

## ***Rethinking America***

M. E. Sokolik (1999)

Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle

### **1: *An Intermediate Cultural Reader***

Pp. xiv + 224

ISBN 0-8384-4750-3 (paper); 0-8384-0811-7 (video)

US \$18.00; one copy of video per school free upon adoption of text

### **2: *A High Intermediate Cultural Reader***

Pp. xiv + 230

ISBN 0-8384-4741-4 (paper); 0-8384-0820-6 (video)

US \$18.00; one copy of video per school free upon adoption of text

### **3: *An Advanced Cultural Reader (2nd ed.)***

Pp. xiv + 236

ISBN 0-8384-4732-5 (paper); 0-9394-0829-X (video)

US \$18.00; one copy of video per school free upon adoption of text

### ***Instructor's Manual for Rethinking America, Books 1, 2 and 3***

ISBN 0-8384-0031-0 (paper)

US \$10.00

Using culture-based materials to teach ESL/EFL can reward a teacher with keen student interest, increased student appreciation of the target culture, and infinite stimulating discussion points, but it sets a teacher up for a number of difficulties and complications. *Rethinking America* is a set of three reading textbooks, with three accompanying videos and a comprehensive instructor's manual, that provide authentic culture-based readings and exercises to the ESL/EFL teacher who is willing to take on these complications. The series is put together well, provides a wealth of material, and gives a thorough and fascinating portrayal of modern America as it examines itself publicly, at its self-absorbed worst, and at its diverse and complex best.

The title *Rethinking America* presumably comes from one of the first readings in Book 3, entitled "Ellis Island": "America has the myth of the Golden Door, through which the 'huddled masses yearning to breathe free,' as Emma Lazarus put it, stepped and found freedom and prosperity at last. Paradoxically, that myth is being rethought and rewritten just as the museum at Ellis Island--started in a burst of patriotic nostalgia--is about to be dedicated" (p. 4). I suspected from this modern and slightly shrewd use of *rethink* (if it is, in fact, a verb), that the perspective of this book would be that of the modernist revisiting assumptions, visions, and elements of the "American Dream," and I was right. But hesitant as I was to be drawn into this modern tendency, I really enjoyed the book. As a reading teacher, I am constantly looking for authentic, appropriate readings that stimulate my students' imaginations and lead them to active discussions and appropriate writing topics. I am overjoyed when short excerpts of videos are available to supplement good readings (the videos in this series are provided by CNN). And I found that the wealth of material in the books and videos more than compensated for the pitfalls one faces when trying to teach using culture.

The first contradiction involved in presenting cultural materials to an ESL/EFL class is that our students are simultaneously attracted to, and repulsed by, elements of American culture. Many have insisted that they would like to learn the language without learning about, let alone adopting, the culture; this is probably still more common in EFL situations than ESL situations. A possible response to this is that culture is an intrinsic part of language, thus a better understanding of it will be useful, even if one doesn't buy into it lock, stock, and barrel, so to speak. Thus the careful teacher can maintain that we are teaching language while using culture, if only to provide interesting discussion points and common reference. Yet one inevitably runs up against mixed feelings. This book will certainly provoke many students' fascination with new technology ("Net Addiction," Book 1, p. 182), and pop culture ("Queen of Talk and More," Book 2, p. 201), for example, but also their horrors at the decadence of America ("Kicking Drugs," Book 3, p. 155, or "Sabotage in the Workplace," Book 1, p. 34). The three-volume set provides an incredibly thorough examination of diverse elements of American culture as it can be seen at this moment, from professional wrestling ("Friday Night at the Coliseum," Book 3, p. 176) to UFOs ("Roswell, New Mexico: Home of the Strange," Book 2, p. 145), so there is really no need to dwell on subjects that might bother students, or be hard for them to comprehend (the article on "Bilingual Education" in Book 3, p. 131, for example, or fascination with Elvis in "Still the King," Book 3, p. 211). Each book is divided into roughly the same ten content areas, so that, for example, one can use four readings and one video clip on the subject of popular culture in Book 1, and revisit the subject, doing four different readings and a different video clip, at a harder level, in Book 2, and yet again, at still a harder level, in Book 3. Other topics include the American dream, money, traditions, people, geography, language, beliefs, entertainment, and technology.

Another problem in using culture-based materials is that students often suspect that we have a hidden agenda, or at least feel that their own culture is being subtly but unmistakably compared, and judged, regardless of whether the author or teacher had any such agenda

or intention. Books that celebrate the diversity of American culture, for example, may make students from more monocultural countries feel that we are trumpeting our cause, though they may only be witnessing a self-absorbed culture coming to grips with itself. The problem is that unspoken comparison creates an unspoken defensiveness, which, left untreated, feeds the fires of homesickness and alienation, which in turn work against successful language learning. Materials that are positive about the U.S. can thus bring out a sullen or defensive silence; materials that are negative bring about confusion, as students hardly expect our free and uninhibited self-criticism either. [-1-]

The solution to the above dilemmas, and the strong point of this series, is the provision of materials that focus on the issues themselves, so that one can focus less on comparing countries, and more on evaluating general or universal trends and developments, many of which are common to all countries. Such entries as "Ben and Jerry's Caring Capitalism" (Book 3, p. 32), "Something Old, Something New" (Book 2, p. 43), "Kwanzaa History" (Book 2, p. 47), or "Bill's [Gates] \$50 Bil: By All Accounts, a Lot of Dough" (Book 2, p. 38) present cultural trends and events in ways that allow comparison but don't force it, and that make students familiar with interesting and important features of our culture, without making them defensive about theirs. A veteran teacher will do well with this series, as it moves quickly and covers a lot of ground, yet doesn't force inevitably uncomfortable comparisons.

New teachers, unfortunately, could fall into a number of traps, the first being the one mentioned above: that the line between presenting a culture and pushing a culture can be almost invisible, especially from the perspective of the student who may already feel the disorientation and insecurity of one whose world is shifting beneath one's feet. Novice teachers can sometimes be surprised at the complexity of using materials that, in the students' eyes, may uncover or expose a culture in ways that have never been experienced before. I sometimes feel that for students, shock at our addiction to self-absorption and self-analysis may be the greatest of culture shocks, since they at least had a chance to prepare for the parts of our culture so freely displayed on television sets around the world.

The series provides another challenge to the novice teacher, which is purely pedagogical: if one needs help working the students through the language, which, being authentic, is never simplified for their level, one doesn't really get that help. The books move quickly, and provide global questions, grammar points, vocabulary, and discussion points, among other things. One is presumably using the videos, working on listening and speaking in conjunction with the readings, and not slowing down for details, which students are presumably picking up in the course of reading interesting, meaningful things. For the more motivated students, this works well; for the weaker ones, more scaffolding would help. In this sense the series epitomizes the trend toward authentic, integrated skills, high interest material; your students will certainly not be bogged down in detail oriented, fine analysis of individual sentences (unless they insist on it).

One final difficulty with using "culture," besides the fact that it is a nebulous, controversial, and changing concept, which I will not go into here, is that it is close to our hearts, and analysis, when it touches a raw nerve, can become difficult, if not impossible. I, for example, find it hard to remind my students that we are all one step from homelessness ("Homeless" from *Rachel and her Children*," Book 2, p. 29) while teaching on an ESL salary; I've also had jobs where I'd be unable to teach "Road Rage" (Book 2, p. 211) without exploding. I can see Canadians cringing at references to "America" (for example, "Why is Superman So Darned American?" Book 3, p. 216), and in fact would hesitate using the book in many EFL environments, since from the outside, many U.S. obsessions can seem surreal (for example, "Barbie Stories," Book 2, p. 63), while the nuances of self-deprecation can be incomprehensible ("Fat Girls in Des Moines," Book 3, p. 106). [-2-]

Culture has always held the fascination of being our mirror turned on ourselves: if you want to know us, here we are. It's sensitive, it's self-absorbed, and it's up close, but it's not boring. Like television, perhaps you can always change the subject and hope nobody gets too offended. Do you like living dangerously? This excerpt from "America's Main Street" (Book 1, p. 87) sums up, to me, the way culture can be difficult to define, close to offensive with its stereotypes and attitudes, yet almost irresistible, even if it can't quite be explained to the outsider: "[Route 66 is] thousands of waitresses, service station attendants, fry cooks, truckers, grease monkeys, hustlers, state cops, wrecker drivers, and motel clerks. Route 66 is a soldier thumbing home for Christmas; an Okie family still looking for a better life. It's a station wagon filled with kids wanting to know how far it is to Disneyland; a wailing ambulance fleeing a wreck on some lonely curve. It's yesterday, today and tomorrow. Truly a road of phantoms and dreams, 66 is the romance of traveling the open highway" (Book 1, p. 88). I'm ready to give it a try.

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