January 1, 2008

Dear REA/APPRRE members:

Happy New Year! I’m still reflecting on the good presentations and conversations I enjoyed during our annual conference in Boston two months ago; I’m also already looking forward to our 2008 conference which will be in Chicago November 7-9.

I’m excited about the theme I have chosen and the Board has approved: “Fiction as Truth: Seeking Religious Depth in Short Stories, Novels, and Film.” Below are just a few musings to whet your appetite for the conference. [If these musings seem a little long-winded, go ahead and skip ahead to the last couple of paragraphs to see what a great line-up of speakers we have so far!]

Art is more than aesthetics or entertainment. It is often an encounter with truth. Picasso, in fact, is reported to have said that “art is a lie that makes us realize the truth.”

It is art, specifically literature, that leads me most deeply into religious depth and truth. By religious, in fact, I mean those aspects of life that press at depth issues. Religious education, in my view, is most fundamentally asking the hard questions about life. When looking at a religious tradition, I’m just as much, if not more, interested in tracing the questions that a people have asked than I am in gathering the answers they have given. To me, the richest religious traditions, and I think there are many rich religions, are those that ask and wrestle with the hard questions.

In her 1995 work, Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life, the philosopher and Law Professor Martha Nussbaum argues that there is an “ingredient in public discourse” that is too often “missing” -- storytelling and literary imagination. She argues that novels, by laying the claim of another’s story, can play
a crucial role in public reasoning. Novels cultivate the imagination, which Nussbaum argues contributes to and deepens the capacity for moral reflection. She focuses on “the characteristics of the literary imagination as a public imagination, an imagination that will steer judges in their judging, legislators in their legislating, policy makers in measuring the quality of life of people near and far.”iii Nussbaum goes so far as to assert: “If we do not cultivate the imagination in this way, we lose, I believe an essential bridge to social justice.”iii

Novels (and other forms of fiction) can make an important contribution to the work of social justice: novels introduce us to the lives of those different than we are, and they thereby both enable us to sympathize with the characters and gain a critical perspective on reality. To quote Nussbaum again: “The novel, so different from a guidebook or even an anthropological field report, makes readers participants in the lives of people very different from themselves and also [makes readers] critics of the class distinctions that give people similarly constructed an unequal access to flourishing.”iv

The work that fiction does in the reader, however, is mysterious, contested and unstable. And that is where it gets exciting and rigorous.

During next year’s conference, we will consider both the theory and practice of reading and viewing fiction. I know that several of us in this organization, myself included, are engaging fiction in our teaching as well as theorizing about the use of fictional forms in religious education. There are a host of questions we need to ask as we engage fiction: what are some rigorous methods for engaging fiction, which fiction do we choose, how do we deal with authorial cultural flaws, how does literary theory help us read, what should be the role of reading strategies, what is the relationship between the author and the text and reader, what do we do about popular fiction and film that we think is, to use Picasso’s language, a lie that makes us believe the lie? These are some of the questions that make up what Wayne Booth calls “the ethics of fiction.

Now, I want to give you a sneak preview of the upcoming 2008 conference. The well known novelist Father Andrew Greeley, who is also a Professor of Sociology at the University of Arizona and a Research Associate with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, will offer our opening address entitled: “How Stories about God Get Written.” [http://www.agreeley.com/author.html] The Chicago based short story writer Stuart Dybek, Distinguished Writer in Residence at Northwestern University
and a 2007 MacArthur Fellow, will speak and read on Saturday, his talk will be: “The Lexicon of Mystery and Awe: Fiction's use of the Language of Religion.”


In my presidential address, I will be looking at fiction and the so-called American Dream. I will make use of what I call ‘robust’ reader-response theory and post-colonial theory. I will consider F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Great Gatsby as “Theodicy in Metaphor” and I will look at Toni Morrison’s Bluest Eye through the lens of what I have titled “The Corrosive Effects of Whiteness.” I hope that we will deeply engage one another.

Keep your eye out for the Spring issue of the Religious Education Journal, which will include a forum on the 2008 conference. The issue will include several short essays to start us thinking about Fiction, Truth, and Education. Check out the website for more information and for updates! [http://www.religiouseducation.net/]

And, feel free to e-mail me if you have questions or comments – or if you’ve read a good short story or novel lately.

I hope to see you in Chicago! Best wishes,

Carol Lakey Hess
chess@emory.edu
Emory University
President elect/Program Chair
Religious Education Association/
Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education

---

2 Poetic Justice, 3.
3 Poetic Justice, xviii
4 Poetic Justice, 46.