

Neil McCaw. *How to Read Texts: A Student Guide to Critical Approaches and Skills*.
London and New York: Continuum, 2008.

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"How to" is a form and an approach that is very much of our time. Self-help manuals abound in every conceivable field, a fact that is surely indicative of our belief that we can choose to do (or attempt to do) anything we want. Another characteristic of our time would seem to be a reluctance to engage in the time-consuming and rarely lucrative activity of reading. Having made this generic observation regarding the *Zeitgeist*, it is only right to acknowledge that *How to Read Texts* is a specialist self-help manual in a specialized field that most students will have chosen to participate in.

The teaching and the study of literature and language is surely all about increasing and developing awareness of how others produce texts and how we as readers react to those texts. Neil McCaw is to be praised for his forward-thinking in identifying this fact in the very first pages of the book ("Introduction: Why read about how to read") and his consistency in maintaining focus on the need for that awareness without ever labouring the point. Also worthy of praise is McCaw's decision to define the terms used in the book's title at the very outset. The noun "text" and the verb "to read" are each given two pages of useful discussion in the introduction. In this way the "competing viewpoints" regarding the raw material and the activity are highlighted. Another useful thread that is exposed in this section is the concept of reading as a *creative* activity, a thread that finds its place in the weave of the book in Chapter 2, "The creative critic." Quoting Paul Auster and Sir Philip Sidney (two writers who have used the metaphor of illness or affliction to describe the activity of writing), McCaw shows how a more "writerly" approach to reading can bring illumination and subsequent satisfaction.

Chapter 2 ends neatly with two juxtaposed readings (critical and writerly) of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," the full text of which is provided in an appendix. There are three such appendices in total, providing literary texts for analysis. The apparatus of the book also includes what in my view is an extremely useful system for undergraduate readers with "Suggested further reading" at the end of each chapter, each book listed with a one-line description of its focus – much less intimidating than the usual lengthy bibliography (or "literature-list" as I recently saw it described elsewhere), which is also duly present. Notes, very few of them explicative, are used sparingly. The one-and-a-half pages of index are similarly manageable, taking us from Adorno to Wordsworth, with italicized entries for movements and methods, from *cultural studies* to *textual intervention*.

The book's six chapters are designed to lead the reader from an initial consideration of what it means to read critically through to considerations of various different stances and approaches that constitute the history of critical reading. The clear language used throughout together with the schematic chapter descriptions and numerous reading

exercises will certainly make this book a useful tool in working with undergraduate English-speaking students of literature. The first chapter ("Beginning from where you are – finding your critical voice") concludes with an "undergraduate questionnaire," which while perhaps slightly unwieldy in its potential for administration to students, certainly appears worthwhile in its potential for increasing students' self-awareness. (The questionnaire is wisely "revisited" in the concluding chapter.)

The rigours of close reading are granted an entire chapter (Chapter 3) and are accompanied by some discussion of the contention surrounding this approach in the history of criticism. All contention apart, however, I firmly agree with McCaw when he writes: "Whatever the decision that is made about the balance of the advantages and disadvantages of a close-reading method, it is obvious that being able to read texts in detail, and with a sensitivity to language, is a valuable skill to possess." If more of us were convinced of the value in that skill then the teaching of language and literature would greatly benefit.

Any lament about this book I feel will inevitably take the form of expressions of individual predilection for one or other type of approach to critical and reading activity and disappointment over the lack of focus on the hobbyhorse in question. The present writer, for example, has felt for some time that reader-response theory and its developments offer a particularly useful and fruitful approach, but why should I expect to find it mentioned in a manual necessarily equipped with the briefest of summaries of the history of critical method? Surely one of the joys of the activity of reading critically lies in discovering such things for ourselves. The best a teacher can hope to achieve is to help equip students for a lifetime of such exploration in reading and writing, and *How to Read Texts* is, I believe, a book written in this spirit.

Ultimately, the one thing no "How to" book can ever succeed in transmitting are the qualities of passion and perseverance necessary for making a more than average job of any pursuit – from a critical reading of *Ulysses* to playing the guitar, DIY, gardening, or cooking. Those qualities are to be found and nourished in ourselves and in our relations with the world at large – books and teachers, at the most, can only be a support, an encouragement and a guide to the application of those qualities and this book fulfils those functions admirably.

Lisa M. Steinman. *Invitation to Poetry. The Pleasure of Studying Poetry and Poetics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.

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Teaching poetry all too often involves a confrontation with students who do not like poetry or at least think they do not like to read poetry. This is in part due to the fact that poetry seems to be rather "difficult." Furthermore, the usual analysis and interpretation of poetry at school may also have contributed to this somewhat negative image of poetry analysis. It is, therefore, highly commendable that Lisa Steinman, who teaches English literature at Reed