



Living Reading: Exploring the Lives of Reading Teachers. Judith Davidson. New York: Peter Lang, 2000. 184 pp.

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Although teachers teach and/or emphasize reading on a daily basis, what is their relationship with reading outside the classroom? This is the question Judith Davidson seeks to examine in *Living Reading*. What begins as an exploration into the "ways that ideas about literacy were formed and enacted through the practice of local reading councils" (p. 7) becomes, for the author, a challenge to her own preconceptions about literacy. As a participant observer, she comes into direct contact with the activities of reading councils, local affiliates of the International Reading Association and her research sites, frequently finding herself an honorary member. In this teacher/researcher role, she takes part in routine council practices, while still managing to capture the whimsy of council interactions and the surprising range of unexamined questions. During her year and a half study of local reading councils a paradox about reading emerges: it is the thing that ties it all together, and yet "we" (reading council members) don't actually talk much about it (p. 8).

In Part 1, Davidson introduces the reader to the reading councils. Four questions direct her qualitative study: How is it that people, especially educators, construct knowledge about literacy? What are the parameters of that knowledge? How are peoples' notions of literacy linked to other cultural notions, such as ideas about religion or patriotism? What are the consequences implied by different stances to literacy? (p. 21) Davidson then provides an introduction to reading councils, discussing their structures, activities, and aims. Finally, the author examines the historical background of reading and developments in the practice of teaching reading.

Chapters four through seven make up Part 2 of the book and provide a closer look into council practices. Chapter four gives an overview of local reading council activities. Davidson compares the development of the year's activities to knitting, where contrasting yarns create a pattern. Each "color" represents a council activity-presentation, carnivals, workshops, awards banquets, conferences, and community service. The finished product of these strands is the state conference. Chapter five presents the "Reading Sorority." Sorority members are the teachers, mostly women, who share the passion for reading and attend the annual conference to bond and share stories. The section's final two chapters are devoted to studying the "expert presentation," highlighted at the state conference, and examining the levels of activity



at the conference itself. These sections read like a "how to" manual for presenters and conference-goers, and are masterfully detailed, regardless of whether or not you agree with these institutional conventions.

Part 3 likens reading conferences to spiritual revivals, comparing the theme of the 1994 Illinois Reading Council conference, "The Magic of Literacy," to "Protestant notions" (p. 149). To Davidson, a spirituality of reading is "a discourse about reading that permeates the practice of the reading councils . . . a cultural and linguistic resource that threads across reading councils and connects them to other overlapping communities of practice" (p. 150). Several members contribute to this spirituality: speakers ("testifying for reading"), teachers ("the new elders"), and books ("the symbolic center") (p. 153-54, 156). Davidson concludes that reading councils not only provide professional development, but a spiritual calling or vocation to "living reading."

Living Reading is a book for teacher educators and researchers in the field of reading and language arts. In particular, it suitably introduces preservice teachers to organizations where they can receive support and professional development when they are in the field. Davidson's writing style is remarkably rich and offers a readable and useful guide for writing ethnography. True to the genre's form, the ethnographic report, in its descriptions and interpretations, leaves little doubt about the importance of the council in reading teachers' lives. However, for practitioners and teachers, Davidson's book raises two important, and unanswered, questions: (1) Are her metaphors of knitting, spirituality, and a reading sorority based on informants' validation, or are they just good fiction? (2) Are the findings Davidson reports significant to future research, or are they only common sense? Whether or not the reader struggles with the same questions, the author has succeeded in providing a thoughtful and detailed account of the inner workings of local and state reading councils.

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