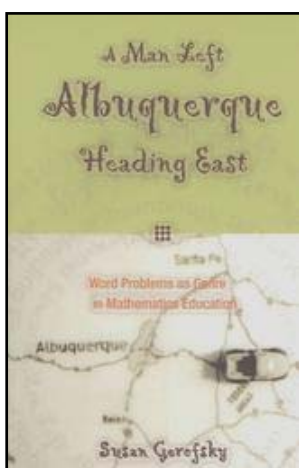


Gerofsky, S.

A Man Left Albuquerque Heading East: Word Problems as Genre in Mathematics Education

(2004). New York: Peter Lang. – 170 pp.
ISBN 08204-5823-6

Daniel H. Jarvis



Gerofsky presents mathematics word problems as a specific genre, discussing and critiquing their traditional components (i.e., “set-up”, “information,” and “question”; p. 27) and their uses throughout the history of education. She further recommends strategies for analyzing and altering this genre in

order to enrich the word problems developed in curriculum materials and implemented in classrooms. As a condensed version of the researcher’s doctoral thesis, the book is structured accordingly. Chapter 1 provides an introduction; chapters 2 and 3 deal with the theoretical background of genre, drawing heavily upon literary and linguistics sources and ideas; chapter 4 provides a rationale for, and description of, the methodological decisions made in the research; chapters 5 and 6 analyze the interview data from the various levels of participants; and chapter 8 explains the researcher’s own creative recommendations for educators and curriculum writers. Chapter 7, dealing with the elaborate history of the word problem genre, could have possibly been positioned directly following chapter 3, in terms of its theoretical nature. However, Gerofsky’s choice of penultimate positioning of this chapter does provide the reader with a necessary context for her major conjecture (i.e., the evolution of word problem utility), and also sets the stage for her recommendations regarding teacher practice in chapter 8.

The elements that I found most intriguing about Gerofsky’s account were the following: her honest and informative comments regarding her evolving research methods (e.g., *oblique questioning*, *think-*

aloud problems, and *probing for deeper responses*) as the study progressed (pp. 47-52); her revealing critique of “authentic” word problems which, under scrutiny and via interview commentary, are shown to often have very little to do with the real and complex experiences associated with the created problems (p. 41); her poignant conjecture regarding the changing nature of word problem utility after the historic introduction of algebraic representation (i.e., from repetitious skill practice to general problem-solving skill development; pp. 127-132); and, her concluding lists of reasons for studying generic forms and suggestions for educators in revisiting word problems in more meaningful ways (i.e., intentional ambiguities, mnemonic imagery, and boundary exploration; pp. 141-142).

By way of criticism, I have only a few minor technical notes and suggestions that I might offer regarding this work: (i) for consistency, the last segment of chapter 5 (p. 84) should possibly include a “Conclusions” heading, as is used in the parallel section in chapter 6 (p. 111); (ii) one subsection ends abruptly with a block quotation (p. 102) and another begins with the same (p. 115); (iii) the example regarding graphing quadratics and *intentional ambiguity* could have greatly benefited from the inclusion of a figure or illustration (pp. 143-144); (iv) the fascinating description of the *genre-awareness activity* seems regrettably brief; and, (v) the final concluding paragraph is arguably somewhat anti-climactic (pp. 149-153), as I was hoping for a much stronger ending to such a powerful work.

Gerofsky is extremely well-read in several diverse areas (e.g., linguistics, film, mathematics education) and, as such, is able to present a unique and interdisciplinary introduction to her study. She has also undertaken a very difficult project, in terms of gathering and analyzing her large amount of interview data, and coherently presenting her findings based on these interviews involving diverse participants including international researchers, teachers, writers, and students from all three levels of the education system (i.e., elementary, secondary, tertiary). Yet she succeeds brilliantly in this endeavour, highlighting many “illustrative and generative examples” (p. 48), and providing the reader with a captivating narrative throughout the entire book. A large part of this success can be attributed, I think, to Gerofsky’s ability to effectively transition back-and-forth between participant quotations, prose analysis, and related theory. The reader will also enjoy the added features of: (i) many intriguing epigrams, many of which are selected word problems from disparate cultures and eras; (ii) an appended glossary of terms

from linguistics, discourse analysis, and genre analysis (pp. 155-158); and (iii) an index of major themes and ideas found within the book (pp. 167-170).

Overall, *A Man Left Albuquerque Heading East: Word Problems as Genre in Mathematics Education*, is an enlightening and informative work of qualitative research, a fact which is certainly supported within the words of *advance praise* written by renowned Canadian education researchers Pimm, Egan, and Davis. In highlighting the complex intersection of curricular *pretension*, teacher *intention*, and student *attention*, as it were, Gerofsky has provided mathematics educators with a refreshing new perspective on mathematics word problems and their use and/or abuse within educational contexts from primary to post-secondary. By invoking *genre* as a relevant framework for analysis and interpretation, she has both historically educated and pedagogically challenged teachers of mathematics to better understand, and to then move beyond traditional approaches to, the genre of the word problem. General editors Kincheloe and Weil are no doubt proud to offer this work as part of their “extreme teaching: rigorous texts for trouble times” series, as Gerofsky both conspicuously problematizes (p. 26) the use of word problems in mathematics education, yet also dares to postulate and provide useful strategies (pp. 142-154) for future curriculum development and classroom practice.

Author**Daniel H. Jarvis, PhD**

Assistant Professor, Mathematics Education

Faculty of Education, Nipissing University

North Bay, Ontario, Canada

E-mail: danj@nipissingu.caW: <http://www.nipissingu.ca/faculty/danj/>