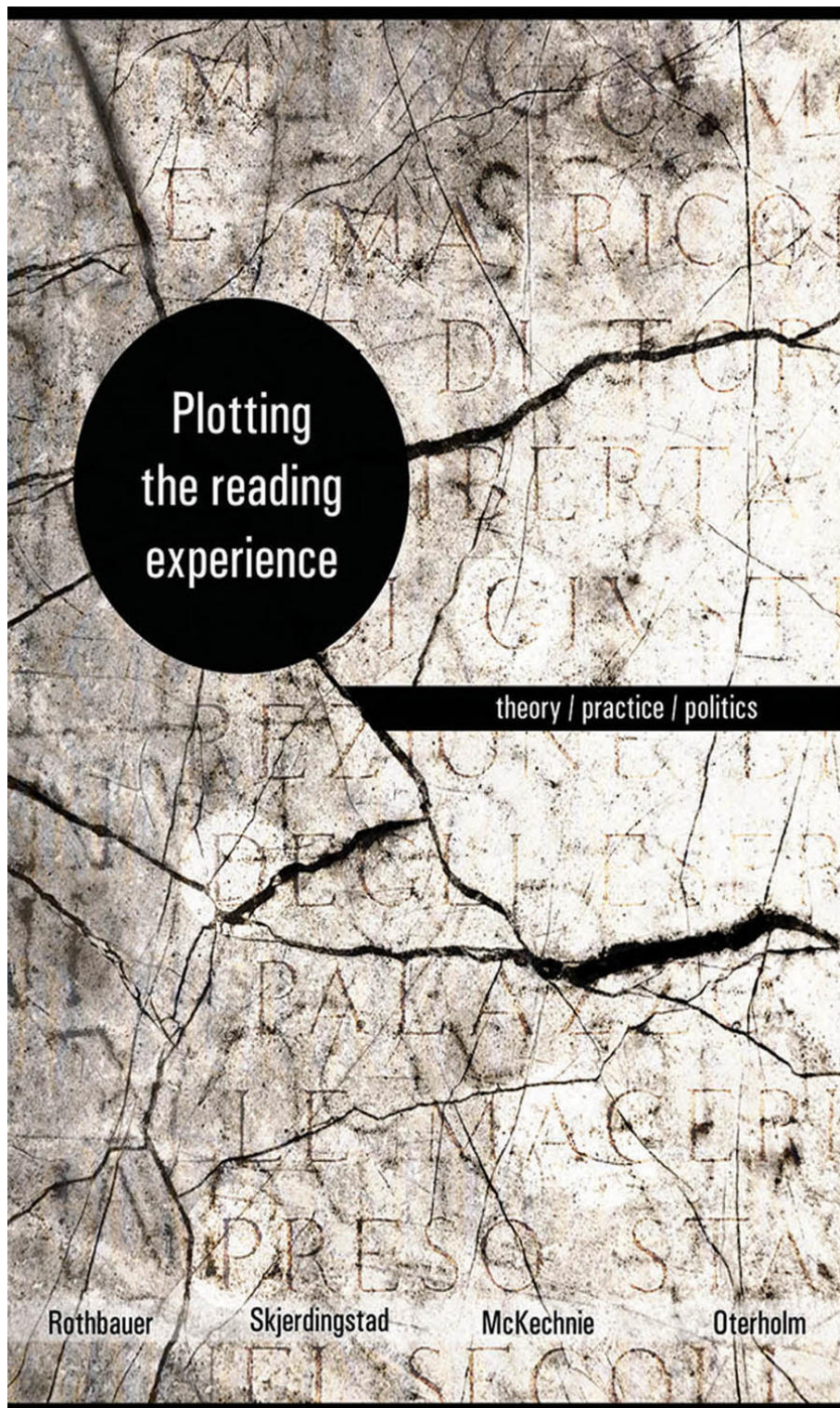


Paulette M. Rothbauer, Kjell Ivar Skjerdingsstad, Lynne (E.F.)
McKechnie, and Knut Oterholm, eds. *Plotting the Reading Experience:
Theory, Practice, Politics*



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Must have been fun. On June 11-12, 2013, 60 scholars gathered at Akershus University's College of Applied Sciences in Oslo, Norway to share their research on readers and reading. *Plotting the Reading Experience* contains 23 papers presented there that focus on readers and their reading experiences. The volume is organized into the three broad yet interdependent categories: theory, practice, and politics. Essays embrace a variety of research methodologies and disciplinary approaches; cover the reading of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction by children and adult readers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; and focus on the Western world, with generous attention to Scandinavian readers. Collectively, these essays explore the ambiguities reading fosters, the multiple understandings it nurtures, and its capacity to transform readers in myriad ways. Many essays also demonstrate how political the act of reading is, because it enables autonomous readers to construct meaning for themselves.

Readers of reviews must be conscious of the fact that reviewers are also readers who bring all sorts of baggage with them to the task. Since it is impossible for me to summarize 23 essays in this review, I will comment on authors who especially caught my attention. My favorite sentence in the book occurs in the introduction: "It is a problem for democracy if the understanding of reading in kindergartens, schools, and other socializing institutions is reduced to reading for quantitatively measurable literacy skills or scholastic achievement" (10). "Here! Here!" a voice echoed in my humanities-oriented brain as I read that passage.

In the "Theory" section, Marianne Barch compares what I consider Harold Bloom's constrained theory of the reading experience with the more expansive representations of reading that novelist A.S. Byatt includes in *Possession* (1990). Barch then reflects on her own reading: its "ability to move me about, and thus move me to experience all sorts of otherness as real, makes reading the best possible education in cultural adaptability" (87). In the "Practice" section, Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo address the effects of mass reading events to which people are attracted "by the combination of social, emotional, intellectual and aesthetic pleasures" (146). They argue these events not only connect people in physical and virtual locations, but also enable them to re-mediate previous reading experiences. In the "Politics" section, I especially liked the way Lynn McKechnie challenges literary canons that children's literature experts have revered for generations (yes, as a youth I read and learned from *Hardy Boys* novels I devoured by the score). She observes and



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analyzes the reading and pre-reading experiences of actual children who manifest their own set of priorities and interests. By putting the reader in the center of the reading experience, *Plotting the Reading Experience* does a good job of harnessing the multidisciplinary scholarship focusing on the emotional, cognitive, and social aspects of reading that most *SHARP News* readers will now recognize.

At the same time, however, it overlooks conclusions emanating from newer neuroscientific research on reading that future scholars will have to incorporate into their thinking. In a March 18, 2012, *New York Times* article, for example, Annie Paul Murphy notes that neuroscientific research on reading demonstrates how narrative activates particular parts of the brain, including the sensory and motor cortexes. “The brain, it seems, does not make much of a distinction between reading about an experience and encountering it in real life; in each case, the same neurological regions are stimulated.” One researcher, she reports, saw “substantial overlap in the brain networks used to understand stories and the networks used to navigate interactions with other individuals, in particular, interactions in which we’re trying to figure out the thoughts and feelings of others.” Methinks scholars at the next symposium that plots the reading experience will have to incorporate some of this research into their conclusions.

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