

Dedication

This book was written by my mother who taught English for 37 years in nine states, receiving many awards for high school teaching, including the Maryland Teacher of the Year Award in 1985.

She went back to school in her late 50's to earn her doctorate in English Literature, which she completed at the University of Maryland, College Park in 1991. In her college teaching she was recognized for expertise in postmodern theory and was a master teacher in a training program at the University of Maryland.

She died in 1997, before this book¹, which is based on her dissertation, could be published.

One of my biggest regrets is that I didn't read her dissertation then—probably because I didn't understand it. I majored in history and saw postmodernism as ahistorical and non-political. I had read Derrida and Foucault, but it was only after I had unearthed and read a draft copy of her dissertation that I began to really understand these theorists.

I was amazed by the way she broke down the fundamental theories of these two towering figures in postmodern theory. In the core of this book, she applied them to teaching high school English, and teaching in general, with humor, playfulness, remarkable ingenuity and creativity.

As I read various sections of her dissertation, I was overcome by emotion and with my memories of her as a unique mother, teacher and academic. While pursuing her doctorate in the late 1980's as she taught full-time, she was drawn to postmodern theory and began to incorporate what she was learning into her classroom.

Her students were always central to her pedagogy and many dinner table conversations were peppered with how she incorporated her students' perspectives, music, culture and spirit into her lesson plans (in fact, the title of this book, "Killer English," comes from a comment on

¹ This book is what I believe to be the last edited version of what she was shopping to prospective publishers right before her death – It was a printed manuscript of her Preface, Introduction, Chapters 1-5, the Appendices and her References. I didn't have the computer files, so I had to use OCR to get it into a Word document, and I created a Table of Contents. I hired freelancers to complete the rest of the work.

one of her student evaluations: “the class was ‘Killer,’ meaning “excellent,” in the slang of the time).

Born in 1935, my mother had a very traditional English literature education, steeped in the Norton Anthology, New Criticism, Northrup Frye, etc. In her time at College Park, she attended many conferences on theory. She told me a story about being “backstage” at a conference with Umberto Eco, who was sitting on a couch smoking a cigarette. Since he was sitting alone, one of her colleagues, who knew my mom also smoked, encouraged her to sit down and have a cigarette with him. A little star-struck, she sat down and when she lit up, Eco told her not to worry because “in Italy they have developed a cigarette with no cholesterol!”

In June 2022 I reached out to the person who was closest to my mom while she was on her intellectual journey through postmodern theory. I found her principal doctoral advisor, Susan Handelman, and we spontaneously exchanged many emails, reflecting on my mother’s life and work. In those correspondences, she strongly encouraged me to self-publish the dissertation and “just get it out there!”

Now, just over two years later and after many fits and starts, I am finally getting it ‘out there.’

This book is dedicated to her memory.

There are many people who were indispensable to making this book happen:

First, my father, Frank Delia, who encouraged me to persevere throughout this daunting process, from digitizing the paper manuscript all the way to the final product (I found out quickly that it takes a while to find honest brokers in the self-publishing world!).

Erica Cosentino, a free-lancer editor I found on-line, captured some of the changes that have occurred in the field and how this work might inform them. You will find her thoughtful comments peppered throughout in various footnotes after the [Ed.] symbol.

Ernesto Mora, (eamora2012@gmail.com, freelancer.com/u/eamora2014) another free-lancer who did an absolute fantastic job formatting and laying out the entire book.

Amron Lehte, at Wild Clover Book Services, who performed an exceptional task in putting together the index.

Susan Lanser for her beautifully written Foreword that truly captured the essence of the book and its on-going relevance to the ever-expanding field of critical pedagogy.

And finally, to Susan Handelman, who without her encouragement and guidance this project might never have come about. Her utterly moving Afterword, with her memories and stories about my mother, as well as our personal correspondences, have help me appreciate just how special and unique my mother's gifts truly were.

It would be wonderful if this book found its way into the hands of some of Mary's Alice's former students, colleagues, or acquaintances. I have set up a website to welcome any and all comments, thoughts, or perspectives about the book: www.postmodernpedagogy.com.

All proceeds from the sale of this book will be donated to the Human Restoration Project, a 501(c)3 nonprofit that promotes, among other things, progressive education and critical pedagogy in the United States and across the globe.

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Mary Alice Delia

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Mary Alice Delia

Foreword

In 1991, soon after joining the faculty at the University of Maryland, I had the good fortune to meet Mary Alice Delia and to accept the honor of serving as second reader for her extraordinary dissertation, "Killer English: Postmodern Theory and the Classroom." Agreeing to serve on that committee was one of the best academic decisions I ever made. Although I had experienced the challenges of teaching theory to undergraduates and had even written an article on that topic, Mary Alice exposed--without ever saying so--the narrow scope of my classroom innovations and my starved pedagogical timidity. I was captivated by her brilliant teaching strategies, which far exceeded my more limited and conventional practices. I was awed that she dared to teach postmodern theory in a high school setting at all, let alone through such dazzling inventiveness, and I was blown away by the signs of her success.

But *Killer English* is not just a "how-to" book, although it is rich in the best pedagogical strategies: it is a profound inquiry into postmodern thought. If the most intellectually radical classroom "remains stubbornly traditional in its attitude toward play," as Delia rightly charges, then we have missed postmodernism's most transformative theoretical points. *Killer English* offers the finest evidence that Foucauldian and Derridean thought, and postmodern theory in general, is itself profoundly pedagogical. To make her case, Delia doesn't just "do" pedagogy; she reads theorists like Derrida and Foucault *as* pedagogy, and in so doing she shows their contributions in a newer and truer light. And in a play-full one: as Delia observes, "the deconstructionist operation is not a treasure hunt for truth, at least not in the traditional sense of uncovering or discovering a truth-object. Instead, it tries, through graftings, parody, puns, and other textual plays, to multiple 'the outside in itself,' to increase the play of representation" (23).

Delia's own classroom texts are brilliant blends of conventional literary works--Shakespeare, Keats--and texts drawn from the students' own spheres, from official documents and letters to the editor to television shows and bridal registries, an array that helps students to see the underlying discourse rules of a particular genre or circumstance. As she writes, "If the present is, as Foucault believes, the story of power

relations, and if power relations are embedded in every society, cultural, and institutional practice, then there is, in the present, no end to analysis and no shortage, ever, of discourse to look at" (101). The classroom itself becomes a text, as the students consider school codes as Foucauldian measure of discipline or analyze their own written excuses about missing class or doing shoddy work. *Killer English* describes a rich range of classroom moments in depth, providing detailed and adaptable practices for transforming student experience. She also shows how deftly designed group projects can yield far more than individual assignments in terms of learning that engages the students and lasts beyond the moment.

We are fortunate that although Delia wrote her book in the 1990s, her methodology is eminently transferable across grade levels, fields, and curricular priorities. Anyone who teaches humanities or qualitative social sciences, at whatever level and in whatever specialization, will find not only a powerful challenge in this book but pathways toward transforming your own classrooms and curricula. Delia's strategies have certainly found a place in my own classes, whether I have focused on prison narratives, apartheid South Africa, representations of women, or the French Revolution. Still, looking back on my career as I reread *Killer English*, I can see how hard one must work against the shopworn norms of the conventional classroom in which the teacher/expert holds forth before students that she hopes are listening. All the more reason to read and reread this book.

The adoption of an active pedagogy of the kind *Killer English* proposes has never been more urgent. At a time of precarious democracy and extraordinary threats to a culture of open inquiry, inclusion, and free thought, *Killer English* offers a path toward the kind of education for critical thinking that is so crucial to a democratic society. To be sure, the scope of "theory" has changed and grown since Mary Alice Delia wrote her book. But her strategies, deconstructive in the best and fullest sense, lend themselves beautifully to engage critical race theory, feminist and queer thought, postcolonialism, and indeed the spectrum of theoretical concerns that teachers bring to their engagement with students today. Mary Alice Delia's dissertation-turned-book is itself a classroom, a place for your own experimental engagement and deep learning. If you are a theorist, you will understand theory in a new way. If you are a teacher, at whatever academic level from elementary school through graduate

students, you will find a myriad of ideas for teaching in new ways. And if you allow it, your classroom will never be the same.

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