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Book Reviews Introduction: Is it Just Me?

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BOOKS

Is it Just Me?

Curt Porter

Scholarship is notoriously slow.

A new academic book is usually the result of years of research, writing, review, and revision. Reading it, digesting it, and responding to it takes significant time and energy as well. All things considered, years can pass between a moment of insight and the moment that insight becomes part of a larger conversation. It's important to recognize a sort of humility that's baked into the process. Academic writers are a careful bunch. To assert that something is 'true' requires extensive debate and constant adjustment and qualification. The whole thing can be exhausting. But we do it with the goal of exploring a given problem as deeply as possible and with the hope of playing a small part in developing our always-imperfect knowledge.

In 2025, not everyone is as patient or as trusting in this process as the initiated. By all accounts, we are living in a time of social, economic, political, and ecological instability. In just the past several months popular media has reported on major cuts to medical research, massive layoffs in the public sector, dramatic changes in health guidelines, the deployment of military troops in US cities, government shutdown.... Commentators speak of the erosion of checks and balances, environmental disaster, a collapse of democratic systems. I do my best to keep up. I make mental notes to follow up with every crisis, but a new headline always comes along, and my attention shifts again. In every case, I know I'm only getting a part of the picture. And yet the media-sphere constantly promises the next big piece of the next big story. So I click and I click. I'm looking for something definitive—some sort of perspective or answer that brings everything together. It's only natural to seek out answers, and the careful deliberation of academic research isn't really designed to keep up.

I recently found myself in stunned silence at yet another batch of headlines. In this case, a conservative activist known for holding rallies on college campuses was shot and killed. It was especially salient to me because this person had visited my own campus several years before, and along with his organization had caused quite a stir. In the wake of his visit, close friends and colleagues of mine received personal threats. There were rumors of students secretly recording lectures and making professor blacklists. Faculty meetings morphed into emergency planning / group therapy sessions. Armed security was stationed outside of my department office. At one point, a bullet was found in one of our classrooms. Our administration insisted there was no credible threat, but they weren't very convincing.

I had a lot of complicated reactions when I heard about the shooting. I thought about this man's young children. I thought about my own two children and what it might be like for them to hear that their father had been shot. I thought about the idea of free speech—his and mine. I thought about the blurry lines between speech and action. I thought about the possibility and the fear of speaking candidly about all this with my students. I thought a lot about that bullet that was found in a classroom in my building.

As if on cue, a video popped up on my YouTube page. It was a familiar face. A clean-shaven and shaggy-haired guy picking a guitar outside. I knew that the viral folk-singer Jesse Welles would write a song about the shooting. He seems to have a song for every major issue and event of the past year or so. But this was fast... less than 24 hours after the fact. I clicked immediately. It was a simple little folksong that spoke to contradictions in our collective reactions to the shooting, further division and potential consequences, and an underlying vulnerability that feels both personal and social. To be fair, it wasn't Shakespeare or Dylan. I suppose it struck me so intensely because it felt like an independent voice that was uneasy with the self-righteous anger and pre-baked explanations already beginning to swirl. It was as if Welles was taking us through his own desperate search for a trustworthy compass and that he had momentarily found it in the acknowledgment of our shared mortality.

It's the immediacy of it all that brings me back to the book reviews in this issue. No one would mistake a two-minute folk song for a major research project. But I think part of what I find so important about Welles' music is that it offers up-to-the-minute commentary that rejects hackneyed partisan talking points. It comes from a place of genuine uncertainty and gives a snapshot of the process through which the artist is responding. In this way, I think his art isn't so different from good scholarship.

Each of the reviews in this issue of *JAEPL* focus on a book that was published long before this particular crisis. The books span very different academic fields and very different research methodologies. Yet each reviewer gives a glimpse of how the research behind each book emerged from lived challenges and illustrates how that research sheds light on the daily work and daily struggle that we collectively face. Kelly Sauskojus reviews *Evangelical Writing in a Secular Imaginary* (Cope), a rigorous study of religious identity as it emerges in college writing classrooms. Sauskojus emphasizes important methodological contributions of this book but does so within a nuanced discussion of the elevated power and politics surrounding religion in our public life. We get a practical lens that allows any instructor to recognize the complex process of navigating faith during a time when religion has been so fiercely politicized. The next review responds to *Curriculum Fragments*, by Tom Poetter. The book is an autobiographical work that describes and demonstrates the role of stories in education and in life.

Joseph Wiederhold takes up Poetter's invitation/challenge to work with our stories through an examination of his own. Rather than a traditional review, we see an enactment of Poetter's *currere* methodology. The result is an account of the struggle against cynicism and his desire to maintain a sense of meaning, connection, and openness in his work. I personally found myself nodding along as he described the reality of AI simulated text interrupting the possibility of genuine learning and connection through human thought and writing. I get the sense that our task is not so much a matter of identifying 'correct' or 'acceptable' uses of AI but of demonstrating to our students and to ourselves what it is we are trying to preserve when we limit its role. Wiederhold and Poetter both suggest that hope can be found in our own stories and the stories of others. Our third piece reviews *Literacies in Times of Disruption* by Bronwyn Williams. Ashna Singh provides an overview then outlines theoretical tools for recognizing the individual and collective impacts of the Covid pandemic on the literacies and the lives of college students. The review includes impressions of pandemic life that will feel familiar to many of us, and Singh offers a potent reminder that the implications and the impacts of the pandemic are still with us. More importantly, Singh also draws out a set of concepts that elaborate on the ongoing disruptions on students' individual, interpersonal, and material worlds and serve as a practical mechanism of understanding, empathy, and action.

While these three books are pretty recent by academic standards, no one would expect them to address this mornings' round of headlines and talking points. But the reviews that follow offer a glimpse of teacher-scholars engaging deeply with research and putting it in conversation with our day-to-day. Individually, they speak to the complicated role of religion in the identities of college writers, impacts of AI generated text on the relationships we seek to build through writing, and the role of emotional well-being on the literate lives of students. Taken together these reviews nudge towards an understanding of the complexity of students' lives and of connecting with them as citizens and as people. This sort of connection is something that I struggle with and strive towards in my own teaching. For whatever reason, my impression is that my students appreciate these efforts more so than in years past. That's just a feeling. I have no way to substantiate it. But similar sentiments on the part of these three reviewers have me wondering if maybe I'm not alone. I feel appreciative of these interactions with research. I feel appreciative of the researchers who have continued to put in the time and care to write books that provide foundations for these feelings, and I feel deeply thankful for the impetus to continue my own academic journey.

Works Cited

Welles, J. (2025, September 11). *Charlie* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UCBkt5Nt1wo>