



A Taste for Language: Literacy, Class, and English Studies (Studies in Writing & Rhetoric)

James Ray Watkins Jr.

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“This is a book about the American Dream as it has become embodied in the university in general and in the English department in particular,” writes James Ray Watkins at the start of *A Taste for Language: Literacy, Class, and English Studies*. In it, Watkins argues that contemporary economic and political challenges require a clear understanding of the identity of English studies, making elementary questions about literacy, language, literature, education, and class once again imperative.

A personal history of university-level English studies in the twentieth century, *A Taste for Language* combines biography, autobiography, and critical analysis to explore the central role of freshman English and literary studies in the creation and maintenance of the middle class. It tells a multi-generational story of the author and his father, intertwined with close reading of texts and historical analysis. The story moves from depression-era Mississippi, where the author's father was born, to a contemporary English department, where the author now teaches.

Watkins looks at not only textbooks, scholars, and the academy but also at families and other social institutions. A rich combination of biography, autobiography, and critical analysis, *A Taste for Language* questions what purpose an education in English language and literature serves in the lives of the educated in a class-based society and whether English studies has become wholly irrelevant in the twenty-first century.

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