Review: *Reading with Presence: Crafting Mindful, Evidence-Based Reading Responses* by Marilyn Pryle  
(Heinemann, 2018, 166 pp.)

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*Reading with Presence* is Pryle’s seventh book aimed at making middle and high school students better readers, writers, and thinkers. Among her other books are 50 Writing Activities for Meeting Higher Standards (2017) and Writing Workshop in Middle School (2013). She is a National Board Certified teacher whose experience includes teaching middle school and high school in both Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, as well as a stint in Nepal with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. *Reading with Presence* is an expression of a portion of her personal mission statement: “I believe that becoming a better writer develops one’s own thinking, a benefit that improves every aspect of one’s life, a skill of attention and attunement to this world.” The book outlines a prescription for not only better writing and response to a text, but a method for students to see pathways between what they read and how they experience the world.

Pryle’s book provides her perspective and methodology on a tried-and-true method of reading response: the journal. However, her version purposefully makes room for both student choice and expansion. In all situations, students are allowed to choose their category of Reading Response (RR)—upwards of fifteen categories—provided that they include each of her four criteria: you must label which type of category you choose, use an original thought, quote a sentence or phrase from the text that supports your thinking, and write at least five complete sentences.

The book is divided into two parts. The first section outlines the philosophy and framework for these written responses. Pryle details all the parts of the response and explains how she views this as *reading with presence*, which she describes as “reading with your whole self, your true self, your memories, your opinions, your willingness to learn and grow” (p. 8). Her ultimate goal is the same for all teachers as they guide students through any kind of reading: to interpret and connect to the text through
writing. While it is interesting to see Pryle’s take, many teachers will simply find an affirmation of their own beliefs about teaching: we all want students to make connections, to reference the text to support their ideas, and to feel free to take risks in response. While her reasons are fairly standard, it is reassuring to see alignment with ideas about good journaling here. If nothing else, it will assure readers of her book that the specifics in the second half of the book will be meaningful.

Pryle also shows how she uses RRs as jumping off points for other activities, such as facilitating discussion, conferencing with students, and expanding them into larger written responses. While the class is provided with work time for other tasks, “I circulate and have a short, focused reading conference over each student’s RRs. This method gives me a chance to check that RRs are complete, as well as a chance to connect directly with each student” (p.39). Depending on each student’s need, she discusses academic vocabulary, their choice of response, or, in the case of students with comprehension difficulties, the basic plot or point of the author. Another example of extending the original RRs comes in the form of what Pryle calls “Polished Reading Responses.” Required every few weeks, they ask students to choose one RR, improve it, and turn it in. This extension seems to be a valuable part of of Pryle’s process and would be an improvement on the standard journal. Her explanation of what she does to make the process valuable beyond the initial writing of the RR is a valuable part of the book. These Polished Reading Responses are evidence that Pryle’s overall structure and follow through on her brand of the journal process.

The second part details the categories of RRs. She explains each one, including the subquestions to help students navigate them, and includes annotated student samples from her own classroom. Again, this part contains many categories for journals that all teachers who have used journals will recognize: Ask A Question, Detect a Conflict, Spot the Setting. An example of detailed guidance for a specific question can be illustrated through the category of Clarify the Climax: “You read a part that you realize is the biggest event (or most important moment) in the story. Explain why it is so important and what questions or problems get resolved because of it” (p.91). Another category example is Trace the Title in which students are asked to address these specifics: “You
read a passage that seems to directly relate to the title of the entire text. What is it, and how does it relate? Does it mean something deeper? Does it touch upon a theme? Perhaps the title doesn’t seem to appear in the book at all—so what could it mean? Why did the author choose these words as the title?” (p.120).

In all, Pryle’s choices of RRs guide students toward all levels of interpretation. Veteran teachers will find a few new ideas here, or, if nothing else, an overall structure to organize journals into a cohesive grouping. Additionally, the ideas for how to use the RRs as springboards to other activities is an effective way to push students to dig a bit deeper, and any time they can use work they have already completed to take the next step is a good idea. Newer teachers will be introduced to an effective method of journaling. There are many ideas here and suggestions for expanding to even higher levels of thinking. Reading with Presence is an endorsement of writing as a response to reading and an effective method of organizing journals while providing for student choice.