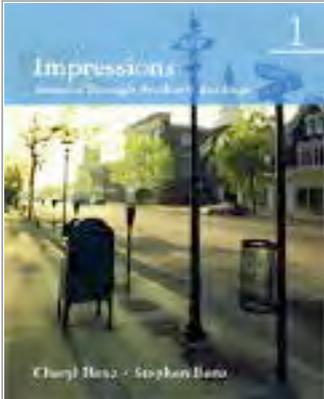


<i>Impressions 1 & 2: America through Academic Readings</i>			
Author:	Cheryl Benz & Stephen Benz (2008)		
Publisher:	Boston: Heinle		
Book	Pages	ISBN	Price
Book 1	Pp. xvii +157;	978-0-618-41026-2	\$25 U.S.
Book 2	Pp. xii + 147	978-0-618-41027-9	\$25 U.S.



The aim of this two-book series is "to encourage students to explore their impressions of American culture" (1: p. xi) and acquire the academic skills necessary in higher education. The authors argue, rightly, that mastery of language is not enough to perform in higher education and that foreign students have to know the culture of the country they are studying in, have to know "much more than the surface features of the language" (1: p. xi). Linguistic, rhetorical and critical thinking skills are necessary for academic survival and success reaching adequate college level reading skills. Each chapter explores a theme, first with a general overview (overall impressions), followed by in-depth impressions, personal impressions, student impressions. The key word, as the title suggests, is "impressions," covering subjects partially, with an emphasis on the subjective. The authors argue that the scope of the book is too limited to cover all aspects of American culture. Each selection is accompanied by comprehension and vocabulary exercises as well as subjects for discussion and writing.

Five themes are explored in each book. Thus we are presented in turn with American values (individualism, for example), language (American English), immigration, geography and culture, music, money, competition, art, nature, and education. Nothing about the political and social systems, very little about the economic system. Each book ends with an academic word list (approximately 300 for the first and 350 for the second) with page reference for each entry.

On each theme, the authors try, in a rather commendable way, to examine several aspects of it, present several points of view, but all points of view are presented with

equal validity, so what are foreign students to make of this? That anything goes? That any opinion is acceptable? To take an example, values: "People in one culture may think it is important to show respect to elderly people. Those people value the wisdom that comes from living for a long time. In another culture, people may value youth. Those people value the energy and new ideas that come from young people" (1: p. 3). It reads as if a culture does one or the other but cannot do both, that both are good. It doesn't say what the Americans do, nor anybody else for that matter. These are just vague ideas, without any substantiation in facts. So what does this tell us? Nothing.

To define American values, the authors draw on the work of Robert Kohls. They interpret his writings (for once, reference is given) in what they probably think is a concrete way that will make theoretical concepts clear to simple-minded foreign students (whose intelligence is addressed in condescending terms usually addressed, it seems to me, to post-toddlers). Kohls thinks indeed that "Personal control over the environment" is the most important American value: Americans no longer believe in fate, think humans can control nature, and refuse to accept limitations, giving going to the Moon as an example (1984, p. 2). Fair enough. But the Benzes, to illustrate personal control over the environment, cite central heating instead, making the argument trivial: "Some Americans are very uncomfortable if they cannot control the temperature around them" (2: p. 4). The lack of solid argumentation and serious examples, in place of which students are fed "impressions," leads to shallowness and frivolity and can only confuse foreign students as to what American values really are. Where is the critical thinking deemed necessary to succeed in higher education? In this same chapter, we are given examples of American "rugged" individualism in the form of John Wayne and Sylvester Stallone. Manly men. How do women express individualism? Or is it only a male virtue? Those males in particular do not seem to me to be very positive images for a country.

Sometimes, there is a truly intercultural approach, comparing the merits of two different cultures, as in book 1, chapter 3, in which a Chinese art student explains her difficulties in graphic design: she tries to incorporate elements from the two cultures to bridge the gap and thus produce art that is acceptable in the USA. But this happens too rarely. In most of the material, the sub-text clearly reads: the United States is best. This implicit ranking occurs, for instance also in chapter 3, in which we are presented with the personal success story of an immigrant, a Russian who found a better life in the USA. Similarly, in the last chapter of the second book, a student compares Chinese and American education. While presenting different views on education, more precisely relations between teachers and students, and seemingly refraining from passing judgment, the authors choose words unequivocally in favour of the United States: (1) "In China, teachers have absolute authority" finds a parallel in "In America, teachers give more freedom to students." (2) "Students have to sit in a stricter way too" is countered by "Students sit in a very relaxed manner." Authority and strictness on one side, freedom and relaxed manners on the other, the scale leaning heavily towards the latter characterizations. This favoritism guiding the choice of examples can reach narrow-minded, ridiculous dimensions. In book 2, a comment in the student writing section in the chapter on consumerism is the epitome of the superficial bias of

the books. The student writes: "In Russia, we never had to learn a separate language just to order a cup of coffee," meaning there is such a choice of coffees in this land of plenty that you have to learn a lot of foreign-sounding words, whereas such variety doesn't exist in Russia - and that is a shame. This sounds like Cold War propaganda. It implies that Russia is backward and therefore life in the US is much better, thanks to cappuccinos and espressos. I know for a fact that Italian coffees are available in Russia too.

Usually, the first selection of each chapter is fairly objective and informative, for example the text in the second chapter of book 1 about American English and the contributions of various languages to it. The next chapter presents first a history of immigration with figures - up to 2010(!) - and offers a brief description of various ethnic groups (Irish, Chinese, etc.) and of the laws restricting immigration. But the readings following it offer only restricted views of an issue or, worse, are irrelevant. For instance, the second document in the chapter on the English language is about Swahili: it can hardly be said that Swahili, only one of the many African languages, has had a major influence on American English, in spite of the wish of some Black Power militants in the 70's to introduce it in the United States. The mention, in the same article, of a Swahili phrase meaning "I love you, and I want you, my dear" in one of Michael Jackson's songs does not seem of such paramount importance as to warrant a reading on a minor linguistic contribution to American English. The authors can do better, and occasionally do: The next article, on African-American vernacular, is appropriate and gives proper consideration to this branch of American English. They should have exercised such judgment more often. As to the selection about Walt Whitman, it is out of place in this chapter.

Many of the texts presented here as "academic readings" are attributed to no one and not mentioned in the credits page, not really the place where a reader should be looking for such information. I can only infer that the two authors of the books themselves wrote the articles. If true, this seems to me either extremely presumptuous (their views and opinions are representative of the country as a whole?) or very lazy (they did not try to find writings relevant to the subjects treated and that would be validated one way or another). I am aware of the difficulty of obtaining free copyright and therefore of the temptation (especially for publishers) to use copyright-free material to lower costs. But it would be honest to say so. As to student essays, presented as models for writing and placed on the same level as the other documents, they can hardly qualify as academic reading either.

The subjects for discussion are open (the right to bear arms, for example) and fairly interesting but what can students base their comments on? Certainly not on the material provided in the books. For example, students are asked to provide advice to someone wanting to immigrate today (1: p. 70). The rosy picture of immigration presented here is not going to help them much unless they are giving advice to a student like themselves and are drawing on their own limited personal experience.

Some chapters hardly treat the theme; in fact, they under-treat it more often than not. "Geography and culture" concentrates on road trips and cars, a rather limited view of geography and culture. The myth of the West is examined without significant mention of Native Americans, except in passing. "America's natural environment" only deals with protection of endangered species and pesticides, with an emphasis on individual efforts to save the earth. Industrial pollution is ignored and the Kyoto agreement (which the USA has not signed) is not mentioned. The chapter on competition defines it as a vital American value. One would expect here something about capitalism, the "rat race," the transfer of industry to under-developed countries, etc. No such luck. Sports seems to be the only area of competition: that is, articles on (1) youth sports, (2) soccer moms (who, themselves, are not in competition as far as I know), (3) the prohibition of alcohol in sports (irrelevant), (4) gender equity in sports (is there competition between men and women?), (5) a comparison between women in Japan and in the United States (American women are more mature, more outgoing, more feminine, more free) and (6) the success story of an Ethiopian immigrant runner. Again, under the disguise of comparing cultures, the "impression" of superiority of American culture prevails.

As usual, when examining a pedagogical resource, I look at the illustrations. Here, as always, women are under-represented. In book 1, we can see a woman with other people (one of them being clearly a man) and a woman schoolteacher (with children). Women do not stand alone and are anonymous. Men are alone and often famous: the aforementioned John Wayne and Sylvester Stallone, John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir again, four presidents (Kennedy, Carter, Clinton, Bush), a gambler, a cowboy, two men on horseback with a slave tied to one of the men while being whipped by the other man, Walt Whitman, Levi Strauss, Chinese immigrants (on an anti-Chinese poster), another cowboy, a jazz musician, Stephen Foster, three rappers, Louis Armstrong. Ethnic minorities are well represented but in only two categories: as victims of oppression and discrimination or as musicians. Book 2 is hardly better.

To sum up, we have here a patchwork of readings, some broad overviews on a topic, some partial views, and some irrelevant commentaries. They certainly do not adequately represent a topic, but then, the avowed aim is "Impressions" and this is what we get. The whole is bland, boring, infantile. Although the authors are intent on not hurting anybody's feelings and appear to present both sides of the coin when the subject calls for it, the material too often reads like ideological propaganda: the need to convince foreigners that the American way of life is the best in the world. The stated aim of developing critical thinking is not fulfilled.

Impressions indeed!

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