

learned to say no?

In "Walden Song," the final poem in *No Country for Women*, Cimon's narrator is comfortable with her own "wildness" and imagines coming to Thoreau,

my body liberated,
no longer tucked
into a heavy gown,
my feet no longer
cinched in laced shoes,
I can breathe
comfortable in a thin
cotton dress
with pink flowers

dark hair loose

my feet bare in sandals.

The reader may rejoice in the poet's freedom and at the same time wonder wickedly what Thoreau might make of this uninvited guest.

The argument each of these authors makes (and in the case of Stonehouse's *Words I Know*, powerfully makes), is that the country for women is language and poetry.

A STONE IN MY SHOE: TEACHING LITERACY IN TIMES OF CHANGE

Lorri Neilsen. Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1994.

by *Kristin Ruppert*

A Stone In My Shoe means to shake up literacy teachers who have become too set in their ways or who may in times of frustration think of themselves as mere classroom technicians. An educator and writer from Nova Scotia, Lorri Neilsen's essays range from accounts of her own struggles as a young teacher trying to live up to the mythical ideal of a schoolteacher with encyclopedic knowledge, to an awareness of the importance of her own teaching experience which she now values as "the richest source of professional understanding."

Neilsen puts a human compassionate face on teaching. The perspective she offers is refreshing and the ideas behind this book prove that she is a teacher who takes her profession seriously, knowing that the future of our world depends to a large extent on our children's education. She opposes the conservative, mechanistic, and linear view of teaching that sees children as mere products that need to be able to function in our society, and advocates organic, growth-oriented teaching that makes the needs of children central and equips them with practical life-skills and the knowledge that they can move and change their world.

Applying the industrial metaphor to education, especially literacy education, has resulted in widespread alienation, inequality, and intellectual and spiritual impoverishment.

The book consists of fourteen essays that can be read consecutively or individually. Each of these essays can stand alone and still convey Neilsen's points; reading the whole book, therefore, means encountering the same ideas tackled from different angles, over and over again. This format does not allow Neilsen to give her analyses much depth and several times she resorts to simplistic dichotomies, like the one between "Uncle Research" and teachers' research. Instead of research that is being done by "experts" in the field, who tend to have no teaching experience, she wants to see more research conducted by teachers in classrooms. "Learning to think for ourselves is becoming a priority for literacy professionals." Dismissing "expert" research so willingly, however, means giving up on many opportunities; it was for example such research that proved that teachers in the classroom attend more to boys than to girls and are utterly unaware of their gender biases.

Neilsen deplores the fact that teachers' work keeps being degraded in the media and "professional esteem is at an all-time low"; for that reason she

urges teachers to trust their experience and intuition and accept that "learning and growth are lifelong activities" whose results cannot be measured by standardized tests. In an attempt to instill professional pride in teachers, Neilsen repeats her keywords "professional renewal," "professional confidence" in a mantra-like fashion—as if visualizing it will make it so. However, she does not suggest many concrete strategies on how to achieve professional renewal.

Neilsen's language and analogies are reminiscent of New Age phraseology as this small selection of essay titles demonstrates: "Galaxies," "Of Parachutes, Mockingbirds, and Bat-Poets," "A Dance of the Heart, A Song of the Soul." An analogy the author draws in her essay "Gardens" between teachers in Canada and illiterate women in developing countries left me feeling quite uncomfortable. Granted, it is the same patriarchal hierarchical structures that keep women there uneducated and teachers here undervalued and underpaid; nevertheless, I found it quite presumptuous to compare the relatively small problems teachers face in Canada—a country that per capita uses up most of the world's natural resources—to the life-threatening problems women face in developing countries.

Although I generally sympathize with Neilsen's views on teaching, I regret that her essays fail to explore the issues she raises in more depth. Perhaps, though, *A Stone in My Shoe* will be a starting point for teachers to re-examine their profession.

The hope for education, I am convinced, lies in the spirit of the growing numbers of teachers who, like weavers, are examining their own practice and creating their own truths. And in the spirit of all teachers, whose daily dedication to other people's children weaves tapestries wider and more complex by the year, this hope is enough perhaps to warm a generation.