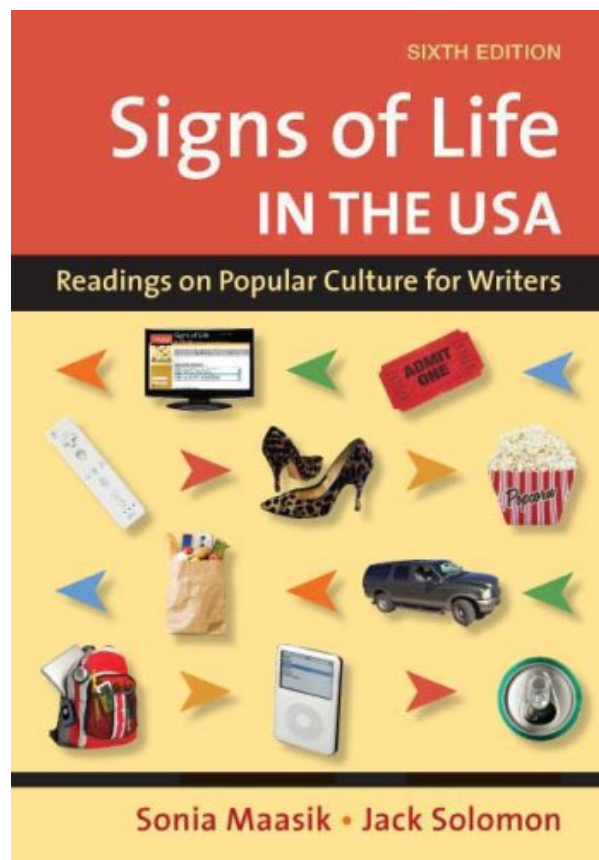


SIGNS OF LIFE IN THE USA: READINGS ON POPULAR CULTURE FOR WRITERS BY SONIA MAASIK, JACK SOLOMON



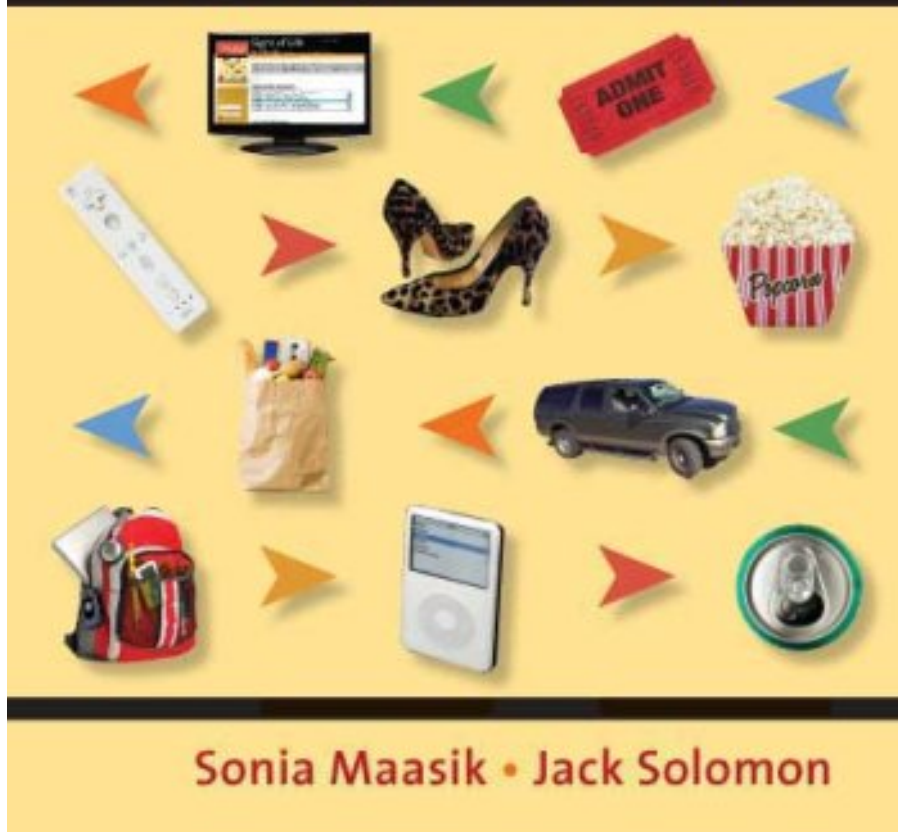
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Signs of Life IN THE USA

Readings on Popular Culture for Writers



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About the Author

Sonia Maasik is a lecturer in the UCLA Writing Programs, where she has taught writing from developmental to advanced levels.

Jack Solomon is professor of English at California State University, Northridge, and teaches literature and critical theory. He is often interviewed by the California media for analysis of current events and trends.

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Unlike other popular culture readers, *Signs of Life* presumes that this topic merits rigorous analysis and so provides a conceptual framework for understanding it: semiotics, a field of critical theory developed specifically for the interpretation of culture and its signs. The selections in *Signs of Life* are arranged in provocative chapters (on such themes as gender codes, television and music, film, and advertising) that tap into students' own experiences with and interest in popular culture.

The uniquely qualified editorial team of a prominent semiotician and an experienced writing instructor have prepared extensive apparatus to prompt the rigorous analysis that helps students become better thinkers and writers. In this exciting edition, *Signs of Life* examines fresh topics with an emphasis on the emerging phenomenon of Web 2.0. Maasik and Solomon continue to stay on the leading edge of popular culture, examining the hottest trends that capture students' attention.

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- 752 pages

About the Author

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Most helpful customer reviews

12 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

"An unexamined life is not worth living."

By Martha Rapp Sayles

Socrates would be pleased with *Signs of Life in the USA*, as it questions the implications of the ideologies put forth by the hydra-headed media of the 21st century. Employing semiotic analysis by association and differentiation, the editors offer students an explicable means by which to begin critically examining the popular culture that comes at them from every conceivable direction.

As a professor of writing and popular culture, I have used various editions of *Signs of Life* over the last ten years with students ranging from timid freshmen to cocky upper-classmen. The reason? I can get them to open the book.

Students love popular culture. They also like to show their friends how much they know about popular culture. Thus, if they are going to be forced to read something, they will more readily read an article that can give them insights on television, movies, music, and video games that they can use immediately in conversation (texted or otherwise). Secondly, the editors approach the students as knowledgeable insiders, validating their experience while teaching them new ways to think about it. The excellent introductions (for the book as a whole and for each chapter) present scholarly, and often historical, approaches to the subject in very clear and accessible prose, yet do so with a tone of mutual curiosity; there is a playfulness that coaxes students out of passivity. One of the greatest challenges in the classroom - particularly in a writing course - is to get students interested. *Signs of Life* makes this easy.

A most appreciated attribute of the book for me is its great flexibility. While the material is presented in such a logical sequence that one can work systematically through the textbook, there are also recurring themes that weave through the chapters, allowing instructors to carve out courses that meet their own interests and needs. One can emphasize the critical theory or simply focus on the topics. The articles are quite diverse in length, purpose, complexity, style, and viewpoint, providing material for numerous pedagogical goals. It is true that some are typical examples of the obfuscated, jargon-ridden gobblety-gook that so many academics have found *de rigueur*; however, these are juxtaposed to numerous examples of clear, communicative prose. One hopes that students can recognize the difference, emulate the latter, and change the nature of academic writing.

Last semester I used *Signs of Life* in a freshman composition course; next semester I will use it in an upper division popular culture class. While some readings overlap, the book is rich and diverse enough for me to be able to satisfy two different purposes without having to change texts. One fewer book in the bag (and the mind) is always a help to an over-worked instructor.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

English 101

By David Zwart

My class was on how society and media effect one another, this book provided a very interesting perspective on the subject and would recommend to others looking for similar content

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

I Like it

By Tom

As a person who could not give a damn about the United States, I was amazed and dis-satisfied at how much people were so vocal about such matters that I believe were to be trivial. It was obvious that I was so uninformed of the inter-workings of the United States and the media that results inside of it. I am glad my professor chose this book, for I have gain an insight into something I would not have found alone. I am sure that some young adults, like me, were overwhelmed by the content inside and highly discouraged. Just take a look at the table of contents and the amount of pages(on).

The table of content, by chapters are the following:

Introduction - Popular Signs: Or, Everything you Always Knew about American Culture (but Nobody Asked)

Chapter I - Consuming Passions: The Culture of American Consumption

Chapter II - Brought to you B(u)y: The Signs of Advertising

Chapter III - Video Dreams: Television, Music, and Cultural Forms

Chapter IV - The Hollywood Sign: The Culture of American Film

Chapter V - You-Topian Dreams: MySpace, YourSpace, and the Semiotics of Web 2.0

Chapter VI - American Paradox: Culture and Contradiction in the U.S.A

Chapter VII - We've Come a Long Way, Maybe: Gender Codes in American Culture

Chapter VIII - Constructing Race: Readings in Multicultural Semiotics

An astonishing 752 pages and 8 chapters is no laughing matter, at least to those who are not well-acquainted with reading books, yet I found myself the ability to read most articles inside the book well enough to understand the key points as if I was reading one of my favorite novels. I believe this is a result of using articles on popular culture as basis for this book. I was extremely conflicted by this approach though, since I sheltered myself from popular culture for about 10 years, but I am sure that people who are in-touch with popular culture will be more motivated to read the articles. As for me, I was genuinely interested in the topics for a personal reason. Even though I was motivated to read, I would be lying if I said I could relate or fully recognize half of the media being analyzed in the articles.

These articles inform the reader of how things came to be or what some things represent in America, which is why semiotic analysis is heavily emphasized in this book. According to Oxford Dictionary, Semiotics is "the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation." It is then you analyze the semiotics of these signs or symbols, of course that is a very simplistic view, nonetheless, it is still a powerful tool at your disposal. By using semiotic analysis, you are able to see the possible hidden interior of an item or even an event. It truly is a useful tool that I have been using for many years, yet the term has never been in my vocabulary until I started reading this book. Semiotic analysis invokes a strong thinking process, especially in this case, since popular culture is something that the majority of people deal on a daily basis. I am sure that it has already been outlined in the Book Description on Amazon, but this book makes writing a much more easier task with the help of popular culture.

When you are finished with reading an article, you are given questions in the categories of "Reading the Text" and "Reading the Signs." Both being somewhat thought provoking and finely specified that you would have to read multiple times and annotate just to remember what was read. This is an excellent thing though, as you are told to write most of the time in the "Reading the Signs" category. One thing that may be a negative towards some consumers, is this book relies on a class or group environment on some questions. I understand that it can greatly enhance the reading experience and can create exposure to different perspectives but I myself am not a great socializing creature and was greatly discouraged into doing the verbal questions. Regardless of the questions themselves, I found doing essays on these articles an easy task when compared to doing essays on specific criteria by professors on literature that I am not well acquainted with. I can confidently say I can write and semiotic analyze more effectively now from these exercises. The "Reading the Text" are just your standard 'what happened in the text' questions, in which they have predefined answers most of the time.

As for the articles themselves, I was most pleased with them. Each article was capable of invoking semiotic analysis easy and was most of the time easy to nitpick with the abundance of slanting language and emotion present that outlined the authors point more effectively. I gotta hand it to the consumption of products(Chapter I) and advertising(Chapter II) portion of this anthology, for it was the most helpful in

providing me knowledge that I had not known before. It was not very interesting, but it was damn useful in knowing. Wikipedia could have probably just been used instead though. As for the other topics, the one that I was most surprised about was the five video game articles included. I genuinely thought video games were still a niche entertainment where the popular idiom "children only play video games" was still in full effect. Regardless, an interesting development I suppose. Just unsure of if those articles should have been included, for finding somebody else to even discuss about those were difficult.

Despite having an enlarged vocabulary, I found reading these sourced articles annoying when the glossary does not include definitions on the terms in these sourced articles or even a little annotation for these terms. Maybe it is just because I hardly read and do not know how anthologies are written, but having to open up a second book(dictionary) or even an online dictionary just to understand a term is just beyond annoying for myself. I had to look up some difficult terms: Chauvinism, oppugned, libidinous, ineluctable, recapitulated, epigrammatic, ostensibly, efficacious, proselytizers, agora, empiricist. Regardless, I am not gonna take down a star just because the book ceases to be an all-in-one book. I am disappointed for the book not being in all-in-one though, since Amazon's(publishers?) official pricing is currently \$52.65; for a price already past \$50 I had higher hopes for this book to be more than just being an anthology.

If you enjoy pop culture and writing, then by all means take a look at this book, otherwise, pass it. I'd imagine you can't pass it anyways, since this book is clearly aimed at instructors with students and is probably mandatory for whatever English/writing class you are taking. I would also like to state that it would probably be a better idea to get the newer addition of the Signs of Life in the USA(for self personal uses); after all, the newer published text has more up to date content.

In conclusion, I hope you enjoyed reading this review.

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