

Bawarshi, Anis, and Mary Jo Reiff. *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2010.

Reviewed by David L. Gugin

As both teachers and administrators in English composition programs throughout the United States, and indeed the world, continue to assess what it is they do well and what they do not do well—what they can do successfully in the classroom and what they cannot do—all would be advised to take a close look at this book. Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff have produced a timely, persuasive contribution to the growing belief that one way of improving composition instruction is by putting the “Rhetoric” back in “Rhetoric and Composition.” More specifically, Bawarshi and Reiff have written a book that offers a comprehensive yet condensed examination of the return to genre that is beginning to occur throughout the discipline, both in the teaching and study of writing. Even more importantly, Bawarshi and Reiff demonstrate how genre-based pedagogies can help composition studies move beyond the by-now somewhat sterile product vs. process debate, with its corollary (and equally unproductive) distinction between form and content, grammar and self-expression. The false binary that has dominated composition instruction for a generation has always centered on the question of what should be privileged and thus emphasized in the classroom, namely, how students write or what students write. Bawarshi and Reiff show how a return to genre could focus on both. It would link how students write with what they write through the proper understanding and identification of genre.

Such a linkage, of course, requires a more precise, fully-operationalized definition of genre, a word that often seems to resist such precision. As Bawarshi and Reiff point out, despite (or maybe because of) the growing body of genre scholarship produced over the past thirty years, “the term *genre* itself remains fraught with confusion, competing with popular theories of genre

as text type and as an artificial system of classification” (3). Bawarshi and Reiff begin by grouping these competing views of genre into two main categories. The basic question is whether genres simply “sort and classify the experiences, events and actions they represent (and are therefore conceived of as labels or containers for meaning), or whether genres reflect, help shape, and even generate what they represent in culturally defined ways” (3). In other words, are genres essentially passive vessels of containment only—forms only—or are they more dynamic, more actively involved in the making of meaning itself—organic forms, as it were? For Bawarshi and Reiff, the answer must be the latter. In fact, much of the book represents a largely successful attempt to trace, and justify, the current reconceptualization of genre, one that recognizes “how formal features, rather than being arbitrary, are connected to social purposes and to ways of being and knowing in relationship to these purposes” (4). Genres do not just classify—they generate.

One of the strengths of *Genre: An Introduction* is its organization. The book itself is the seventh title in a series called *Reference Guides to Rhetoric and Composition*, edited by renowned genre scholar Charles Bazerman, whose preface focuses on the centrality of genre to human communicative achievement. Bawarshi and Reiff then provide a useful, reader-friendly opening chapter that functions as a narrative outline for the remainder of the book, which divides into three main parts: history of theory, current research, and teaching implications. Such an organization gives readers of the book considerable flexibility. It can be used by genre scholars, history of rhetoric scholars, composition studies researchers, or by those rhetoric and composition teachers (and students) who may be less interested in theory and research and more interested in their pedagogical applications. Passing over the theoretical discussion would be a loss, for Part 1 is perhaps the strongest section of the book. It establishes the historical context for the transformation of genre studies from a theoretical approach that perceives genre as “simple categorizations of text types” to one that argues instead for an “understanding of genre

that connects kinds of texts to kinds of social actions” (3). Over a span of just ninety pages, Bawarshi and Reiff do an excellent job of summarizing and connecting past and present approaches to the study of genre.

Part 1 begins with five major traditions, or “trajectories,” of literary genre theory and genre study that have directly or indirectly influenced writing instruction and writing program development. In Neoclassical approaches, best exemplified by Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, genres are defined in terms of abstract, analytical, *a priori* categories, which are then “applied to texts for purposes of classification” (14). While Neoclassical taxonomies are typically concerned with organizing relations between literary texts, Bawarshi and Reiff correctly point out that these taxonomies have also been largely responsible for the still-prevalent and widely-taught modes of writing such as “description,” “narration,” “persuasion, and “exposition” (16). Though not entirely dissimilar, Structuralist approaches, often identified with the work of Jonathan Culler, are “more concerned with how socio-historically localized genres shape specific literary actions, identifications, and representations” (18). Such approaches recognize and elucidate the role of genre in determining textual interpretation and production. Romantic and post-Romantic approaches, originating in the work of Freidrich Schlegel in the late eighteenth century, take a completely opposite view, insisting on the originality and uniqueness of literary texts. These approaches have denied “genre’s constitutive powers, arguing instead that literary texts achieve their status . . . by exceeding genre conventions,” which are perceived as prescriptive, debilitating, and thus to be avoided (20). Unfortunately, one result of this resistance to genre has been the almost perpetual (and ultimately unnecessary) tension in writing instruction between the privileged authenticity of students’ voices and ideas and the allegedly constraining forces of genre rules and conventions. Reader Response approaches, perhaps not surprisingly, reverse the emphasis in genre theory on the writer, focusing rather on how genres serve as predictive, or

specifying, mechanisms for readers. In the words of John Frow: “Genre is not a *property* of a text but is a function of reading. Genre is a category we *impute* to texts, and under different circumstances this imputation may change” (Bawarshi and Reiff 23). But still, Reader Response, with its emphasis on the interpretive as opposed to productive role of genre, tends to ignore genre’s social dimension.

Unlike the preceding four approaches, which all contribute to some extent to a bipolar view of genre as either exclusively aesthetic (taxonomic) or merely constraining, Cultural Studies begins to offer a wider scope to genre study. According to Bawarshi and Reiff, in its attempt to analyze “the dynamic relationship between genre, literary texts, and socio-culture – in particular [how] genres organize, generate, normalize, and help reproduce . . . social actions in dynamic, ongoing, culturally defined and defining ways,” Culture Studies eventually leads to an examination of the manner in which literary genres interact with non-literary genres in a larger cultural and historical context, how literary genres situate themselves in regards to other genres within a culture’s overall genre system. Such an understanding of the “multiplicities of genres, their functions, and situations” can help integrate literary, linguistic, and rhetorical approaches, especially in the classroom (27-8). It can create a shared understanding of genre as the integration of writer and reader, text and context.

Recent approaches to genre in Rhetoric and Composition studies have certainly been influenced by literary theory, but connections to linguistic, rhetorical, and sociological traditions are perhaps more explicit. In chapters three and four, Bawarshi and Reiff provide an insightful explanation of genre studies within particular linguistic traditions, especially Systemic Functional Linguistics and English for Specific Purposes. With their theoretical origins in Michael Halliday’s *Language as Social Semiotic*, J.R. Martin and the so-called “Sidney School” of Australian genre pedagogy have had significant influence on the wide-ranging LERN (Literacy and Education Research Network) project. In short, the “Sydney School” moves from the “identification of social

purpose as represented in generic structural elements . . . to the analysis of a text's register . . . to language metafunctions to more micro analyses of semantic, lexico-grammatic, and phonological/graphological features (34). The key point here is the fundamental insistence that linguistic features, and genre structures, are intimately related to social context and function.

English for Special Purposes (ESP) approaches, closely associated with the work of John Swales, share the same insistence. Like the systemic-functional model, they also are motivated by the need for a "visible pedagogy," one that makes clear to "disadvantaged students the connections between language and social functions that genres embody" (42-3). However, ESP targets a much different audience than the Australian school children of the "Sydney School," concerned as it is with graduate-level international students in Britain and the United States, who as non-native speakers of English are not so much culturally marginalized as they are linguistically disadvantaged. Bawarshi and Reiff note that for teachers and scholars working with these kinds of students, whose academic disciplines and professional environments "are more bounded and where the genres used within those contexts are more identifiable, the analytical and pedagogical focus has been on actual, community-identified genres within those disciplinary settings"—for example, research articles, conference abstracts, and grant proposals (43-4). Instead of more generalized cultural contexts, ESP genre approaches locate genre within discourse communities, "more specifically defined contexts . . . where the genres' communicative purposes are more specified and attributable" (44). Interestingly, what emerges then is a clear and natural connection between these ESP genre pedagogies and the recent Writing-in-the-Disciplines (WID) movement, which prioritizes genre-based writing instruction outside the relatively narrow (and generically neutral) confines of a standard first-year composition program.

Part 1 concludes with an extended, well-articulated two-chapter discussion of the origins and current manifestations of Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS), an approach to genre that builds

on literary, linguistic, and sociological traditions but also deviates from them in significant ways. Bawarshi and Reiff write that although RGS shares with its precursors the recognition of genre as inextricably linked to situation, it does not view genres as primarily forms of communicative action. For RGS, following Carolyn Miller, genres must instead be seen as “forms of social action” (57-8). While, for example, ESP genre scholars have typically defined genres as “communicative tools situated within social contexts, RGS scholars have tended to understand genres as sociological concepts mediating textual and social ways of knowing, being, and interacting in particular concepts” (59). It is this emphasis on the performative aspect of genre that gives RGS its unique, and to some extent, anti-pedagogical perspective. Because if genres are conceptualized as both “habitations and habits,” or rather, “genre as noun” and “genre as verb,” then they must also be understood as more “rhetorically and socially dynamic,” not just responding to social situations but actively constructing them as well (59-61). In other words, if genres are indeed “typified rhetorical ways of acting within recurring situations [that] function as symbolic means of establishing social identities and cooperation,” they can only be separated from their use contexts, their “recurring situations,” with great difficulty, if at all (62). They must therefore be acquired (experienced, practiced) and not taught (learned, explained). Genre control is thus implicit and not explicit. It is ongoing and recursive, never fixed or finalized.

With its excellent historical overview of genre theory, moving from literary to linguistic to rhetorical/sociological traditions and culminating in *Rhetorical Genre Studies*, Part 1 is almost required reading for any teacher, student, or scholar working in the field today. At the very least, it is an essential starting-point. But as the title of the book indicates, Bawarshi and Reiff are also seeking to connect those traditions and trajectories to contemporary research in multiple contexts and contemporary teaching practices at various levels and within different disciplines. As such, Part 2 offers a three-chapter guide to research in academic settings (with

an especially useful discussion of how genre knowledge can impact transfer), research in workplace and professional contexts (including the recent methodological trend to ethnographic genre scholarship), and research in public and new media environments (using genre-based studies of Weblogs as one specific example). Part 3 follows with a whole series of specific genre approaches to the teaching of writing, beginning with implicit genre pedagogies and then focusing on numerous explicit genre pedagogies. As Bawarshi and Reiff demonstrate, these pedagogies are clearly

adaptable to multiple and varied institutional contexts, as evident by their use within ESL programs, graduate-level writing programs for international students, primary and secondary school writing curricula, first-year composition programs, and writing in the disciplines/writing across the curriculum programs (209).

Moreover, though already impressive, one cannot help but feel that genre's full range as a pedagogical tool is yet to be exploited.

The end pages of *Genre: An Introduction* complete a book of considerable merit. The glossary and annotated bibliography, both written by Melanie Kill, are especially worthy of note, and would be of particular use to students or scholars new to genre theory. Of course, no book is perfect, and this one can be somewhat repetitious, as material in Parts 2 and 3 has occasionally been covered or referenced already in Part 1. Many of the chapters also end in the same way, with fairly formulaic language forecasting what is to come in the following chapter. But these are minor distractions. Bawarshi and Reiff are to be commended for writing a comprehensive and readable overview of genre theory, research and pedagogy. In particular, they have demonstrated effectively how the understanding and use of genre can offer a potential resolution of the "writing to learn" versus "learning to write" debate. I know of no higher recommendation a reviewer can make than to say that he or she will be using the book under review in his or her own work. Next year I will be teaching a Graduate

Seminar in Rhetoric and Composition here at the University of
Guam. I have found my textbook.