

## Book Reviews/Recensions

### *TOO SCARED TO LEARN—WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND EDUCATION*

Jenny Horsman (1999). Toronto: McGilligan.

Horsman advocates changes in the philosophy, the structure, and the curriculum of literacy programs for women. Her book is based on interviews with literacy workers, adult learners, and therapists and counsellors who deal with issues of violence in various programs situated across Canada—British Columbia, the Prairies, Central Canada, Atlantic Canada, and the North. She argues that these voices from the front line of literacy work signal the need both for a deeper understanding of the impact of abuse on the ability of individuals to learn, and for the development of more effective strategies to support learners who have experienced violence. She employs the interview material to identify the sometimes conflicting challenges facing learners and instructors alike when working with the harms imposed by trauma; they must deal with disclosure (or over-disclosure) of personal experience in the name of speaking out; difficulty with boundaries, burnout, and vicarious traumatization; the problem of setting appropriate expectations for behaviour and academic performance; the creation of an appropriate safe space in education; and the impact of traumatic experience on concentration and one's ability to be "present" to learn. She uses these often painful accounts to support her position that "the task is not to encourage educators ... to diagnose who has been traumatized and then treat them differently from other learners ... [but that] *all learning must be carried out in recognition of the needs of survivors of trauma*" (p. 32).

In the first of three main sections, Horsman articulates an analysis of the historical "normalizing" of violence against women, and the need for educational settings (and literacy programs in particular) to recognize the presence of trauma survivors. In the second section she examines some specific difficulties for survivors in learning situations, and uses the voices of both learners and educators to suggest ways to bring the whole person to learning. The third part of the book is devoted to therapeutic issues: concern for the workers, models for relationships between educators and counsellors, and suggestions for ways to support the work. Relying heavily on references from recent therapeutic discourse (in particular Herman, 1992, and others in the field of trauma treatment), Horsman argues that many of the behavioural and relational problems commonly encountered with literacy learners arise from a learned set of survival skills—these strategies allow the subject to survive, but were acquired in the context of "normal" violence (the well-documented prevalence of physical and sexual intimidation and abuse experienced by women and children at all levels of society). She appeals, she challenges, she lectures, she exhorts,

she demands that literacy educators work to make these levels of violence visible, in order "to make the unacceptability of violence clear ... so that its impacts on learning become simply one aspect of education"(p. 300).

Without using the word *feminism*, she outlines a feminist social justice agenda, underlines the need for change at a fundamental level, and offers some concrete strategies presently in use by literacy workers in existing (or recently cut) programs in Canada. All of the requirements of good political advocacy are represented: valuing difference and respectful treatment for the stigmatized individual; focussing on strengths and survival instead of on personalized deficits; facilitating writing, speaking, and/or creative expression of individual and collective identity; and purposefully contextualizing individual women's experience in a larger societal frame, to politicize the issue of violence against women.

The great strength of this book is Horsman's obvious commitment to compassion and advocacy for those learners and literacy workers who have experienced violation. Her allegiance to the ideal of collaboration and her respect for the authority of experience is evident in her copious use of the transcript material and the fact that her pointed critiques are saved for the "experts"—particularly those whom she sees as operating from within the medical or educational models, which characterize victimization (or illiteracy) as an individual problem. Her expressed intention in writing this book was to "begin to build a bridge between therapeutic and educational discourses" (p. 11), and, to some extent, she succeeds in this. Her democratic use of examples from her interviews as well as her choice of inclusive language should make this an encouraging, even inspiring resource for those many educators in literacy programs struggling with the visible and disheartening consequences of violence. The obvious passion of her argument provides academic readers in education with an engaging and thought-provoking view from an unfamiliar position.

But this is not a balanced account, even in the places where it pretends to be one. Many educators who have had a well-planned class unexpectedly sidetracked by an explosive emotional response, or who have felt overwhelmed or attacked by a complaint from someone in their classroom who does not feel safe, may not be satisfied. Horsman's suggestion that there is a need, "not so much for literacy workers to be counsellors, but more to learn *not* to be counsellors" (p. 249) does not solve the practical problems of the classroom. She is not the first to suggest that the worker can and should set her own boundaries and "just say no" to too much information, but both the language and the content of the transcript material chosen for this book illustrate how difficult it continues to be for workers to do this. The stories are difficult to hear, and often delivered in ways that make them, once started, difficult to stop. In fact, even after over 20

years in direct service as an educator and therapist specializing in work with street-active adolescents and sexually abused adults, I found it difficult to keep reading the page-after-page disclosures that she provides as authority for her argument. In this book, as in real life, the exhortation to listen and to be sensitive to the needs of survivors (at least the survivors who are learners) is much stronger than any encouragement for literacy workers or counsellors to “look after themselves” (p. 284). If we understand that in any group of women there are some survivors of violence who are not prepared to disclose their histories, then one hopes that the recognition of the presence of survivors in the classroom would extend to those many who have chosen *not* to identify themselves as such, including those on the other side of the desk.

This book could have benefited from reference to the critique of an ethics of care in education, as identified by Luttrell (1996), who cogently argues a need to “subvert the politics of caregiving” (p. 359) in literacy. Luttrell believes that the model of maternal omnipotence is supported by the privileging of exclusive one-to-one tutor/learner relationships, and suggests that the unequal gender distribution of literacy can be better addressed, at least in part, by “expanding the each-one-teach-one motto to include spouses, children, lovers, friends, coworkers, classmates, and community members in the adult learning-to-read process” (p. 358). Also, Horsman’s superficial mention of the problem of transference did not come close to addressing the theoretical issues of power difference in helping relationships with survivors, nor the difficult question of ethics regarding confidentiality and exploitation of the teaching relationship. For example, from the viewpoint of confidentiality and the consciousness of power relations, the thing I had the most difficulty with in the book was Horsman’s repeated use of quotes from and stories about the one learner she tutors.

Another area of weakness of the book is its lack of acknowledgement of its location within what Sandell (1996) has called “therapeutic feminism: the most clearly articulated version of which we now call victim feminism” (p. 27), in particular in relation to the shift in focus that is implied wherever “those experiences we have previously learned to understand as instances of institutionalized oppression we now increasingly view as instances of victimization” (p. 23). Though Horsman often declares the need to politicize violence in the educational setting, her belief in the primary value of the individualized solutions of the therapeutic paradigm is evident on every page. She mentions the important dissenting paper on survivor discourse by Alcoff and Gray (1993), but does not take their argument into account in her analysis. She refers to Brown (1994), but does not seem to have taken her call for ethics and theory in feminist therapy seriously.

Unfortunately, without reference either to critiques of the paradigm or to deeper levels of theory on which to ground praxis, the bridge that Horsman has

begun to build needs some stronger supports to carry the weight of her very admirable intention. As it stands, it is a fragile span balanced over some very difficult depths, many of which have already been carefully mapped in both liberatory theories of pedagogy and the clinical concerns for relationship articulated in feminist therapy. Without some of these maps for guidance, Horsman's bridge looks to me like a dangerous shortcut, and the risk is, once again, to those who are least able to protect themselves—those survivors of multiple oppression who are in need of (among other things) the services of literacy educators. If we literacy educators are to provide relevant and useful programs to respond to those needs, we may be required to take the long way around to ensure that we can deliver services without the necessity for the recipient to find herself infantilised, medicalized, or pathologized in the relationships which are created in the process.

### References

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