouzouasis) of *Being with A/r/tography* (Sense Publishers, Rotterdam), and a co-editor (with Robert Kelly) of *Creative Expression, Creative Education* (Detselig Press, Calgary), and a co-editor (with Monica Prendergast and Pauline Sameshima) of *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences* (Sense Publishers, Rotterdam). He is currently completing a new book titled *Pedagogy of the Heart: Learning to Live Poetically*. He recently became a grandfather—an experience of intimate and ultimate poetic inspiration.

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