

Elyane Dezon-Jones and Inge Crosman Wimmers, eds. *Approaches to Teaching Proust's Fiction and Criticism*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2003. 184p.

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For all those professors of French literature, like myself, for whom teaching about Marcel Proust means the obvious and the simple—i.e., baking madeleines for the class and speaking briefly on the most famous incident on involuntary memory from *Combray*—this collection of 26 essays should forever broaden and intensify the ways in which instructors can help students grasp the richness of *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* and the various critical works of a particularly challenging author, and can take their teaching techniques far beyond the ordinary and the overdone.

This recent volume in the MLA *Approaches to Teaching* series begins with the editors' question, "Why Proust now?" They claim that this early 20th-century "sur-impressionistic" writer has become the cultural phenomenon he is because his works contain a modernity that brings him into the 21st century: i.e., through his blurred lines between autobiography and fictional narrative as well as his hybrid tendencies, a rhapsodic "third form," and deconstructive tendencies (xiv). They urge professors to mine this collection of suggested approaches to teaching Proust for inspiration on how to develop their own chosen approaches and styles in the classroom.

The introductory material in the volume as well as all of the essays are written in English, and quotations from Proust's works are given first in French, then in English translation. Each essay is short and pithy, and most are full of practical guides for professors and specific exercises to help students better understand the richness of Proust's works, his concepts of time and space, and how he has made personal intimacy into an art form. Many of the contributors suggest how professors can urge students to discover their own connections to their author as they delve into involuntary memory and other methods of self-discovery through typical Proustian experiences.

Only a small minority of these essays, in my opinion, are of limited use to instructors either because they are overly pedantic or because they concern a too-small slice of the multi-faceted über-novel *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

The first essays focus on the various editions of *A la Recherche* that are available in French or English and with various kinds of prefaces, annotations, etc. Subsequent articles discuss the astonishing amount of critical commentary, dictionaries, websites, CD-ROMs, video documentaries and biopics, and recent films that are available specifically on Proust and his works. On-line chat rooms on Proust abound, and

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new resources are ever burgeoning, particularly at the Bibliothèque Nationale and Universités de Paris.

The plethora of essays offers a variety of focuses, such as the specific themes in “Proust: A Man of His Time,” “The Role of the Dreyfus Affair in the *Recherche*,” “Cataclysm at One Remove: The War in *Le temps retrouvé*,” along with more aesthetic topics such as “Proust Art Nouveau?,” “Proust and Painters,” “Proust and the Cinema,” “Proust and Architecture: Reconstructing the Churches of ‘Combray,’” and “Teaching Proust Comparatively: Proust, Ruskin, and the Visual Arts.”

One of the most interesting and practical of the essays is Margaret E. Gray’s “Maintenant, Regardez’: Proust in a Postmodern Context,” in which she calls Proust “that most different, alien and baffling of writers” (65). Nonetheless, she describes with a number of concrete suggestions how teachers can engage as a teaching tool students’ preconceived ideas that the reading of the author is boring. “Proust is our friend,” she states. “Beneath what seems to be so alien, he is like us, runs the message of this postmodern approach” (61).

Gray suggests urging students to find pop-culture tidbits that satirize Proust and involuntary memory and analyze why, in today’s frenetic culture, we have lost the desire for nostalgia and retrospection. Another recommendation is that students keep a twilight sleep journal over a period of weeks and write about their own experiences in *déjà vu*. “Such exercises help students break down the barrier they may perceive between their lives and the events Proust wrote about” (62).

Another fun and practical piece is Susan Rava’s “Proust in Humanities Course: A Place for the Madeleine” in which she includes her five-day plan for teaching and responding to the madeleine incident. Day one is a pre-reading phase during which she holds a “Proust bazaar” consisting of a brief segment of the videocassette *Marcel Proust: A Writer’s Life*, a five-minute mini-lecture about Proust in relation to other writers studied in her course, a display of photos and news articles with “Proustiana,” and a challenge to students to bring in pop-culture references to the author. “This tangible exposure demystifies Proust and inspires student to tackle the celebrated writer,” Rava states (158). Her course has resulted in students asking that the university offer a nonspecialists’ lower-level humanities course in English on Proust alone.

A longer-than-average, complex essay that is replete with details on teaching textual analysis—especially of several key incidents involving involuntary memory—is Geneviève Henrot’s “In Search of Hidden Impressions.” The author provides several diagrams that will aid teachers in connecting Proust’s discourses on memory with his peculiar style. She suggests that students may enrich their comprehension of

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Proust by analyzing how other authors such as Rousseau and Chateaubriand also have written of involuntary memory.

In “Homosexuality in the *Research*,” Lawrence R. Schehr notes that homosexuality “is the operating system of the novel” (104) and explains how professors can guide students to key portions in several of the different volumes to comprehend the whole scope of this theme.

Christie McDonald specifies how she organizes her course and assigns various analyses to more sophisticated and experienced students in “Proust in a Graduate Seminar: Structuring the Proustian Experience.” On the other hand, Michèle Magill illustrates in “Teaching Proust through ‘Morceaux Choisis’: Peddling Proust” that choice pieces by the author can be taught to any level of students, and explains her success in introducing portions of Proust’s works in her French 101, conversation, translation, literary survey, and masterpieces in 20th-century literature courses. Mostly, she recommends giving students an ample background in Proust’s breadth and influence, and encouraging them to read his prose in small bites. “One has to do one’s best for French studies in these lean times,” she concludes. “I remain convinced that for both students and teachers, some Proust is better than no Proust” (122). ✱