

Teaching Particulars: Literary Conversations in Grades 6--12

Helaine L. Smith

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After her forty years of teaching, Smith's keen understanding of the literary canon makes her the perfect candidate to write this humorous and insightful book.

"While there are differences in what students at each grade level respond to, there is virtually no difference in how one teaches great literature to sixes or to twelves," states Helaine L. Smith in the introduction of her new book, *Teaching Particulars: Literary Conversations in Grades 6-12*. "The only difference is the pace at which one goes." And Smith should know. For the past forty years, she has taught English to middle- and high-school students.

Smith explains how, by examining the grammar, tone, character, plot, and other aspects of a text, students gain a deeper understanding of the material, unlocking its meaning in the process. She also demonstrates through fictional dialogues how to focus classroom discussions about great literature around the particulars of the text. She tackles canonical works—stories whose sources range anywhere from the Bible to the *Odyssey*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Twelfth Night*. The book begins with discussions aimed at a sixth-grade audience and evolves chronologically.

Smith's writing is entertaining. The dialogue is rich with inside jokes about literature, and even some of the lessons are amusing. In chapter 9, she compares Ben Jonson's "On My first Sonne" to Mark Twain's "Ode to Stephen Dowling Bots, Dec'd," which she calls "comically lugubrious." The lesson in this case is to "think about tone, and compare a great poem to an awful one." In the dialogue, she asks one of her fictional students to read the poem aloud. "By the time she's finished [reading], we're all laughing," writes Smith.

The book is an excellent guide for educators. Smith does not view her approach as prescriptive: "There's no pleasure ... in examining material so as to arrive at a single, predetermined 'right' answer." The chapters offer examples of how discussions may be led, but the goal is ultimately to "learn what questions to pose and what directions to go in." That is why readers of all ages can also benefit from her book.

JACQUELYN LAZO (Summer 2015)

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