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Review: A Life in School

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Tompkins, Jane. *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996. 229 pages, $22.00/$12.00PB (ISBN: 0201912120).

Reviewed by Byron Stay

Midway through her book, *A Life in School,* Jane Tompkins writes of her disdain for T.S. Eliot, a poet who stood for everything she hated "in poetry, in criticism, in the attitudes of the literary establishment" (115). In the end, however, it is Eliot's poetry which uncovers the fear she experienced from her earliest years in school: "My fear of my students and of my colleagues was after all a fear of myself. The same shape twisted on the bannister. If I could have read Eliot in full consciousness of what I was feeling as a freshman, as a sophomore, I could have begun to face myself" (130).

At its very heart, this is a story of fear—of school, of failure, of meaninglessness, of students, of colleagues, of criticism, of the self.

However, because it also traces the effect of fear on the student and classroom teacher, this book is relevant to every writing center tutor, client, and director. Most writing center professionals take for granted that both tutor and client bring to the writing center a wealth of unspoken needs that have to be addressed before real teaching can take place. This book opens up the tumultuous experience of one student who became a teacher and offers considerable insight into the devastating effect that fear may have on the learning process.

Tompkins takes the reader through the trauma of being a sensitive elementary student in the hands of insensitive teachers, through her personal and intellectual growth in high school and later at Bryn Mawr, and finally to her emergence as a graduate student, if not quite yet a scholar, at Yale. Tompkins levels scathing criticism toward Yale. In her story, Yale becomes an Ivy League prison where professors care only for obscurity in their teaching and domination in their mentoring. Her graduate years are best captured by an experience in a course in romanticism that she took from Cleanth Brooks. Brooks began a discussion of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* by asking the question "Is this poem utopian . . . or Arcadian?" As the class, Tompkins included, frantically began searching their memories, one precocious student raised her hand and announced, "Well, I think Shelley meant it to be utopian, but it's really Arcadian" (78). In one swoop the student showed herself to be smarter than Shelley (who did not know what he was writing), than Cleanth Brooks (for his overly-simplistic question), and than fellow graduate students (who were still trying to distinguish "arcadian" from "utopian").

This story, I believe, typifies the first half of Tompkins' book.

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Even though she herself is precocious, Tompkins cannot help being victimized by her fear in the classroom. Yet, in the second half of the book, Tompkins addresses her experience as a professor who takes this fear and then projects it into her own classroom. As the book progresses, she shows us how she finds ways of uncovering and countering the very fear she now promotes.

While the book also chronicles her life as a feminist and literature professor married to Stanley Fish, most important for writing center professionals is Tompkins' sharp criticism of contemporary education's failure to address the tenuous relationship between teacher and student. For Tompkins, directive teaching is ultimately bankrupt because it maintains and valorizes the intellectual distance between teacher and student. However, transforming directive pedagogy to a student-centered class is no easy feat. Nor, as we find, is it easy to work collaboratively with students used to directive methods. It will hardly be surprising to composition and writing center specialists that Tompkins is somewhat unnerved as she attempts to move her attention from her subject matter to her students: "I simultaneously thought of myself as a fraud—someone passing for a teacher who didn't in fact have anything to teach—and as a real person for the first time in my life" (122).

This is a therapeutic book for many reasons. Most teachers and tutors will find much here that reverberates with their own lives as students and as teachers, and feminist readers will take much from her description of the effect of feminism both on her life at home and in the classroom. However, the book also reveals the tremendous complexity of the classroom or writing center. Late in the book, Tompkins reflects on what she took to be disappointing student evaluations from a class she thought to have been one of her best. One student, reflecting on the class, told her that "there were sixteen rooms in that room." He meant, Tompkins writes, that "there were sixteen stories going on simultaneously" (175). Teachers who enter a class expecting one story—her own—to dominate seriously underestimate the complexity of the classroom and the real needs of the students.

Instructional behaviors are not just determined by what the teacher or tutor expects to teach or by any single goal, whether stated or not. Behaviors are determined as much by what the professionals learn and have learned and by their diverse experiences as students themselves, whether or not they acknowledge these influences. Students also bring to the classroom considerable personal and cultural baggage. What becomes clear is that each student and each faculty member brings a story to the classroom and, more specifically, to reading and writing assignments.

Tompkins is an imaginative writer and a superb stylist; she writes prose as though she were writing poetry: one chapter, a version of her

renowned 1993 *Journal of Advanced Composition* article "Postcards from the Edge," comprises a set of imaginary letters written to and from herself. If there is one flaw here, however, it is that the book is about too many things. The fear that permeates this book arises from many different sources, including experiences at home, early schooling, from callous graduate professors, unreasonable self-expectations, and from an uncaring educational establishment; all of this somewhat blurs Tompkins' focus.

Nonetheless, this is a readable and engaging book for all educators, but especially for those who, like writing center practitioners, pride themselves in listening to the voices of their students. Tompkins' honesty and self-revelation will also be refreshing for those who realize that they, too, bring into the learning context attitudes and assumptions that need to be attended to every bit as much as that of their students.

Perhaps, as Tompkins says, fear is not necessarily a bad thing. If nothing else, it keeps people honest, focusing on the *relationship* between themselves and students.

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