

*Response Ability: Environment, Health and Everyday Transcendence*

Frank Fisher, Melbourne: Vista Publications, 2006, 315 pp. ISBN: 1 876370 10 6

*Response Ability* is a collection of papers, articles and letters written by Frank Fisher over a period of nearly thirty years of teaching in Environmental Science at Monash University. Fisher is described by Editor Fran MacDonald as “a theorist but also – and even more so – an activist for social change, and so has always had the practical aim of resolving real life problems in the real world” (p. xi). And, as one reads the book the reality of Frank Fisher as a true-believer, who “lives the dream” of environmental sustainability we all strive for, shines through despite the many obstacles in his (and our) way - such as resistance to change, discrimination and denial - and exacerbated through his own ill health and rebellious body. In the Foreword, by Professor Ian Lowe, the reader is reminded that the current strategy of economic prosperity solving all social and environmental problems has failed and that a new approach that addresses our thinking is required.

The book is organised very effectively into groupings of writings on various topics which allows the reader the choice of reading from beginning to end or starting at whatever topic may be of interest to them. What makes this book different is that Fisher looks at the usual sustainability topics, such as energy and transport, from a social constructivist approach: “A social constructivist approach attends to information as a product of social relations, constituted and effected by practices that occur among people within particular contexts” (Lloyd, 2005). This is a refreshingly new approach for me (but perhaps not for his many students who would have been exposed to this for years) and I suspect for many current Environmental Educators with a ‘pure’ science (such as geography, biology and chemistry) background.

The beginning of each chapter of the book contains a concise overview of the writings to come and how the separate pieces fit into a complete picture of the title topic. The beginning of each chapter also contains some very clever cartoons by Simon Kneebone, which focus the readers mind on the new topic. These cartoons provide that moment of amusement that we all need to help keep the frustrations of working towards social change in check. They are also very thought provoking when it comes to succinctly questioning the social constructions of the chapters’ topic and that topics aspects of society.

The first chapter of the book presents five articles on the theory of the social construction of reality. This is an invaluable beginning for those of us with no previous exposure to this theory. There then follows several chapters on the specific topics of environmental science, energy, transport, chronic illness (where I am now very knowledgeable on incontinence and will share my ‘private’ toilet with any who ask) and “a range of environmental issues”. These chapters are rewarding in-depth looks at several sides of the social contexts surrounding these issues and are very illuminating for environmental educators looking for another view of these issues.

But it is the last two chapters on “Taking Action” and “Personal Fulfillment” that are the most refreshing parts of this book. In “Taking Actions” examples of real actions that have been undertaken to address various issues are shared. We all know what doesn’t work and what is starting to get stale – we are always on the look out for a fresh approach which Fisher provides. The last chapter - “Personal Fulfillment” – provides the support we all need to avoid despair in an occupation that can sometimes be quite

manic depressive with its highs and lows. Fishers' descriptions of 'deconstructing' problems rather than technologically fixing problems and referring to people as "human becomings" rather than "human beings" provides us with hope and a way of moving past the despondency which sometimes threatens.

Reading *Response Ability* has been in part like reading Frank Fishers biography. I feel I have come to know part of him – his writings are peppered with his obsession with toilets (through living with his illness) and his love of his bike and the ease with which it allows him freedom in a car dominated city. These insights help to alleviate the feeling of reading a text book but also demonstrate the humanisation of all the issues he covers in this book. I recommend this book to all educators (including environmental) as a new insight into human social development but also into the extraordinary person that is Frank Fisher.

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## References

Lloyd, A. (2005) *No man (or woman) is an island: information literacy, affordances and communities of practice*. <http://www.alia.org.au/publishing/alj/54.3/full.text/lloyd.html>

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