The argument of this ambitious book is two-fold: literary interpretation occurs mainly through writing about a literary text and misreadings of literature are particularly fruitful for new interpretive insights. Weissman claims that literary interpretation is at its heart a rewriting of the primary text and that the writerly choices we make create our understanding of the work. Student writing about a text should therefore be “first steps in an ongoing, collaborative process of literary analysis” (1) with the author.

_The Writer in the Well_ draws on scholarship from reader-response theory, narrative theory, composition and rhetoric, and creative writing to construct what Weissman calls “writer-response theory.” His examination of “how both kinds of writers make literary texts meaningful” (27) builds on theories of reader-response to make the case that literary interpretation is concerned with the act of writing. In other words, a literary analysis inherently tells a new story about the literary text because of the interpretive choices being made by the new writer. For Weissman, “misreadings”—or interpretations of the literary work that may be considered less valid or nontraditional—highlight the details of a text that are not accounted for in dominant interpretations within the field. Misreading, then, becomes a productive strategy that “can lead us to ask good questions” (23) and productively challenge what we think we “know” about a text’s meaning.

Weissman qualifies his argument for valuing misreading by stating that some interpretations of a text have more validity than others; indeed, misreadings fail to be productive when they are the result of a lack of care and attention to the text (18). Overall, Weissman makes
a strong case for the value of misreading and literary interpretation as an act of writing more than reading, though he moves well beyond these points into issues of authorial intention and literary interpretation “as a collaborative and cumulative undertaking” (182).

In the first chapter, “Misreadings,” Weissman examines several student misreadings of Ira Sher’s short story “The Man in the Well” (1995)¹ and provides commentary on the underlying assumptions that might produce such readings. He then examines his own interpretation of Sher’s story in the second chapter, “Authorities.” Weissman’s interrogation of his own reading of the story elaborates how student interpretations have influenced the way he has viewed, and re-viewed, the story over the years. His ultimate focus is the two types of authorities to which students most often defer when interpreting a literary work: the author and the teacher. Weissman reflects on his own authority as teacher to assess student readings of Sher’s story as either correct or incorrect, and models the process of “muddling” through the story with his students to highlight the process of writing as discovery.

Weissman offers an original interpretation of Roland Barthes’ declaration of the “death of the author” as well. He argues that the death of the author need not equal the death of the writer. Although we should view the writer as “the constructive agent of the text” (119), for Weissman this is not the same as saying that authorial intention (if it can ever be determined) is the final word on the meaning of a literary work. Rather the writer of a text is free to offer an interpretation of his/her own work. This interpretation, however, should not be viewed as inherently more valid than any other reader’s; in fact, Weissman’s call for a middle-ground on the question of authorial intention may be among the most compelling dimensions of this book.

In “Genres,” the third and final chapter, Weissman incorporates the claims of Peter Rabinowitz, Michael Smith, and Jerrold Levinson that readers not only use knowledge of the genre they are currently encountering when forming an interpretation, but that in the absence of this knowledge they will fall back on what they know about other genres. Weissman explains that students who misread Sher’s story did so in part because of their unfamiliarity with literary short fiction. Instead, these students attempted to place Sher’s story in a genre with which they were more familiar, like the fairy tale, as a kind of short-hand for interpreting the text.

Weissman closes his book with an Afterword, in which he presents a sample of emails he exchanged with Sher, curated into a conversation, about the process of writing, reading, and interpreting “The Man in the Well.” In one email conversation with Weissman, Sher describes his attention to the story’s pacing and style and how this in turn “affects the narrative” (qtd in Weissman 120). Sher continues, “[Attention to pacing] creates language choices that might seem to be about saying something a particular way from a critical perspective, but which actually originate in style—not to draw too hard a distinction” (121). Here, we see Sher describing authorial intention that is less about what he intended the story to mean and more about how he wanted it to feel. This conversation complicates the idea of authorial intention as a way of circumscribing a text’s meaning by highlighting Sher’s attention to aesthetic effect rather than message.

Weissman’s thoughtful treatment of student writing, his close reading of student responses to Sher’s story, and his discussion of classroom conversations about “meaning” provide a useful pedagogical model for teachers of literature. His willingness to reflect on his own interpretation of “The Man in the Well,” including his description of over-reading and under-reading, reinforce his argument that no one interpretation of a work should be considered
definitive. The three large chapters are divided in a way that makes the flow of ideas easy to follow, with Weissman effectively breaking each chapter into numerous short, one-to-three page sections with headings that guide the reading experience.

The theoretical perspectives on which Weissman draws—reader-response, narrative, psychoanalytic, authorship studies, composition studies, and creative writing—provide a range of perspectives on how readers and scholars make meaning from literary texts. While Weissman’s choice to incorporate these theoretical perspectives forwards his argument, occasionally this strategy sacrifices depth for breadth. At times Weissman only hints at the possibilities of his theory before shifting focus. Additionally, connections between some of these disparate schools of thought and his larger point could have been made clearer. For example, in “Misreadings” Weissman includes an intriguing discussion of Ralph James Savarese and Lisa Zunshine’s (2014) description of “mindblindness,” a particular form of “communication failure” resulting from an inability to accurately “read” another person through their nonverbal cues (Savarese and Zunshine2 24-25, quoted in Weissman 41-42). Weissman posits that mindblindness occurs in reading when readers are unable to “determine characters’ states of mind” (42). While this concept has interesting potential in connection to the challenges of textual interpretation, more could have been done to relate it to the larger arguments and concepts of the chapter. The array of interpretive lenses could be dizzying at times, and his argument might have been easier to follow had a few of these lenses been discarded.

There are times, too, when greater attention to a particular theory might have provided a more complete representation of a particular theorist’s work. For example, Weissman briefly

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discusses a few ideas from Louise Rosenblatt’s 1938 *Literature as Exploration* (2005)\(^3\)—a foundational text in reader-response theory. However, Weissman’s use of particular quotations out of the context of her larger argument makes Rosenblatt sound almost like a New Critic; for instance, he references her advice that readers return to the text to evaluate their responses and claims that, while he does this as well, he does not regard the text as an “objective measuring instrument” (71). This misrepresentation of Rosenblatt’s view of texts in the meaning-making process would be alleviated with more description of the basics of her theory of reading as a *transaction* between reader and text.

*The Writer in the Well* is a rewarding pedagogical reflection on literary interpretation and criticism in practice. Weissman’s inclusion of scholarship from literary studies, composition and rhetoric, and creative writing make this book pertinent to a variety of audiences: for courses in literature, this book offers pedagogical models of writing in the literature classroom; for courses in writing studies, it addresses challenges student-writers might face in interpreting a reading assigned for a writing project; and for courses in creative writing, it offers a sustained dialogue with an author about his creative work, giving students insight into how one established author thinks about his own story and writing process.

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