BOOK REVIEW

Literary Theory: The Basics (Fourth Edition)

Hans Bertens: Routledge (Taylor and Francis Group), 2024, 266 pp.

In contemporary humanities discourse, the term theory frequently evokes a polarized response: it is viewed as a liberatory critical tool capable of uncovering societal power structures, yet also seen as an intimidating labyrinth of esoteric jargon. Hans Berten's *Literary Theory: The Basics,* now in its updated fourth edition, attempts to negotiate this dialectic by providing a structured guide to literary studies. Bertens, known as a Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature at Utrecht University, brings his background in the field to this task. His previous works, such as *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History,* demonstrate a capacity for synthesizing dense theoretical frameworks into comprehensible prose. In this monograph, Bertens aims to show how literary theory and literary practice are connected. The book contextualizes theory as an academic discipline that requires ideological understanding. By tracing the evolution of literary criticism from the mid-twentieth century's linguistic shift to the digital humanities, it attempts to clarify theoretical paradigms and present theory as a functional tool for interpreting literature.

Physically, the book is published by Routledge within "The Basics" series, which aims to provide accessible overviews of fundamental subjects. It spans approximately 266 pages, concluding an index that facilitates the navigation of terminology and historical concepts. It is single authored by Bertens, though it references numerous critics and writers to build its historical narratives. The volume is divided into the core chapters, an introductory preface, and an organized bibliography. The book does not rely on visual aids; there are no images, charts, or tables within the chapters broken down into demarcated subsections. A practical feature of the book is the inclusion of an annotated bibliography, titled "Suggestion for Further Reading," at the end of each chapter, which provides curated recommendations for further academic study.

Thematically, the book is organized in a chronological order that also functions thematically, charting the evolving paradigms of literary studies. Bertens begins by examining the humanistic essentialism of early literary criticism, focusing on the belief that literature serves as a repository of moral instruction. He traces the legacy of Matthew Arnold and the academic professionalization of literature led by figures like T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, and F.R. Leavis. From this foundation, it progresses into the text-oriented approaches of *Practical Criticism* and American New Criticism, which shifted the focus toward a micro-level analysis of the text. Bertens discusses how New Critics emphasized paradox, irony, ambiguity, and internal coherence as key markers of literature. He explains that the new critics excluded external factors from their analysis to maintain scholarly objectivity. He details how W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley warned against the intentional fallacy, arguing that allowing intentions that are not in some way present in the poem to influence our reading leads to skewed interpretations. They simultaneously established the affective fallacy, warning against interpretations that are unduly influenced by the reader's emotional response to a poem. This focus on form highlights the early twentieth century's pursuit of an objective critical methodology.

Moving chronologically, Bertens navigates the transition from Anglo-American New Criticism to Continental European theories, focusing on Formalism and Structuralism. He explains how Russian Formalists like Victor Shklovsky introduced the concept of

defamiliarization, arguing that literature's function is to make the familiar world seem strange through linguistic devices. Bertens breaks down the distinction between *fabula* (the chronological story) and *syuzhet* or *sjuzhet* (the narrative presentation), demonstrating how form manipulates perception. This discussion bridges into French Structuralism, rooted in the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Bertens clarifies Saussure's concepts of the arbitrary sign, the signifier, and the signified. He explores how thinkers like Clade Lévi-Strauss applied these models to anthropological phenomena, giving rise to semiotics and narratology. Roland Barthes's dissection of modern myths is presented as an example of structuralism in action. Furthermore, Bertens provides an overview of narratology, developed by figures such as Vladimir Propp, A.J. Greimas, and Gérard Genette. By dissecting narrative mechanics, Bertens demonstrates how structuralism sought to establish a grammar of storytelling. A notable aspect of these middle chapters is the effort to make abstract structuralist concepts comprehensible without oversimplifying the source material.

The book then shifts to the political, social, and identity-based criticism that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Bertens provides an overview of Marxist literary theory, exploring how the socio-economic base conditions the cultural superstructure. He details that evolution from traditional Marxist reflection theory — championed by George Lukacs — to the understandings of Louis Althusser's ideological state apparatuses and Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Through these concepts, Bertens outlines how cultural materialists read texts to expose ideological fault lines. Parallel to this, Bertens explores Feminist criticism, tracing its trajectory from early analyses of patriarchal representations of woman (such as the works of Kate Millet, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar) to the intersections of gender, class, and race. He underscores how feminism addressed the culturally constructed nature of gender roles and disrupted the male-dominated literary canon.

This leads into discussion of African American literary studies and Postcolonial theory, where theorists like Franz Fanon, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha deconstruct Eurocentric narratives. Bertens outlines the transition from *négritude* to understandings of diasporic identities, double consciousness, and cultural hybridity. He notes the contributions of critics like Henry Louis Gates Jr., who theorized the strategy of signifying within the Black literary tradition. Bertens highlights the overlaps and underlying tensions between these various politic readings, showing that literature functions as an active political arena.

In its final chapters, the book addresses Poststructuralism, Ecocriticism, Animal Studies, and Posthumanism. Bertens guides the reader through the theories of Jaques Derrida and Michel Foucault. He explains how Derrida's deconstruction addresses the play of *différance*, rendering language ambiguous. Similarly, Foucault's analyses of discursive formations reveal the operations of power and knowledge. Bertens also dedicates space to Queer Theory, noting Judith Butler's arguments regarding the performativity of gender. Exploring contemporary applications, Bertens discusses how ecocriticism addresses the material realities of the Anthropocene and environmental issues. He engages with Donna Haraway's concepts to show how posthumanism and animal studies question traditional boundaries between human, animal, and machine. This thematic progression presents literary theory as an ongoing historical conversation where new ideas react to and revise older ones.

Within the field of literary studies, *Literary Theory: The Basics* occupies a stable position as a foundational introductory text. The landscape of theoretical primers features established works such as Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory* and Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction.* However, Berten's volume distinguishes itself through a generally balanced, non-polemic tone. While Eagleton's introduction is driven by specific Marxist

framework, Bertens aims for a scholarly neutrality that allows readers to evaluate the individual merits and limitations of various theoretical schools. The book meets its goal of demystifying theory, operating as a bridge that offers more engagement than superficial summaries while remaining more accessible than primary source texts. It presents theory not as a rigid dogma, but as a toolbox intended for application to cultural and literary artifacts. Berten's theoretical scaffolding serves not only as a retrospective of historical debates but also establishes an analytical foundation applicable to exploring contemporary and unconventional literary forms. For instance, the insights derived from his chapters on poststructuralism, cultural materialism, and narratology provide useful frameworks for readers analysing boundary-defying genres such as theory-fiction, autotheory, and autofiction. These hybrid texts require the type of analytical decoding outlined by Bertens. Furthermore, the book's exploration of gender performativity, sexuality, and queer studies offer relevant critical lenses for dissecting emergent phenomenon like slash fanfiction. While such topic fall outside the traditional academic canon, it remains sites of cultural negotiation that benefit from theoretical investigation. By equipping readers with theses foundational tools, the text supports the exploration of cultural aspects outside traditional parameters.

Ultimately, *Literary Theory: The Basics* is a functional and reliable guide for those navigating modern literary studies. Its target audience includes undergraduate and graduate students encountering critical theory, as well as readers seeking a refresher on theoretical paradigms. Bertens notes that reading is not neutral activity, and theory provides tools to analyse the ideologies embedded within fiction. The book's structure, annotated reading lists, and clear prose help explain concepts like logocentrism, heteroglossia, and intertextuality without excessive complication. By demonstrating that theory can enhance the reading of literature through an awareness of underlying meanings and power dynamics, this book serves as a practical resource for developing reading skills.

Andi Febriana Tamrin

Andi Febriana Tamrin
Department of English Literature and Cultures
Doctoral School of Literature and Cultural Studies
Ifjúság útja 6, 7624
University of Pécs
Pécs, Hungary
e-mail: andifebriana90@gmail.com

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