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Book Review

***Powerful Prose: How Textual Features Impact Readers***

**edited by R.L Victoria Pöhls & Mariane Utudji. transcript, 2021. 264 pp. \$55.**

Natasza Gawlick

Duke University & University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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With the exception of Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* published in 1938, the literary approach called "Reader-Response Theory" blossomed in the late 1960s and into the 1980s with works such as Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980), Norman Holland's *Five Readers Reading* (1975), and Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading* (1978). Each of these scholars addresses the concepts of Reader-Response through different approaches: Holland through the perspective of psychological research, asking how personality and identity shape a reader's interpretation; Fish through a phenomenological stance, in which "a text is not an object, a thing in itself, but something that happens to and with the participation of the reader" (Al-Haba 85); and Iser through a logic of aesthetics, in which the author and the reader both contribute to the dynamic character of a text. Though they approached Reader-Response Theory from and with different perspectives, each of the above-mentioned thinkers, among many others, grappled with the relationship of reader to text.

Reader-Response Theory has become less and less prevalent in literary discourses, partly because, as Patricia Harkin posits in her article "The Reception of Reader-Response Theory," "theories disappear – *as theories* – when they become naturalized – when they become (apparently) *so easy to understand* that they no longer serve to demarcate their adherents as more knowledgeable or *more intrinsically intelligent* than the average person" (415). Nevertheless, Reader-Response Theory shares commonalities with other literary theories, such as those of poststructuralism/deconstructionism, and highlights the need for a more concerted

focus on feminist, postcolonial, and queer theory (Kubowitz 203 and Brookes; Browne 79). Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) became one of the first feminist texts to interrogate the assumption of readers being male; Miller has been joined by contemporary scholars such as Toril Moi and Cora Kaplan, who have also emphasized feminist theory in the process of reading. Wanda Brooks' and Susan Browne's *Towards a Culturally Situated Reader Response Theory* (2012), as well as Bethan Benwell et al.'s *Postcolonial Audiences: Readers, Viewers and Reception* (2012), highlight the necessity of integrating and discussing postcolonial theory within the Reader Response framework. With these recent interventions, which continue to emphasize that the reader "cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature" (Tyson 162) and does not passively consume texts but rather actively creates meaning through the process of reading, Reader-Response Theory continues to be a compelling means of interpreting, interacting with and analyzing texts.

Drawing upon the question of "What happens when human beings encounter written texts?" (Harkin 411), *Powerful Prose* stakes its place within the long and broad tradition of reader-response theory. This edited volume seeks to 1) explore the effects that texts can have on readers and 2) investigate the meaning of "powerful" through an empirical focus, analyzing the specific elements of a text such as its linguistic, stylistic, and other textual features that affect readers' reactions to literature (Pöhls and Utudji 12). Punctuated by close readings, extensive citations, and a clear structure, this edited volume successfully investigates the question of what makes a text powerful. The contributing authors utilize the Reader-Response framework but are also guided by specific approaches - psychological, iconographic, and semantic - and linguistic techniques of the chosen texts.

Part of this volume's success lies in its clear structure and formatting: *Powerful Prose* opens with a comprehensive introduction, in which the book's aims and stakes are

laid out through subheadings in order to guide the reader through the three main sections. The first section, “Emotional Experiences,” probes the role of emotional responses as an indication of a text’s impact and power. Elina Valovirta’s chapter titled “Repeated Pleasure: Reading the Threesome Ménage Romance as Digital Literature” emphasizes particular stylistic choices, such as the importance of repetition of consent, the trope of a happy ending, and conventions of monogamy in erotic novels. These characteristics signal a safe way to explore the thrill of an e-romance and textual threesome while remaining within the boundaries of normative heterosexual relationships. In the following chapter, Peter Wenzel grapples with the emotion of fear and horror by emphasizing the interaction between psycho- and neurological aspects, as well as historical and cultural features that contribute to particular passages conjuring a sense of suspense. Wenzel presents a sophisticated exploration of the linguistic and aesthetic characteristics of Matthew Gregory Lewis’ *The Monk* that summon a response of fear and horror in readers. He also, however, acknowledges the work’s original 18th-century audience compared to a contemporary one and the potential linguistic and stylistic choices that would now appear outdated rather than suspenseful.

The emphasis on the stylistic and syntactical choices in texts remains a focal point of analysis in this second section of *Powerful Prose* titled “Coming to the Fore,” but transitions from a mere exploration of emotions and affect to other aspects that can make a text powerful. Particularly convincing is Kimberley Pager’s article, “Introducing Jane: The Power of the Opening,” which centers on the opening paragraph of *Jane Eyre* and demonstrates how the use of pathetic fallacy, iconicity, and features pertaining to discourse shape the reader’s emotional response to and characterization of the protagonist, Jane. Whereas Christine Chollier’s chapter, a semantic reading of one of the final passages of *The Great Gatsby*, emphasizes the power of suggestion and ambiguity, as well as literary strategies that engage and affect the reader both on an

emotional and intellectual level, Maryvonne Boisseau compares two thematically related texts - a passage from a nonfiction text with a poem - to depict the way orality, rhythm, and prosodic condensation impact a reader's reaction to two structurally different texts.

The third and final section of this edited volume, titled "Readers, Characters, Authors," considers elements of a text that generate feelings of empathy and identification within readers and, in turn, facilitate readers' constructions of characters. Sixta Quassdorf's analysis of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* explores the author's use of cognitively and visually complex textual structures - the use of columns, inverted commas, and sentence length - that can draw the reader in and lead to a sense of collaboration in understanding and creating the meaning of the text. In an exploration of the relationship between internal monologue and the instances of voiced narration in David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green*, Constance Robert-Murail effectively uses this chapter to demonstrate how methods and juxtapositions of narration and narrative voice can elicit empathy and emotional connections between reader, character, and text.

Ultimately, *Powerful Prose* departs from traditional understandings of Reader Response Theory by focusing less on the transactional nature of a reader and text and more on an empirical methodology that investigates the power of a text and its impact on readers. This edited volume seeks to focus on aspects of texts that make them powerful, regardless of the reader and their particular background. Though the close readings within this book display attention to crucial textual elements, the question remains of how to qualitatively or quantitatively measure and determine the ways in which (and which particular) narrative, structural and literary elements may cause texts to be more universally powerful. Additionally, less attention is paid to particular readers that may be drawn to certain genres of texts, who may thus be more affected by the texts' stylistic and thematic content. Nonetheless, by centering around an analysis of textual elements that affect, move, and stir emotions in readers, the chapters in this

volume serve not only to revitalize Reader Response Theory but also to add another dimension to this method, in which more attention is paid to the formal and literary qualities of a text and its power on a broad population of readers.

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