cannot remember the exact year. Suffice to say it was decades ago when I saw my first walking book. A tiny grey-haired woman with a surprisingly determined step was moving in my direction in a gaudily carpeted convention hallway. My mouth dropped as I read her nametag: Louise Rosenblatt. I could not believe it. How could the author of the book that I would be reading throughout my teacher training be there in the flesh? Literature as Exploration, the book that shaped how I, and thousands of other English teachers, framed our teaching of literature was standing in front of me, a first-year teacher who somehow thought that going to the Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) might be a good idea. I thought I would pick up some lesson ideas, some handouts, and maybe a book or two, but I never thought I would actually meet one.

I was struck immediately by how accessible Louise seemed. There was an adoring knot of conference-goers who surrounded her, peppering her with questions and offering examples of their response-based literature lessons. It seemed so democratic: a rookie teacher whom nobody knew granted access to one of the most important books ever written about the teaching of literature. This is just one of those freak occurrences, I thought to myself, like the sighting of a celebrity in a West Hollywood restaurant—a democratic accident, a bibliophile’s dream. Something like this will never happen again.

But it did happen, again and again, beginning with the very next year. Perhaps fittingly, given the deep intellectual and personal bond he shared with Louise Rosenblatt and her transactional theory of reader response, the next walking book I saw was Response and Analysis: Teaching Literature in Junior and Senior High School. In another convention hallway, in a city I have long since forgotten, a boyish Robert Probst was heading into the same concurrent session I was. As an anonymous second-year high school teacher, I was flummoxed. I could hardly keep myself from asking him the million questions I had about the teaching of literature that his book had raised for me. And then, from the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a book I had admired for years, a book that helped radicalize my approach to thinking about the work of teachers. Tall and elegant on the outside, belying its ferociously radical exterior, was The Dialectic of Freedom (Maxine Greene). I was speechless. This NCTE conference is something I better keep going to, I thought. These walking books are too good to miss.

The following year was peppered with walking books. Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English (Arthur N. Applebee) and Envisioning Literature (Judith Langer) took graduate students backstage to describe their research methodology and to expand on their theories of response to literature and the pedagogical stances that literature teachers adopted. Peter Elbow was Embracing Contraries in another corner of a poorly ventilated conference room, and George Hillocks Jr. was explaining his wide-ranging findings of Research on Written Composition. I remember being awed by the commanding presence of Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America (Geneva Smitherman) as she highlighted the linguistic and cultural forces behind her power-
ful book. In another crowded room I heard the grace and explanatory power of Shirley Brice Heath’s Ways with Words. Farther down the hall was a book with a voice as charmingly childlike as the children it so beautifully explored, The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write: Popular Literacies in Childhood and School Cultures (Anne Haas Dyson). Later on that afternoon, the inspirational bible of so many novice teachers, Making the Journey (Leila Christenbury), was enthralling a throng of new teachers in a Virginia accent. Once, in San Diego, I was fortunate enough to spy one of the most beautiful books on learning ever written, Lives on the Boundary (Mike Rose).

The Influence of Important Books

These face-to-face encounters with such important books had a profound influence on me. They shaped not only my teaching but also how I thought about teaching. They prompted me to question my own beliefs about literacy, about authority, about language, about writing, about literature. I was surrounded by the living animations of the professional literature I had poured over, and with each encounter, the books themselves mattered more than ever. This led me to what might seem like an obvious conclusion. NCTE was not only an organization of earnest teachers looking for practical answers to real classroom dilemmas. It was a living library, a place where practitioners and scholars gathered and exchanged ideas until it was difficult to tell one from the other.

In fact, I would venture to say that these gatherings of literacy practitioners and researchers helped encourage the kind of teacher research that changed the way our field asks questions of itself and authorizes classroom teachers to conduct the kind of authentic inquiry that perhaps only classroom teachers can. This kind of approach was guided by such living texts as Inside City Schools (Sarah Freedman) and Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge (Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle) who were met by teachers suddenly realizing that they could be the producers and not simply the consumers of literacy research.

Like the New York Times, we have some living books that are “best sellers.” You can tell where those books are talking by the overflowing rooms at the NCTE Annual Convention. There you will find In the Middle (Nancie Atwell), Seeking Diversity (Linda Rief), The English Teacher’s Companion (Jim Burke), Teaching Adolescent Writers (Kelly Gallagher), or Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys (Michael Smith and Jeff Wilhelm). In these rooms, readers/teachers revel in the connection between the concepts that drive those books and the illustration of those concepts by the authors.

In contrast to these “hot” contemporary volumes, sometimes the living books had been resurrected from the archives. Mind in Society (Vygotsky) lived again in the hands of scholars as diverse as Vygotsky and Education (Luis Moll) and “Is This English?” (Bob Fecho). And Bakhtin has become a living member of NCTE through works such as Bakhtinian Perspectives on Language, Literacy, and Learning (Arnetha F. Ball and Sarah Warshauer Freedman) and Voices of the Mind (James Werstch). And, of course, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (James Moffett) continues to live in the work of many of us, but most clearly in the work of Betty Jane Wagner and others.

It is not only the readers/teachers who benefit from the living library; living books do as well. Anyone who has published anything knows how frustrating it can be to have your words be permanently fossilized (or so it feels) when your ideas about what you have written shift dramatically. A living book can be held hostage by its own pages, unless it has the ability to have an exchange with its readers. Sometimes the living books say amazing things like, “I used to believe that, but here’s how I think about it now,” or even “I can’t believe I said that.”

Sometimes the vital exchanges between the living books and their readers cause the authors to rethink, refine, and reframe their perspectives based on the comments, questions, and experiences of those readers. When there is a revision, a second edition or a new version of the book, it reflects the interaction between reader and text in a way that even Louise Rosenblatt might not ever have imagined.
The Living Library as Research Catalyst

The living library has not only served to inform my own English education; it has been a catalyst for my own scholarship as well. I clearly remember one gathering when I was dining with Teaching Literature (Rick Beach and Jim Marshall), “You Gotta BE the Book” (Jeff Wilhelm), Authorizing Readers (Peter Rabinowitz and Michael Smith), and On the Brink (Susan Hynds). As I looked around at my dining companions, my fellow conference-goers, I realized that I was the only one at the table who was not a living book. Sure, I was able to engage in lively conversation and even present workshops or papers with these living books, but I had not put my own ideas about teaching in a volume where they could be more easily shared. I confess, silly as it might seem, that there was a part of me that felt that I did not deserve to be dining with those books, unless of course I produced one of my own. After that conference, both inspired and a bit embarrassed by the fact that I, a non-book, was keeping company with such illustrious volumes, I started writing furiously. I told myself that by the time the next NCTE Annual Convention rolled around, I would be a living book, too. It took a couple more Conventions to roll around, but I did it. And the first book gave way to a few more. Here’s the moral of that story: If it were not for the living library, I would not have ever written any book. Period.

I realized something important as I wrote my first book. Not only did the scholarly accomplishments of my fellow NCTE members inspire me, they actually had shaped my thinking. Their work, the work of teachers from all over the country, the continuing dialogue both at conferences and through journals and books, had helped me discover what it was that I wanted to think about, write about, and research. This generation of new knowledge, this inspiration is what makes the living library dynamic. And it is nothing short of thrilling to see new living books emerge from those who, like me, came to NCTE because they thought they were simply going to a conference and left having read and experienced the living library.

New generations of important scholarly work have joined the living library as the landscape of what we know about literacy learning has expanded to include the sociocultural contexts of our classrooms and of our students. Signifying as a Scaffold for Literary Interpretation (Carol Lee) followed by her Culture, Literacy, and Learning: Taking Bloom in the Midst of the Whirlwind created a paradigmatic shift in the living library as Lee offered ways of helping teachers use their cultural knowledge and experiences. This living book helped pave the way for others: Reading for Their Life: (Re)Building the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males (Alfred Tatum), Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation (Ernest Morrell), Harlem on Our Minds: Place, Race and the Literacies of Urban Youth (Valerie Kinloch), and Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms (Maisha T. Fisher).

In addition to the dynamic generation of new knowledge, the living library that is NCTE also affords us an opportunity to interact with the ideas in a way that actually transcended Louise Rosenblatt’s idea of reading as a transaction. For example, while Why Kids Can’t Read might be one of the most readily accessible and eminently practical books ever written on literacy education, think of how different it is for teachers to learn at the masterful storyteller hands of Kylene Beers. As powerful and practical as that book might be, it is a completely different experience to see it walk—and talk. And again, story begets story in that reciprocal relationship between a living book and the readers/teachers who revise their classroom practices because of it.

Living Books and Literature

Some of the living books (Judith Ortiz Cofer in the Classroom, Alice Walker in the Classroom, Nikki Giovanni in the Classroom, and Sandra Cisneros in the Classroom (Carol Jago)) have helped us learn to teach literature and to diversify our curricular offerings. They have helped us prepare to meet those books as well. In keynote speeches and luncheon addresses, the novels, poems, and short stories at the center of our teaching have come alive for us and, in turn, for our students. The parade of walking books, of literature that has come alive at NCTE Conventions, has been wide-ranging and awe-inspiring.
So, as we celebrate 100 years of NCTE, through this journal volume and throughout the year, let us celebrate the fact that we are not only a collective of dedicated literacy educators; we are also a magnificent living library of the collected wisdom of our profession. That living library is brimming with walking books that wed theory to practice, bring scholars and teachers together, and create the production of the repository of professional knowledge that is NCTE.

Nota Bene

This is an idiosyncratic and unsystematic tour through the living library that is NCTE. My apologies to all those wonderful living volumes who were not mentioned in this whirlwind tour.

Works Cited


