

**David Damrosch, ed. *Teaching World Literature*
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Geoff Berry

Teaching World Literature is a compendium of sorts, comprising an introduction by the editor David Damrosch, with five sections on differing aspects of the problem – how to teach a world of literature when the canon keeps on opening up to new markets, genres and even traditions, and how to do so in the increasingly pressured humanities departments of today's universities. Each section addresses part of this challenge and while the book is designed to help teachers collate, develop and present such courses, providing answers to some of the issues that will inevitably arise along the way, it is not written as a guide or manual; the authors tell their own story of their experiences in an engaging and conversational manner.

Part I takes up "Issues and Definitions" and asks such questions as how we define literature across the world today, how the ongoing western legacy is reframed in the mirror of its ever-arising 'others,' how the whole idea of an 'other' (which suggests a previously defined 'self' is itself framed) and of course the thorny issue of how translation affects teaching. In Part II a selection of different strategies for teaching world literature are discussed. At all times the impossibility of mounting a comprehensive solution to the problem is admitted in a way that is pragmatic yet optimistic, as would be expected of such a volume. Some authors look at the particular example they have designed as a response to diverse populations in their own institution, such as Kathleen Komar's context amongst the political and racial turmoil of Los Angeles. Others, such as Oscar Kenshur, outline their responses to traditional disciplinary boundaries, negotiating between different types of literature departments and their own ideas of turf, standards and exemplary practices. Many point out that students themselves often have the ability to help shape a course with input from their own perspec-

tives.

Part III takes up the actual teaching strategies put in place by many teachers of world literature, which of course must take up other challenges arising in such courses; how can women writers be better integrated, oral traditions included – especially those wherever indigenous communities live, such as in Australia, New Zealand and the Americas – and how do we teach such courses across disciplinary boundaries and in teams. Part IV offers a survey of particular courses that have been run and gives examples of the kinds of results they encountered. Again, various challenges come to the fore: teaching Islamic literature in America today, introducing young adult audiences to gay and lesbian texts, teaching classics such as the Ramayana in a comparative context, questioning identity in aesthetic and technological frameworks and choosing to teach world literature through the vehicle of a theme. As a student of myth, this strategy was a favourite of mine. Author Eric Sterling found success by dividing his course, which considers literature from Gilgamesh to Paradise Lost as well as more modern masterpieces, into literary works differentiated by their reference to either polytheism or monotheism. Sterling found crucial distinctions in the way entire world views, characters, gender relations and general attitudes operated according to this dichotomy. Student responses to Oedipus include recognition of the tragedy of his relationships to his parents, his gods and to the universe of cruel fate as well; while overtly religious texts comparing Biblical, Qur’anic and ancient Mesopotamian records often inspire impassioned comments and even real resistance in the classroom. For Sterling, teaching world literature in the context of comparative spiritual texts inspires students but also forces them to question the way they see and experience the world and I agree with his conclusion that this is always a worthwhile exercise.

Part V introduces a list of resources available to the teacher of world literature, which includes theoretical texts, anthologies and other reference works, web resources and some examples of translation studies and cross cultural receptions and influences. But for my conclusion, I will turn to Damrosch’s wittily titled Introduction, “All the World in the Time.” Some of his opening statements resonated with my recent teaching experiences; students not prepared to read long tracts, teachers’ preparation challenged by their own needs to administer courses (and in many cases, including mine, by the nature of sessional or casual work in general), the incredible variety of literatures available in an increasingly globalised world... The challenges are wholesale, but Damrosch presents them in a way that suggests that rather than paralysing the field, they stimulate it. As would be expected, this occurs in many different contexts and this diversity shapes the way any

particular course is developed. From the situation of the teacher's particular institution and its departmental structures, to the makeup of the student body and their expectations, to the staff involved, many different types of programs have proven successful. Amongst the plethora of options, however, certain patterns emerge, and they can be usefully considered under the rubric of a simple set of questions: what literature are we presenting, whose world does it represent, and how much time should be spent on the related issues of definition, literary history and cultural context? Damrosch shows that the definition of world literature used at the outset of the course should help direct the way it is planned and delivered. He discusses the three basic paradigms under which the idea has been employed since Goethe's coinage of the term *Weltliteratur*: the classics, the masterpieces, and the windows on the world, pointing out that while there has been a shift from the first to the last, all three retain intellectual cache today. In terms of teaching world literature, according to Damrosch, the classic can be considered a foundational work of its culture, which retains influence over time; the masterpiece offers a smaller and more highly selective category of works, allowing the course to jump from one great piece to another in an almost conversational sense, without filling in the vast amount of cultural and intellectual context required for a fuller study of any particular work; while today's global perspective allows an idea of world literature as a set of windows on the world, which need not reflect the dominant voice in even their own setting, instead offering the reader a unique way of looking into the world of another, across any set of boundaries imaginable. These all remain workable hypotheses and any combination is possible. Finally, the real tension involved in the world literature course is one of depth. The question of how much can be covered in a semester will always vex such courses and Damrosch wisely concludes that they should be seen as "explorative rather than exhaustive, creating a teachable progression of issues and works rather than striving after some impossible proportional representation or near-native cultural literacy in each region involved." (9) Although dealing only with the findings and commentaries of American teachers of world literature, this book should be very helpful for anyone teaching literature that crosses regional, cultural or historical boundaries and who wants to take the issues inevitably involved in such breadth seriously.

Monash University

Geoff.Berry@arts.monash.edu.au