

## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION



### Inferring Authors

Early in *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield thinks about the books he has recently read, differentiating them on the basis of whether he'd like to call the author on the telephone. Holden's ruminations anticipate Booth's (1961) notion of the implied author that sees writers' creating and readers' inferring an author's persona in or from a literary text: the morals, values, interests, qualities, and so on that seem to give rise to the fiction.

Harris (1997) argues that Booth's idea of the implied author is tied to a strand in composition theory that emphasizes the voice of the writer, the quality that makes writing "honest, authentic, personal, original, human" (p. 24), with texts suggesting a persona for the author behind their production. Harris's claim appears to apply to a particular kind of writing, that which is honest and authentic in intention, yet an implied author can be entirely a creation devised to fashion a particular effect. Rose (1989) provides an illustration in his description of university professors whose writing advocates more equitable treatment of society's oppressed and exploited yet who refuse to teach undergraduate courses. Cary Grant described a less disingenuous

version of this process in his own persona: "Everybody wants to be Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant" (McCann, 1996).

The generation and projection of a voice and its implied author have been viewed differently by different schools of thought. The tradition of Romanticism locates voice in the individual, as exemplified by Rousseau in such eighteenth century works as the *Social Contract* and *Emile* in which he set forth what Goethe called a *nature gospel*. In these works he created an implied author whose celebration of the quietude of nature and innate equality of all people contradicted his own personal conduct: his "pronounced egotism, self-seeking, and . . . arrogance . . . the reaction against which resulted in [Rousseau's] growing misanthropy" (The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1996). Composition theorists in the Romantic tradition abound, including Atwell (1987), Elbow (1973), Graves (1983), Murray (1980), and many others who view students as individuals whose natural development can be thwarted by teachers whose agendas deprive students of their agency as writers.

A different school of thought views all human activity, including writing, as

constrained by culture, a tradition that dates at least to 430 B.C. with the publication of Herodotus's *History* of the Greco-Persian wars (Cole, 1996). In these volumes Herodotus attempts to describe the wars through an understanding of how the two cultures originated and developed to shape distinctive perspectives and ways of life that came into conflict. Those taking a cultural view of writing (Nystrand, 1986; Witte, 1992; and many others) would argue that writing, like all human activity, is constrained by culturally-mediated world views, goals, communication patterns, and other factors. Any individuality a writer may have, then, is channeled by the possibilities provided by culture.

Differences in conceptions of reading also follow from these two traditions. The Romantic tradition conceives of the reader as having a pure, unadulterated response to texts; teachers should minimize their influence (Atwell, 1987) and readers should resist culture (Probst, 1986) in order for that response to emerge in the most personal and fulfilling way. From a cultural perspective readers interpret the world, including texts, through cultural schemata, that is, through frameworks for thinking that are developed through engagement in cultural practice. If writers *imply* authors, readers *infer* them based on the ways in which they have been enculturated to read textual codes and other cultural markers. The reader's construction of the author's persona, in this sense, comes about through not just the author's implications but the ways in which the reader has learned to view the world.

The authors in this issue of *RTE* take a cultural perspective on literacy. Doing so requires asking questions about those who make inferences about people based on the texts they produce. Assuming that all texts project an implied author, transactions that involve those texts raise questions for those who read them: What codes does the text employ in its representation? To what degree does a reader recognize and resonate with those codes? What generalizations are available in making inferences based on these codes, and what consequences might follow from making those generalizations? To what extent does the presence of the codes that project the implied author mask the possibility that other aspects of the author are not realized through the text? Each of the articles in this issue of *RTE* takes up these questions in different ways.

Su-Yueh Wu and Donald L. Rubin call into question the practice of constructing writers based primarily on generalizations about an author's cultural background. In their article they compare Taiwanese college students' writing in both Chinese and English and American students writing in English. They analyzed the collectivist orientation of students, a characteristic commonly attributed to Chinese people, and then analyzed the writing of those students for textual markers of a collectivist orientation. They found that American students tended to be more direct and to reveal more personal anecdotes and that Taiwanese students tended to use more proverbs and to express humaneness and collectivist

virtues more frequently. But the differences in writing features were associated with nationality and language and not with writers' individual levels of collectivism, suggesting that more might be at play than the cultural influence of Confucian values, more specifically the socialized discourse practices in which the writers had been involved. Wu and Rubin's study suggests that voice is culturally channeled. Yet readers who make inferences based on cultural markers do so at the risk of essentializing the author. Wu and Rubin caution that people are not simply members of a broad culture but participate in the practices of various subcultures, including that of school. Inferring the author's qualities and worldview on the basis of limited cultural knowledge risks stereotyping authors on the basis of their most evident features.

Judith Solsken, Jerri Willet, and Jo-Anne Wilson-Keenan provide a case study of the complexity involved in constructing authors. They reexamine the writing of one of the students in Wilson-Keenan's first-grade class and document their gradual recognition that her texts, which employed home, school, and peer language practices, were more sophisticated than they had originally thought. They offer the notion of hybridity as a lens through which to view students' literate practices, an idea rooted in the belief that no single social world can account for what student writers produce. They argue that broad cultural knowledge was necessary to understand the student's texts but so too was the knowledge of the immediate educational and social

contexts in which the literate activity took place. Like the study of Wu and Rubin, their research suggests that readers should take care in inferring traits of authors given the overlapping social worlds, cultural practices, and discourse conventions in which their writing is situated and produced.

Bob Broad illustrates the difficulty of making use of and managing the wealth of information about student writers a teacher may have, especially in situations that seemingly call for standardized assessments of a student's writing. Broad examined the crises faced by college faculty attempting to standardized their evaluations of student portfolios. The crises occurred in part because faculty valued what Broad calls "context-bound knowledge," most especially of the author of the portfolio, over knowledge based exclusively on textual analysis. Broad's argument for a hermeneutic approach to evaluation is based in part in recognizing how these kinds of knowledge complicate and complement each other. His study also reveals both the ways in which the extent of writers' savvy in implying an author (e.g., one who knows what counts as a good or bad topic) can affect the ways they are constructed by readers and the ways in which readers' inferences about authors can have high-stakes implications for students' educational futures.

Taken together, the articles in this issue of *RTE* illustrate the complexity of inferring an author based on perceived cultural traits. They also reveal the ways in which a meticulous approach to data collection and analysis

can get beyond the oversimplified expectations that people can have when making assumptions based on one set of cultural markers. Rather than profiling their participants based on one set of features, the authors in this issue reveal the ways in which individuals represent the confluence of multiple sets of cultural practices and values. Furthermore, they reveal the ways in which individuals' agency within those overlapping discourses—including the agency to create a favorable persona—places even greater demands on readers when inferring traits about the author.

We leave, then, with a set of questions to our readers: When providing accounts of participants and their

contexts, on what basis do you make your judgments concerning their representation? To what degree do you rely on the most visible traits, such as being members of a particular social class or racial group, at the expense of other cultures in which they may take part? What are the consequences of your choices in deciding the basis of your characterizations? What are your ethical obligations to these individuals and communities regarding the ways in which you infer and depict their traits? What are the consequences for research for the kinds of decisions you make?

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