Anis Bawarshi’s *Genre and the Invention of the Writer* comes at a critical moment for rhetorical genre theory and Composition. On the one hand, genre theory has begun to garner a great deal of attention, not only within Composition Studies, but also in the fields from which its proponents have drawn their theoretical constructs and methodologies: applied linguistics, the sociology of science, education, and Communication Studies, to name a few. Genre, it seems, is the term that everyone is talking about. On the other hand, compositionists are, quite justifiably, calling for a more thorough exploration of genre theory’s implications for and applications to classroom practice. Randall Popken has observed that articles and books which have argued for the importance of genre theory to Composition seem to stop short of offering more than a few tantalizing glimpses of what that theory might mean for pedagogy. It bears pointing out as well that while articles with “genre” in the title are now legion in the major Composition journals, very few books on genre have been published which explicitly address a Composition audience. And those that do exist tend to be edited collections, providing at best a smorgasbord of issues and insights rather than a cohesive argument.

Thus, by applying rhetorical genre theory to an analysis of invention, Bawarshi offers a much-needed exposition that integrates genre with concepts central to Composition. *Genre and the Invention of the Writer* is not an introduction to rhetorical genre theory nor is it a “how to” book on genre analysis or pedagogy; nevertheless, the book addresses both of these exigencies as it makes a larger theoretical point about the relationship between genre and subject formation in writing. By way of introducing genre theory, Bawarshi takes Foucault’s author-function as the basis for his “genre function,” a concept which integrates definitions of genre from various disciplines around a description of genres as constitutive of rhetorical actions, social roles, relationships, and identities. Although Bawarshi draws from a range of thinkers for his concepts, from Bakhtin to Heidegger to Halliday, the general movement of this theoretical introduction is toward the social theory of Anthony Giddens, whose notion of the duality of structure (as presented in *The Constitution of Society*) fits neatly with the ecological metaphor that Bawarshi presents later on. Genres, he argues, function as rhetorical ecosystems in that they both shape and are shaped by the communicative acts that subjects perform within them.

In addition to this introductory work, the book provides excellent models of genre analysis, not only by examining the published and unpublished work of
others, but also by engaging in insightful readings of a number of literary and everyday texts. And although these moments are sure to stimulate the imaginations of students and novice researchers, they are not, as I have noted, merely there to demonstrate the nuts and bolts of a rhetorical analysis of genre; rather, they are always a means of advancing the overall argument. Indeed, what makes Bawarshi’s genre analyses useful is the fact that they are so thoroughly grounded in the book’s theoretical position. For example, Bawarshi contrasts the discursive features that mark D. H. Lawrence’s expression of his ambivalent attitude toward his mother through novelistic and poetic genres, thus illustrating his contention that even literary genius and creativity are constituted within “genred” spaces. Similarly, a discussion of greeting cards serves as a demonstration of how genres interpellate subjects in the Althusserian sense by providing readers and writers with specific choices for the subjectivities which they may take up as they read or write.

The theoretical heart of the book lies in its location of invention “at the intersection between the acquisition and articulation of desire” (13). Bawarshi argues that current theories of invention, particularly as they have developed through the process movement, have resulted in a “privatization” of invention, emphasizing its introspective and individual aspects to the detriment of social and historical considerations. This view of invention has not gone unchallenged, however, and Bawarshi notes some of these challenges, focusing specifically on Karen Burke LeFevre’s Invention as a Social Act (1987), whose call for inquiry into the “ecology of invention” Bawarshi takes up by proposing genres as sites of invention, within which writers acquire desires as well as the means to fulfill those desires as meaningful social actions. A key facet of this approach is its dynamic view of agency. Genres, that is, organize and generate a writer’s desire to act through an interplay between motive and intention. Here Bawarshi draws most directly on Giddens, who describes motives as socially learned, ideologically located potentials for action, and intentions as the individual, interpretive instantiations of motives. Thus, the realization of agency through genre can be viewed as a dialectical process: by situating themselves within generic structures, writers not only make their intentions recognizable as such, they also reproduce and, quite literally, remake those structures through their individual intentions, often altering them in subtle ways.

The final chapters of the book explore the implications of this theoretical approach for teaching, with the first-year course (FYC) as the primary reference point. Building on David Russell’s work in activity theory, Bawarshi analyzes the FYC from the perspective of the various genres that shape and enable rhetorical activity within it: the syllabus, the writing prompt, the essay. In this way, he supports his contention that the FYC is not the artificial environment that some have claimed it to be, but rather a rich and multilayered site for rhetorical action—a real writing situation, in which invention can be defined as the way in which writers take up, respond to, and position themselves in relation to other writers and other texts. He closes by proposing genre analysis as a way of “making this positioning visible and
accessible to students” so that they can reflect on it, interrogate it, and, ultimately, participate critically in the identities and relations formed within genres (14).

Some readers will undoubtedly find it a bit frustrating that these final chapters, which argue so powerfully for a rethinking of pedagogical goals and classroom practice along lines suggested by rhetorical genre theory, offer few specifics—other than a useful heuristic for genre analysis—as to how a genre-based course might be carried out. To be fair, though, this isn’t what the book sets out to do (and it should be pointed out that Bawarshi has co-authored, with Amy J. Devitt and Mary Jo Reiff, a textbook entitled *Scenes of Writing: Genre Acts*, which fills in the details that may seem to be missing here). What I think compositionists will find most engaging and provocative about this book is that it connects its arguments about genre, invention, and desire to larger debates within the field: the importance of rhetoric to Composition as well as the place of the FYC in the university. In Bawarshi’s formulation, rhetorical genre theory, with its focus on the production of texts and writers’ placement within the conditions of that production, presents nothing less than a way of reinvesting Composition with the foundation in rhetoric that many scholars have argued it lost with the invention of the FYC in the late nineteenth century. And this is what justifies the FYC in the face of writing in the disciplines (WID) initiatives that would seem to render it obsolete, instead making the FYC what Bawarshi calls the “rhetorical promontory” from which students can begin to negotiate their identities as readers and writers within specific disciplinary and professional contexts (155). Not only does *Genre and the Invention of the Writer* do an excellent job of defining and refining the place of genre theory in Composition; it also encourages us to reflect on the place of Composition itself: the situated discursive spaces in which writing is formed through the congruence of socially defined, ideologically informed, and individually interpreted relations and identities.

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**WORKS CITED**


