Book Review

Searching Writing
by Ken Macrorie
Hayden Book Co., 1980

As I read Ken Macrorie’s latest book, Searching Writing, I was continually delighted with its freshness, its good sense, its readability, and its subversion of the many oafish traditions connected with the school research paper. That’s what the book is about, research papers, or, as Macrorie renames his version of them, I-Search papers. Macrorie’s guide to the uncommon research paper is unique, better even, in its way, than the author’s previous composition texts, Writing to be Read and Telling Writing.

Macrorie rejects the traditional research paper as “…an exercise in badly done bibliography, often an introduction to the art of plagiarism, and a triumph of meaninglessness—for both writer and reader.” In its place he proposes the I-Search paper which “…comes out of a student’s life and answers a need in it.” The finished product is a narrative about the students’ quest and his discoveries. The experience of the search is reported along with the results of it; the subjective and objective are balanced, blended as they are in life. Macrorie’s symbol for this is the Moebius loop. In Chapter Two, called “Loopy Learning,” he describes it:

Cut a half-inch strip down the side of a sheet of typing paper, give one end a twist, and scotch-tape the ends together so [they] join [to make a continuous circle]. At any one point along the Loop there are two sides—for the I and The Others, for subjectivity and objectivity, or any other set of polar opposites. If you press the point of your pencil on the Strip and pull the paper along, you’ll find that the line eventually runs into itself. Two sides, but in the long pull they become each other.

This Moebian image informs the entire book, especially the chapters “I and Others” (“others” being authorities from whom one learns) and “Objectivity and Subjectivity.” But Macrorie not only preaches the Moebian theme, he practices it as well. Few pages go by without his recounting a telling anecdote from his experience to introduce or illuminate an idea he is presenting: In an example from Chapter Ten, “Talking Animals” (on the importance of speech),

I’m sixty years old as I write this, and only in recent months have I realized that when I sit down to write, I hear the words that are forming the sentence I want to write. Too often I reject them and try for something better. When I do, I break down, stutter, and contrive a sentence rather than hear it take off and sing.

I-Search papers abound in Searching Writing. Several chapters are studded with excerpts from student I-Search papers, and others contain complete ones. My favorite I-Search papers in Searching Writing are Macrorie’s own. He composed several chapters as I-Search papers: one on the Encyclopedia Brittanica; one on the Oxford English Dictionary; one on the history of periodical indexing; and a chapter on Samuel Johnson, Noah Webster, and their dictionaries. The usual term paper manual informs its readers on the use of reference materials in ways that put insomniacs to sleep. But in Searching Writing the chapters on reference works are treasures, small gems of historical essays that—believe it or not—make the reference works come to life. Macrorie has described the human beings behind the thick volumes of the OED, for example, and writes of them and their endeavors engagingly. He shows how that august work was put together including the money problems, the personality problems, the time problems.

The differences between an I-Search paper and the traditional research paper are simple: the I-Search asks the student to write about something he is truly interested in, something that affects his life, not an abstract topic handed down by the teacher. And it asks that the writer be part of the paper as he was part of the search. Macrorie’s advice is to tell the I-Search quest as a story, and he suggests this four-part structure:

1. What I Knew (and didn’t know about my topic when I started out).
2. Why I’m Writing This Paper (…the writer demonstrates that the search may make a difference in his life).
3. The Search (the story of the hunt).
4. What I Learned (or didn’t learn. A search that failed can be as exciting and valuable as one that succeeded).

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A final charm of this book is Macrorie's putting into practice his belief in honesty in writing. He tells his readers that he himself fudged a bit in writing this book. Macrorie's research into the *OED* led him to discover that its great editor, James A. H. Murray, sometimes fabricated his own illustrations for words when he couldn't find appropriate historical examples. When Sir James said that to me, I thought of the problem that I had in this textbook. Since for most of the chapters I had on file or readily accessible a number of quotations, I thought consistency required that every chapter be supplied with them, but for a few chapters I was wanting some. Thus, like Murray, I made up a couple myself and signed them "Lu Po Hua." The words of Lu Po Hua? "Where there is curiosity, a mouse may be caught." Ken Macrorie wants curiosity to live and be satisfied. He fears that traditional methods of doing school research papers kill students' curiosity. *Searching Writing* is devoted to correcting that situation, to catching a lot of mice.

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