Ball, Cheryl E., and Drew M. Loewe, editors. *Bad Ideas About Writing*. **Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Libraries, 2017. 370 pages. Free and open-access at https://textbooks.lib.wvu.edu/badideas/badideasaboutwriting-book.pdf. ISBN: 978-0-9988820-0-0.**

Reviewed by Mark Blaauw-Hara

Writing Studies has a fake news problem. When I say this, I'm not using the term as many politicians do—i.e., to discount real facts that make me uncomfortable. I mean there really is a collection of incorrect ideas about writing and writers that persists in the public mind: for example, that Standard English is inherently correct and easily understandable, that America is in the midst of a literacy crisis, that good writers are born and not made, that writing well in one context means you can write well in all contexts, and more. These ideas cause real problems for us in the classroom and in our schools, and unfortunately, we writing teachers have done a poor job dispelling them.

One reason is that we tend only to talk about how writing and writers work with our students and each other—i.e., in classrooms, journals, academic books, and conferences—rather than with the public at large. As a result, the public is behind the curve of current writing-studies scholarship, which has repercussions for us in the classroom and in the larger university context. Consider if our students already came to us understanding that writing is recursive and individual, that audience and purpose are vital considerations, or that good research begins with a genuinely thorny question. How much time might we gain in the classroom? If our administrators and legislators understood that writing is a difficult, idiosyncratic process, and that writers could benefit from working with experts in the field, how might funding and staffing situations change in English departments?

Bad Ideas About Writing is an effort to widen the conversation about writing studies. In their introduction, Cheryl E. Ball and Drew M. Loewe write that the book was conceived as a vehicle for Writing Studies scholars "to name particularly unhelpful or backward ideas

[about writing] and argue directly to the public about them" (1). The result is a series of short essays that consciously eschew the syntax and style of journal articles, attempting rather to "summarize the available research and present it in a way similar to how a newspaper, introductory textbook, or podcast might deliver such research" (2).

The book is organized around eight categories of "bad ideas": what good writing is; who good writers are; style, usage, and grammar; writing techniques; genres; assessing writing; digital technology; and writing teachers. Most sections include five to ten essays, each of which summarizes a bad idea, points out its flaws, and provides a nuanced, expansive, and research-based alternative view. The book contains more than sixty such essays, usually around five pages each. The bad ideas are well chosen and some are, at least to me, darkly funny. For example:

- "Writers are Mythical, Magical, and Damaged"
- "Texting Ruins Literacy Skills"
- "Popular Culture is Killing Writing"

The titles of these essays have a similar effect as does reading a post about how presumably liberal climate scientists are faking global temperature data in an attempt to sabotage American energy production: an initial disbelieving chuckle, followed by a sense of disquiet shading into slow-building alarm. Do people really believe this? If so, how can we get them not to?

Recently, Nick Behm, Sherry Rankins-Robertson, and Duane Roen published an excellent piece in *Academe* arguing that a functional democracy should have access to current knowledge and conversations of the type faculty produce and engage with on a daily basis. Yet as Jill Lepore memorably opines in a piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, academic writing tends to be "a great, heaping mountain of exquisite knowledge surrounded by a vast moat of dreadful prose." Of course, Lepore's critique is not true in every case, and some academic prose is difficult to read not because of its inherent quality but because it engages with difficult ideas. Yet if we put our minds

to it, I'm sure we could figure out how to present those difficult ideas in more accessible prose.

Essentially, that's what *Bad Ideas* attempts to do: identify erroneous understandings, show how they lead to negative repercussions, and correct them, all through relatively simple writing. For example, Jacob Babb's rebuttal of America's perceived "literacy crisis" touches on institutional racism, technology, socioeconomics, and public discourse. Anjali Pattanayak, Jennifer M. Cunningham, and Steven Alvarez each have entries that further explore how the idea of a standardized, privileged form of English impacts marginalized populations and serves to ossify socioeconomic stratification. Seth Kahn's entry on writing teachers describes how the bad idea that "anyone can teach writing" has resulted in the mass exploitation of a part-time workforce. Alison C. White's entry on how research should proceed from intriguing questions (rather than already-held assumptions) supports genuine public dialogue as we engage with the challenges of our current time.

Language-wise, the essays do a good job of adopting a more accessible prose style. For example, here is a section of Elizabeth Wardle's entry that pushes back against the concept of "writing in general":

> There is no such thing as writing in general. Do you doubt this claim? Test it out. Go to your desk right now and attempt to write something in general.... You can't do it, because it can't be done. (30)

Contrast this segment with a few sentences from Wardle's 2009 article "Mutt Genres":

> Genres arise when particular exigencies are encountered repeatedly; yet each time an exigence arises, people must be attuned to the specifics of the current situation in order to employ the institutionalized features of the genre effectively— or, in some cases, throw them out. (768)

Both segments argue that writing is done for specific purposes in particular situations, yet the prose is markedly different. The first segment addresses the reader directly, contains contractions, and makes its argument in five short, straightforward sentences. The second is a single, syntactically complicated sentence that relies on discipline-specific terms. Just for fun, I ran each through several online readability assessments: the first segment has a Flesch Kincaid grade-level score of around 3.0, whereas the second scores around 24. Of course, one is not "better" than the other, but the first will likely be easier for a wider audience to understand.

I do question whether that wider audience will ever read the book in the first place. Housed on an academic server, composed in a single .pdf, *Bad Ideas* is a digital version of an academic text, and is likely to be read by the same audience that reads most academic texts: us. If our goals are to "argue directly with the public" (1), as Ball and Loewe state, those goals might be better reached through other modes of delivery. For example, many colleges have annual speaker series, open to the public, that feature faculty discussing interesting facets of their fields. These might be better ways to get the word out, as it were. Writing in more public outlets—websites, local newspapers, etc.—might also be effective. Behm, Rankins-Robertson, and Roen argue for this sort of public engagement in their *Academe* article.

Where this book shines is in conjunction with writing curricula that focus on helping composition students develop a "theory of writing," as Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak advocate in their book *Teaching for Transfer. Bad Ideas* would also serve as an excellent component of a curriculum based in Writing Studies of the sort outlined in Downs and Wardle's pivotal article "Teaching About Writing, Righting Misconceptions." The approachable prose would make the book's essays much more accessible to students than most of the writing in our field. They could be used on their own or in conjunction with more "academic," in-depth articles on similar subjects. My own department recently adopted a writing-about-writing curriculum, and I forwarded the link to *Bad Ideas* to the rest of the faculty. I plan to use it in my own sections of first-year writing, not only because the

essays engage key ideas that would help my students understand writing, but because the style of the book demonstrates that difficult ideas can be discussed in a stylistically direct way.

My hope as well is that the book will help me push back against some of the false narratives—the fake news—in my classroom. In the public sphere, fake news often persists because in some way it meshes with a worldview already held by the reader. Believing a contradictory truth is often uncomfortable because it calls that worldview into question. In the classroom, writing's version of fake news can operate in much the same way. Believing that "some people are just born good writers," as Jill Parrot's essay is titled, counter-intuitively serves as a salve to struggling writers: If they struggle with writing, it's because of immutable genetics. It's not their fault; they are off the hook. In contrast, if writing is viewed—as Parrot argues—similarly to sports, wherein genetic predisposition plays a role but training and sustained hard work can help *anyone* improve, that means that our students can no longer shrug their shoulders when they confront their own writing. Improving at writing becomes largely a matter of choice: Do they *want* to improve? If so, how hard are they willing to work to do so? What are the best strategies to support their growth?

These are challenging questions, and we should forgive our students and the public for buying into narratives of writing and writers that relieve them of the responsibility of asking them. However, we should challenge those narratives when they contradict what our scholarship has shown to be the case. Doing so will help our students grow as more informed, confident, and proficient writers.

Similarly, the field has a responsibility to engage with the wider public and share what we know. I admire and agree with the editors' and authors' goals, and writing the book and posting it for free represent a genuine attempt to share what we know. *Bad Ideas About Writing* is well worth reading. I see its application being primarily in the classroom, but the charge of the book—to engage a wider audience—is one we should heed.

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