Employment of English

Published by NYU Press

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MICHAEL BÉRUBÉ is a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Director of the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities. Born in New York City in 1961, he received his B.A. in English from Columbia University in 1982 and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in 1986 and 1989, respectively.


When he's not reading or writing, he's playing drums with his rock band, Nastybake, or haunting the local roller hockey leagues. He lives in Champaign, Illinois, with Janet Lyon and their two sons, Nicholas, 11, and James, 6.
"In the tradition of Richard Ohmann’s classic English in America, one of our finest cultural critics takes on the world of literary study with wit and passion. From the challenge of cultural studies to the unionization of graduate students, Bérubé is a marvelous guide to the contemporary intellectual and economic employments of English."

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"An important and provocative book that imaginatively challenges the profession. In eloquent and stirring prose, Bérubé explains how literary criticism and cultural studies can become mutually reinforcing, offers savvy proposals for creating ethical working conditions in the academy, and advocates for new connections between critical theory and public policy. This is essential reading for anyone who has a stake in the health and viability of English studies."

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"Michael Bérubé is the academy's answer to the dullness of its critics: a live—and lively—public intellectual. His essays are as rewarding in the classroom and committee room as they are on the nightstand. Bérubé’s subjects—like theory in the New Criterion, cultural studies in English departments, union busting at Yale, truth in Dinesh D'Souza—cry out for the keen sense of the absurd, and the wicked pen, he brings to his task."

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What sorts of cultural criticism are teachers and scholars to produce and how can that criticism be “employed” in the culture at large? In The Employment of English, Michael Bérubé, one of our most eloquent and gifted critics, examines the cultural legitimacy of literary study. Bérubé asserts that we must situate these questions in a context in which nearly half of all college professors are part-time labor and in which English departments are torn between their traditional mission of defining the movements of literary history and the protocols of textual interpretation, and their newer tasks of interrogating wider systems of signification under rubrics like “gender,” “hegemony,” “rhetoric,” “textuality” (including film and video), and “culture.”

Are these new roles a betrayal of the field’s founding principles, in effect a shortsighted sell-out of the discipline? Are they simply a supportable means of shoring up the status of—and student enrollments in—English? Or are they legitimate objects of literary study, in need of public support? Simultaneously investigating the economic and the intellectual ramifications of current debates, The Employment of English provides the clearest and most synoptic account of this controversy to date.

Cultural Front

MICHAEL BÉRUBÉ is Professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His previous books include Life As We Know It, Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics, and Higher Education Under Fire, coedited with Cary Nelson.