



**Private Practices: Girl Reading Fiction and Constructing Identity.** Meredith Rogers Cherland. Bristol, PA: Taylor & Francis, 1994. 242 pp.

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In this fascinating study of gendered reading practices, Meredith Cherland describes scenes of affluent white Canadian girls reading and exchanging books with their peers and their mothers in and out of school. Cherland combines ethnographic detail garnered from a yearlong study with extensive and explicitly feminist and neo-Marxist analysis. She uses thick description of the rules and norms that govern how people--particularly girls--read in a small town and how they learn and are taught to read, to argue that reading always occurs in particular cultural contexts. Critical structural analyses of society and schooling are sandwiched between the details of the reading lives of 11- and 12-year-old female readers in their sixth-grade year. Unlike authors who examine reading from psychological and individual perspectives, Cherland offers us an interpretive study grounded in the field of anthropology to argue for the essentially social nature of reading.

Cherland introduces us to the home and school lives of seven girls who read more than ten books a month and live in a small "idyllic suburban community." She claims, and provides ample evidence to support her contention, that two cultural discourses surround girls as they read. First, she suggests that, through both the practice of reading and the material the girls read, they learn how to "do girl" or, stated in another way, they learn gender. In this community, reading is a gendered practice; unlike the men in the community, nearly all of the mothers and grandmothers of these girls are avid readers. The second cultural discourse that girls learn through the art of reading fiction is how to "do friendship." Girls learn from their mothers not only what to read but also how to incorporate reading into their daily lives. As a result, both the girls and their mothers are involved in extensive, and important, exchange networks. Girls pass around their own books and found books in stores and libraries for their friends, using books to initiate and maintain relationships, critical functions performed by women in this community. The detailed descriptions of reading in this community add to our understanding of literacy as a complex social and cultural practice.

Cherland compares the ways girls and boys read at home and at school to suggest that these reading practices mirror the broader social practices inscribed and passed down by parents and community members in this town where each gender had distinct and circumscribed roles and responsibilities. She asks, provocatively, whether the ways that girls were taught to read might be considered "improper literacy," a term used by Colin Lankshear and Moira Lawler (*Literacy, Schooling, and Revolution*, New York:



Falmer Press, 1987) to mean a form of knowledge that actually works against the best interests of a group of people. Although reading, education, and achievement are highly valued in this small town, the women who have grown up as avid readers of fiction are less educated and less powerful than their spouses. Thus, Cherland concludes, women's reading of fiction reproduces gender inequality and social class differences.

The inclusion of phrases such as "the reproduction of social class" leads to my major discomfort with this book: Cherland reaches sweeping conclusions about gender and class based on a study of white middle-class academically successful girls. For instance, she repeatedly includes statements such as the following: The form of knowledge passed on to children made it likely that working-class children would get working-class jobs while affluent children would learn to "serve a world capitalist economy" (p. 123). While this point may have merit, and other studies suggest that it does, it does not follow from Cherland's particular study, which is exclusively about successful middle-class white girls.

Cherland begins the book with the explanation that she will not address issues of race and class because they were not addressed by the community itself. The question I would raise, which others have raised, is whether this is possible or even desirable: can gender be addressed separately from these other aspects of identity? Cherland seems to wonder about this also and, in her final chapter, addresses issues of class and race by raising the kind of question about social-class inequality mentioned above, which seems unwarranted by the evidence she presents. She continues this analysis by making quick comparisons of her study to studies of inner-city youth such as Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines's ethnography of literacy (*Growing Up Literate*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988). It is too little, too late. The study would have been more convincing had she either drawn conclusions specific to white middle-class girls or, alternatively, integrated race and class along with her gender analysis throughout the study.

As someone who is both a researcher and a teacher, I find most critical education research--research based on perspectives that I generally agree with--to be long on critique and short on solutions. Despite their interesting and often provocative analyses, these studies often provide few clear guidelines for how to apply the findings. I found the final chapter, which offered implications drawn from this study, to be highly dissatisfying. I worry about the value of the kind of research that positions the researcher as an inside observer, an outside critic, and someone who never brings the findings back to the community. On her final page, Cherland writes quite honestly, "This study did not benefit the people of Oak Town." While Cherland



argues that this study will have import in discussions of curriculum and pedagogy--and I believe it will--my question concerns the ultimate value and ethics of a study that is not connected to change in the local context. (See Michelle Fine, "Working the Hyphens: Reinventing Self and Other in Qualitative Research," In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, eds., *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994.)

All of this said, in her study of the social nature of reading, Cherland reaches interesting and potentially significant conclusions: she suggests the ways schools and homes work to construct and reproduce gendered inequalities; she wonders whether the resistance displayed by both boys and girls can be used as a starting point to work toward change; and she concludes that because gender, class, and race are constructed by literacy, "we need a deeper knowledge of literacy as a situated social practice in order to support social transformation" (p. 212). This study takes us a long way toward this understanding of literacy.

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