Louise Rosenblatt

Louise Rosenblatt, an influential theorist of reading and the teaching of literature, a true Pragmatist, and a great lady, died on February 8th, 2005. She was 100 years old.

Louise was born in Atlantic City to first-generation Jewish immigrants of modest means. She received her undergraduate degree from Barnard College in 1925, and her doctorate in comparative literature from the Sorbonne in 1931. After working as an instructor at Barnard, she was appointed assistant professor at Brooklyn College in 1938; during World War II she worked for the Office of War Information, analyzing data from Nazi-occupied France; and in 1948 she joined the faculty of the School of Education at NYU, where she remained until her retirement in 1972.

Louise’s first book, on the “art for art’s sake” movement in England, was published, in French, when she was 27 years old. Her seminal Literature as Exploration, first published in 1938, was reprinted many times. The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work, appeared in 1978; and a selection of her many essays, Making Meaning With Texts, was published early in 2005, appearing a week before her death.

In his Foreword to the 5th edition of Literature as Exploration, published by the MLA in 1995, Wayne Booth wrote that he doubted “that any other literary theorist of this century has enjoyed and suffered as sharp a contrast of powerful influence and absurd neglect as Louise Rosenblatt.” For Louise’s Deweyan conception of the meaning of a literary work, as residing in the transaction between the text and the reader, was little appreciated in the days of the New Criticism and of the “back-to-basics” movement in pedagogical theory; the appeal of her reader-oriented but far-from-deconstructionist approach, focused on the personal engagement central to the experience of reading, only came to be fully appreciated relatively late in her long life.

Louise received the “Great Teacher Award” from NYU, and the Distinguished Service Award from the National Council of Teachers of English, in 1972, and the David Russell Award for Distinguished Research from the NCTE in 1980; she was elected to the International Reading Association Hall of Fame in 1992; she received the John Dewey Society Lifetime Achievement Award in 2001, and the James R. Squire Award for Extraordinary Contributions to Teaching and Learning in the English Language Arts in 2002. In November 2004, when she spoke to a standing-room-only session of an NCTE convention in Indianapolis, the Executive Director of the association
commented that her "fresh and liberating" ideas had brought her "rock-star status."

Louise was married for 63 years to economic historian Sidney Ratner, who died in 1996. I was privileged to count them both among my friends; privileged, too, to have Louise speak to my class in Philosophy and Literature when, in her mid-nineties, she was Visiting Professor at the University of Miami. During her visits to Miami I learned that Louise remained deeply concerned and engaged with issues in education — and a dedicated swimmer. She was also a great raconteur, with a fund of marvelous stories: about her roommate, Margaret Mead, at Barnard; about meeting André Gide and Gertrude Stein in Paris; about the difficulties someone Jewish faced, in the 1930s, when they sought an academic position; about having unexpectedly received a copy of an Arabic translation of her Literature and Exploration and opening it, baffled, at the wrong end.

I still remember how much I enjoyed the way that Sidney, who was a feminist of the very best kind, bragged to me about his wife's achievements. He did not exaggerate: Louise was a truly remarkable person.

Susan Haack
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