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ShakesFear and How to Cure It. By Ralph Alan Cohen.

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***"ShakesFear and How to Cure It. By Ralph Alan Cohen.
Clayton, Delaware: Prestwick House, Inc., 2007. Pp. 440."***

reviewed by Tom Mistler

Ralph Alan Cohen's *ShakesFear and How to Cure It* explores the problems that many teachers face when introducing Shakespeare to students. Recognizing that students of the present sometimes feel overwhelmed or bored by Shakespeare's style, Cohen provides educators with an impressive list of tips and lessons designed to inspire the same affection for the Bard that so many generations have felt.

The first part of the book contains a list of practices that Cohen believes can either help or harm the cause of those for whom this book is mainly written: the teachers who have problems and concerns about "communicating to their students the greatness that they can see in Shakespeare's works" (11). The pedagogical methods he recommends all seek to break down the barriers that force one to see the Bard's plays as relics of a bygone era. In their place, Cohen suggests that teachers erect a new image of Shakespeare—a much more welcoming one suggesting that, though the Bard is an author of classic texts, he is still widely relevant in the world as we see, know, and experience it today. For teachers to convey this idea, Cohen argues that one should encourage students to think Shakespeare's drama as works of popular entertainment,

that is, as theatre. He suggests helping students see how Shakespeare deals with sex (135-6), makes puns (136-9), stages murder (140-1), and uses “smart-ass” characters like Lear’s fool in order to make audiences think, laugh, and eventually applaud (146-8). Approaching lessons this way, Cohen believes, will ultimately help one fulfill the objective that teachers of Shakespeare should be looking to execute: “You must always be building a theatre in their [one’s students’] minds” (67).

A part from these recommended classroom techniques that Cohen provides the would-be-successful Shakespeare teacher, there are also moments in *ShakesFear* when Cohen tells teachers how they should enact his proscribed techniques. Perhaps by drawing from his experience as a director of Shakespearean theater, Cohen coaches his readers into discovering how to perform their lessons on the Bard in a sincere and authentic way. “If you want Shakespeare in your classroom,” he says, “you must bring him in as part of yourself” (70). Doing this, Cohen suggests, requires that teachers let their students see “where and how” Shakespeare’s drama emotionally touches them (70). Cohen even encourages teachers to admit to students if indeed there parts of Shakespeare’s plays that are not personally interesting. “Such an admission,” he says, “sends two important messages: first, it tells your students that having problems with Shakespeare is normal; second, it says that someone can have a few problems with Shakespeare and still enjoy his work and understand its value” (73). Ultimately, directing his readers in this way impresses upon them the role that an impassioned

performance by a teacher can play in inspiring young minds. It also reminds hopeful pedagogues that indeed all the world, including the classroom, is a stage and that acting out one's lessons in a humble and enthusiastic way can inspire the young readers to find the motivation they need to work through the intricacies in staging, plot, and language that make Shakespeare the iconic literary figure that he is and has always been.

The second part of *ShakesFear* moves away from a list of "do's" and "don'ts" for teachers and instead provides readers with a catalogue of thoughtful and engaging lessons for twenty-two of the Bard's most celebrated plays. Unlike part one, this section is more focused on the text of Shakespeare's drama, and the pedagogical methods Cohen suggests are targeted directly to a specific play. Of course, Cohen provides too many lessons for one to enumerate them in a short review, but there are several exercises or "ploys" (as Cohen calls them) that are recommended for students who are discovering Shakespeare's greatest works for the first time. One such ploy is the presentation of alternative readings of the same passage or speech in a play. This exercise, according to Cohen, will show a class the "breadth of possibility" in staging Shakespeare, while also allowing students to choose for themselves which reading of several that are offered they prefer (26). Part two also contains a list of film adaptations for each play along with short critiques on them, which, though brief, are useful for the

teacher who is not familiar with Hollywood's most famous film versions of Shakespearean drama.

The brevity of Cohen's film critiques speaks to a stylistic problem that *ShakesFear* sometimes suffers from: the "sweeping generalizations" made by the author on a wide range of issues—including those that have been subject to much debate among Shakespeare scholars (22). Within the span of just a few pages, Cohen puts forth arguments concerning the artistic failures (as he sees them) of *As You Like It* (247-52). In that same span, he also tries to summarize and debunk post-modernist critiques of Shakespeare (15-20), and he even provides a strident verdict on the issue of the Bard's authorship of his plays—a topic that has been debated in several full-length books by many scholars (169-71). One could argue that Cohen at least warns his readers that such bold commentary and use of generalizations are not meant to be taken too seriously by readers, but that act only further begs the question: why then does *ShakesFear* still at times pretend to be something that it is not (22, 175)? Is this book an indispensable work of Shakespeare criticism? Even Cohen admits that it is not: "What you find here is merely my understanding of the plays...My advice to you is to remember that by the time you read this, I won't myself believe it" (175). Can *ShakesFear*, however, be used by teachers of all kinds to find new ways of presenting the Bard to students? Absolutely.

At its best, Cohen's *ShakesFear* functions as a tool to help educators find how to bring the world's greatest dramatist to students in the most accessible way. With its

wide variety of engaging lessons and its helpful tips for teachers, this book successfully provides educators with the means for helping students realize that Shakespeare's plays have universal and timeless appeal—a fact that, if understood by young readers today, can help bring the joys of Shakespeare safely into future generations.