Review
In Defense of Unruliness: Five Books on Reading

Kelly Blewett


By validating “unruly reading,” a move we understand might sound odd to some, we are directing attention away from the notion that “students can’t read” and “reading is a problem” to an acknowledgement that students have capacities and abilities we have yet to pay adequate attention to.

—Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue (Deep Reading 314)

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College English, Volume 80, Number 3, January 2018

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here is a familiar story about reading in the United States today, namely that Americans are reading less material and more poorly than they did in the past. The Nation’s Report Card, a project run by the National Center for Education Statistics, reported in 2015 that only 37 percent of twelfth graders performed at or above proficiency level in reading (qtd. in Deep Reading xv). Pleasure reading is down according to the Pew Research Center, which reports that 26 percent of American adults haven’t picked up a book in any format in more than a year (Perrin). In K–12, the combination of Common Core State Standards and high-stakes testing are committing what Kelly Gallagher calls “readicide,” the death of pleasure reading at the hand of school (qtd. in Deep Reading xv). In fact, as many have pointed out, the move toward standardized testing encourages a text-focused close reading that seems at odds with the thoughtful, interpretive reading many teachers value. And the activity of reading itself seems to be changing. As Deborah Brandt’s The Rise of Writing suggests, readers now skim over long-form texts—a mode called shallow by some (e.g., Carr) and purposeful by others (e.g., Brandt). Regardless of how we position ourselves in relation to these changes, it seems clear that a reading controversy has been and continues to be unfolding in our midst.

However, an exclusive focus on the controversies surrounding reading elides some of the activity’s most mysterious and excessive qualities, as a new essay collection, Deep Reading (NCTE 2017), points out. One of the themes that emerges from this book dates to Louise Rosenblatt, who is honored in the book’s dedication and widely cited throughout: it is important to acknowledge the complexity of reading—the social, emotional, cognitive, material, personal, and public aspects of reading. In the second part of this review, I will briefly introduce four books published outside of composition studies that explore these dimensions of reading. I use Salvatori and Donahue’s conception of “unruly” reading (which is reading “liberated from . . . prescriptive ideas about how students should both read and be taught to read” [qtd. in Deep Reading 314]), to highlight what these five texts collectively bring to composition studies: a reclamation of “the complex and elusive nature of reading” which is “surprise-provoking, possible, self-reflexive, and interpretive” (318). My hope is that by offering this cornucopia of new titles, teachers of English will feel a renewed sense of curiosity and wonder around the topic of reading, will be moved to pick up a new book and engage in conversations that have a very different end goal than to bemoan the current state of literacy in America—conversations that affirm the disorderly exuberance of how we interpret what we read.
The editors of *Deep Reading: Teaching Reading in the Writing Classroom* suggest their ideal audience to be teachers from grades 6 through 14, a suggestion that might raise eyebrows if the reader (like me) is not accustomed to seeing postsecondary and secondary education wrapped quite so neatly together. I was reminded of Ellen C. Carillo’s comment that the desire to separate the field from secondary education is part of the reason reading was abandoned as an area of inquiry in composition (*Securing* 3). Nonetheless, the scope is useful, particularly because, as David A. Jolliffe points out in his contribution, what is happening with the Common Core influences how students approach reading and writing in college (chapter 1).

*Deep Reading* aims to assist teachers with conceptualizing, teaching, and talking with students about reading, and it is divided into four sections. The first, titled “The Nature of the Problem,” includes notable contributions from Kathleen Blake Yancey and her colleagues, whose chapter considers how device and design shape reading experiences (chapter 3), and from Jolliffe, who offers an overview of the last ten years of reading research in secondary and postsecondary schools. The second section, “Listening to Student Voices,” is composed of three essays by college students that directly reflect on their reading, each followed by a respondent in the field who is a mentor or former teacher of the student writer. As our field privileges student voices but sometimes struggles to include them in the conversation, I appreciated this tangible and highly visible inclusion of students. Overall these narratives suggest that student reading practices are highly diverse, and that the students who leave college with a deep affection for reading are often the ones who arrived that way.

The third section, as long as the other two combined, offers nine contributions that focus on praxis, which amounts to, as Alice Horning writes, a “grab bag” of pedagogical approaches (359). Here readers learn more about how Carillo teaches mindful reading (chapter 10), and how Patricia Donahue and Mariolina Salvatori position unruly interpretation as central to the typical genres associated with reading—annotation, paraphrase, summary, and quotation (chapter 16). Sullivan makes a case that what he theorizes as “deep reading” should be considered a threshold concept in writing studies (chapter 17), and Muriel Harris discusses the role of reading in the writing center (chapter 12). With these contributions and more, this section firmly positions the text as a book about reading for the writing classroom and assures that teachers will walk away with new ideas for incorporating reading pedagogies in their courses. The final section, “Letters to Students about Reading,” is designed to engage high
school students directly in research-based discussion about reading (both letters, in different ways, encourage pleasure reading).

In this collection, I see both dynamic agreement around specific ways of synthesizing and resisting the dominant discussion about reading, as well as a shared call for action. For instance, a quick review of the collection reveals the prevalence of reader response models as particularly salient for composition classrooms. Many of the pieces prod at the reading-writing connection, bemoan the decrease of pleasure reading in the wider culture, suggest that there may be a place for literature in composition courses, and cite the same authors to orient their discussions. Many wonder why reading research from the eighties and nineties is so rarely cited now. Most encourage what might be positioned as a more humanistic approach to reading—an appreciation of reading for reading’s sake—and suggest college reading instruction can and should do more than simply confirm (and conform) a class’s understanding of school-assigned texts.

At the same time, divisions between contributions certainly do exist, perhaps most pertinently regarding the titular theoretical concept of the volume, “deep reading.” This concept, most clearly unpacked by Sullivan in his two individual pieces, connect deep reading to threshold concepts and suggests that deep reading happens when students openly, cautiously, and humbly engage texts that provide troublesome knowledge and pose challenging questions (145). Deep reading, for Sullivan, is about both a readerly stance and a difficult interpretive situation. The opposite of deep reading is surface reading, which calls for cursory textual engagement and enables students to fake reading in a range of school situations. While I like the concept of deep reading and will, in subsequent paragraphs, connect aspects of it to other books examined in this review, I also found myself considering the many relevant inquiries into the phenomenon of reading that a focus on deep reading removes from view, such as research into the complexity of students’ actual reading practices. In his letter directly to students, Sullivan explicitly draws attention away from social media to prioritize student engagement with “articles and books” that require “sustained concentration” (343). Yet the work of others in the volume—notably Yancey and colleagues, who cite a taxonomy of eight different reading approaches to digital material, all of which fall in the “surface reading” category (36)—suggests that there is value in looking at surface reading more carefully and that the division between deep and shallow engagement might be more complex than Sullivan’s construct might suggest. Still, the larger question of how we define the reading we want students to do and whether it belongs among the threshold concepts of the field is worthwhile, and the overarching purpose of the volume is not to forward a singular conception of reading, but rather to get teachers talking...
about what reading means and how we might productively teach reading in the writing classroom. On this score, the book achieves its goals.

In addition to this contribution, recent work outside the field connects to, and may help expand, our conception of unruly reading which “bypasses the restrictions of certain established reading patterns” to find “zones of possibility, provoking, even encouraging, the element of discovery” (xxiii). Collectively, the following books demonstrate reading’s complexities, beginning with the idiosyncrasies and power of a personal response to a book.

**Books on Reading beyond Composition Studies**

Will Schwalbe, a New York book editor, burst onto the popular reading scene with *The End of Your Life Book Club* (Knopf 2012), a memoir about how books helped Schwalbe and his mother, who was then suffering from the late stages of pancreatic cancer, spend meaningful time together during her final days. For *Books for Living*, Schwalbe penned 26 essays on reading, profiling personally significant books from his childhood through the present. Louise Rosenblatt theorized reading as “an event in the life of a reader, a doing, a making, a combustion fed by the coming together of a particular personality and a particular text at a particular time” (qtd. in *Deep Reading* xiii). Such a definition finds full demonstration in Schwalbe’s collection.

Schwalbe shows how books establish meaning through the personal context in which they are read. In one case, the character David Copperfield becomes bound, in Schwalbe’s mind, to the boy David Baer, a close friend of Schwalbe’s who passed in a sudden, tragic accident just after college. Schwalbe rereads Dickens’s classic while infused with melancholy about his own David, a rich sadness that only makes the book more meaningful. Books are celebrated not only for their content—such as *Giovanni’s Room*, which helped Schwalbe come to terms with his sexuality—but also for how they made their way to him. In the case of Baldwin’s novel, a knowing librarian left a copy for Schwalbe on the library cart. He writes that this book, among others purposefully shelved on the cart, “helped me create a vision of a life I could look forward to with something other than dread” (78). The collection also celebrates the material, physical pleasures of everyday reading. In one of the strongest essays in the book, a piece called “Nourishing,” which profiles three cookbooks, Schwalbe writes of his preferred approach to reading cookbooks: at night, in bed, after brushing his teeth. Across these essays, then, Schwalbe demonstrates the close ties between books and memories, books and identities, and books and affects.

Books contribute to the development of what Schwalbe calls one’s “practical philosophy,” a point echoed by Sullivan, who suggests that a deep reading
pedagogy can help students develop their own personal philosophy (147). Schwalbe’s great example of this is in his engagement with Lin Yutang, a Chinese philosopher from the 1930s who attempted to explain Eastern philosophy to Westerners. Schwalbe was so taken by Yutang’s ideas, which he came across rather unexpectedly decades after Yutang’s book was out of print, that he arranged to have an edition of Yutang’s book re-released. Schwalbe’s approach to reading is accessible and human, fully engaged, and richly affective. The book can be gulped in a weekend or savored essay by essay. And, if one wanted to redesign a literacy narrative assignment to focus on the significance of self-sponsored reading—and then assemble a class’s collective anthology of “books for living”—I can imagine that selections from Schwalbe would serve as marvelous models for student writing.

If Schwalbe’s book points to complicated, interior responses to a text, then *The Bestseller Code* emphasizes the role of hidden patterns within a text that create a certain kind of reading experience—namely, the page-turning, gut-churning, emotional roller-coaster ride of bestselling fiction. Jodie Archer and Mathew L. Jockers open their book with an audacious claim: a novel’s fate in the marketplace can be predicted with over 80 percent accuracy in advance by a computer algorithm. The pair’s collaborative approach to bestseller lists intriguingly couples a seemingly unpredictable corpus with the granular analysis of data mining. Using a set of just over 5,000 books (500 of which are NYT bestsellers), the researchers programmed computers to track more than 20,000 discrete characteristics. *The Bestseller Code* attempts to turn this research into a highly readable report that culminates in the revelation of which book from the bestseller list proved to be a “perfect” fit for the algorithm. The analysis here flies in the face of book publishing culture, which, as Archer and Jockers write, tends to predict success by raising “a wet finger held up in the air” or by using “the mysterious crystal ball that the highest paid agents and publishers seem to conceal under their desks” (11). Success in the marketplace is perceived to be stubbornly unpredictable, particularly in the cases of books like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, and *The Shack*. They were written by little-known authors, who published or self-published with little fanfare and were unnoticed by the major review outlets. Yet, to the algorithm there is something in all three of these titles identifiable as bestseller material. To suggest that the public unknowingly recognized and responded to these features, which are invisible to the publishing professionals, is provocative and appealing.

However, the book is not perfect. At times, the tone—infused with a kind of hyperbolic enthusiasm for pleasure reading—can be a bit grating, even for a former book publicist such as myself. The writers seem to have struggled to determine how nuanced the book should be, a struggle occasionally dramatized...
in footnotes and appendices. One footnote, for example, talks about the danger of “biasing the classifier” [133], a phrase that is undefined and does not appear in the main body of the book. Some of the conclusions drawn are not really all that surprising. And yet, despite these limitations, the book has staying power. The fresh and democratic approach to analyzing public reading patterns is supported by engaging arguments and twenty neat visualizations of data that call for increased engagement with pleasure reading as a topic and data mining as a method. It’s a book that begs to be discussed and that demonstrates that hidden patterns—in style, plot, character description, and language—invisibly draw responses from readers.

As thoughtful as they are, the data visualizations in *The Bestseller Code* pale in comparison to the designs of Peter Mendelsund, who has worked as a cover designer in book publishing for decades. In an article in *The Wall Street Journal* that explored Mendelsund’s process for designing the cover of the previously mentioned bestseller *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, his work is referred to as “the most instantly recognizable and iconic book covers in contemporary fiction” (Fedor). In 2014, Mendelsund authored *What We See When We Read*, a book comprising words and images that explores how readers visualize prose. The cover of the book is all black with a small golden keyhole pictured at the center. When readers flip the cover open, they are greeted by black endpapers and a slightly larger keyhole. This one appears like a window, and through its shape the reader can see the gazing eye of a person on the other side. The graphics suggest that what we see when we read is always partial and mysterious.

Across nineteen short chapters with titles like “Time,” “Vividness,” “Co-Creation,” “Memory & Fantasy” and “It Is Blurred,” Mendelsund slowly takes readers down what feels like a very deep rabbit hole into the visualization of prose. Pastiche collages, outsized fonts, antique illustrations, vintage photographs, and spiky diagrams dominate the book’s pages. For example, in one spread an antique print of Don Quixote seated in his library and surrounded by mythic creatures appears opposite words in black Roman font against a white background that read: “What do we see when we read? (Other than words on a page.) What do we picture in our minds?” (7). Mendelsund positions reading as a “continuous unfolding of images”—something like watching a film but much less directed.

His point is simple but profound: readers’ interior projections are inchoate and blurry. Books unfold in a visual fog and readers themselves light the way forward. Mendelsund writes, “Much of our reading imagination comprises visual free association. Much of our reading imagination is untethered from the author’s text” (295). Here I recalled one of my own visual idiosyncrasies: my habit of imagining novels as taking place in a very particular house in Pennsylvania that used to belong to my uncle. Though I haven’t set foot in this house in decades,
I still see its traditional blue exterior nestled at the bottom of a rolling green hill and can easily imagine all the rooms inside. This kind of reading experience is, I think, exactly what Mendelsund means when he writes, “We take in as much of the author’s world as we can, and mix this material with our own in the alembic of our reading minds, combining them to alchemize something unique. . . . the practice of reading feels like, and is like, consciousness itself: imperfect, partial; hazy, co-creative” (403). Blurriness and haze are necessary and even desirable, because a perfect image of the character or setting would be both restrictive and exhausting.

His emphasis on the active yet semiconscious contributions of the reader in the co-creation of the text is resonant with reader response theory, though Medelsund’s book raises more questions than it answers. I found myself wondering about the role of interior visualization of informational texts. What do we see when we read arguments, political rhetoric, and even student writing? How does positionality shape what we see? How does close engagement with one text change our interior projections of other texts? Mendelsund’s ideas are valuable for raising those kinds of questions, but it is the experience of *What We See When We Read* that distinguishes the book from more scholarly explorations of the topic. In her recommendation, creative writer Karen Russell writes, “Like the *Wizard of Oz* tornado, his lucid, questioning prose and his surprising, joyful visuals collide to create a similar weather system inside the reader.” As researchers in composition increasingly turn their attention to visual rhetoric and the potential of making complicated arguments through image, Mendelsund’s book and his own large body of work as a cover designer seem welcome objects for consideration.

Visualizing reading also comes up in Gary Weissman’s *The Writer in the Well*, a book about misreading in the literature classroom. When asked why she pictured a story as taking place in the Dust Bowl during the Depression, Weissman’s college student Krista attributed this assumption not to the text, but rather to her previous exposure to texts about these topics. Such an interior projection impacted Krista’s interpretation of the story, because, as Weissman puts it, “she cites economic and environmental conditions to explain character motivation” (79). Krista’s misreading is one among many that Weissman explores in *The Writer in the Well*, a book he wrote after teaching Ira Sher’s short story “The Man in the Well.” Sher’s story presents readers with a case of immoral behavior. A group of children witness a man trapped in a well and choose to do nothing, despite the man’s repeated calls for help. Weissman’s students had more difficulty interpreting the text than he’d anticipated. And then, over the course of several years, Weissman also began to have difficulties as he reconsid-
ered his own interpretations as well as the larger project of analyzing literature in the classroom.

In his extremely readable book, Weissman turns this experience into an object lesson that deftly deploys scholarship from various sides of English studies, including literature, composition, and creative writing. He comes to value misreadings because they expose the group to “a range of interpretive possibilities, both ‘wild’ and ‘successful’” and reveal “the limits imposed by any single interpretation” (17). His readers also get to play. After a thorough (and entertaining) introduction into the complex nature of interpretation, Weissman includes Sher’s story in full and asks readers to respond to the same prompt as his students. As I wrote, I became aware of how my interpretation hinged on key moments in the story—and how through writing, I was reinterpreting and rewriting my reading. Weissman, too, is fascinated by the interrelatedness of the writing and reading processes and refers to his text at as a kind of proto-work of “writer-response theory” (27). When I then read how Weissman’s students reconciled, overread, or ignored key textual moments and how Weissman himself interpreted them, I was completely absorbed, especially when Weissman began corresponding directly with Sher. The two “authorities” puzzle over the students’ readings together and stumble into realizations about the limits of their own (both, for example, assumed a male protagonist despite the absence of textual support). In the final chapter, Weissman explores how “our unfamiliarity with certain genres and their conventions, and our deep familiarity with others, accounts for how we construe the story and rewrite it to fulfill genre expectations” (28). In this case, Weissman explores how treating “The Man in the Well” as a modern parable versus a confessional narrative versus a fairy tale leads to different kinds of interpretations, all of which occurred in the class. Weissman writes, “I was made aware of my interpretive choice by my students’ alternative choices, and in gaining this awareness I became more aware of and open to other interpretive possibilities” (176). Weissman and Sher close the book with a dialogue that reconsiders the story in light of how it has been theorized and rewritten throughout the book.

There is resonance between Weissman’s volume and Sullivan’s deep reading pedagogy. Sullivan writes, “I propose that we theorize writing as a form of deep reading and learning—an active, generative process of intellectual inquiry built around reading and sustained engagement with complex, ill-structured problems” (145). Using this theorization, Weissman’s book is an excellent demonstration of deep reading pedagogy, as his students are immersed in “confusion, uncertainty and chaos” and must “integrate reading, writing, and thinking” in deeply interpretive ways (145). Beyond this, The Writer in the Well is a book
that begs to be read with students. Given that Sher’s story is so short—a scant six pages—I can imagine many teachers using Weissman’s assignment early in the term to foreground the issues surrounding textual interpretation that will be at stake throughout the class.

**Moving Forward in Unruly Fashion**

Despite the commonality in topic, these books represent a range: three are not published by an academic press, and they do not, on the face of it, speak to the kinds of concerns we have around the topic of reading in composition. With the exceptions of *Deep Reading* and *The Writer in the Well*, they do not help students interpret scholarly sources or answer the pedagogical imperative. Four of them deal with literary texts, a content area that continues to have a vexed place in the composition classroom. Still, in this review, I aimed to draw attention to new ways that we might, as a scholarly community, talk about reading. How, through some self-sponsored reading, we might move ourselves a little bit closer toward the sort of habits of mind we value in our students: flexible, curious, engaged.

Despite their differences, the books have a great deal in common. Collectively they provide an alternative to the “reading is a problem” story so often heard in higher education and the culture at large. They also illuminate what Salvatori and Donahue call “the reader within,” meaning that just as we have writerly orientations that can be highly discrete and emerge from diverse repertoires, so we also have unique readerly orientations (*Deep Reading* 332). Finding ways to talk about “the reader within” is valuable because this invisible presence influences how we engage, interpret, and write about what we read. And, as many of these books underscore, pleasure reading matters. By talking about and encouraging self-sponsored reading, we can find ways to move toward the kinds of deep reading pedagogies endorsed by Sullivan and others.

I value these books because they broaden the public conversation about reading to include the kinds of concerns and orientations that show up in our private lives—dog-eared copies of favorite books, semiconscious processes of visualizing what we read, satisfying—but-hidden patterns among bestsellers, and even our own tendencies to overread or ignore what is on the page in front of us. These aspects of private reading influence the reading we do in other environments, like school, and demonstrate that reading is a rich activity that remains stubbornly mysterious and unruly. Unruliness is not something to be avoided, but something to be explored. Together, books emphasize that readers make complex interpretive moves, often without being completely aware of it, and resist the idea that a single reading of a text is possible or preferable. As Ann E. Berthoff has written, it is interpretation that unites reading and writing, and the
“spiraling circularity” of interpreting our interpretations that makes us uniquely human (qtd. in Carillo 5).

Works Cited


Carillo, Ellen C. *Securing a Place of Reading in Composition: The Importance of Teaching for Transfer*. U of Colorado P, 2015.
