



Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory

Peter Barry

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Beginning theory has been helping students navigate through the thickets of literary and cultural theory for well over a decade now. This new and expanded third edition continues to offer students and readers the best one-volume introduction to the field. The bewildering variety of approaches, theorists and technical language is lucidly and expertly unravelled. Unlike many books which assume certain positions about the critics and the theories they represent, Peter Barry allows readers to develop their own ideas once first principles and concepts have been grasped. The book has been updated and includes two new chapters, one of which (Literary theory – a history in ten events) innovatively surveys the course of theory, while the other (Theory after ‘Theory’) maps the arrival of new ‘isms’ since the second edition appeared in 2002. Liberal humanism - Structuralism - Post-structuralism and deconstruction - Postmodernism - Psychoanalytic criticism - Feminist criticism - Lesbian/gay criticism - Marxist criticism - New historicism and cultural materialism - Postcolonial criticism - Stylistics - Narratology - Ecocriticism - Presentism/Transversal poetics/ New aestheticism/Historical formalism/Cognitive poetics.

Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory Details

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Suzi says

Again, I haven't completely finished this book during the course BUT I feel like I've read enough to say that "I've read it". It was quite interesting but since the teacher told us that the post-structuralist analysis was completely wrong, I'm only giving it 2 stars.

Zach says

This is an excellent introduction to literary theory. The different brands thereof are explained clearly in brief, easy-to-follow chapters.

My only complaint would be about the chapters on Feminist Criticism and Gay/Lesbian Criticism. I don't think either of these topics was covered well, as if Barry himself didn't fully understand the implications of their philosophical approach. Barry is British, so this might simply be because of a disconnect between the American version of Feminist Criticism I'm already familiar with and its British counterpart. But his tone in these chapters is somewhere between confused and doubting, and he fails to illuminate the broader implications of the theories advanced. Maybe, unintentionally, political conservatism got in the way of objectivity. Whatever the case, these chapters need to be supplemented by additional reading.

The rest of the book really is fantastic. I'd recommend it for writers like me who want a basic understanding of the theoretical ideas without having the sludge through countless wordy texts to get there.

Sara Joharshamshiri says

I remember sitting in a class on essay writing a few months ago where the professor asked us to write a paragraph and volunteer to read it out loud. When I read mine he made a remark (which I have, ironically, forgotten) to which my answer was that "well, it makes my essay more friendly." This seemed like an outrageous thing to value in an essay to the professor and I think he said something along the lines of "You want to give information, not make friends." I know, dumb. (needless to say I have been less than attentive of the rest of the classes; here's hoping I don't flunk it.)

Okay, so the thing about this book is that it's just so friendly, so full of **character** and not at all at runs the risk of being "uninformative" (cue the eye-rolling). In fact the humor has the effect of making the divulged information **stick**.

In the introduction to the 13th chapter he says that he has always "*preferred to integrate information into a themed narrative.*" and I mean, job well done Mr. Barry.

It was really informative, full of helpful references and extremely unprejudiced. I can say a lot of good things about the book, but let's just say it was an absolute **delight** to read and leave it at that.

P.s. Just one thing though, can anyone explain the COVER to me?? dammed if I get it.

Zenmoon says

Beginning Theory offers the literary studies student a fantastic primer to help navigate the often convoluted and complex domain of literary theory. Barry shows us that theory need not be daunting, and successfully manages to convey difficult concepts in a voice that is consistently conversational, and never dry. I appreciated his occasional interjection of self for the way in which it humanised the text. The book covers all the major theoretical approaches from Structuralism, through Psychoanalytic, Marxist, and feminist criticism, as well as newer areas such as Ecocriticism. Barry weaves the theoretical positions of each, within a historical framework. Since all theory arises out of distinct social, cultural and political processes, the historical backdrop provides an additional anchor for learning.

Although this is marketed as a beginner's guide, the breadth of coverage, and expert condensing of detail, makes it a must for any student of literary or cultural studies. I've revisited it again and again during my Masters, and it's now an invaluable addition to my study shelf.

Sadia Mansoor says

The FIRST EVER BOOK I bought, when I came to English Department for an easy start to all the literary theories. It's a reader friendly book & quite handy to go through all the basics of the theories.

Robyn says

This book is a good starter for a class like the one I read it in (senior seminar) but I disagree with Barry on so many things I couldn't give it more than 3 stars. He does a good job of breaking down theories and methods so that they are easier to understand, and picks out the best distinctions to make between similar sorts of theories so that students can tell them apart. His examples of how to apply the theories are not always great. (He uses Barthes' S/Z for structuralism. Not your typical undergrad reading.) He also makes some declarations and generalizations, and I think he wants the student to "believe" him. I'm keeping the book around for some handy numbered lists that are in there, but the best things about it are the huge lists of suggested reading at the end of each chapter!

Meghan says

Read this for Critical Theory. It worked for the class, but half the time I had no idea what the author was talking about and only sort of understood after class discussions. I know the point of theory is that there is no bottom line but it would have been extremely helpful to have one for those of us who don't care for theory that much and just need a basic understanding.

Alok Mishra says

As a student, as an instructor and as a 'someone' helping others understanding the complex theories of literature, I did not find any better book than this one by Peter! I will recommend this book to anyone who wants to understand literary theories from the scratch and even the advanced students can use this book rather fairly!

Paul Bryant says

FRANK

In 1959 Frank Sinatra recorded his great version of Cole Porter's "What is this thing called Critical Theory?" 36 years later Peter Barry in this excellent book explains that it's a network of ideas developed in the 60s, 70s and 80s which challenged the status quo of liberal humanism and made flesh that haunting phrase from Marx :

all that is solid melts into the air

Critical theory puts you wise. You thought you had an identity? That, like, you were a YOU? Guess again - you don't. Sorry bout that. Yeah, I know. So many things you thought were absolute, you were such a sweet kid, but now you know they're contingent. Stability is so 1950s. Things is tough all over. Definitions? Ungraspable. Dictionaries? Xeroxes of snapshots taken by whitewater canooists hurtling down the dangerous chasms of illusion and the flumes of fantasy called language. Disinterested intellectual inquiry? Common sense? Canons of great writers? You can kiss all that goodbye, that's gone like jobs for life, like horseless carriages and divorceless marriages, they're so gone it's like they were never here. This is a relative universe. My name is Barthes. Come on in. it's okay, once you get used to it.

CILLA

A mere seven years after Frank's profound statement of non-faith came Cilla Black (discovered as you all know working the cloak-room at The Cavern) singing "What's it all about, Alfie?" She hadn't *at that point* read Barthes, Saussure or Levi-Strauss or she would have changed this beautiful Bacharach/David song's coda to "when you walk let linguistics and structuralism lead the way/And you may find love any day". It would have been cheeky but so right.

ARETHA

So critical theory was at war with every previously accepted cultural concept, and also, having the courage of its convictions, it was at war with itself. In 1980 Aretha Franklin, one of popular music's greatest post-structuralists, recorded "What a Fool Believes" which from the perspective of a dedicated follower of Jacques Lacan expertly lashed into the corny structuralist's romantic conviction that meaning ultimately resides in scientific method and language – in verse three Aretha is pitiless about Barthes' use of diagrams, for instance – and throughout the song her fearsome voice convinces even the casual listener that the signified must always escape the signifier.

FAB

You may think that after the terminal scepticism and playful despondency of the post-structuralists theory

itself had nowhere to go, and we were left with endless Beatles revivalists singing “Paperback Derrida”

*Sir or madam will you read his book
It took him years to write and it's worth a look
"Of Grammatology" or "Counterpath"
They're all heavy slogs but you wanna read a paperback Derrida
Paperback Derridaaaaaah*

or Dave Davies' classic “Let's all drink to the death of the author” or the Dixie Cups' weird celebration “Eco Eco”. But in 1991 the Spice Girls brought a real breath of fresh theoretical exploration as their giant hit “Who Do You Think You Are?” presented the world with a bracing three and a half minute tour round the complexities of post-colonialism and identity politics in general (that the flipside was yet another cunning Beatles revival “He's Said, She's Said” was in this case only apt.)

ZOMBIES! WHERE ARE THE ZOMBIES? WE HAVE TO HAVE ZOMBIES!

From Sinatra to the Spice Girls, from Levi-Strauss to Baudrillard – a hectic four decades which Peter Barry in this very smart book sums up with panache. You'll be reaching for Youtube or Spotify or even Groovespark constantly as Peter Barry infuses new meaning into old chestnuts like “She's Not There” by the Zombies and “The Windmills of Your Mind” by Noel Harrison. (Note : Peter Barry is not related to John Barry who recorded the Bond theme. That would have been cute, but it isn't true.)

Highly recommended.

Beth says

I didn't discover this book until halfway through a graduate level class on Postcolonial Theory. This would be after trying to keep my head above water while reading Derrida in the original language. I wish I'd read it years ago.

Despite its bland title and intimidating chapter headings, this book is very accessible. Each chapter takes a different ideological camp of literary theory — from Post-structuralism to New Historicism — and breaks it down into understandable terms. A brief history of each theory is given, along with an introduction to important scholars and influential works in the field. For me, the most helpful aspect was the practical application: the bullet pointed lists of what scholars from each camp actually *do*, and the mini-essays interpreting specific poems and short stories using the principles of each camp of literary criticism. (Several poems and short stories are included in the appendix and it was fascinating to see the same story interpreted differently depending on the chapter.)

For me, reading this book was like discovering the cipher to a code that I was already supposed to know. The

articles for my class, which are littered with references to Foucault, textual deconstruction, Bhabha, and Narratology, are beginning to make sense. The genius of this book is its ability to take obtuse terms and abstract concepts and to bring them down to earth. The author writes in an easy going, casual voice, and isn't afraid to poke fun at his own profession at times. After Derrida, it's a breath of fresh air.

If you appreciated this review, check out my blog at pagesandmargins.wordpress.com

janet says

I read this book for a course. The title concerned me. I thought it might be too basic, but it was very helpful in that one person gave his honest view of different critical approaches as well as examples of how each was used. The examples proved the most useful bits. He also forced the reader to get engaged and do some thinking and analysis. He gave all of the theories equal time if not equal respect in that he was more critical of some schools of thought. He also included discussion about possible new trends in critical theory. The one wonder I have is why he ignored Ethnic or Critical Race Theory and Culture Studies. He lumped that into other sections or ignored them. That wasn't cool.

Maria says

For the student diving into literary theory as a newcomer, this book is an excellent source to start. (Hence its title "Beginning Theory" obviously).

I myself recently started collecting knowledge about different approaches within the literary theory field. I'm writing my BA thesis, for which I need to analyze some literature, and to do this in an academically approved manner, I first delved into the different literary approaches. This book helped me gain a basic knowledge about existing approaches and also to put this new knowledge into practical use.

I especially appreciated the 'STOP and THINK' sections of the book, which put the rigid theory into practical knowledge. The summary of what a particular critic approach researches was also very useful. And finally, the selected reading for further research was good too.

The only thing I think needs improvement is that the writing style is oftentimes confusing. The author creates long sentences with commas awkwardly placed. (My digital copy also had an inconsistent array of fonts, but I think that is not the case in the original printed version).

This book definitely made me more aware of what approaches are existing in literary theory and what these approaches focus on. It proved a stepping stone to understanding literary theory, and as such I recommend it!

Michael Arnold says

A new handbook. I'm going to find this book invaluable, and it has taught me so much. It was like an atom bomb going off in my head.

Alokita says

10/10 in fulfilling its purpose of introducing the students to the complex yet essential world of Literary Theory and Criticism.

It explains in an easy to understand language, a concise outline of various literary theories in their chronicle order. It attempts to explain the main theories through series of questions and answers, encouraging readers to think about the various aspects of theories and relate to them to a greater extent. The addition of resources at the end of each literary theory is also helpful for people interested in exploring the topics that interest them.

In short an excellent resource not only for English majors but for pure novices interested in Literary theory in general.

Dave says

A nice, concise gloss of one scholar's estimation of theory's most important movements and themes. I was considering this as a possible text to use in an introductory theory class I'm teaching. Ultimately, there are three major reasons why I won't be using it.

1. Age. Even in its updated form, this book is more than a decade old. A lot can happen in a discipline in that amount of time, and students tend to see texts like this as definitive. I worry about setting them up to be not just name droppers, but even worse, old news name droppers.
2. Pedagogy. This format of tight, narrative-focused chapters that tie up many thinkers into a chapter-based -ism might work for old teaching models (like the quintessential college lecture that Barry likely used in his instruction along with most other UK academics) but there's not a great way to use this text in a more discussion-based and student-centric classroom.
3. Gloss. Finally, and most importantly, I think students who read this text as part of a college course should ask for their tuition money back. I was struck more than once that Barry's interactions with the original theoretical texts (from Aristotle to Greenblatt and Bhaba) were markedly different than mine. And it's not hard to determine why. We're different people. These primary texts are rich with subtle and playful reasoning. I had to tackle these texts on my own, and I had strong connections with the powerful theoretical ideas contained in a Foucault or a Derrida. The texts were dense, but, like Barry himself mentions in his introduction, effort is usually well rewarded. My job as a professor is to prepare, push, and reward that same effort in my students. We will never cover all the texts mentioned in these pages, but the skills my students gain in reading even a small subset will improve their intellectual success much more than an encyclopedic big picture view could.

So, I certainly recommend this as an excellent back pocket text for the enterprising student (or the faculty member hurriedly trying to brush up on a narrative of theory to use or resist in her own syllabus) but definitely not a classroom text.

