Research into the reading responses of elementary and secondary students burgeoned in the 1970s, as more formalistic criticism lost favor, and Rosenblatt’s (1978) transactional theory of reader response readily meshed with a cognitive-based revisioning of reading comprehension (Marshall, 2000; Pearson, 1985). Rapidly, literacy researchers began to ask questions about how and under what circumstances readers constructed their interpretations of text. As the 21st century opened, Galda and Beach (2001) posited that the complex nature of response and new theoretical perspectives had contributed to even more “sophisticated questions about texts, readers, and contexts for response” (p. 64).

Since the publication of the second volume of the *Handbook for Research in Teaching the English Language Arts* in 2003 (in which Louise Rosenblatt contributed the chapter on literary theory), scholars have deliberated whether her transactional theory is comprehensive enough to enfold the sociocultural and critical perspectives that have characterized much inquiry in the last two decades (Cai, 2008; Dressman & Webster, 2001; Probst, 2002; Sumara, 2000). Rosenblatt (2003) contended that hers was a theory of *reading* that made room for each reader’s history, circumstances, interpretations, and questions—“the matrix within which any critical approach is selected” (p. 70). Even so, in framing recent work, researchers have increasingly explained their theoretical bases as linking reader response theory with, for example, Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory; Bakhtinian (1986) perspectives on the dialogism of literacy events; Bourdieuian (1985) notions of social space, as well as critical perspectives on literacy, discourse, gender, class, and race. Whether a critical approach represents a unique stance or finds a place on an aesthetic–efferent continuum is not at stake here. That is, when a research perspective informs how literary understandings take shape (Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006), the study became relevant to this review.

Along with a broadened theoretical lens, since the last edition of this *Handbook* was published researchers have drawn “different academic figurations of reading and interpreting literature” in a greater variety of settings, using a breadth of techniques for collecting and analyzing responses (Enciso, Coats, Jenkins, & Wolf, 2008, p. 220). For example, early research into how readers made sense of literary texts relied almost exclusively on writing or on interrupted readings to gain insight from informants (e.g., Purves & Rippere, 1968; Squire, 1964). In the years that followed, investigations turned to the naturally occurring talk of read-alouds, literature circles, and discussions, as well as readers’ dramatic, and artistic representations of meanings (Adomat, 2007; Rowe, 1998; Sipe, 2008b; Whitin, 1996). Building from Hickman’s (1981) pioneering work in elementary classrooms, investigators have frequently become observers or participant-observers (often teaming with the classroom teacher as co-inquirers) toward understanding the complexities of teacher moves and student responses to text invitations. Ethnographic techniques and inductive analyses, (e.g., McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996; Sipe, 2008a) have been more prevalent than empirical studies (e.g., Bobola, 2003). Further, recent shifts have involved researchers in collecting and analyzing students’ responses gathered from new technologies, such as online book discussions, digital response journals, weblogs, wikis, and more (Larson, 2008; Love, 2002; Scharber, 2009; West, 2008).

Although there have been changes in both scope and approach to research into literary meaning making, we have chosen a traditional framework to organize this review—one that presents studies as primarily focused on the reader, on the text, or on the context—a frame through which we (Martinez & Roser, 1991, 2003), and others (e.g., Galda, Ash, & Cullinan, 2000; Marshall, 2000) have approached earlier syntheses. Although most inquiries cross these factors, we have nonetheless attempted to array studies to illustrate dominant themes, mindful of the interplay among reader, text, and context.
Student’s Literary Responses

Reader-Centered Responses

Using a Literary Response Questionnaire, Dutch researchers (van Scoofoet, Oostdam, & de Glopper, 2001) determined that grade, gender, education, vocabulary size, reading behavior, and cultural level of the home were among the best predictors of 600 upper grade students’ literary response scores. More typically, however, researchers have used close lenses to describe the ways in which small groups or individual readers approach and interpret literary texts (e.g., Thein, 2009). In this section, we highlight selected studies that considered the influences of age, gender, and diversity on meaning making.

Young Children  In a series of studies, Sipe (e.g., 2000, 2008a) investigated kindergarten through second grade children’s discussions of texts read aloud in classrooms. Arguing from a Vygotskian perspective on the centrality of children’s language use in social settings to their cognitive development, Sipe proposed a conceptual categorization system to describe children’s responses to picturebooks as being primarily (a) analytical, (b) intertextual, (c) personal, (d) transparent, or (e) performative. The analytic category broadly subsumes children’s talk of text structures and meanings, format features, narrative elements, references to the book as a crafted object, and more. The intertextual category collects conversational turns that relate the focus of the picturebook to other texts and products. Personal responses are those in which the children connect their own experiences to or from the text. Transparent responses are those in which children position themselves inside the narrative such that the story and the child’s life merge. Finally, Sipe describes performative responses as those in which children use (or even subvert) the text as a platform for their own spontaneous playfulness. In his grounded theory of children’s literary understanding, Sipe demonstrates the power of text to draw in young readers such that the barrier between story and life becomes permeable. Read-aloud time is construed as a space in which children thoughtfully and playfully receive, construct, elaborate, enact, and manipulate text toward greater literary understanding. For comprehensive reviews of young children’s literary meaning making, see Sipe (2008b) and Martinez, Roser, & Dooley (2003).

Middle Elementary Through Adolescent Readers  In their pioneering study of literature discussion in fifth grade, Eeds and Wells (1989) described features of the “grand conversation” that became possible when students (and teachers) worked together to construct and articulate meanings. Following their lead, other researchers have produced purposeful inspections of the ways in which readers collaborate to build defensible interpretations of text. In a year-long study of fifth-graders’ perceptions of their own discussion groups, Evans (2002) found that students held clear notions of factors that contributed to effective student-led literature discussions. These included the gender make-up of the group, respectful discussants, absence of a bossy group member, and a good text (with “good” defined as exciting, adventurous, or discussion-worthy). In a related inquiry, Almasi and O’Flahavan (2000) found that fourth-grade proficient peer discussions were marked by returns to prior topics, ability to sustain topics, and linkages compared to less proficient groups. Recent studies of middle grade and adolescent learners have led through literature to explorations of issues of identity, of personal and cultural connections, and the possibilities of one’s own life (e.g., Broughton, 2002; Smith, 2005; Thein, 2005).

There is evidence that middle grade readers respond more positively and fully to literature that reflects their own cultural experiences (Brooks, 2006; Hicks, 2004). Dressel (2005) investigated the responses of middle school, dominant culture students to multicultural novels. In their dialogue journals, these students were able to “feel what it was like to be part of a non-dominant group” (p. 756); however, in post surveys, many of the students did not appear to recognize that characters from non-dominant cultures faced societal limitations. In a semester-long study, Beach, Thein, and Parks (2007) examined shifts in high school students’ literary responses as they explored multicultural literature from a critical literacy perspective relating to issues of race, class, and gender. These researchers, along with many others (Alsop, 2003; Athanases, 1998; Bean & Rignoni, 2001; Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2006; Wood, Soares, & Watson, 2006), build a case for instructional methods that encourage students’ discoveries that help to assault stereotypes, to remain open to diversity, and to take up text from multiple perspectives.

English Language Learners  Drawing on findings from a second-grade bilingual classroom, Martinez-Roldán (2003) argued that the sharing of personal stories in literature circles may be especially important for readers from non-dominant cultures, enabling them to draw on their funds of knowledge in responding to literature. DeNicolo and Franquiz (2006) found that fourth-grade children in a bilingual classroom used time in literature circle to consider multiple perspectives and to think critically about the imprint of racism revealed through multicultural children’s literature. Following a 2-year longitudinal study of adult/child story reading in the home of one Chinese American girl between the ages of 2 and 4, Wan (2000) concluded that such studies are critical for the understanding of children who are racially, linguistically, and culturally different from their teachers.

Gendered Readings  Researchers have also inspected how reading particular texts serve to reveal and disrupt entrenched gender roles held by boy and girl readers. Dutro (2003) asked fifth-grade American boys to read a novel they had previously rejected as “for girls,” arguing that boys must be encouraged to adopt a masculinity that is less oppositional to femininity. In a study of sixth-grade boys and girls reading a folktale containing both traditional
and non-traditional gender roles, Rice (2000) uncovered traditional frames of references held by both boys and girls. Even so, girls registered more statements that reflected non-traditional female characteristics. Similarly, when investigators compared the responses of two groups of fourth graders across a span of 22 years to the picturebook, William’s Doll (Zolotow, 1972), they found children separated by a generation held the same stereotypes for “appropriate” male toys. Girls, however, were more likely than boys to have favorable responses to a male character’s desire for a doll (Greever, Austin, & Welhousen, 2000). In a study of home-schooled middle grade boys, Young (2000) showed how critical literacy activities (and participation in critical literacy discussions) sustained or disrupted the boys’ awareness of gender inequities in their self-selected texts.

Race Other studies have described the effects of literature as launching points from which individuals analyze their own life experiences and ways of being positioned in the world by race. Often, gender and race conflate within inquiries. Sutherland (2005) highlighted the meaning making of 16-year-old Black girls reading The Bluest Eye (Morrison, 1994). She described how participants represented and co-constructed identities, as well as refuting the attempts of others to place limits on their lives. Similarly Brooks, Browne, and Hampton (2008) looked through participants’ responses to what those responses suggested about readers’ identification with a fictional hero whose status has been marked by peers based on skin color, clothes, and certain physical traits. In a study of first-grade children’s responses to an African American version of ‘Twas the Night Before Christmas (Rosales, 1996), researchers described how a Black Santa character opened to conversation about race in the classroom (Copenhaver-Johnson, Bowman, & Johnson, 2007).

The composite reader emerging from these studies is one engaged, critically aware, and actively involved in identifying, analyzing, questioning, connecting with, and resisting a more diverse literature than ever before. The now extensive body of research on reader response suggests that readers become more thoughtful in the presence of particular texts and illustrations. The literature also suggests readers may cling to entrenched ways of responding even in the presence of texts that invite a critical stance.

Text-Centered Studies

Lewis (2000) has argued for engaging with literary texts in ways that meld “the personal, pleasurable, and critical in aesthetic response” (p. 257). Today’s texts that invite the melding are written, oral, signed, digital, graphic, and enacted. Further, as mentioned above, there has been growing interest in texts described as critical literature—“risky” texts that can help to surface discussions of attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs. In classrooms researchers continued to examine the influence of particular genres on response, as well as respondents’ awareness of the artistry of texts.

Genre Knowledge Elster and Hanauer (2002) found elementary aged children gave more attention to features of craft and genre during discussions of poetry than during discussion stories, adding evidence that children talk differently about different kinds of texts. Shine and Roser (1999) noted preschoolers assumed different stances and shared different kinds of responses to four literary genres—fantasy, realistic fiction, narrative nonfiction, and poetic narrative—underscoring an early sensitivity to text forms. Deep knowledge of a literary genre and its demands can be linked with exposure. That is, typically students spend more time with narrative structures than non-narrative, helping to explain why they may be less facile with the expository texts that dominate later schooling (Donovan & Smolkin, 2002; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). When students approach text genres (whether to read or write), their comfort may also be linked with their opportunities to explore and features of genre that can signal readers to adopt particular stances (Galda & Liang, 2003; Kamberelis, 1999; Maloch, 2008).

In a study of middle schoolers’ responses to particular text features in culturally conscious African American children’s books, Brooks (2006) found that students not only identified the text features, but actively used those features to develop literary understandings. Brooks’s work suggests that culturally influenced textual features also have potential as pedagogical tools. Sipe (2000) argues that children’s developing literary understandings are served by the intertextual connections they make. That is, intertextual connections help readers interpret language, narrative elements, and symbolic aspects of stories; and by comparing and contrasting stories, readers are able to make generalizations about story structure and genre.

Literary Understandings of Texts Literary readings require more than awareness of literary elements and story structures. Responsive readers, according to Nodelman and Reimer (2003) deploy knowledge of elements into a repertoire of strategies for responding to texts—strategies that include reading for character, experiencing plot, and exploring thematic structures. When researchers (Martinez, Keehn, Roser, Harmon, & O’Neal, 2002) read the same short story to nearly 300 students aged 6 to 14, the students revealed different understandings of character in their follow-up conversations. Overall, younger readers talked more extensively about external facets of character, describing a character’s age, gender, or skin color. By contrast, older students rarely described characters’ external attributes; rather, they talked about character traits, feelings, or the ways in which the character changed.

Young children demonstrate keen awareness of the crafting of the visual elements in both picture storybooks (Sipe, 2008b; Styles & Arizpe, 2001) and informational books (Maduram, 2000; Tower, 2002). In groundbreaking work, Sipe and Brightman (2009) inspected children’s interpretations of the intervening action and events between page turns in a picturebook. Investigating young children’s meaning making in postmodern picturebooks, Pantaleo (2002,
2004) found children actively collaborate to interpret these stories and attend, in particular, to the metatextual devices that distinguish postmodern picturebooks. Similarly, McClay (2000) found elementary students shared observations, extended one another’s interpretations, and drew on their knowledge of other media in their collaborative reading of a postmodern picturebook.

**Newer Text Forms** Researchers have only begun to explore readers’ responses within newer media. Online book clubs and literature discussions have been receiving much attention in professional journals, but systematic studies are fewer. For example, Larson (2008) introduces the electronic reading workshop (ERW) as a means of promoting online responses to literature discussion groups. Teachers have also invited video compositions, online book discussions, and Powerpoint interpretations of poetry as means of encouraging students’ literate, cognitive, and social practices with new media, as well as preparing students for the multimodality of everyday life (Moje, 2009; Scharber, 2009).

Although print-based texts have had the longer run in garnering students’ responses, newer media show the promise of providing different ways to understand. Popular texts (not just traditional literary ones) are also serving students’ literate and composing lives (Dyson, 1997; Wohlwend, 2009).

**The Context**

Context—so widely and variantly defined (Rex, Green, Dixon, & the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1998)—has a potent impact on literary response. Beach (2000) nominated the social contexts of meaning construction (whether book club, computer chat, or classroom) as one of the primary contributions of Rosenblatt’s transactional model of reader response. Even so, Beach contended that Rosenblatt’s conception of context “needs more specificity regarding the various components shaping responding as a social event” (p. 238). In this section, we highlight studies in which context refers to the interacting influences of place, community, activity, purposes, discourses, practices, and conditions that support readers meeting and making sense of texts (Lewis, 2001).

**Time/Space** Möller and Allen (2000) describe the collective “response development zone” (p. 149) that emerged as an adult mentor and four fifth graders read Mildred Taylor’s (1987) *The Friendship*, a story based on actual events in the deep south of the 1930s. The researchers contend the response development zone provides the time, the space, the guidance, and the dialectic that enable both connection and resistance to well-chosen texts with powerful central issues, such as racism. In their discussion, the four girls, described as struggling readers, used the provided time and support to understand characters and actions, to broaden their lens to the story’s setting and tensions, to make deep connections that awakened present-day fears, and to lift the issues with parents—in search of safer places. Both their “engaged connecting” and the “engaged resistance” were performed from places inside the story as they came together over a 2-week period to sort out their understandings. Arguing that the taking up of such texts entails risks and the opening to uncomfortable, resistant feelings, the authors point toward the necessity for a context for the conversations, support, and writing that such books and learners require.

**Teacher Moves** Researchers have also looked closely at the ways in which teachers’ strategies and pedagogies shape and support literary meaning making, e.g., as teachers join a teen book club (Lapp & Fisher, 2009), or help children work out the vagaries of a text form (Everton, 2004). At times, teachers support the reading experience by helping students build layers of meaning, as for example when a high school teacher uses simulation, lecture, poster analysis, and film to help students understand the context of a Chinese novella (Louie, 2005); or when a teacher introduces a mediator such as “body biographies”—life-sized human outlines to be filled with words, images, and phrases—to represent the character Laertes in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (Smagorinsky & O’Donnell-Allen, 1998).

Others have investigated the nature of discussions in which teachers stretch and scaffold students’ thought and talk. In describing the role of a primary-grade teacher whose children participated in rich discussion of information texts, Maloch (2008) found the teacher provided multiple opportunities to engage with information text, assurance of the text-child match, scaffolded meaning making, and explicit help with text features. Many (2002) also noted the nature of instructional scaffolding in conversations between teachers and students as they constructed meaning from literary and nonfiction texts. She presented her findings as “verbal tapestries” that provide images of the ways scaffolding weaves in and through the conversations.

At times, teachers work to make particular text forms more comprehensible and engaging. For example, Maloch and her colleagues (2008) studied third-grade children and their teachers as they read, thought about, discussed, and wrote fantasies during a six-week genre study unit. By exploring the classroom talk that surrounded the features and forms of fantasy, the researchers proposed three discursive moves that the teachers made to support students’ understandings. The teachers (a) evoked and reframed shared experiences with texts, (b) revoiced students’ contributions as a way of focusing and deepening insights, and (c) strengthened familiarity with a literary genre by nudging student talk between abstractions and specifics (and back again). In a study of how one first-grade teacher helped children navigate their first experience with a chapter book, Roser, Martinez, Fuhrken, and McDonnell (2007) described how she helped the children focus on character (traits, intentions, needs, and behaviors) as a way to both engage with the text and untangle the plot. Children were encouraged to enact, connect, link, revisit, write, draw, and puzzle out meanings together.
Conclusion

In the literature of response, the past decade has presented more attention to the diversity of readers; more and more critical types of texts to respond to (information text, graphic novels, multi-modal texts, and even picturebooks that break the mold); and more purposes, tool, activity, and outlets for response. With an eye to the diverse ways in which researchers work to make sense of disciplines and theories, we can point both to “the continuities in our practices” as well as “the edges and intersections” that could stretch our scholarship and open new conversations (Enciso et al., 2008, p. 220). When Galda and Beach (2001) examined research at the beginning of the decade, they pointed toward shifts in readers’ interrogation of texts for the authenticity of the social norms they portray, in reader responses situated in social practices, and of teachers’ influence on response within communities of social practice. Their review advocated the further blurring of boundaries among reader, text, and context, and they reminded researchers intent on describing changes in students’ abilities to respond of the need to understand how “students acquire interpretive and social practices over time through participation in particular types of communities” (p. 67). The researchers represented in this review appear to have heard and heeded.

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