



Standing by Words

Wendell Berry

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In these six essays, award-winning author Wendell Berry considers the degeneration of language that is manifest throughout our culture, from poetry to politics, from conversation to advertising, and he shows how the ever widening cleft between words and their referents mirrors the increasing isolation of individuals from their communities and of their communities from the land. From the essay, *Standing by Words*, Berry writes, “Two epidemic illnesses of our time—upon both of which virtual industries of cures have been founded—are the disintegration of communities and the disintegration of persons. That these two are related (that private loneliness, for example, will necessarily accompany public confusion) is clear enough. What seems not so well understood, because not so much examined, is the relation between these disintegrations and the disintegration of language. My impression is that we have seen, for perhaps a hundred and fifty years, a gradual increase in language that is either meaningless or destructive of meaning. And I believe that this increasing unreliability of language parallels the increasing disintegration, over the same period, of persons and communities.” Out-of-print for more than fifteen years, *Standing by Words* offers a masterfully written argument for the literary tradition.

Standing by Words Details

Date : Published January 13th 2005 by Counterpoint (first published January 1st 1982)

ISBN : 9781593760557

Author : Wendell Berry

Format : Paperback 224 pages

Genre : Writing, Essays, Nonfiction, Language, Poetry, Philosophy, Cultural

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From Reader Review Standing by Words for online ebook

Kelly Jolley says

Worth 5 stars for the title essay alone.

Ien Cheng says

Loved Berry's collection of essays What are People For? in college and was hoping this would be as incisive and enjoyable. Nope. Didn't finish.

Elana Metz says

Okay, I didn't really finish it. Some good ideas but waaaay to dense.

Emma says

I'm really disappointed that I didn't like this book as I've heard good things about Wendell Berry. I found these essays very inaccessible and it was often hard to decipher his main points out of the dense writing, his ranting, and the number of quotations (from many different authors, primarily Romantic poets).

Jocelyn says

Read this in the early eighties and want to reread. About integrity in use of the language, and how it shapes or breaks down communities.

I need to read it again in light of current political discourse which is maddening.

Cheryl says

Because Montaigne in Barn Boots: An Amateur Ambles Through Philosophy...

Ian Caveny says

At this juncture, I feel like I have become pretty familiar with Wendell Berry and his wide variety of skills. The man writes poetry, he farms, he critiques globalism and corporatism, he tells stories. These I have become fairly familiar with over the course of three-four months of rapacious reading. I feel like I have just

experienced a graduate-level course in "The Thought of Wendell Berry"... and yet I still was not ready for the intelligent, savvy, powerful literary criticism discourse of *Standing by Words*.

To be sure, this collection of essays is no parallel in prowess to Berry's other masterworks; it lacks the sublimity of his poetry and the imagery of his prose. But, then again, literary criticism, despite what some of its proponents may think, is just not "sexy." It is an informative and critical art, and attempts to make literary criticism more artistic lead either to the perverse cycles of self-indulgence found in the Aestheticism movement (see Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*) or self-critical, meta-reflexive art that mock the genre (like postmodern literary master, Mark Z. Danielewski) without accomplishing its ends. Berry's commitment to an old-school of literary criticism serves him well.

Berry's unique ability to bring everything back to agrarianism is always surprising, and the standout final essay, "Poetry and Place," manages to do so by simultaneously honoring the work of Alexander Pope (to the surprise of many) and the dismantling of the work of Percy B. Shelley (to the surprise of absolutely no one). This re-reading of British Romanticism as against an "old order" of hierarchized nature is illuminating and valuable, especially since the current academic climate, which feels anemic toward Shelley and Wordsworth, is long overdue for an ecological overhaul when it comes to "dangerous terms" like "hierarchy" or "authority."

The essays here do a particular powerful work of asserting the goodness of particularized language, and claiming that generalized and de-particularized language is actually a social ill. This is powerful medicine, if received well. Altogether, I find Berry to be a stalwart proponent of something that we may call "pre-modernism"; and his rejection of both the modernist-industrialist West and of post-modernism's tendency towards the relative is refreshingly prophetic.

Cindy Rollins says

I struggled with how many stars to give this. At times it was rough going. There were 5-star paragraphs throughout the book but it was not as easy to read as say, C.S. Lewis-a 5-star author.

I might even have given it 3 stars had it not ended with a discussion of *As You Like It*. I spent the entire last chapter thinking, "As You Like It?" I felt quite vindicated by Berry's agreement.

Steve says

I believe this to be a very important book for our modern difficulties with truth. Any erstwhile teacher should read and spend a lot of time considering how Berry's words about words have application to our use of words in the classroom. Highly recommended; every essay is key.

Caleb says

I read the first two essays, including the title essay, and the final essay about poetry and marriage. Having read several other collections from Berry, it didn't feel necessary to read the other three in this collection because the themes are familiar. The essays that I did read, however, are holistic and often wise responses to

hyper-individualism and the knee-jerk rejection of form and tradition. As usual, Berry is at his best when he shows how creativity, communities, and individual selves need constraints to flourish.

Scott says

Relevant, terse yet rich with meaning, enjoyable, pertinent clarity.

Patti says

I admit I got bogged down in several of the essays and skipped through them. When I settled down and dug in, the words and ideas resonated as they always do when reading Wendell Berry. The essays I most connected to were "People, Land and Community" and "Poetry and Marriage".

There is a paragraph in the essay "The Specialization of Poetry" that strongly speaks to our times. "Contemporaneity, in the sense of being 'up with the times,' is of no value. Wakefulness to experience - as well as to instruction and example - is another matter. But what we call the modern world is not necessarily, and not often the real world, and there is no virtue in being up-to-date in it. It is a false world, based upon economies and values and desires that are fantastical-a world in which millions of people have lost any idea of the materials, the disciplines, the restraints, and the work necessary to support human life, and have thus become dangerous to their own lives and to the possibility of life. The job now is to get back to that perennial and substantial world in which we really do live, in which the foundations of our life will be visible to us, and in which we can accept our responsibilities again within the conditions of necessity and mystery. In that world all wakeful and responsible people, dead, living, and unborn, are contemporaries. And that is the only contemporaneity worth having."

The false world has not improved in the 29 years since this essay was written.

Adam says

The main essay "Poetry and Place" was the least effective for me. He tries to say something quite sweeping, but I felt a lot more impact from his shorter treatments on marriage, and the relationships between people/land/community, the movement in which his thoughts and actions were probably the most influential to date. This was my first exposure to Berry, and I found it particularly illuminating in light of the "slow food" and buy-local activism that is so prominent in the SF Bay Area. Like going back to an original text... finally!

Jordan Kinsey says

Berry at his most dense.

Fionnuala says

Wendell Berry's essay, 'Standing by Words' was written in 1979 and concerns the disintegration of language which Berry claims has been happening now for more than one hundred and fifty years. During that period he believes there has been 'a gradual increase in language that is either meaningless or destructive of meaning'. He makes an eloquent argument for the upholding of standards. He says, "In order for a statement to be complete and comprehensible three conditions are required:

1. It must designate its object precisely.
 2. Its speaker must stand by it: must believe it; be accountable for it, be willing to act on it.
 3. This relation of speaker, word, and object must be conventional; the community must know what it is."
- This is what Berry calls the 'accountability' of language. What would he make of twitter speak, I wonder?
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