

## The Ongoing Legacy of Wendy Bishop Is In Our Stories: a Review of *The Subject is Story: Essays for Writers and Readers*, Edited by Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom

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To review *The Subject is Story: Essays for Writers and Readers* edited by Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom in this time and place, one must be a "Dupie Warrior" (Bob Marley was one) or a ghost fighter (as most of us are at one time or another). How much is gained and lost when one of our field's key players writes and dies? What can any review of any book ever truly say about a writer's spirit, and isn't that what really matters now?

I teach my students not to address sources by their first names unless they are personal friends. Wendy's bibliography makes certain she will be a source in our field for a long time to come. This book (her penultimate publication during her lifetime) is a good trail marker for any teacher and writer to leave behind. Within the creative space that Wendy herself might encourage, *The Subject is Story* is a haunting message from our lost colleague asking us to consider ongoing crossover guidance from Ostrom and a cohort of compositionists who provide much of the necessary theoretical and practical insights that students and teachers need to tell their stories in their academic writing.

Wendy Bishop was mother, sister, aunt, cousin, and friend to so many that it seems inadequate to focus only on one of her books in this time and space. Her work touched so many aspects of our professional and personal writing lives. However, we must remember well what she gives us compositionists. If nothing else, her absence requires a more direct need to carefully listen now to her creative contributions. Wendy Bishop made to the sibling fields of Creative and Writing Composition and Rhetoric more loving about each other's ideas. We need to use her crossover wisdom and that is why even the story of simply missing her belongs in this academic review.

Remembering Wendy's heart and spirit is easy for me. She and Hans led a creative writing workshop at the first CCCC I attended. Wendy was the first ray of crossover light I found to figure out how to join my M.F.A. and Ph.D. (English Education) training into an effective writing and teaching life centered on composition. I did two pieces of freewriting that charmed Wendy into letting me correspond and learn from her. First I wrote:

When I was four, I thought I could fly. I put on a towel with an embroidered "S" (for Schloss) on my shoulders, stood on the window sill, and waved proudly to my mom and folks in the street. The neighbor who saw me first said to my mother, "your son is about to jump out of his window" and she calmly told me to wait because she had something for me first. She raced upstairs, cajoled me off the sill with a piece of candy, and promptly spanked me. The next day there were bars on the window. They've been there ever since.

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Later in the workshop, I wrote:

When I was a young graduate student at the University of Montana, I assisted in an Introduction to Creative Writing class taught by Richard Hugo. The learning moment I remember best happened in one of our first class meetings. We were all sitting around in a circle, and a young lady awkwardly dropped a folder of poems and notes on the floor. We all paused in the awkward moment, and by the time anything registered beyond the image of an academic mess, there was Hugo (regardless of a bum hip and bad arthritis) at the student's feet, picking up her papers and relieving her of a very awkward situation. Hugo was one of the west's best known and loved poets showing his students and this future teacher what caring teaching is all about. Hugo's alert willingness to gather his students papers at her feet may be the most a writing teacher can learn to do.

Freewriting has always worked well for me as both a poet and teacher of composition. I always do freewriting with my students in classes and sometimes find that I've started a poem or story I need to work on later. If Wendy Bishop's ideas work on writing teachers, then we become Writing teachers more so than simply compositionists or creative writing teachers. As I grew to know Wendy and her work, I knew that following her lead was a path that I had been waiting for—her ideas and professional success made me see my two writing worlds working for not against each other. She helped me understand that when teaching both creative writing and composition, Writing teachers should look for the most effective writing pedagogies and experiment with crossovers as much as possible. See *The Subject is Research*, the 2001 predecessor (with Pavel Zemliansky) to *The Subject is Story* for a good example of how to infuse student research writing with creative and useful ideas.

Like Richard Hugo, Wendy Bishop was kind to others despite her fame and importance. I probably bugged her with my requests and submissions, but she never stopped smiling and answering me with insight and generosity. As Chair of the CCCC, she helped me establish a reviewing system of the conference for *Academic Writing* (which combined with *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines* to become *Across the Disciplines: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Language*). Wendy gave me "My Conference Poem" (See <https://wac.colostate.edu/aw/reviews/cccc2000/sessionh24.htm>) for inclusion in the review of the conference she chaired. What a perfect objective correlative for her ability to innovate academic discourse. Quite simply, Wendy Bishop was a great colleague who helped us all remove bars from our windows. Remembering her poetry and telling stories here to review *The Subject is Story* is one small but necessary way to respect her composition teaching.

When you consider *The Subject is Story*, think about Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrum gathering our best ideas on the ledge of flight, urging us to find creative ways to imagine flying and making composition grow. "Growth" can be as vague or relative as "improvement" is when we don't know how to blunt the sting of a good student's poor attempts at drafts. Nevertheless, it makes sense to me to read the essays in this collection as not-so-secret growth agents toward a more multigenre and Post-Process understanding of modern composition. (See *Blending Genre, Alternating Style: Writing Multigenre Papers* by Tom Romano and *Post Process Theory* edited by Thomas Kent). You haven't heard it here first. You see it in collections like *Ways of Reading* and *The Presence of Others*, you see it in collections of the year's best essays, and you see it in our work and our student work. Tag. You're it—and "it" is your stories, your metaphors, your spirit all because voice has identity—even academic voice. Wendy was a master at blending academic and creative worlds. Her bibliography shows how able she was to draw wisdom from many worlds. I think that it was Bishop's keen sense of identity and otherness that helped her explain writing crossovers for so many teachers and students. Listen to how she ends "Autobiography" from her 1997 poetry collection, *mid-passage*:

My lives line up like clothes on a clothesline.

A shirt billows out in grass-  
 sweet-smelling dry sun. A skirt hangs inanimate  
 in drizzle rain. My lives dream  
 as wind rises, bath towel flapping and solitary.  
 Why, even now, my lives  
 snap off the line and fly into space  
 between this place and my other lives.

Wendy Bishop was a most artful dancer between her many lives. Her Tallahassee obituary (<http://www.freelists.org/archives/comptesol/11-2003/msg00096.html>) talks about how Wendy Bishop was a Kellogg W. Hunt distinguished professor of English at Florida State University, that she died Friday, Nov. 21, 2003, and that she was part of a large and wonderful family. Wendy Bishop was truly a distinguished professor of professors. And she was a true writing master. The poet, the story teller, the compositionist, the editor, the CCCC wizard--Wendy was all this and more. Her vision continues to help us see beyond genre and academic entanglements straight to the minds, hearts and spirits of people and their texts. Her obituary is for us teachers her legacy of ideas about how to best inform ourselves with writing pedagogy from more than one genre. In other words, her legacy is how she enables students and teachers to be released into our own language. (See *Released Into Language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing*—this 1990 book is one of her most often cited titles.)

*The Subject is Story* does a great deal for writing teachers and students who want to understand their literacy experience as an ongoing narrative. As Ostrum so forcefully concludes in his essay:

Think of your own education as a kind of story with a plot. Are you satisfied with the plot? How would you change it? To what extent have others written the plot for you? How might you revise it? What roles do you occupy, what characters do you find yourself playing, in this story, "education"? (9)

In this book's first section, "The Persistence of Story," Ostrum, James A. Herrick ("Narration and Argument") and Douglas Hesse ("Looking for Dr. Fuller: Story Strategies in Essays") build on Jerome Bruner's understanding of how deeply narrative is psychologically embedded in our abilities to construct and use language. In Part II, "Story, Discovery, and Recovery," John Boe, Stuart H. D. Ching, Michael Spooner, and David Wallace, personalize the point of the collection by using their own storytelling as a path toward writing insights about style. As Boe says, "If people are listening to me tell a story, or even listening to me talk (such attention is a delight in itself), obviously I should listen to myself as well" (39). The text's self-reflection is reflexive and instructive for teachers and writing students who want to understand why mutligenre compositions that use narrative happen quite often despite many assignments to the contrary.

Part III, "Story in Context: Responsibility, Community, Heritage" offers essays that do indeed situate narrative more explicitly in particular writing communities, and Part IV, "Persuasion, Product, Process, and Story," particularizes narratives in terms of travel, reflection, and narrative about process. Part V, "Hint Sheets for Students and Teachers" offers more specific, more practical advice. To be critically honest, the most glaring shortcoming of the collection is that it lacks direction about some of the psychological and sometimes traumatic effects of using story in our teaching of our writing. As a longtime supporter of mutligenre writing, and as a Writing teacher always trying to use more creative thinking in our composition work, I have learned that such liberation of style and genre does not come without costs.

Often, when we encourage ourselves and students to tell true stories as part of our writing and research, we cross boundaries that we may not be as psychologically able to transgress as we are rhetorically able to know. I've read essays from students that deal with events and feelings that I personally didn't feel competent to

discuss beyond caring and hoping to help the student articulate her or his meaning more clearly. Even this review, as it edges toward elegy, asks readers and me to consider death and writing in ways that some may consider inappropriate or insensitive.

Wendy Bishop's last book before she died was *On Writing: A Process Reader*. It begins with a dedication to her family, followed by a quote from Virginia Woolf saying "I am so composed that nothing is real unless I write it." In so many ways, Wendy is encouraging us to be our writing as we learn to write, and if that's true, there will always be risks. I once wrote an creative non-fiction essay titled "Teaching with Technology: Reading, Writing and Singing to Save My Life" and it was published in a pretty academic journal, *Issues in Writing*. I used the story of wanting to kill myself to dramatize the overload of work necessary to make tech and my teaching work during the early nineties. When I wrote the essay, I remembered typing the last few paragraphs in tears. I was happy as a writer because my ending was finally clear to me after no small amount of writer's block, but I was also having a bit of a breakdown because finishing the essay made it increasingly clear that I was being overwhelmed with my too-seriously perceived responsibilities. A good cry can wash away a lot of angst. I was lucky that day. Not only were there no guns in easy reach, but I had the help of a friend and great reader (Bill Sheidley) who, as my chair, saw both the value of my words and the struggle of my work well enough to nurture both back to health. Let's not imagine what may have happened if the essay didn't get published--the real point is that writing our own stories has some danger and we need to grow more mindful of those liabilities while we promote the virtue of narrative in our composition work. *The Subject is Story*, in it's own haunting and illuminating way should make us investigate the stories of our lives with more art and more scholarship—we owe Wendy Bishop that much and so much more.

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