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ON NOTICING WHAT YOU SEE AND HEAR

Recently, I went to an amusement park outside of San Antonio, down the road from where I live. Take a look at Figure 1.1, a photograph of a sign near the entrance to a particularly scary roller coaster.

It's the kind of thing you might glance at and not give a second thought to, but take a harder look. Consider the context: San Antonio, one of the ten largest cities in the United States, is also a city in which the majority of people are of Latino, Hispanic, or Spanish-speaking heritage. So why is the warning sign in Spanish smaller than the one in English? Perhaps of more interest is the question of what that difference does to people who see it. Think about what message size conveys all by itself.

As I write this, I am in Cape Town, South Africa, for a conference. The conference organizer left me this note when I arrived: "Welcome! I hope your travels were pleasant. As you get settled, give me a call on 082 731 xxxx. I am just around the corner, and perhaps we can meet up for a coffee on Tuesday or Wednesday."

It's a perfectly fine note, but it contains a couple of words that I would not have used had I written it. He asks me to call him "on" such and such a number. I would have asked someone to call me "at" a given number. And he wants to have "a coffee." I would have said "coffee." Not a big deal, but it's interesting to me. I don't know that much about this person. He teaches at a large Midwestern university in the United States, as have I most of my life, but I don't know if he's *from* the Midwest. So I'm wondering what the source of our minor language differences would be. As a frequent traveler to South Africa, has he adopted a South African, British, or European way of speaking? Or does his usage reflect some other pattern? What do my preferred wordings say about me? Not the most earthshaking questions, but their answers reveal some interesting things about where he and I are from and what our social allegiances are.

FIGURE 1.1



Author Photo

Most people wouldn't even notice this wording, and you might be wondering why I would do so. And you might not have paid much attention to the signs in front of the roller coaster in our first example. But I think that being in the habit of noticing what people say and write and being able to reflect on what these messages mean is a useful habit to pick up. It is a habit of *close reading*, and this is a book about how to train yourself to be a good close reader. In Chapter 1, I argue that *close reading is the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings*. The objects we will learn to read closely are called texts or messages. It's important to be able to read closely because it helps us to see things about messages, such as the difference in size of the warning signs, that *do* make a difference and do affect how people think.

These two examples—the roller coaster sign and my colleague’s note—show us two dimensions in which close reading is important. First, it is important *socially*. As citizens, as people active in public life, we need to know how the messages we encounter may influence the public in important ways. We all know that instances of racism and ethnic inequality occur from time to time, for example. Rarely will we find these and other problems openly and explicitly expressed or perpetuated. Instead, we are more likely to be socially influenced in small ways—such as through signs in an amusement park. A single sign in an amusement park that makes English bigger, for better or for worse, will not by itself create social and political attitudes. But a day’s or a month’s experiences of such signs might. As public citizens, we at least need to be vigilant as to the meanings and possible effects of the messages we encounter. Close reading can help us do that. We can thus claim that the ability to read closely is a public, civic responsibility for all of us.

Second, close reading is important *personally*. My ability to get along with my friend may well be improved if I can fully understand the ways his language use differs from mine. Paying attention to differences may alert me to other language variations I encounter, such as the British, in which one lives “*in* Hampton Street,” as opposed to the American usage, in which one lives “*on* Hampton Street.” We have all probably had other experiences in which the ability to read people and their messages was important. When we were young, we likely needed to pay close attention to our parents and read their tones of voice, words, and actions so that we could learn, grow, and stay out of trouble. Many of us have had difficult bosses or supervisors who needed to be closely read to make the workday go more smoothly. Learning how to read the messages of others more closely is therefore also a valuable personal skill.

Many of the readers of this book are college students. Students have particular need of skills in close reading. If you are a student, seldom in your life will you be in so diverse a group of people, and the ability to read others and their messages is important. Many of you will keep blogs or will post messages through such currently popular sites as Facebook or Twitter. The ability to read these very short messages of others may alert you to important dimensions of personality or social beliefs of people you are getting to know or to changes in how old friends think as they go through college. Is a recent blog posting sarcastic? Should you take it seriously? Is the poster angry? Or perhaps seductive? An ability to read closely may help you answer questions like these. And of course, the ability to read a syllabus or course assignment carefully and understand it can make a big difference in your success or failure in college.

Chapters 1 and 2 introduce you to the general subject of close reading. In this first chapter, the section titled “Being a Reader, Being a Critic” explains in more detail what I mean by close reading, and it introduces you to the idea that we read closely in our daily lives. This book will help you to read closely in more disciplined and systematic ways. Further, this chapter discusses what it means to be a critic. It also introduces the idea of rhetoric, or persuasion, and why a

better understanding of the rhetoric of what we read is an important goal of close reading.

Chapter 2 explains the concepts of theories, methods, and techniques. For many, these may sound like three difficult concepts, but actually, we use them in everyday life. I explain that a *theory* is like a map to a text and that you have likely already learned several theories about how texts work. If you have studied small group communication, for instance, you may have learned theories that help you navigate a group meeting, understanding what is going on as people communicate. A *method* is the vehicle you use to navigate a text, so to speak, following the theory's map. You might use methods of ethnography, for instance, to study a small group as it meets. And *techniques* are habits, tricks, or skills you acquire to study things—for instance, ways of recording conversations in small groups. These key terms are organized conceptually so that you can see how you can use the knowledge you have already gained in your education to support close readings. Additionally, these and other key terms and concepts are italicized in the text and summarized at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 2 also explains the ethical implications of close reading for both critic and audience. Critics and their audiences risk something when they read closely, and they ask others to take similar risks—hence, the ethical implications. The chapter discusses both inductive and deductive theories and shows how methods connect to theories. Finally, the chapter introduces the idea of techniques, which are the focus of the rest of the book.

Chapter 3 explores the idea of form. You will learn that *form* is the structure, the pattern, that organizes a text. Techniques for detecting and understanding form in texts are explained. The three main techniques you will study in Chapter 3 are narrative, genre, and persona. *Narrative* is, as you will learn, the story-like form of a text. Three elements of narrative are found in texts: *coherence and sequence*, *tension and resolution*, and *alignment and opposition*. A *genre* is a recurring type of text within a context. You will learn that a genre has recurring *situational* and *stylistic* responses to recurring kinds of *contexts*. One can also think of a genre as a recurring type of narrative. Our final technique is the detection of personae, and you will learn that a *persona* is a role, much like a character in a narrative, that someone (such as a reader or critic) plays in connection to a text.

Chapter 4 explains techniques of exploring ideology by analyzing the arguments in texts. *Ideology* is a systematic network of beliefs, commitments, values, and assumptions that influence how power is maintained, struggled over, and resisted. Ideologies are supported by and also revealed through argument. *Argument* is a process by which speakers and writers, together with audiences, make claims about what people should do and assemble reasons why people should do those things. You will learn that some good techniques for detecting the arguments that establish ideologies are found in these questions to ask of a text: What should the reader think or do? What must the text ask the reader to assume? How does the reader know what the text claims? Who is empowered or disempowered? With these techniques, we may think more critically and productively

about the good reasons texts give us for believing what they want us to believe. The chapter talks about how a close reading might reveal how ideologies of gender, race, sexual orientation, and so forth are being presented or countered in texts.

Chapter 5 uses the idea of transformations to organize some techniques for looking beneath the surface of texts, for seeing what might not be apparent at first glance. We will see that *transformations* are ways in which the ordinary, literal meanings of signs and images are turned—reversed, changed, altered—by readers of texts. Some transformations you will study are called *tropes*, and we will examine techniques for identifying the important, common tropes called *metaphor*, *metonymy*, *synecdoche*, and *irony*.

Chapter 6 is a single close reading, which illustrates how techniques from across the chapters might be used. The text read will be a cartoon from the strip *Candorville* that appeared shortly before President Obama's inauguration.

Finally, a conclusion reviews these techniques to sum up how they might be used and what we have learned.

Close reading in a disciplined way is a skill that will serve you well for the rest of your life. By no means is it merely an academic exercise. In a world in which messages increasingly ask us to believe, accept, buy, and follow, the ability to read texts closely is an indispensable survival skill. Close reading is both personally and socially empowering. Join me now in learning some techniques of close reading.

BEING A READER, BEING A CRITIC

It won't come as any surprise to you when I point out that you are reading: You are reading this book. Reading is something you do every day, but let's think for a minute about what that involves. You are looking at this book, an object, that is full of black marks on white paper. Not just any black marks; these marks have *meaning*. You know what these black marks mean in the English language, and you know how to put together into a coherent message the meanings that these marks suggest. We can think of *meaning* as the thoughts, feelings, and associations that are suggested by words, images, objects, actions, and messages. Consider this series of ink marks on paper:

DOG

When you read it, certain thoughts, feelings, and associations come into your head, which are what the markings (the letters) mean. That is how all reading works. If you couldn't find meaning in reading (and sometimes we cannot!), you'd quit doing it.

It's a remarkable thing about reading that a hundred people who read the same thing will likely find both the same meanings *and* different meanings. This is true even in ordinary conversation. The last time you said, "I didn't mean that," you were complaining that somebody read a meaning in something you said that you

would not find there yourself and that you certainly didn't intend anyone to find. But despite the recurrence of misunderstandings and misreadings, we continue to read books, movies, TV shows, and each other with confidence that we will find enough of the same meanings others would find that we can all make sense of the world together.

Although you know there is a lot of disagreement and "slippage" regarding what messages mean, you are fairly confident that you are finding many of the same meanings in this passage that I, your author, hope you will find there. You are also fairly confident that you are finding many of the same meanings most other people would get from this reading. If somebody else reading this book told you, "You know, the first paragraph is a coded message from that Brummett fellow that the world will end in 2030," you would be justified in doubting such a reading. Although it's not foolproof, we read just exactly to discover meanings that we think most other people would also find if they read the same way we did.

There is a whole field of study called *semiotics*, or semiology, that concerns itself with meaning and how meaning is read. We don't have time to explore it fully here, but some classic texts, referenced at the end of this book, are by Charles Sanders Peirce, S. I. Hayakawa, and Ferdinand de Saussure. Semiotics studies different kinds and levels of meaning; it is sensitive to the differences in meaning that arise out of personal experience and between personal experience and generally agreed-upon understanding. I encourage you to explore this further if it interests you.

One recurring concern in semiotics is the management of ambiguity in language. Some thinkers believe that language works best when all ambiguity is removed as much as possible (although most recognize that is not possible). Other thinkers believe that ambiguity is of the essence of language and that total precision of meaning is not possible. A close reading may fall on either side of the controversy, although when there is ambiguity in language, close readings can work to reveal the ambiguities and to show slippage in the meanings of a text.

When we read, we do lots of complicated things at once:

- We examine an object (like a book) to figure out some of the things it means.
- We usually (although not always) try to figure out which meanings the person who created that object wanted us to find.
- We usually are interested in finding meanings that other readers who share some of our experiences and contexts would also find.

A *reading*, then, is an attempt to understand the socially shared meanings that are supported by words, images, objects, actions, and messages. Somebody might well think that my first paragraph means that the end of the world is impending, but that is likely not a *socially shared* meaning, since hardly anyone else will find that meaning in the paragraph. A reading is an attempt to find *reasonable* or

plausible meanings in a message or object, and readings are done in such a way as to be *defensible* after the fact. By *defensible*, I mean that someone can produce evidence to support your reading from the message or from widespread usage. You might defend a reading by saying, for instance, “I read the message this way because of the way these two sentences are phrased,” or, “In the southern United States, most people see that image this way.” There is a connection between the fact that we search for socially shared meanings and the fact that we search for meanings that are also plausible and defensible: In everyday reading, we want to read so that most people who encounter the same message could see the same meanings if they, too, were to read the same things. If you get a party invitation that says “semiformal,” and you show up in suit and tie while your host greets you at the door in a swimsuit, you will surely defend your reading (that is, give evidence for your understanding) of the invitation as correct, as what most people would find in such a message, and as the meaning most people would intend by “semiformal.”

A reader is a *meaning detective*, and while detectives may often make guesses about the mysteries they try to solve, those are usually *educated* guesses that can be backed up with evidence; the same is true for the meaning detective of a message. The meanings we detect are the plausible, defensible, socially shared meanings that are supported by a message. Like detectives, though, we can make educated guesses about meaning, and to do so, you must be educated! That is the purpose of this book: to give you some ways to read plausible, socially shared meanings and share them with others in ways you may not now be able to.

It may come as a bit of a surprise when I suggest that you read many other kinds of experiences, some of them clearly messages and some of them not, in ways similar to the way you are reading this book. You see a garden bed all trampled down and read that as meaning that the neighbor’s dog has been rolling in it again. You enter your apartment to find pizza boxes here and there and clothes in need of laundering on the floor, and you read that to mean that your roommate has come back early from a visit home. When you go to the movies, think of the screen as an enormous book with each new scene a different page. You see images, you hear dialogue and sounds, and you read them as you would a book. You see a character in a movie pull out a pistol, and you know to read the pistol as meaning the threat of violence. Two characters kiss tenderly, and you read those images as meaning love or affection. As with a book, you are fairly confident that the makers of the film meant you to find these meanings, and you are confident that the people you are with are drawing generally the same meanings from their readings of the movie. If one of your friends shrieked aloud at the sight of a tender kiss and whispered, “Oh! I’m so afraid!” you might wonder at her reading and think that she had found some meanings in the movie unlikely to be shared by other viewers.

In a similar way, you read your boss and coworkers, you read your family members and the gatherings at which you meet them, and you read the music you listen to. You read using techniques of deciphering meaning that are generally,

although sometimes not universally, shared among a community of readers: the public, other people who more or less share your experiences, people who have been exposed to the same messages that you have. It would not be too much to claim that any society, any culture, depends on its members sharing roughly similar ways of reading a wide range of experiences. Nor would it be too much to claim that an ability to read is essential to your own happiness and your ability to function socially. Think of what it would be like if you did not know how to decipher the meanings of your friends' gestures and expressions or if you could not share in an understanding of what that new hit comedy on HBO last night meant to your coworkers. It would be as if you lived in a country where you spoke none of the language and understood none of the gestures people used. Think how isolated you would be without the ability to read in this broad sense of the term.

Although nearly everybody reads messages and experiences in one way or another, you know from your own experience that there are times when you have to slow down and pay special attention to what you are reading. Did you ever read a book in which there were so many characters in different relationships and with so many different personalities that you had to slow your reading down or read certain passages over again carefully to make sure you understood who was connected to whom and in what way? Many people experience this kind of complexity in the *Harry Potter* series of novels by J. K. Rowling, and they find that slow, careful reading and rereading of the books reveals new understandings. Did you ever see a movie more than once because you felt that there were meanings and dimensions of the film that needed to be understood better—and perhaps you found that paying close attention to a movie the second or third time through helped you to read things you hadn't read before, to see meanings you hadn't seen before? The *Lord of the Rings* and the *Matrix* series of movies affect many people this way, as do the *Stranger Things* or the different *Twin Peaks* television series, and they find that seeing the films or shows over and over again allows them to find new meanings each time.

This second, more careful kind of reading we call a *close reading*. There is no sudden, distinct threshold one crosses to go from a reading to a close reading. The more care and deliberation one takes, the more one studies the words, images, actions, objects, and other components of what one is reading, the more one is closely reading. The move from reading to close reading is a continuum. *Close reading* is mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings; often, that understanding is shared with others in the form of a *criticism* or *critical analysis*. This book is about the techniques we use when we engage in and share close readings of texts. We are proceeding on the assumption that it is possible to learn techniques of close reading that help you get more out of a message and share what you learn with others in a critical analysis.

What do we want to call the “thing” that you are reading when you read? Of course, we could call it what it is—a movie, a textbook, a country-western tune, and so forth. Let's agree on one overall term for all these things: You are reading a *text*. A *text* is the object that generates the meanings you want to know more

about and perhaps tell others about. Knowing how to read carefully and then systematically tell others about a text is what makes a *critic* out of a *reader*. We will explore the concept of being a critic a little later.

There are complications we need to consider when we read a text, however. Two important ones are context and audience. The *context* is what is going on in the surroundings when we read. I mean surroundings in at least two senses here: the *historical* context and the *textual* context. People who read texts are influenced by what is going on historically—not necessarily in the sense of a grand sweep of hundreds of years but in the sense of what is going on socially and politically in the day's events. A text that is a movie about a terrorist attack will be read differently the morning after an actual terrorist attack than it will the morning before it. For example, since 9/11, news reports of downed airplanes almost always say whether a terrorist attack is suspected. A haunted house story will be read differently on a bright sunny day than on a stormy night. These are examples of how *historical* contexts affect readings. *Textual* contexts also affect readings. If we are reading a book that has been ironic, playful, and funny all along, we are much more likely to read further passages of the book as ironic, even if they appear to be in deadly earnest. If a vampire appears in a comic movie, we might laugh at it; if a vampire appears in a movie that has been full of werewolves and ghosts, we may cover our eyes in fright. Texts often set up their own contexts that guide readings.

I noted earlier that readers attempt to arrive at plausible, socially shared readings. But it is important to realize that not everyone reads texts in the same way. The reader may need to qualify his or her reading by describing the audience perspective from which a particular interpretation of the text may be derived. A news story about an earthquake in China may be read differently by people of Chinese heritage than by other people. A story about the world's richest human will be read differently according to readers' economic class. Although texts often contain widely shared meanings, honesty and accuracy require the reader to be clear about the audience perspective from which a reading takes place. In other words, the close reader should not assume that his or her reading of a text is necessarily what the text means to others.

Now, let's get a little practice in close reading—or, more accurately, let's remind ourselves of what we do when we read closely. Please take a look at the *Baldo* cartoon in Figure 1.2. Think about what happens as you read this text, understand it, and snatch a bit of truth and humor from it. You have to examine all of the words and images that make up this text, and for such a small block of space in the daily newspaper, there is actually quite a bit of information that you must process. What is key to making the cartoon work as an insightful and humorous text? Of course, it is the contrast between Baldo's upbeat, inclusive words and the picture of what is in fact a segregated high school cafeteria, with Hispanics, African Americans, and European Americans at separate tables.

Now, think for a moment of some ways to read this cartoon that would miss the “punch line.” You could look at it and simply say, “Oh, Baldo is mistaken; the text is showing us how foolish some teenagers can be.” Or you could say, “Clearly,

FIGURE 1.2

BALDO/ by Cantú and Castellanos



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the artist in the cartoon wasn't paying attention to the words; this is just a mistake on the part of the makers of the cartoon." But these interpretations are not likely to be offered by most people. More to the point, these are implausible and not very defensible.

Most people who have spent a significant amount of time in this country will realize the poignant truth in the cartoon; that although we celebrate diversity in our talk, our personal lives and actual practices often are not so diverse. Awareness of the contradictions that occur in life in a diverse culture is the bundle of meanings we will likely pull out of this reading. We say we appreciate other cultures but then flock together with birds of our own feather when it comes time for lunch, worship, or marriage. I'm guessing that nearly all of us know this to be true with such clarity that we are confident that the cartoonists meant us to recognize that sad discrepancy between what is said and what is done in the cartoon and to recognize that it applies to our lives. I'm guessing that nearly all of us know that others have seen the same cafeterias (or playgrounds or churches) come into conflict with the same hopeful talk. So we are not only confident that the creators of this text intended us to find meanings exposing the contradictions between talk and practice, we are also confident that others in the United States will see the same contradiction and recognize it as a widespread fact of life.

We should also take into consideration the historical and textual contexts within which the cartoon might be read. The course of race relations changes over time, and the presence or absence of some startling news event having to do with race may affect how we read the cartoon. This cartoon appeared before the election of President Obama, for example. How might it be read differently now, after his presidency, than when it was first printed? The cartoon occurs within the

textual context of the comic strips of a newspaper, which would encourage the reader to approach this text lightheartedly. And, of course, the reader needs to be careful about the audience perspective from which the text is read: How might readers who are members of the different groups portrayed here read the cartoon differently?

But could we go deeper? What would a closer reading look like? We may already be closer in our reading practices than most average viewers of the strip in the morning paper, but let us think about what a close reading entails. Such a reading depends on recognition of some rather detailed and complicated components of the text. For instance, we recognize the different styles that Baldo calls our attention to in the artist's depiction of the three cultural groups. The European American, Hispanic, and African American groups have distinct clothing styles and different postures; if you look closely enough, they even have different facial expressions or gestures by group. Now, are these stereotypes about these ethnic groups, or are they truthful generalizations, perhaps the very reason for the discrepancy between Baldo's words of inclusion and the scene of segregation? Our answer to that question has a lot to do with who the text asks us to be. Are we the kind of people who would sit in separate groups, as do the young people of the cartoon? Or are we called on by the text to be wiser than that and to recognize the need to overcome social habits if we want to live up to Baldo's words? What is there in the text that gives you some clues as to who the text is inviting us to be?

Likewise, is there anything in the text that invites us to stand beside Baldo in his sentiments, or are we meant to take a stance superior to his? Are we called to see ourselves in his words or to take a smug position and recognize how mistaken he is? Who, then, is the text calling us to be in terms of his words as well as the picture?

All that insight from a quick look at a cartoon! That's what we do when we read. And when we read closely, we probe even deeper into texts to extract meanings. We could not yet call our reading of this cartoon a disciplined one, and you may recall from our earlier definition that a close reading is a *mindful, disciplined reading of an object or text*. We will turn, in the next chapter, to the kinds of tools that can discipline our minds and guide us systematically through close readings. First, let's look at another step we might take in the process of reading: critiquing.

From Reading to Critiquing

Some people keep moving along that continuum of reading into close reading regularly, perhaps habitually. These people are often on the alert for extra dimensions of meaning. They seem to have a knack—or maybe they use rules of thumb or guidelines—for finding meanings that may not be apparent on a first reading but become clearer after a close reading. Such people become interesting to others and of service to others when they share these insights. Let's call these dedicated close readers by the name *critic*. A critic is not critical in the sense of being negative but rather in the sense of critiquing meanings based on a close reading.

Critics come in two forms: professional and everyday. We are used to professional critics, or dedicated close readers. These are the people who offer close readings for us of movies, books, sports, and so forth on blogs, on television, and in newspapers.

Professional critics are all around us, and if you think about it for a moment, you'll realize that you may be more familiar with critics than you think. Do you ever read the opinion page of the local newspaper? Then you will read critiques sent in by local critics in the "Letters to the Editor" column, as well as critiques written by members of the paper's editorial staff. Do you read comments and predictions made by local columnists in the sports sections of local newspapers, in print or online? They are professional critics. Nationally syndicated columnists often offer critiques as well. For instance, Leonard Pitts is a widely read columnist based in Miami. Take a look at some of his recent columns at <http://www.leonardpittsjr.com>. Not all of these pieces are critiques of a text, but some are. Notice how many of them are based on sharing the results of a close reading of a reader's e-mail, the president's tweets, or the commentary of a television pundit. Another place we find critics is on the radio. National Public Radio often airs blogs and critiques by a number of commentators, which you may find at <http://www.npr.org/about-npr/198341814/npr-blog-directory>. Note how often these critiques are based on a close reading of the texts of a recent game or a statement or performance by a sports figure. The Internet Movie Database, at <http://www.imdb.com>, often includes critiques that go beyond mere reviews, offering brief close readings of current movies in theaters and on DVDs.

You can be an everyday critic, however. An everyday critic is not a job you apply for. You have likely been a critic yourself, based on a close reading. Perhaps you know how to read baseball games closely, and when sitting in the stands, you called a friend's attention to a strategy that was developing on the field. Maybe you follow a soap opera closely, and while watching one with your sister, you offer her your take on why that character is being such a jerk. Just as we can all learn to read closely in our everyday lives, so we can all become critics who read closely regularly and share our insights with others.

Everyone reads, and everyone has the potential to critique. When we critique, we figure out a way to share our reading with others. We become *critics*. We offer other people special insights or knowledge into some object or experience. All of us read movies, music, television shows, Internet sites, and books. Not everyone critiques professionally; not everyone is a paid critic. A critic is someone equipped with special ways of sharing readings with others, but the critique also involves a commitment to teach others how to read. A critic is the friend who sits next to you in a movie theater and points out things about the movie that you may not have noticed, links actions and characters together in ways you had not considered, and—unless he or she makes a pest of herself in doing so—adds to your understanding and enjoyment of that movie. A critic is not necessarily negative and is not focused on finding fault. A critic has seen something new and wants others to see it as well. A *critic* may be defined as a person who is trained in close

reading and in sharing those readings with others. If a reader is a meaning detective, then a critic is a Sherlock Holmes, a Hercule Poirot, or an Adrian Monk of close reading. And that can be you in your everyday life!

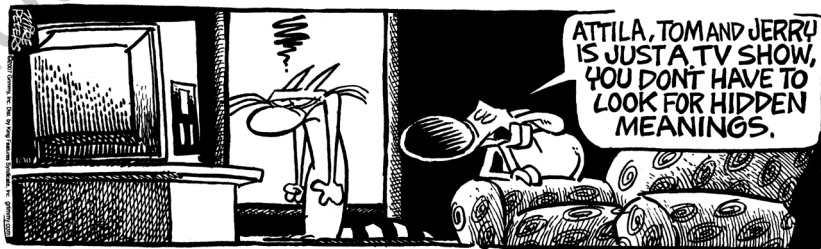
What does a critic do, exactly? If you know a friend is going to a movie, you might ask which theater he is going to. “Westgate,” he will reply. Your friend is not yet functioning as a critic. He has given you some information you had before, but it is information in a form already understood by all and easily discoverable in that form by going online or looking in the newspaper. Similarly, if your friend says, “The first show is at 7,” that is not a critique but rather a factual—and useful—statement. Neither statement required close readings of anything.

Your friend becomes a critic when he comes back from the movie, and you ask him how it was. Let’s suppose he replies, “You know it was one of those *Star Tussle* movies set in outer space, but it occurred to me that it was really a Western in disguise. The spaceship was like a covered wagon going through dangerous territory toward a distant, promised land. They had to repel all sorts of threats from other beings and from natural forces. They all carried weapons, which were used a lot. Yup, just like a Western.” Now, your friend has become a critic. Why? Your friend is sharing with you *a way to see a text* that you did not have before. Your friend knows *a way to read texts* that enables him to give you *knowledge* about the text that you did not have before.

The *Mother Goose and Grimm* cartoon in Figure 1.3 is an example of a widespread attitude toward messages, especially such entertaining texts as *Tom and Jerry* cartoons. The idea that there are “no hidden messages” in a text just because it is a cartoon or a television show or even a commercial is mistaken, if common. In fact, we might closely read this very cartoon for such meanings. Note the old-fashioned television set, a big boxy type that is no longer made. Note the large pattern on the overstuffed chair, which looks dated and homey. Note that the chair is pulled right up to the television set. We see no other furniture, no sofa on which a number of people might sit. The cartoon conveys meanings of a single, perhaps even lonely, older person who is not concerned about having up-to-date

FIGURE 1.3

MOTHER GOOSE & GRIMM



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technology or stylish furniture in the home. One might wonder if that is the kind of audience the cartoon wants to attract: an older, more conservative demographic. So there we are: Although the cartoon characters may find no hidden meanings in *Tom and Jerry*, there may be hidden meanings in their own little world! It is legitimate for critical close readers to search for such meanings anywhere.

A little earlier we defined a critic as one who is trained in close reading and in sharing those readings with others. What is the critic trained to do, or how is a critic trained in seeing a text differently from others? This way to see a text, this “thing” that can generate knowledge, we will call a *technique of criticism*. Anyone can learn these techniques, as you will in this book. We begin talking about techniques and how to use them in close reading in a later chapter. It is methods and related concepts that give us the discipline that moves us from reading to close reading.

Communication of insights about the meaning of a text is therefore an important dimension of being a critic. Why do we share these insights? Critics want to share their insights about the meanings of texts because they have understood that they live more richly, with more awareness, when they arrive at these insights, and they want others to have the same advantages. Critics therefore serve an important public function—whether the public is the nation or just a group of friends watching a makeover show—of opening people’s eyes to hidden depths and dimensions of meaning. You can serve that function yourself in everyday life.

Let’s get some quick practice in being a critic; later in this book we will learn in more detail the discipline of methods and techniques that can make us critics. But for the moment, try this exercise: Think about a text you have experienced (cable show, movie, song, or Internet site) that was a fairy tale in disguise. Of course, you’ll have to think about what makes something a fairy tale, even if it is in disguise—that is, even if it’s not really about witches and elves and fairies and dark forests and so forth, it’s still a fairy tale. No fair saying that you watched a Netflix of *Little Red Riding Hood* on that last visit to your little cousins—we already know that’s a fairy tale; you don’t need to do a close reading to realize that. Let me give you a hint. How do some of the *Star Wars* movies (especially the first one) begin? Why, with these words: “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.” Now, what does that sound like? Does the parallel to fairy tales continue throughout that and other movies? No fair using this example; you got it for free, so find another one: What’s some other text you have seen recently that is a fairy tale in disguise, and why is it one?

Now, let’s think about what good it does to say that such and such a text is a fairy tale in disguise. When you have shared that insight with others, even when you have arrived at the insight yourself, what have you and others learned? How are your lives enriched? Think about these things:

- New meanings you can see in the text that you couldn’t see before, enabled by that statement. If you start to develop the idea of what it means to be a fairy tale, do even more new meanings begin to surface out of the text?

- The possible fruitfulness of asking the fairy tale question about other texts.
- The possible fruitfulness of asking similar questions about other texts. (What texts are commentaries on interracial relationships in disguise? What texts are like boxing matches in disguise?)
- The possibility of new ways to think or act, even small ones, that you or your friends might gain from the insights you have had. What difference in your lives might those insights create?

The more enthusiastically and thoroughly you have acted like a critic, the more you will see how your thinking about these issues reveals insights and has the potential to make a difference. That such benefits might befall other people, too, is the reason why people would want to engage in critique and communicate their insights to others.

The question might reasonably arise, Why do we need close readers and critics to discover socially shared meanings? In other words, if the meanings are socially shared, won't people already know about them? What, really, does a critical close reader do that the average person on the street does not do? I argue that the close-reading critic reveals *meanings that are shared but not universally* and also *meanings that are known but not articulated*. The benefit of revealing such meanings is to *teach* or *enlighten* those who hear or read the critique.

First, just because social meanings are shared does not mean they are universally shared. A critical close reader is able to expand people's knowledge of socially shared meanings by calling their attention to meanings that not everyone shares. A former student and friend of mine who is gay once told me that the *X-Men* series of movies is actually about the theme of "coming out," or revealing one's sexuality to a sometimes hostile world. This friend told me he thought that most gay and lesbian people would find such meanings there. He explained that many of the themes of the films have to do with choices to reveal or not to reveal one's difference and with how to handle the consequences of others' knowing that you have "special powers." I had no idea! Since he called my attention to those meanings, seeing the *X-Men* films again has confirmed his close reading for me. I now see meanings that I would not have seen before. The more this student shares his critical close readings with others, the more widely the net expands of people who will know to find those meanings in those films.

A critical close reader is also able to call to people's attentions meanings that they know but have not articulated. Sometimes, we "know" those meanings at a level that is nearly subconscious, but the critical close reader can help us recover what we, at some level, already know. All of us have had the experience of having a vague hunch about a text, a public figure or event, a feeling that something is going on beyond what meets the eye, but we haven't quite been able to put it into words. Think of the movie you want to watch again and again but could not explain why. Think of the political leader you mistrust but cannot say why. Think

of the television evangelist you trust but cannot say why. Critical close readers are good at helping people clarify the socially shared meanings generated by these texts.

Both of these ways in which the close-reading critic reveals socially shared meanings to us are *epistemological*: They are ways of arriving at knowledge. The epistemology (or logic of knowing) that critical close reading depends on is based on *teaching* and *plausibility*. The critical close reader is a teacher of those who read or hear the critique. The critic's job is to uncover these meanings in such a way that people have an "aha!" moment in which they suddenly agree to the reading—the meanings the critic suggests suddenly come into focus. The meanings seem plausible to the hearer or reader. The standard of success for the close reader who is also a critic is therefore the *enlightenment*, *insights*, and *agreement* of those who hear or read what he or she has to say.

The Calling to Be a Critic

Some people have what you might say is a kind of *calling* or *vocation* to be a critic. People refer to a calling or a vocation in describing the feeling of commitment held by those who enter religious orders, who devote their lives to spiritual work and service. But those terms have application beyond religious contexts. You might say that someone really has a calling to be a baker. Or someone might tell you that he or she works in a grocery store but that his or her vocation is to be a poet. An important dimension of a calling is that it never leaves you; if you have a calling to be an architect, then you are nearly always thinking about structures, shapes, and designs. You move through the world studying buildings, if your vocation is to be an architect. If your job is to be a small-engine mechanic, you might stop being a mechanic at 5:00 p.m. and become something else. But if your calling or vocation is to be a small-engine mechanic, you go home to study journals and magazines on engine repair, you go online to find blogs or websites of other mechanics, and you take an interest in your neighbor's balky lawnmower.

Being a critic can be a kind of calling. Most committed critics are not professional; they are just committed to close reading, to paying attention. The really good critics are always on the lookout for messages and experiences that repay a close reading. Not all experiences do, of course; you get tired pretty quickly of giving careful attention to the back of a soup can. But many of life's everyday messages and experiences do repay a close reading. A true critic in this sense is often "on," always thinking about ways in which the extra attention of close reading might reveal meanings and dimensions of books, movies, television shows, and so forth.

The critic is often "on" because of a conviction that the meanings of messages and experiences are important. The critic assumes that this music video, this movie, or this wedding ceremony is influencing or affecting people and that the meanings one can find in those experiences are key to that influence. The critic wants to know about these often complex dimensions of meanings because

understanding them is a way to understand how our attitudes, actions, perceptions, and predispositions are formed. The critic is on a mission to inform self and others about what messages and experiences are “doing” to us so as to shape how we think and act.

An important part of a critic’s calling is the openness to consider a wide range of texts and the commitment to devote the attention and energy of close reading to texts that will repay the effort. We should be open to the possibility that the label on a soup can, to use an earlier example, might repay a close reading—that we might find some interesting meanings and important possible influences on that soup can. But if an attempt at close reading fails to show such wonders on the soup can label, the critic will also give it up, reserving the effort for texts that are rich enough or deep enough to repay a critic’s attention.

The concern with how people are influenced is sometimes summed up under the term *rhetoric*. *Rhetoric* is an ancient term denoting the study of ways in which people are persuaded or influenced. Throughout history, people have been influenced in different ways, from public speaking to advertisements to political debates, and the study of rhetoric has included all of these communicative experiences. One can be a critic and want to know about many different dimensions of messages and experiences: aesthetic dimensions, psychological dimensions, and so forth. But if you want to know more about what messages and experiences mean because you are interested in how people’s thoughts and actions are influenced, how people are persuaded, then you are a *rhetorical critic*. The calling of the rhetorical critic, then, becomes a mission to say to self and others, “Look! This movie, this song on this disc, supports these meanings that you may not have thought of before. . . .”

For instance, I just took a break from writing after that last paragraph and walked through my living room, where my daughter had the television on. A commercial for bottled water was proclaiming, “The best things in life are pure.” Hmm. . . . now, the casual reader of that advertisement might shrug and say, “Yes, I guess so, whatever.” Which, of course, is what the sellers of the water want people to do. I stopped and spent some time reading that simple phrase in my head closely. I think there are some meanings in there that we need to be aware of and think about, and they cause me to wonder, What does *pure* mean? Does it mean “composed of all one thing”? If something different enters into the nature of a thing, does that make it impure? What does this mean in regard to people of more than one racial background? Does it make them “impure”? What does this mean in regard to complicated questions, such as whether or in what way to go to war? If someone thinks the matter is not simple but has many contradictory issues wrapped up together, is that “impure” thinking? Suppose we have a population that is trained by television commercials like that one to think that *pure* equals *simple* and thus that *simple* equals *good*. Would that population think of the world in black-and-white terms, with no shades of gray? And so on and so forth. As a critic, I often think about what experiences and messages mean because I think that their meanings affect people in powerful ways. And if I get the chance, I’ll

share these insights with others because I want them to see the texts in their lives more richly. In fact, I just did that with you!

Here's another example: I was online and found a link to a movie review. The title suggested that the reviewer "tries to find deeper meaning in the *Atomic Blonde* movie." That reviewer must be a critic: someone interested in telling the public about movies and what they mean. Of course, the public itself is fully capable of going to movies and reading them, but someone who is offering up "deeper meanings" is going to do a closer reading of a movie than is the guy sitting there with his feet up enjoying the popcorn. The reviewer is a professional critic and gets paid for close readings. Most critics do not get paid money for close readings. As a calling, it becomes woven into one's way of life to probe into messages and share those deeper meanings with others. That is the kind of habit this book wants to encourage you to take up: to be always ready for a close reading, to become a critic. If one is not paid a salary for doing it, then one is paid in enlightenment, in the ability to see deeper levels of meaning and to share those insights with others.

To be a rhetorical critic gives us another level of understanding of the concept of meaning. Earlier we defined *meaning* as the thoughts, feelings, and associations that are suggested by words, images, objects, actions, and messages. If your interests are rhetorical, then you also think of meaning as what words, images, objects, actions, and messages do to people's thoughts, motives, attitudes, and predispositions. If I refer to a certain political candidate as a dog, then the meanings of *dog* that I am attaching to that candidate will be what my statement does to you. To think rhetorically is to think of meaning as powerful, as affecting people. Of course, that is another important reason to be a critic for yourself and others: so you can help people understand what texts are doing to them.

Social Justice

People who feel a calling to be a critic, who feel a vocation to do so, are usually concerned with *social justice*. By that I mean that such critics often have a sense that our society is unjust, unfair, inequitable, and not a level playing field. Most critics concerned with social justice will focus on one or a few issues of injustice that particularly trouble them. Nobody can take on every issue of this sort. Issues of social justice that concern critics have to do with age, race, sexual identity, gender, economic status, language differences, national origin differences, and so forth. Critics focus on one or a few of these categories to show how injustice is communicated by texts.

Behind that commitment to show injustice in texts is an understanding that power differences in any society are ultimately text based. Sometimes power inequities are enforced by violence or the threat of violence, either from the state, the police, or other groups in society. But the actual use of violence is expensive and embarrassing, for it exposes inequities that benefit certain groups who wield that power. Social injustice is more often perpetuated through everyday texts that

constantly reinforce certain ways of seeing the world. Critics work to uncover those texts and to suggest different ways of speaking and writing that would contribute to a just society.

That means that people are often “recruited” by texts to agree to their own disempowerment. If texts create a sense in certain people that injustice is natural, is just the way things are, then injustice can especially be perpetuated textually instead of through violence. This condition of empowered people enjoying the cooperation of the disempowered has been called *hegemony* by some classic Marxist theorists such as Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci. Critics work to expose hegemony and then oppose it.

I want to stress that social justice may be seen from many different political perspectives. Your idea of social justice may differ from mine. Your idea of oppression and how it works may differ. That’s alright so long as people called to be critics work to expose the textual means by which such oppression occurs.

From Critiquing to Communicating

I have said several times that communicating the results of a close reading to other people is what turns a reader into a critic. In this section, I invite you to think creatively, with a sense of possibilities, about ways that you can function as a critic and thus communicate your insights to others. You may have a sense that there are, indeed, critics in this world but only an elite few who write for magazines and newspapers or appear on television—such people as professional movie or restaurant reviewers, political or opinion columnists, and the like. You may have a sense that there are few outlets for your own critical voice to be heard. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even before we begin to learn specific techniques of close reading, you need to understand that your voice can be heard in a variety of ways. Let’s organize our survey of “ways to be heard” according to the media in which you might express yourself: *You can be a critic on the Internet, in print, and in person.*

Critiquing on the Internet. Going online is a wonderful way to share your critiques with others. Potentially thousands, if not millions, of people might be informed by your insights on a global scale. There are at least three ways you can use this powerful medium to share your critiques with the world.

First, you can create your own website. This is not necessarily free, especially if you want a high-quality site, and it may require a certain amount of technical skill. So creating a website might be a less attractive option for some. But it is still a definite possibility for many people. On a website, you can put commentaries and illustrate them with visual images, links to other websites that might allow downloads of television or movie material, and so forth. This lets you couple your critique with samples of the text that you might be critiquing, which may have more impact on your audience than a critique alone.

How to set up a website is well beyond the scope of this book, but there are a number of resources online for finding out how to do it. You can go to a search engine such as www.google.com and simply type in “create a website,” and all sorts of currently available services will pop up for you to explore. Typing in that request at this writing generated many such services, of which these are but a few:

<https://digitalexits.com/make-a-web-site>

<http://www.2createawebsite.com>

<http://www.ipage.com>

http://www.homestead.com/?s_cid=G130023B

Sites such as Facebook allow fairly easy creation of a presence online. Go check it out!

Second, you can start a blog, short for Web log, which is actually a very specific kind of website on which people can record their daily thoughts and reactions, post photos, and so forth. Many people treat their blogs as a sort of online diary. Blogs are widely read and have been invaluable sources of information for many people, as bloggers around the world keep the public informed about political and social developments and even natural disasters and upheavals. If there is a revolution, hurricane, or tsunami in some part of the world, people often seek out bloggers to find out what is going on from the perspective of the “person on the street.” For this reason, critics who share their views on blogs can find a ready audience. Once again, typing in “create a blog” on a search engine such as Google will yield a number of current services. At this writing, such a search found these sites, among many others:

<http://www.createblog.com>

<http://www.blogger.com/start>

<http://www.sixapart.com/typepad/start>

Third, you can join a Usenet group, bulletin board, or discussion room and participate in ongoing discussions in which you can share your critiques. This is an especially useful tool for sharing quick, short insights. (Long posts don’t work as well in this format.) There are literally thousands of groups and websites that allow people to exchange messages on any subject, from politics to poodles to polo horses. Some groups are moderated, with an individual or small group of people responsible for screening possible messages, while others are not. The moderated groups tend to be more useful, as they do not collect huge piles of spam that can get in the way of real discussions. Many websites host their own bulletin boards or discussion groups, which also function as small “public places” for discussion. One place to begin locating a group that would suit your interests is Google groups, which at this

writing may be found at <http://groups.google.com/grphp?hl=en&tab=wg&q=>. You can also look for chat room or bulletin board options on some of your favorite websites, on any topic. All of these options for discussion groups, bulletin boards, chat rooms, and so forth are excellent places to share short, focused critiques.

Critiquing in print. Many people may feel that they are shut out of sharing critiques with others in print. We read magazines and see nationally syndicated columns in newspapers, and some people may conclude that they can never participate in a discussion at that level. Although it is true that few can become syndicated columnists who publish critiques on politics, entertainment, or sports in newspapers and magazines on a regular basis, those same printed media are very often open to the general public.

Take newspapers, for instance. Most papers accept letters to the editor or even lengthier opinion pieces written by members of the general public and publish some every day. These venues run the full gamut, from local papers in small communities that may publish only once a week to such papers as the *New York Times* or the *Houston Chronicle*, which may have regional or national distribution. The likelihood of your critique being published in some kind of newspaper is much greater than you might think. Newspapers have the advantage of being timely; in fact, your critique should probably have something to do with current or cultural events that are happening in the moment. Even a week late can mean that the newspaper regards your critique as old news. Examine the newspapers that originate near you to see what these opportunities might be. Look at the editorial pages for letters and longer opinion pieces on topics of current interest. Look in the arts and entertainment pages for reviews written by readers on books, films, television shows, restaurants, and so forth. Many newspapers even publish letters on sports-related subjects in the sports pages. Pay close attention to the styles and topics that are preferred by these newspapers, as these may vary considerably from paper to paper.

Magazines are harder to be published in, but some may regard a critique published in a magazine as of higher status. Magazines often pay their contributors; you could be well on your way to fame and fortune as a regular writer! It is especially important to examine the magazine to which you intend to submit your work, to get a sense of the style and topics the magazine prefers. Magazines tend to be more specialized than newspapers, so your critique will need to be a close match to the interests of the publication to which you will submit your work. There are several ways to start. You can't do better than to go to a local newsstand—or even a magazine rack in a nearby library, grocery, or drugstore—to examine the array of likely magazines. You can also go online to the *Writer's Digest* website (at <http://www.writersdigest.com>) or find a hard copy in a bookstore. *Writer's Digest* is a useful guide to a wide range of magazines, and it also contains helpful advice on how to write and publish in magazines.

You can get good information on how to publish in magazines and other venues, as well as good feedback from others interested in critiques, by looking

for local or regional writer's associations. These groups often host workshops on how to publish. They often hold short courses on writing that can strengthen your critiquing skills. Just a few examples include writer's associations in Southern California (<http://www.ocwriter.com>), Texas (<http://www.writersleague.org>), Florida (<http://www.floridawriters.net>), and New York (<http://www.nywriterscoalition.org>).

Think also about newsletters or bulletins that may be locally produced for very small audiences. A school or neighborhood association newspaper; the bulletin or newsletter for a church, synagogue, or mosque; or the local publication of a social or civic club might be an outlet for critiques of a very focused sort. It helps if you are a member of the organization putting out the publication.

Many of you may be reading this book in connection with a class, and sharing a critique with your instructor in writing may be a class assignment. Think of this as a good opportunity to influence the instructor, at least. It is also a good practice session for developing a critique that you might share with a wider audience. Reading your critique to others may even be part of a class exercise. You may well have the chance to influence several others just in class through your writing.

Critiquing in person. The best place for you to practice being a critic may be in person, in your everyday life interactions with friends, family, and coworkers. This is especially true if you develop the calling to be a critic; you will always be thinking about what messages mean, and you will instinctively be doing close readings of texts. You can offer critiques based on those close readings to people you are with while watching television or movies. You can critique important memos or e-mails at work. You can help your relatives understand what another relative is saying by “unpacking” his or her spoken and nonverbal texts. Of course, you want to observe the rules of proper behavior and good taste in all this—few people like someone who is critiquing every minute of the day—but if done in the context of sharing insights with others, a critique based on the habit of close reading can become a way of being for you.

Summary and Looking Ahead

In this chapter you have learned a number of concepts and definitions. To review, they are as follows:

- *Meaning* is the thoughts, feelings, and associations that are suggested by words, images, objects, actions, and messages.
- *A reading* is an attempt to understand the socially shared meanings that are supported by words, images, objects, actions, and messages.

- In a reading, we identify meanings that are *socially shared, plausible, and defensible*.
- We learned that a field of study devoted to exploring the meaning of language in texts is called *semiotics*, or *semiology*.
- A reader is a *meaning detective*.
- *Close reading* is the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings.
- Close readings are often shared with others in a *criticism* or *critique*.
- A *text* is the object that generates the meanings you want to know more about and perhaps tell others about.
- Close readings must take into account *context*, both *historical* and *textual*.
- Close readings must take into account the *audience perspective* from which reading occurs.
- A critic may be defined as a person who is trained in close reading and in sharing those readings with others.
- An important part of being a critic is communication of insights about the meaning of a text.
- A critic teaches or enlightens those who hear or read the critique by revealing meanings that are not universally shared and meanings that are known but not articulated.
- It can be a kind of calling or vocation to be a critic.
- Most critics are concerned with social justice and with showing the ways in which injustice is perpetuated by texts as to create *hegemony*.
- Rhetoric is an ancient term denoting the study of ways in which people are persuaded or influenced.
- Opportunities for critiquing are available to you on the Internet, in print, and in person.

You may recall that I briefly mentioned *techniques* earlier, but these concepts are not listed in our summary. That is because I will be developing them, along with the concepts of *method* and *theory*, in the next chapter. Although these ideas may sound rather academic and therefore dull, nothing could be further from the truth. You will learn in the next chapter how much of what you already know or are learning in other classes can be put to use in close readings.

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