



## Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed

*Mary Klages*

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This *Guide* for the Perplexed provides an advanced introduction to literary theory from basic information and orientation for the uninformed leading on to more sophisticated readings. It engages directly with the difficulty many students find intimidating, asking 'What is "Literary Theory"?' and offering a clear, concise, accessible guide to the major theories and theorists, including: humanism; structuralism; poststructuralism; psychoanalytic approaches; feminist approaches; queer theory; ideology and discourse; new historicism; race and postcolonialism; postmodernism. The final chapter points to new directions in literary and cultural theory.

## Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed Details

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## Kate Stevens says

Fantastic resource!

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## Hasan Abbasi says

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## Mohammed Asiri says

This is great book to begin with. It gives a whole picture of most important theories from Aristotle to postmodernism theory about literature. It includes humanist literary theory leaded by Aristotle, structuralism leaded by Saussure, deconstruction leaded by Derrida, psychoanalysis leaded by Freud and Lacan, feminism leaded by Gilbert and Gubar, and Queer theory. Later, it discusses the realtion between ideology and literature establishing some critics such as Bakhtin, Foucault and Althusser as figures for what is known Discourse analysis. It concludes the book by talking about colonialism and post colonialism as well as modernism and postmodernism. The langue is really comprehensible and easy to follow although the topic is so complicated.

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## Karl Steel says

Probably the first of several such books I'll be reading in the next few weeks, since next semester I'm teaching my first graduate-level Intro to Theory Course, and I'd like to know how such things are done, given that I don't have great memories of my own Intro courses.

It's not that bad. Although its choices are sometimes idiosyncratic--in the "Ideology and Discourse" chapter, many pages devoted to Bakhtin, and only a few for Foucault (which, given the relative importance of the two thinkers, should be reversed); in the review of the history of criticism, *no entry for Kant!*--and although she grossly distorts the critical legacy of the Middle Ages (and the origin of close reading, which wouldn't exist without Rabbinic exegesis), it's a model of clarity. Her explanation of Cixous and Irigaray is particularly clear (although it would have been good to have Spivak or hooks in a chapter on feminism).

That said, it's very rare that Klages descends into linking these various critical schools with interpretation. Examples are a prerequisite for this kind of overview, especially given its audience. Moreover, it would have been useful to anticipate the objections of the more thoughtful, savvy students, who might find

psychoanalytic narratives ludicrous and also wonder about their truth value in comparison to cognitive science and psychiatry. Certainly the long discussion of Freud and Lacan in particular could have benefited from explaining what any of this has to do with literature. I know, but students won't.

Now, it may well be that Continuum simply didn't allow Klages the space she needed to make this a very useful book. She knows the stuff, and I'm sure she's a fine teacher. And she provides a great set of notes on theoretical schools to which I'll be directing my students all semester; but there's no way I'll assign this book. I'll direct students to it as a reference; however, I just don't think this book, at least not without a lot of supplemental work, will answer their questions about how this all relates to *literature*.

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### **Shel says**

I bought this book to help me in my Master of arts (Writing and Literature) degree and it certainly made my study life easier.

I had to wade through swathes of literary theory in a relatively short period and gain a strong understanding of each theory. Including chapters on Humanist Literary Theory, Structuralism, Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Queer Theory, Ideology and Discourse, Race and Postcolonialism, and Postmodernism, Mary Klages' presents complex theories in an easily understandable manner. This book demystifies literary theory.

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### **V says**

Really enjoyed it -- especially the tone. It was reassuring, even companionable of a read. Do its individual parts stand alone? I suspect not. But as an overview, start, or reference guide, really excellent. Recommend.

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### **Ted Scofield says**

Prior to reading this book, I knew absolutely nothing about literary theory. Why was that fact causing me distress? Well, as a new author, interviewers were asking me "literary" questions that, honestly, I didn't understand. (St. Martin's will release my debut novel, *EAT WHAT YOU KILL*, on March 25.)

So I sought out an introduction to literary theory, and Professor Klages' little book fit the bill. From humanism to postmodernism, the book introduces readers to the **framework for literary theory & criticism**, an academic area still evolving and, in my opinion, in flux.

I'd suggest the book is not for a casual reader looking for a quick & easy read. It is not "for dummies." The theories are complex and often counter-intuitive, but Professor Klage does a good job explaining them, with examples that definitely help cut through the intellectual clutter.

Finally, I will proudly exclaim, **Literary Theory** has already proven to be valuable to my understanding of literature. A new book, **The Double Life of Paul De Man**, by Evelyn Barish, has been in the news recently. De Man was a champion of deconstructionism. Had I not read **Literary Theory**, I would not have known what that means.

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### **Rambling Reader says**

grateful for this introduction to literary theory

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### **La Petite Princesse :-) says**

Finally!

It was a good book. It gave me an idea of literary theory and now I think I'm ready to start reading more complex books on the subject.

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### **Bahar Mir says**

A great guide for the truly perplexed, as I had been(still am, to some extent). Everything was explained and exemplified, and if there was a reference into some already discussed topic a brief definition of the whole thing would be given.

I'm pretty sure the author must be a wonderful professor, hope that I can attend one of her classes someday.

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### **John Fredrickson says**

This is an excellent book. The author introduces numerous trends in literary/philosophical analysis, all of which are very sophisticated in their approach, but she manages to make the bulk of the material understandable. I think this is quite a feat. Topics range through Humanism, Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction, Feminism, Queer Theory, PostModernism, and more. Most of the material makes sense (at least to this reader) upon a first reading, but there are definitely sections where the going gets very difficult to follow - this may improve with another reading.

Interestingly, upon finishing the book, I have a far better understanding of what the above topics mean as individual signifiers, but find that I am still somewhat at a loss for how they tie together as facets of 'Literary Theory'.

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### **David says**

After a brief introduction to classical and humanistic poetics, a concise and well-integrated overview of the complex of ideas arising from structuralism and the linguistic turn in thought, with very lucid discussions of de Saussure, Freud, Lacan, Derrida, Cixous, Irigeray, Judith Butler, Bakhtin, Foucault and others. Well-integrated in that it clarifies connections between post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, queer theory, Marxism, and so on, rather than treating them as separate and competing theories. It isn't until about halfway through the book, when she talks about various post-Marxist theorists, that Klages really starts applying any of this stuff to literature. I found the discussion of Bakhtin to be particularly illuminating, since his theory of

monologic vs. dialogic speech seems to redeem the novel as a more dialogic form - many other theorists treat the novel as bankrupt because patriarchal, hegemonic, phallogocentric, all that bad stuff, as compared to poetry (although it seems to me that much contemporary poetry is no longer as "monologic" as it might once have been). Ends with Deleuze and Guattari's notion that knowledge is "rhizomal" (rather than tree-like), i.e. without a center. English grad students and other academics may find all this quite familiar but for me it was a useful way in to some interesting ideas.

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### **Patrick Goff says**

After reading her book, I can tell that Dr. Klages must be a great professor. She clearly explains some of the more abstract concepts of literary/critical theory (the Lacanian Other, Marxist conceptions of ideology, etc.) and does so without ever being condescending. She also manages to do this with an excellent sense of humor, never taking herself nor the theorists too seriously. For example, in her chapter on "Ideology and Discourse," she sarcastically dedicates an entire page to her own poststructuralist-esque analysis of a simple shopping list, as if it were a poem. I even laughed out loud a few times as she openly poked fun at the theories she summarized, and yet I appreciated how each joke served an educational purpose.

That being said, the book left me feeling a bit disappointed. In her introduction, Klages admits that she was once "perplexed" by literary theory, and she describes some of her experiences struggling to navigate academia's frustrating, seemingly impenetrable culture. It felt as if I was sitting in her office as she revealed to me that before all of these know-it-all professors knew anything about theory, they sat exactly where I was sitting. Maybe this book isn't the place to look for that kind of encouragement, but I wished that Klages had been more consistent with her tone. Every now and then, she would dedicate a part of a chapter to her own experience, but she spent most of her time simply explaining and summarizing the work of prominent theorists. I would have enjoyed the book more had she written it in just one style, instead of shifting haphazardly between a dense academic text and an encouraging memoir.

Klages also makes some questionable decisions regarding how much time she dedicates to each theorist. She spends about a page (maybe less) on Marx, yet spends the majority of the following chapter on Mikhail Bahktin (who?). In her chapter on Race and Postcolonialism, she only mentions W. E. B. DuBois in a passing comment, glossing quickly over the concept of "double-voiced discourse." I know she had to make decisions about what and what not to include in a work like this, but I still found these choices odd.

Nonetheless, if you're interested in theory but don't know where to start, this is an excellent place to begin. It's quick and even fun at times, and it inspired me to learn more about the concepts that have shaped and continue to shape our culture.

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### **Alex Fairhill says**

A good general overview of literary theory. The chronological nature of the text makes it easy to understand how the theories and theorists were built upon by subsequent movements, but towards the end some of the more complicated theories, such as Marxist and postmodernism felt like they were almost skimmed over. There's a lot of information in some of the areas, which makes it difficult to contain all but the bare basics in the allotted space.

Despite this, Klages provides a great entry to the subject, and the resources and further reading listed as part of each chapter are a great jumping-off point for further research into any area.

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### **Bill says**

For what it is and what it needs to be, I found it to be perfect. Klages navigates the murky waters of literary theory for newcomers. Her essay on postmodernism saved me from looking completely clueless in front of my senior English class.

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