

Review of From the Other Side of the Desk

by

Julie Ball

My first introduction to Linda Miller Cleary was second hand. One of her students, an enthusiastic soon-to-be-teacher, was doing an apprenticeship at my school and was primarily observing and practicing in my classroom. Robyn tried to introduce me to the readings about adolescent literature that Linda had pushed, but it wasn't until Robyn and I began talking about adolescent writing that I began listening more seriously to what she was saying about her teacher.

Yes! Here is a college professor who does, indeed, listen to teenagers. Here is a scholar who isn't twined in the ivy tower and strangled by its vines. Here is a writing teacher who responds to what kids write instead of strangling them with formulas. Robyn made me want to read Linda's book. And *From the Other Side of the Desk* was not a disappointing "how to teach writing" book. My copy is now underlined and tea-stained and dog-eared to the point of fitting in with my professional library, alongside Strunk and White and my Freshman Composition Book. Linda's book complements the "how-to" from methodology classes. Linda's book says "This is."

This is a book about what writing is for adolescents: not how we should teach writing, but how we should respond to writing. Tracy, in Chapter 1, engages me from the start. With Tracy, we see the research process for this book. Her writing experiences focus our attention on exactly what the author of this research is aiming toward: an examination of what is... with a projection, on our part as teachers, of what could be. Charts and graphs that profile students are made more real because we have Tracy. And Tracy can represent "any student" for both beginning teachers and experienced teachers. I found myself, while reading the charts and graphs, substituting students I've had in writing. So, I continued reading past Chapter 1, even though I think I know "how to teach writing." I was curious about how Linda Miller Cleary would break down all these sociological categories she had set up in her researcher's charts and graphs.

This is a book about listening to adolescent writers. Beware of Carlos in Chapter 2. Carlos might make you feel guilty about everything you haven't done as a writing teacher. You may be excellent at teaching grammar structures and format (and these are important in the final analysis), but are your students writing, for real? Carlos tunes us to what writing is "supposed to be." By the end of Chapter 2, I'm affirmed, as many teachers of writing will be: writing should be a process for thinking for the student, not an exercise of style for the teacher. Carlos says, "And I worry what's the paper

gonna look like, am I gonna typewrite it or not? If I type it, it's too short. I worry about how neat it's gonna be. Is the sentence right..." Is this what we want our writers to worry about when they're drafting?

In Chapter 4, Elana tells us how she can "get around" teachers in writing. She is successful as a writing student...she writes well. She knows what the teacher wants...and she writes for the teacher. Linda Miller Cleary asks us, through Elana, is this what we want, as teachers of writing?

And we find, in Chapter 5, peer pressure. The big deal. And Chapter 6, almost the opposite...ESL. Whoa. Is this too much in one book? No. This is not too much. This is adolescent writing. It is everything.

I like the introduction comments for Chapter 7 from Doug and Joseph: "Why does the struggle for voice begin for most students in the secondary school years?" I like that question. For most students, real thinking begins in the secondary years...how could voice happen before then? The more important question is the one Linda poses for all of us who teach writing:

Why aren't we listening?

Chapter 8 summarizes "what's happening in secondary schools..." Good.

The first seven chapters are for current teachers of writing, and they are for entering teachers of writing. Read this book. It's a good book. Linda Miller Cleary is a good writer...and she does research well. I like it.