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**Alenka Žbogar.** *Kratka proza v literarni vedi in šolski praksi*. Ljubljana: Zavod Republike Slovenije za šolstvo, 2007. 126 pp. €20.45 [= \$27.33] (paper). ISBN-10 961-234-592-9, ISBN-13 978-961-234-592-1.

Although the chief aim of this brief study is to show how to employ short prose works in secondary school teaching, the author concomitantly presents a strong argument for literature's importance in the curriculum. While the book is valuable to teachers in Slovenia because of relatively recent curriculum changes (beginning in 1996) and the need individually to choose reading materials, teachers elsewhere can benefit from Žbogar's well reasoned approach, which amounts to a strong defense of literature as a subject of study. Compactness is essential as the author moves from genre considerations through reception theory to current practices and proposed models in roughly 125 pages. The teacher pressed for time and the literary theorist curious about practical applications will appreciate Žbogar's economy.

What begins as a seemingly abstract review of definitions of short prose genres in Europe and North America (i.e., terminology, word counts, and history) turns out to be part of the knowledge necessary for curriculum planners and teachers to choose literary works. Žbogar observes how

fundamental surface characteristics such as the number of characters and point of view relate to genre definitions. This is important because informed selection of materials avoids overshooting young readers' competencies, with negative effects on their desire to read. Žbogar's review of short prose in Slovenia (22–32) reveals the variety available to the teacher from the writings of the two postwar generations that had matured by the 1990s.

The book's organization is an implicit objection to a strictly survey approach to literature, and Žbogar takes explicit issue with this as well. The study of literature should promote what Žbogar calls a culture of reading. Taking into account students' reading interests prevents them from becoming alienated from the subject. Overly difficult or unfamiliar materials alienate students. The argument for a culture of reading is essentially a negative one (i.e., preventing alienation), albeit very practical and one I imagine most teachers would appreciate. Buried in one of the student questionnaires, however, is a question containing a positive rationale for the study of literature (although stated negatively):

One of the benefits of reading is that it helps you understand people, which is one of the most important abilities in life. People that do not understand others, that cannot empathize with and give adequate attention to others, will likely commit major and serious interpersonal mistakes in their lives. (92)

It would be difficult to state the benefit of learning better to appreciate other points of view any more plainly.

One strength of the book is Žbogar's reliance on evidence from the field. Results of an empirical study of technical and academic high school students' reading competencies in the 2002–2003 academic year (47–51) are grounds for making judgments on what they are able to and like to read. Žbogar gives sample results from the student questionnaires and enough statistical evidence to form an impression of the study's import. A key finding is that technical and academic high school students have quite different levels of preparedness. An excursus into reception theory and its use in schools precedes the results of this empirical study (33–46). As elsewhere in the book, the author cites authoritative sources in various languages and conveys an easy familiarity with matters such as age-appropriate reading matter.

In the final part of the book, the author gives examples of activities—stressing the importance of learner-centered and cooperative ones (56–67)—for select works (a novella and short story) in technical (85–101) and academic (101–07) high school settings, including student evaluation forms. For technical high school students Žbogar suggests, by way of example, Drago Jančar's "Death at Mary-of-the-Snows" ("Smrt pri Mariji Snežni"), a postmodernist novella published in 1985, but

recommends reducing emphasis on evaluative tasks. It is most important for these students to demonstrate comprehension of the text, an appreciation of its genesis, and knowledge of the genre it represents. Academic high school students, on the other hand, might read Andrej Blatnik's short stories from the collection *Zakon želje* (2000), doing relatively more independent research work and dealing with topics such as intertextuality (101). Žbogar gives examples of pre-reading, in-class, and post-reading activities. An entirely separate section (108–14) is devoted to learners of Slovene as a foreign language. Recommended reading materials and activities are calibrated to grade level within the secondary range.

Žbogar acknowledges (17–20) theoretical disagreements going back to the late nineteenth century regarding the nature of short prose genres' possible connections with societal changes. However, she seems eager to link social displacement and challenges to an integrated individual identity with the rise of short prose genres (12–13)—in the case of Slovene literature, in the last decades of the twentieth century. The author raises, but cannot resolve on the pages of this book, the question of the fragmented depiction of humans in literature, possible correspondences with life in the (let us call it) postmodern world, and formation of the person in school.

It is refreshing to meet an informed advocate of using contemporary literature in the secondary school program, and one that has a good deal of confidence in students' (and teachers') abilities. It is important to point out that short prose genres are taught in parallel with novels and poetry throughout the secondary school years in Slovenia, and so this book deals with a part of the literature curriculum. Nonetheless, its pedagogical suggestions are, of course, transferable.

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