

REVIEWS

RON PADGETT, ED. *The Teachers & Writers Guide to Walt Whitman*. New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1991. 224 pp. \$13.95, paperback.

Fast on the heels of the 1990 Modern Language Association volume, *Approaches to Teaching Whitman's "Leaves of Grass"*, comes this volume of teaching suggestions from New York's Teachers & Writers Collaborative. Where the MLA volume focused on a range of approaches to Whitman for various college-level courses, from introductory surveys through graduate seminars, this new volume is aimed at elementary and secondary school teachers. Contributors to the MLA volume were college teachers and Whitman scholars; contributors to this volume are all practicing poets, some of whom have taught poetry to young children. Many of the pieces in this book contain numerous examples of Whitman-inspired poetry written by students as young as kindergartners, and there's an infectious energy as poet-teachers write of their exhilaration in helping very young people respond creatively, intelligently, and enthusiastically to Whitman's words. Kenneth Koch, whose work about how to get children to express themselves through poetry is already legendary, provides two short essays (one reprinted), and many of the other notes collected here are indebted to his work and develop approaches that he first suggested.

The pieces are somewhat uneven, ranging from very brief three-page suggestions on through to a twenty-two page extended lesson plan (by Margot Fortunato Galt) for getting students to write original ballads based on Whitman's Civil War writings and on Civil War photographs, and a twenty-seven page handbook for teaching Whitman in high school (by Bill Zavatsky). Some of the pieces are reprinted, including Allen Ginsberg's long meditative ramble through Whitman (here titled "Taking a Walk through *Leaves of Grass*") and Langston Hughes's short 1946 preface to Whitman, "The Ceaseless Rings of Walt Whitman." It's always pleasant to come across these classic idiosyncratic structurings of Whitman, but their inclusion in a book on teaching Whitman to younger students does not seem particularly pertinent. More relevant is the reprinting of Ginsberg's brief and wonderful reminiscence about his "Sherwood Andersonesque" high school teacher, "a lady weighing perhaps 250 or 300 pounds, of immense girth and humor," who relished reciting Whitman lines like "I find no fat sweeter than that which sticks to my own bones"; from this teacher, Ginsberg says, he first learned of Whitman's "humor and self-acceptance."

There is a refreshing candor in most of the contributions to this book, creating a sense—very much unlike the MLA volume—that Whitman isn't such a difficult poet to understand, that in fact he is fun and easy to emulate and to learn from. It's a nice corrective to the usual run of Whitman criticism to hear Anne Waldman, for example, ease her way through "The Sleepers" and conclude that it's "a fairly straightforward poem. Its language is accessible."

Ron Padgett reminds us that Whitman himself was a schoolteacher and had a history of working humanely with children, and he reprints three of Whitman's 1840s *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* articles on education, where the poet avers, "We consider it a great thing in education that the learner be taught to rely upon himself. The best teachers do not profess to *form* the mind but to *direct* it in such a manner—and put such tools in its power—that it builds up itself." These early statements about education anticipate, of course, Whitman's developing aesthetics and his projection of democratic readers who would also be taught by the poet to learn to rely upon themselves. Padgett's book is an American pedagogical primer, encouraging teachers 150 years later to follow Whitman's lead.

The University of Iowa

ED FOLSOM

JOHN VERNON. *Peter Doyle: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 1991. \$22.00.

A colleague of mine recently observed that the era of magical realism in fiction was over and that we were now entering the era of "magical New Historicism." Count this novel by John Vernon as one of the first in that emerging genre. Vernon rewrites nineteenth-century literary and cultural history, and his narrative is rich with gender (re)construction and with clashes of class and with up-to-the-minute racial re-balancings (the Indians in this book are both very much "other" and very much victims of white racism and imperialism). *Peter Doyle* is a novel about power, knowledge, and subjectivity—the New Historical triumvirate; characters are literally constructed and deconstructed before our eyes, as is history itself. The book begins with Napoleon's death and moves us through the aftershock of that death half a century later in America, where the idea of western empire is still working itself out in the post-Civil War years.

In Vernon's rebuilt history, where the focus is on the peripheral, Walt Whitman plays a central role. Whitman has been quoted in many novels, has appeared as a character in several others, has even been the subject of a couple, but he has never been so fully fleshed out as in this one: Vernon has given us a vividly realized fictional Whitman. We first meet Vernon's version of Walt in New York in 1869 and follow him through his troubled relationship with Peter Doyle (who in this novel is not what you supposed, but far different), then we see him again in 1872 during an imagined visit with Emily Dickinson and follow him through his stroke, and then we accompany him on his train journey to the West (here moved from 1879 to 1873), which eventually takes him to Greeley, Colorado, where Peter Doyle has ended up. We see the poet finally in 1886, once again with Doyle, who pushes him in a wheelchair at Emily Dickinson's funeral.

Vernon, who teaches at the State University of New York at Binghamton (and who has written several books of literary criticism in addition to two previous novels), has shuffled and juggled a lot of information in order to