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Book Reviews -- Monographic Musings

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tenet of American regional policy as early as 1823 to a letter from a U.S. black soldier in the Philippines to selected dispatches by war correspondent Steven Crane to an excerpt from The Military Policy of the United States published in 1912.

Encyclopedia of the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars: a Political, Social, and Military History is easily the most thorough and comprehensive reference work dealing with these wars. Teaming with his co-editors James Arnold and Roberta Wiener, Mr. Tucker has produced an encyclopedia that meets the standards set in his previous award winning efforts. Both academic and larger public libraries will find it a useful addition to their collections.

Anyone interested in the historic interplay between American education and our societal values will appreciate this recent addition to the Sage Reference catalog. The Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Foundations of Education (2009, 978-1412906784, $425 – eReference price $530) is a three-volume set that tackles this multidisciplinary, but important area of study. As noted by general editor Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr. in his introduction, the social and cultural foundation of our education system “reflects the conflicts, tensions and forces in our society.” It is also arguable that the education system is at the forefront when these conflicts and tensions are played out. As one examines the scope and nature of the topics covered, this argument gains strength.

Besides discussing instructional issues like curriculum, evaluation and testing, and educational theories and models, there are a number of articles addressing major social themes. There are specific entries that deal with issues related to equality and stratification, multiculturalism and special populations, sexuality and gender as well as religion and social values. Readers will find coverage of topics as diverse as Black English Vernacular (Ebonics), the GI Bill of Rights, Busing, Migrant Education, Ethical Issues and School Athletics, Mainstreaming, the Social Impact of the Internet, the No Child Left Behind Act, Video Games and Learning, and Work based Learning.

The Encyclopedia is arranged for ease of use with the first two volumes offering more than 400 alphabetically arranged articles complete with “see also” references and lists of further readings. There is also a reader’s guide that groups related articles under 16 categories. The third volume provides biographical sketches of 130 “important men and women in education” briefly discussing their influence. In addition, there is a compelling visual history of American Education using images ranging from those in Colonial primers and hornbooks to illustrations from 19th century magazines, and from photos of one room school rooms in Arkansas to those of civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s.

The third volume also contains an essay entitled “Toward a Renewed Definition of the Social Foundations of Education” that highlights another role that good subject encyclopedias often play. Such works can help clarify and “define” a discipline, especially one that is informed by a variety of fields. The Encyclopedia fulfills this function as well as offering possible new directions noting in the above mentioned essay that in particular “the integration of insights from the field of cultural studies can provide the basis for a new approach to the field.”

It is obvious that the Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Foundations of Education is a serious and scholarly work that is intended for a specialized audience. This reference provides solid background and overview information while at the same time offering food for thought to both students and professional educators. Academic libraries that support either undergraduate or graduate education programs will want to add it to their collections.


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My husband, a former literary academic turned corporate consultant, tells me that Harold Bloom has sold out. (Ironic, is it not?) But has he? As I look at The Brontës, a volume in Bloom's Classic Critical Views series, I wonder if the academic superstar has churned out a few armchair-academic titles, and, if so, for what purpose?

I dig into the book. Bloom has written a lovely introduction that places the Brontë sisters in the context of the literary chronology, and that is age-appropriate for the intended audience (ninth grade and up). Bloom can be prone to R.W. Apple-like melodrama when it comes to writing, but I find none of that here; instead, he is matter-of-fact and concise. The volume editor, Tabitha Sparks, has included a robust collection of excerpts of literary criticism in The Brontës. The book is divided by Brontë sister (Charlotte, Emily, and Anne). Each sister's section begins with a one-page biography followed by the criticism excerpts, which are organized by theme (personal, general, and works). Each excerpt is introduced with a few sentences about the author, explaining the role s/he played in the Brontës' lives and/or in literary scholarship. In a word, this volume is tight. The Brontës is easy to follow and it lacks what might be considered by some to be superficial text. The excerpts give the reader only the information that is necessary to understand the significance of the criticism and its role in explicating the Brontë sisters' works.

In some instances, the excerpted text is primary in nature, coming from correspondence. Primary sources: one of the jewels of research! Using Bloom's Classic Critical Views series in conjunction with Bloom's Modern Critical Views series could give students a thorough understanding of Brontë studies.

It occurs to me, though, that Bloom's series are never-ending. In the Addlestone Library, we like to teach students about the "library brand of information." Bloom seems to be cultivating his own brand of information. Can this be so? To try to assimilate my inner-cynic, I dive into Bloom's How to Write about the Brontës. Interestingly, the introduction to this volume, also written by Bloom himself, is very similar to that of The Brontës. The book's author, Virginia Brackett, offers invaluable ideas to student-scholars, not only concerning the Brontë sisters' works but also about writing, period. The first chapter -- "How to Write a Good Essay" — could be quite informative for a ninth grader and a concrete review of basic writing skills for a first-year college student. This 40+ page chapter heavily references the sixth edition of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers and even includes (just like the MLA Handbook) a sample essay exploring garden imagery in Charlotte's novel The Professor. Following the first chapter, Brackett dedicates chapters to the Brontës' novels — Jane Eyre, The Professor, Shirley, Villette, Agnes Grey, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, and Wuthering Heights — as well as a handful of Brontë poems. Each rich chapter provides tips for readers to engage themselves with the work, clues they might note as they take in the story, and hints about different literary mechanisms that season the writing. Also, each chapter presents numerous sample topics divided into the following categories: Themes; Character; History and Context; Philosophy and Ideas; Form and Genre; and Language, Symbols, and Imagery. A bibliography and list of online sources complete each chapter.

Bloom's How to Write About the Brontës is like an English instructor, librarian, and writing lab tutor condensed into a neat package. This book would be extremely helpful for the student who does not have easy access to one of the afore-mentioned professionals (perhaps in an online learning environment). Beyond that, this book also would be quite beneficial to those teaching any one of the Brontës' works; Brackett is, after all, a professor of English and a widely-published expert on British literature.

Both of these books would be solid additions to your collection if your library does not already possess an extensive set of Brontë material. But for those library collections that are already Brontë-rich, I return to the question sparked by my husband's original claim: is Harold Bloom really a sell-out? I pause and ponder. Considering his ever-growing brand of literary criticism, he might be. However, to be fair, I do believe Bloom's potential Faustian trade-offs are dwarfed by some much more pressing concerns. Let's be honest: while these books are certainly high-quality, Bloom's ever-growing Classic and Modern Critical Views series (that's series, ahem, plural) aren't saying anything new. Even Bloom's How to Write About Literature series, which most definitely can benefit student researchers, cannot substitute for real, live, personal, and human instruction and assistance. In the current budget-cutting climate, instead of buying books that essentially digest what has already been written and taught about the Brontës, why don't we teach students to find the criticism in its original publications? Why keep students from the joy and satisfaction of that a-ha moment when their hours of Brontë exploration results in their own conception of an essay topic? Finally, amidst all of the literary criticism excerpts and food-for-thought that Bloom's series push, what is being left out?