Jerome Klinkowitz.  
*You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught: Learning and Relearning Literature.*  

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“The Mis-Education and Re-Education of Jerome Klinkowitz”

When one reflects upon the mis-education of a person in the United States, one would not think of Jerome Klinkowitz, the University of Northern Iowa Distinguished Professor and Scholar. Rather, one tends to picture a minority student not receiving the kind of education that would also include the student’s specific cultural and historical background. Not for “feel-goodism,” as Arthur Schlesinger would lead us to believe (in *The Disuniting of America*), but the kind of curriculum that recognizes the diversity of the U.S. as a strength, an asset—think about Carter G. Woodson’s *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. Yet, it is all there in *You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught: Learning and Relearning Literature*, a memoir about how Jerome Klinkowitz was miseducated in literature. He had to re-learn literature in order to teach it to students more effectively by going against the grain of what English departments used to do. As he points out in the introduction, his text is “the prototype for the complete reinvention of what English departments, if they want to, could be doing” (2).

Like the song (from the Rogers and Hammerstein musical, *South Pacific*) it takes its title from, *You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught* is a protest book of a sort. Protest against the way we teach literature in English departments. As a memoir, however, *You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught* is not a theory of pedagogy, albeit a willing literature teacher can pick up some tips on teaching literature here and there throughout the book. Nor does Klinkowitz claim to proffer any pedagogical “catechism.” He writes from experiences and shows us why he has been successful in making students enjoy reading and discussing about literature. His is a serious-teacher method. Klinkowitz sees himself as an agent or a dialogue facilitator, while the students take responsibility for their own education.

Following a foreword by Kurt Vonnegut, *You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught* is divided into three chapters: Education, Home Schooling, Teaching. In chapter one, “Education,” Klinkowitz tells the story of his education and love for literature that he developed by first reading such history books as *Chief Black Hawk*. We see him going through Marquette University High School, where Freshman English was as bad as the sciences. His education at this time also included the story of Jazz, with his high school hosting such Jazz luminaries as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Cannon Adderley. We see him playing in a rock band and attending the University of Marquette and then the University of Wisconsin
at Madison. We agonize with him as he goes through three doctoral comprehensive exams in 18th, 19th, and 20th-century American literature. Unprepared for the twentieth-century critical jargon, he flunked the third section of the exam. A second-exam chance fitted him better, as he had been offered a teaching job at Northern Illinois University. It asked him to write “a model syllabus for a twentieth-century American literature course, offering detailed rationale for each text chosen” (43). There are some humorous moments, too, such as when a registrar at Marquette sent his father’s record to the State University of New York at Buffalo, where Klinkowitz wanted to study with the late Leslie Fiedler. SUNY at Buffalo wrote back asking why someone in his fifties with bad grades would apply for graduate school.

In chapter two, “Home Schooling,” Klinkowitz relates his teaching experiences at both Northern Illinois University (NIU) and the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) in the 1970s, particularly how he transformed his way of teaching literature from a trite, modernist approach to teaching fiction by Kurt Vonnegut, Ron Sukenick, and similar innovative writers. For Klinkowitz, “Aligning Vonnegut and Sukenick was the act that made both interpretation and literary history clear, and it was an act that was first of all pedagogical” (55). In this chapter, Klinkowitz narrates how the older faculty members at UNI, who saw their responsibility primarily in teaching, resented the administration’s move to also emphasize publication and scholarship. What he saw at UNI had been happening at Marquette and other academic institutions across America: mandatory teaching of literary periods without any deviation. Admitting that he may be harshly expressing his views of the UNI English faculty of the 1970s and 80s, Klinkowitz succinctly presents a narrative of the politics of teaching and evaluating colleagues for tenure in the department of English. The narrative shows a union and a university squandering resources in bargaining negotiations and a faculty warped into protecting individual turfs. On the other hand, it shows Klinkowitz churning out book after book on baseball, Jazz, philosophy, and air force historiography while inserting these disciplines in his literature class. Further, by not pursuing a distinguished professorship at another university, UNI reduced his nine-hour teaching load to a six-hour load and allowed him to teach half semesters. Later, a new head of the department asked him to “teach two sections of the widely scorned general education course Introduction to Literature” (88). The experiment was so successful that Klinkowitz has been repeating it since then. That is the subject of chapter three.

Chapter three, “Teaching,” shows Klinkowitz at work, teaching his two sections of “Introduction to Literature”. He candidly and specifically writes about teaching strategies, including an emphasis on students sharing their reading experiences in class, forming small discussion groups that meet separately for forty minutes before coming to class as a group, and knowing one another’s names. Here, Klinkowitz details what he does in his two sections from the beginning to the end of the half semester, which includes meeting small groups of students on Friday afternoons to look over their final papers. I have seen these groups of students streaming in and out of his office on Friday afternoons at the end of each half semester.

You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught is a well-written memoir on the teaching of literature and the history of English departments at three Midwest universities, a history that could be microcosmic of English
departments across America between the 1960s and the 1980s. It is Klinkowitz’s story of what he experienced as a high school, undergraduate, and graduate student, and then as a junior faculty and later a seasoned, distinguished university professor. Although what he says about the teaching of literature and the teaching strategies he details in his memoir may not sound new in “pedagogical theory,” it confirms what some us in the same field have been trying to do. Make literature courses less trite but still rigorous and include as many living authors as possible, or at least interface “canonical writers” with the contemporary ones. With You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught, Klinkowitz shows us that there still hope in English and literary studies. It deserves serious attention.

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