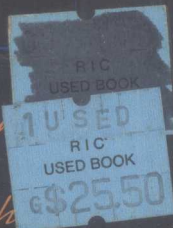


JACK SELZER

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the end of the twentieth century."*



CONVERSATIONS

READINGS FOR WRITING

THIRD EDITION

CONVERSATIONS

Readings for Writing

third edition



Jack Selzer

The Pennsylvania State University

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PART I

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*For Molly and Maggie:
Their Book*

Preface



Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance.

This well-known passage from Kenneth Burke's *Philosophy of Literary Form* explains the basic metaphor and the orientation of this anthology of readings for first-year college composition courses. *Conversations* contains conversations: public discourse on contemporary issues that is calculated to engage students' interests, to encourage and empower their own contributions to contemporary civic discussions, and to represent a broad cross-section of the kinds of conversational styles and genres that are available to writers at the end of the twentieth century.

What's Different about *Conversations*?

Conversations encourages student writing on important current civic issues. The premise of this reader is that writing is less a private act of making personal meaning out of thin air than it is a public and social act of making meaning within a specific rhetorical situation—a specific situation that guides and shapes the meaning-making activity. To put the matter more simply, writing emerges from other writing, other discourse. Though nearly every anthology claims

to encourage student responses, those anthologies just as often actually intimidate students because they present only one or two authoritative voices on a given issue and because those voices are given little context outside the anthology; the student reads an essay by Quindlen or Baldwin or Woolf or some other eloquent writer and says to himself or herself, "Gee, that sure seems right to me. How could I disagree with such an expert?" By contrast, instead of one or two authoritative items on an issue or topic, this reader contains "conversations" on public issues or topics, conversations-with-contexts that will seem less intimidating and therefore invite student responses.

In fact, the book will encourage students to adopt a social and rhetorical model—a "conversation model"—for their own writing. Instead of seeing writing merely as private or as point-counterpoint debate, students should sense from *Conversations* that "people are talking about this issue—and I'd like to get in on the talk somewhere." The conversation metaphor does not mean that students should "write like they talk" (since conversational informality is not always appropriate in public discourse); rather, the metaphor simply implies that students should see writing as a response to other writing or to other forms of discourse, a response that students make after considering the implications and importance of what they have read and heard. Students should be encouraged to cooperate as well as to compete with other writers, to address subissues as well as the main chance, to seek consensus and new syntheses as often as victory.

Thus, *Conversations* is organized around focused, topical, contemporary public issues (e.g., censorship, what to do about public education, affirmative action, legalization of drugs, abortion, gun control), each within seven larger thematic groupings (education, language, race and gender, family matters, civil liberties and civil rights, crime and punishment, and science and society) that lend additional historical and conceptual perspective to those contemporary issues. *Intertextuality* would be the buzzword from contemporary critical theory: The book includes items that "talk to each other" both directly and indirectly. Some pieces speak directly and explicitly to each other (as in the case of the four-way discussion of single parenthood, or Milton Friedman's exchange with William Bennett about the legalization of drugs, or the e-mail discussion of electronic

censorship, or the controversy on the meaning of "race" from the pages of *Black Scholar*). Some pieces refer only indirectly to others, as in the sections on education, genetic engineering, and affirmative action. And still other items comment on selections in other sections of *Conversations*: for example, selections on education comment on those on language and race; the section on pornography is informed by the sections on gender and the causes of crime; the items on gay, lesbian, and bisexual rights are related to the section on AIDS and same-sex marriage. And so forth. There is certainly no reason why the selections in this anthology cannot be read individually as they are in other books, without reference to other selections, especially since the headnotes orient readers to each item. And there is certainly no reason why the selections could not be read in some other order than the order in which they are presented here. Nevertheless, *Conversations* does give students a particular incentive to write because it establishes contexts for writing.

The conversation model should make the book suitable to a range of writing courses. There is plenty of expository prose here: comparisons of all kinds; a careful analysis of the language of men and women by Deborah Tannen; Tom Regan's analysis of the religious grounds for animal rights; Karen Grigsby Bates's overview of interracial adoption; cool descriptions of schools and school choice, men and women, the internet, campus politics, single parenthood, and a hanging; expositions of the reasons why women are excluded from science and why people commit crimes; etc.—lots of et cetera. The "modes of exposition" are illustrated by numerous selections, as the alternate table of contents makes clear. But *Conversations* will also accommodate courses with an argumentative edge, for this book includes a fair proportion of explicitly or implicitly argumentative writing and tends to encourage a broadly argumentative approach to all discourse. In short, the conversation metaphor implies an inclusive approach to prose, one that subsumes and includes exposition as well as argument, dialogue as well as dialectic. *Conversations* includes not only Jonathan Kozol's prescriptions for the high school classroom, but TheodoreSizer's descriptions as well; not only partisan arguments for and against gun control, but also a careful analysis of the issue by Leonard Kriegel; and not only impassionate pro and con arguments on capital punishment, abortion, animal rights, and the "men's move-

ment," but also dispassionate analyses of language issues, child custody laws, multiculturalism, the internet, and more.

Consequently—and this is another notable feature of *Conversations*—this anthology includes a very broad range of genres and tries to represent as fully as possible the full spectrum of the "universe of discourse." True, essays are prominent in *Conversations*—familiar and formal essays, academic as well as nonacademic ones—because the essay is a common and important genre and because the form has important correspondences with other genres (e.g., the letter, the sermon, the report, the news story). But essays are not so prominent here as to exclude other genres. Students will find other ways of engaging in public discourse as well: through fiction, poetry, drama, letters of various kinds, internet postings, public oratory, posters, congressional hearings and reports, cartoons, advertisements, journals, and more. The occasions for public discourse are many and various. Students and their teachers will find news stories and book reviews, rhetorical analyses and studies of cultural artifacts, parodies and satires, letters to the editor and counter-responses, laws and proposed laws.

And they will hear a range of voices as well. *Conversations* assumes that students are ready, willing, and able to engage in civic, public discourse, but that does not preclude the possibility for personal inventiveness. Indeed, *Conversations* is committed to the proposition that there are many possible rhetorical stances, that there is no one "correct" way to address a reader. This anthology therefore exposes students to as many rhetorical choices as possible—from the studied erudition of John Simon to the semiformal, "objective" voice associated with the academy; from the conversational informality of E. B. White, Garrison Keillor, and Deborah Tannen to satiric invective by Judy Syfers and Lewis Grizzard; from the thrilling oratory of Sojourner Truth to the careful reasoning of Iris Young; from *Rolling Stone*, *Ms.*, *Mother Jones*, and *The Village Voice* to *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, and *The American Scholar*; from Jamaica Kincaid, Stephen Jay Gould, Adrienne Rich, and James Baldwin to George Orwell, bell hooks, Richard Rodriguez, Molefi Asante, and Andrea Dworkin. Students will encounter mainstream texts and dissenting views, conventional rhetorical maneuvers and startlingly inventive ones. They will hear from famous professional writers and anonymous

but eloquent fellow citizens; from public figures and fellow students (a dozen or so contributions by students are included); from women and men, gays and heterosexuals; from majority and minority voices. *Conversations* gives students a better chance to find their own voices because they've experienced a full range of possible voices in their reading.

"A rhetorician," says Kenneth Burke in his essay "Rhetoric—Old and New," "is like one voice in a dialogue. Put several such voices together, with each voicing its own special assertion, let them act upon one another in co-operative competition, and you get a dialectic that, properly developed, can lead to views transcending the limitations of each." Fostering that "co-operative competition" is the aim of *Conversations*.

Editorial Apparatus

Substantial editorial assistance has been provided to the users of *Conversations*. The book's Introduction orients students to social motives for writing and domesticates for them the metaphor of conversation. It also introduces students to the notion of critical or rhetorical reading, so that they might have a practical means of approaching every item in *Conversations*—and so that they might better understand how careful reading habits can reinforce effective writing habits. In addition, a headnote is provided for each selection so that students can orient themselves to the rhetoric of each piece. The headnotes provide background on the author (especially when prior knowledge about the author affects one's response to an item), on the topic of the selection (when the matter requires any explanation), and on the specific occasion for the piece (especially on when and where it was originally published). The assumption of most anthologies is that the original context of an essay or story—or whatever—doesn't matter much, or that the anthology itself comprises the context. *Conversations* assumes instead that careful reading must take into account the original circumstances that prompted a given piece of writing. Writing, after all, most often emerges from other writing, so situating each item by means of the headnotes is essential to the concept of *Conversations*. Finally, each of the seven major parts of the book includes an introductory overview of the partic-

ular issues under discussion in that part. In sum, the editorial apparatus ensures that the selections in *Conversations* can be used in any order that a teacher or student might wish.

Otherwise, the text of *Conversations* assumes that students are already quite capable readers. On the grounds that students and teachers can handle things on their own and can appropriate readings to their own ends, the book includes no selection questions, no suggestions for writing assignments or class discussions, no exercises, and limited footnotes. Space that might have been devoted to those matters is given instead to additional selections so that teachers might have as many selections as possible from which to choose.

Instructor's Manual

Teachers who do want additional background on unfamiliar readings or specific suggestions for making the most of *Conversations* will find plenty of help in the detailed Instructor's Manual I compiled with Robert S. Davis of Clark University. The manual contains further information on writers, overviews of the parts and discussions of each selection, some suggestions for further reading, and ideas for discussion and writing. It also offers pointers for teaching each "conversation"—for how particular selections can be used with other selections. Together, the editorial apparatus and the Instructor's Manual are designed to help *Conversations* engage the intelligence and passion of students and teachers, without getting in the way of either.

Acknowledgments

There may be only one name cited on the cover of *Conversations*, but this book too is the product of conversation—many conversations, in fact—with a number of people who collaborated in one way or another on its development and production. My greatest debt is to those who assisted me in finding appropriate selections. Anneliese Watt (Penn State), Rosa Eberly (now at the University of Texas), Dawn Keetley (now of the University of Wisconsin), and Jay Shuchter (Penn State) deserve special mention. But

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