
Tim Engles and John N. Duvall, eds. *Approaches to Teaching DeLillo's White Noise*. NY: Modern Language Association of America, 2006. 235p.

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For those teaching Don DeLillo's *White Noise* for the first time, or even for those seasoned DeLillo scholars hoping to develop new and innovative approaches to teach the novel, this book in the MLA's *Approaches to Teaching* series will prove to be an invaluable resource. The text, edited by Tim Engles and John N. Duvall, is an anthology of 18 articles that explores various ways to theorize, deconstruct, and culturally locate one of DeLillo's most provocative and best-selling novels. Separated into five parts, *Approaches* is a text that consistently builds upon itself, each section both reliant upon and adding to the previous. For instance, suggested assignment materials and discussion questions posed in "Teaching *White Noise* in the Context of Electronic Media and Technology" are informed by previous theoretical discussions of DeLillo's text presented in "Cultural and Theoretical Approaches." Similarly, the practical strategies described in the last section "Classroom Techniques and Strategies" are extremely effective because they are supported by textual readings and cultural contextualization of the novel provided in earlier sections of Engles and Duvall's text. Engles and Duvall thus must be commended for the organization of the articles included in this anthology.

Despite the strength of the collection as a whole, however, some of the individual essays veer away from the anthology's primary aim; numerous contributors seem to forget to discuss approaches to *teaching* the novel, assuming that their innovative approach toward or reading of *White Noise* speaks for itself. The most glaring examples of this are found in the section titled "Surveying *White Noise*." For instance, while extrapolating the text in innovative ways, contributors Michael Bérubé and Margaret Soltan seem reticent either to consider or to expand upon the needs of their students, positioning their own readings of the text before their students' understanding. And while Bérubé's approach might interest students knowledgeable about sport, one can help but wonder how much he must alienate those students who know very little about athletics or baseball. Similarly, Soltan's approach, so deeply imbedded in the need to revive religion in the classroom, also leaves a lot to be desired; non-religious students must find it hard to cope with her proselytizing. Both Bérubé and Soltan would do well to borrow both strategies and approaches from Louisa McKenzie. In her article "An Ecocritical Approach to Teaching *White Noise*," an article which is by far one of the most engaging of the anthology, McKenzie not only demonstrates an awareness of her students needs and assumptions, but demonstrates a pedagogical and

theoretical self-reflexivity that Bérubé and Soltan lack. McKenzie's argument focuses upon student understanding, rather than simply providing new analytical readings of *White Noise*. Like many contributors, she asks students to read *White Noise* through the lens of cultural and literary theory; however, McKenzie's also explains how to help students to deconstruct and critique cultural and literary theory (specifically ecocriticism) using insights gleaned from *White Noise*. Unlike Bérubé and Soltan, teachers that obviously enter the classroom with fixed readings of the text already in mind, McKenzie bases many of her classroom activities upon students' reading of *White Noise*. The success of this student-centered approach is clearly illustrated when she describes how, for her students, "*White Noise* offers so many recognizable elements from the students' experiential world that they find themselves making connections and 'doing literary criticism' with relative ease" (62).

McKenzie is not alone in her self-reflexive, student-centered approach. Contributors Tim Engles, Timothy Melley, Kathleen LeBesco, and Mark Osteen also discuss their pedagogical philosophies and expectations of students. Osteen's article is particularly insightful as it explores practical ways to interest and empower students. McKenzie excels, however, because of her ability to provide extremely helpful teaching strategies while providing a theoretical framework that does not advocate the teaching of the novel "as an instance of 'applied' Baudrillard or Jameson" (as John N. Duvall paraphrases Cornel Bonca) (125).

The tendency to focus intently upon *White Noise* as either an indictment of late 20th-century capitalism, or as representative of post-Pynchon postmodernism, may account for the refusal of many of *Approaches'* contributors to consider gender issues in DeLillo's work. After reading many of the approaches in *Approaches* one is left wondering whether or not the women in *White Noise* are as irrelevant as they fear they might be. Are women not affected by capitalism? Are women not consumers? Or are the women's and girl's experiences simply insignificant to Marxist, postmodernist discussions of DeLillo's work. Considering how women figure in Jack Gladney's (*White Noise's* protagonist's) life, how Babette (Gladney's wife) disintegrates as a result of her interactions with and the pressures of the hyperreal culture in which she is immersed, it is amazing how so many discussions of DeLillo's capitalist, cultural, and consumerist critique and completely elide gender at the same time.

Philip Nel, author of "Homicidal Men and Full-Figured Women: Gender in *White Noise*," is the only contributor to *Approaches* who even attempts a reading of male and female roles in the novel. Surely he is not the only feminist teaching or writing about the teaching of DeLillo's novel! Slipped in toward the end, Nel's essay functions as a token nod to those teachers concerned with gender, to those

feminists that may take issue with the male-centered nature of *Approaches*. Nel's piece is both provocative and informative, but it cannot make up for glaring omissions within the anthology. *Approaches to Teaching DeLillo's White Noise* is certainly worth reading before teaching DeLillo's work; but if one wants examples of teaching strategies that allow for discussions and activities that address DeLillo and gender, one might have to supplement Engles' and Duvall's text with other pedagogical and theoretical readings. ✱