

Dethier, Brock. *21 Genres and How to Write Them*. Logan: Utah State UP. 2013. 279 pages. \$26.95. 978-0-87421-911-1. Print.

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There's a lot to like about Brock Dethier's *21 Genres and How to Write Them*. Dethier's writing style is enviable, smooth and seemingly effortless, employing everyday diction often alliteratively ("head full of worry but not words," "revive your mind and your momentum") and iambically ("The moves will give you ways to handle everything") (1). This engaging style, coupled with a purposeful focus on demystifying writing for students by explaining twenty-one common "genres" and outlining an exhaustive list of "moves" with which to write them, creates a sense of overall goodwill that can only be genuine. Anyone who reads this book will come away from it understanding that writing involves hard work and personal discipline far more than inspiration or inborn talent. "Give up the romantic notion that only spontaneous, unconscious writing is worthwhile" (163) and "Banish the idea that good writers are just 'gifted'" (162) are two pieces of advice that underscore Dethier's facilitative approach to helping students see that writing involves a set of skills that can be learned, practiced, and mastered. Moreover, Dethier is careful, throughout the entire text, to remind his audience members to be kind to themselves during the writing process, to turn off the critic while creating and remember that we write to make meaning, not to torture ourselves.

Targeting "the individual writer, whether or not the writer is currently in a composition class," *21 Genres* ambitiously aims to be "the smallest, most inexpensive writing text on the college composition market" (5). Dethier, an award-winning professor and writing program administrator at Utah State University who taught for almost two decades in Donald Murray's famed writing program at the University of New Hampshire, clearly has his audience members' best interests in mind as he attempts to

concisely and entertainingly get them writing and keep them writing until a revised piece is ready for presentation. With this focus on momentum, Dethier casts himself in the role of coach, motivator, and travel companion with a friendly tone and the been-around-the-block, “I’ll let you in on a little secret” helpfulness of an insider.

Dethier has divided the book into two main sections. Part I treats the titular genres, with Dethier defining genre as a “type, form, or category” of writing that allows for overlap and mixing (3). The genres run the gamut from abstract to wiki. Part II covers 228 “moves,” which Dethier defines as “tools for your writer’s toolbox, steps to revive your mind and your momentum, things to DO to solve your writing problems, to get the pages out” (1). Examples of moves include “Answer the journalist’s questions” and “Use a double-entry journal.” A third, appendix section choreographs these moves into twenty “plays,” which Dethier sums up as “sequences of moves that take you from the first glimmerings of idea to finished product” (265). Plays include “Step by step—for those who like doing what the teacher asks, and doing it well” and “Jump right in—for those eager to fill up the screen with words” (266).

Part I: *Genres* provides readers with a solid process orientation toward writing based upon Dethier’s planning-heavy, eight-stage model: discover, develop, gather, integrate, focus, organize, revise, present—each of which he later details in a separate chapter in Part II: Moves. In the first section of the book, Dethier grounds his discussion of each genre rhetorically, asking the same eight questions of almost all of the twenty-one genres: “What are its purposes?” “Who are its audiences?” “What’s the typical content?” “How long is it?” “How is it arranged on the page?” “What pronouns are used?” “What’s the tone?” and “How does it vary?” Dethier also pays particular attention, not just in section one but throughout the text, to visual rhetoric, asking writers to consider how a piece of writing looks on a page or screen.

This first section on genres, however, is problematic from conception. Dethier’s twenty-one genres include the following:

abstract, annotated bibliography, application essay, application letter, argument, blog, email, gripe letter, literary analysis, literature review, op-ed essay, personal essay, profile, proposal, reflection, report, response to reading, resume, review, rhetorical analysis, and wiki. In Dethier's defense, he states from the beginning of the book, "Almost all texts mix genres. A simple two-paragraph gripe letter contains description, narration, analysis, persuasion, and summary and may use a memo format and the tone of a business report" (3). This important caveat is well-taken, but Dethier is on to something here: his definition of "genre" is confusing, to say the least. In the quotation above, Dethier mentions six genres, but only one appears in the book—the gripe letter (a term not widely used in the field and thus seemingly idiosyncratic to the author). More traditional modes-based genres like description and narration don't appear as genres in the text while argument does, which leads to the question, "Is an argument a genre in the same way that an email is a genre?"

Using Dethier's own definition of a genre as a "type, form, or category" of writing with "rules and conventions [that] govern the genre" (3), I would have to say "no." What sets an email apart from other types of writing is not a set of rules or conventions but a medium and mode of delivery. Similarly, wikis and blogs don't lend themselves to the designation of genre in the same way as literary analysis or rhetorical analysis. The result is a lack of parallelism that frustrates. For example, the entry on blogs could easily represent a diary entry, a chapter in an epistolary novel, or even an op-ed essay or personal essay (two of Dethier's other genres) using narrative and descriptive modes. Nothing about this piece, other than an assumption by the reader that it will be viewed on a computer screen, illustrates any conventions germane to a blog genre.

In addition to these problematic generic designations, this section also lacks prefatory contextualization or description before presenting models of the genre. This practice becomes especially troubling when the genre example is itself problematic. To wit, the chapter on email: Dethier, who thus far and everywhere else

in the book has worked to build rapport with his audience through goodwill and companionship, destroys his carefully constructed *ethos* with a mean-spirited example of a poorly written email from a student to an instructor. A sort of straw-man depiction of student emails, this example is hyperbolic to the extreme, including nearly every faux pas imaginable: all caps, misspellings, texting-style abbreviations, lack of punctuation, *et cetera*. Moreover, the example portrays a sense of entitlement on the part of students and even implies stupidity on their part when the “student” that Dethier has created argues that she or he needs a C or above in the course and won’t settle for a C+. Such a move is uncharacteristically curmudgeonly for this book, and it’s made worse by the fact that it completely leaves out the eight “moves” for this genre and is the *only* example provided in this chapter, leaving readers to wonder what a *good* email might look like.

Because Dethier’s stated audience includes individual writers who are not currently enrolled in a composition class, some of the questions he poses after his decontextualized examples are in need of answers. For instance, after an example of a restaurant review, Dethier asks whether the reviewer’s criteria are clear, and after an example of a literature review, he asks the reader to explain the differences between a literature review and an annotated bibliography. While these would be excellent questions to spur a classroom discussion, leaving such questions unanswered imposes unnecessary ambiguity for writers who aren’t using this book in a writing class. Perhaps Dethier was overambitious in trying to target writers outside the composition classroom, especially since his goal was to keep the book brief: in achieving brevity, he ends up neglecting the needs of certain readers.

One further set of questions related to his choice of genres: Why focus on these twenty-one types of writing assignments? Do they represent the most common forms of writing produced in college composition classes? I don’t believe so, but the reader isn’t told. These genres are simply presented in alphabetical order, not arranged according to the setting in which they are likely produced (several of these pieces are germane to workplace

writing), the cognitive skills necessary to produce them (there is no scaffolding if students follow the book's order from one genre to the next), or even the rhetorical strategies employed in each genre (analysis, summary, persuasion, and so forth). Consequently, the list of genres seems arbitrary. In all, the section on genres suffers from lack of clarity.

Part II: Moves contains 228 solutions to writing problems. While Dethier's advice in this section is generally rhetorically sound, no doubt gleaned from decades of practical experience as a writer, writing instructor, and writing program administrator, the sheer number of prescriptions in this section of the text might seem daunting to his intended audience. Edwin C. Woolley's landmark textbook, *Handbook of Composition: A Compendium of Rules*, published in 1907, contained 350 grammar, punctuation, spelling, and usage rules; this text's dominance in the composition marketplace was ended in 1941 when John C. Hodges' *Harbrace Handbook of English* (later the *Harbrace College Handbook*) broke the major concepts down to 35 (Connors). While Dethier is offering strategies instead of rules, he could learn from Hodges' choice of simplicity with *Harbrace*, rather than going the Woolley route. On the other hand, Dethier wisely places each move under one of the stages of his nine-step writing process, which provides an organizing pattern for the hundreds of moves. For example, freewriting is treated as a subcategory of the first stage, discovery, while choosing a medium is covered under the final stage, presentation. Most helpful in this section is an additional chapter called "Solve your Process Problem," which offers such sage counsel as "Reward yourself" for work you've accomplished and "Take small steps" in the writing process. Such advice certainly mitigates the overwhelming number of moves in the second part of the book.

The appendix, "Plays," may be Dethier's most original and innovative effort in this text. In this section, he lays out twenty recipes whose ingredients comprise between four and eleven of his moves. This approach to rhetorical pedagogy has a long tradition dating back to antiquity and, when done well, holds

great generative power for writers. With a more simplified approach to the moves, including a smaller number of them, this section on plays would be even stronger as long as it wouldn't lean too far toward the prescriptive. But I wouldn't worry about overprescription in Dethier's hands. He is nothing if not suggestive (in fact, Play 20 is called "Make your own play"), always encouraging his readers to take risks and give themselves permission to fail as long as they promise to learn from their failures.

Overall, *21 Genres* is a mixed bag: a beautifully written, witty text full of genuine empathy for the needs of readers—undercut by a shaky premise and a tendency to try to cover too much in under 300 pages. Like Peter Elbow in *Writing Without Teachers*, Dethier focuses on helping students generate material and keep on writing until it's time to revise. But unlike Elbow, who wanted students to "get along without any teacher—without anyone who can bring to bear greater knowledge, or authority" (xx), Dethier, when anticipating a lack of clarity on the reader's part, consistently tells the reader, "Ask your teacher or boss." With a nondirective text like this one, that's good advice, and Dethier's ideas about the writing process are generally excellent. While I can't see myself using *21 Genres* as a primary text in one of my college composition classes, I can see myself cribbing some of Dethier's plays, and the moves from which they are built, when I teach.

Works Cited

- Connors, Robert. "Handbooks: History of a Genre." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 13.2 (1983): 87-98. Print.
- Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.