

Reading and Writing About Kevin Roose's *The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University* (2009)

ENG1101

Dr. C. Harris/Nov. 2013

Introduction to Teaching *The Unlikely Disciple*

As a journalism major at Brown University, Kevin Roose, who grew up in a secular Quaker family, is curious to bridge what he calls the “God divide” in the United States and lands on the idea of enrolling for one semester at Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. Roose decides to go undercover—to hide his secular orientation in order to learn about the “authentic” experience of evangelical student life. Embarking on a bold project of undercover journalism, Roose relates his experiences with Liberty students, at times funny, at times poignant, both in and out of class. There is a surprise aspect to the ending (I won’t spoil it!) that adds to the book’s suspense and keeps students reading to the end.

I chose this book in part out of personal interest after an uncle recommended it to me. He, like my father, grew up in Lynchburg, which is like a second hometown to me. I grew up knowing firsthand about Jerry Falwell and his college and out of curiosity attended services at Thomas Roads Baptist Church. I remember in the Seventies when he bought Chandler Mountain and renamed it Liberty Mountain before construction of the college was underway.

In Spring 2012 I taught Roose’s book in three sections of ENG 1101 and was surprised to learn how enthusiastically the students received him. Students are drawn to him I believe because of the undercover nature of his project, his humor, and his fair mindedness. The book struck a deep chord with Muslim students in particular, who identified with Roose’s need to hide aspects of his religious identity to fit in. (See the attached essay assignments, the wording of which I modeled after the ENG 1101 Final Exam.) In November 2013, Roose spoke to my students in ENG 090W. I was delighted by their questions, which kept the conversation going nonstop for the full 75 minutes.

Roose’s idea-rich book provides students with the vocabulary to talk about different kinds of institutions (public vs. private, secular vs. religious, commuter vs. residential), to understand the hierarchy within an institution, and to see City Tech in relation to other colleges and universities. It also allows students the occasion to write analytically about their own experience.

Reading Quiz/ENG 1101/C. Harris

Kevin Roose, *The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University*

1. What kind of institution is Brown University? Liberty University? New York City College of Technology? Write 3-4 sentences describing each school, using some of the vocabulary we’ve discussed in class.
2. One paragraph: In what specific ways does each school differ from the other?

3. Who is the president of Liberty University? Of New York City College of Technology? (If you don't know the latter, how would you find out?)

Essay Assignment/Kevin Roose

Mon. Oct. 14: Columbus Day. College Closed.

Tues. Oct. 15: Rough Draft due (three copies): 2 pages minimum, typed, 2 quotations

Thurs. Oct. 17: Bring your grammar book to class!

Mon. Oct. 21: Final Draft due: 3-4 pages minimum, typed, 2-3 quotations (attach all rough drafts and peer review sheets)

Goal of paper #3: Use Roose's concepts, experience and language to help you analyze your own experience and see it in a new light.

A. In his introduction chapter "Prepare Ye," Kevin Roose explains that, in order to understand and write about the "authentic" college experience at Liberty University (12), he decides he must hide certain parts of his own identity to blend in with the students there. In other words, he goes "undercover" in order to immerse himself in this domestic foreign culture and be perceived as an insider of the community. Think of an experience you've had or heard about in which someone felt the need to hide certain parts of his or her identity in order to blend in to a different culture. Perhaps the person saw him- or herself as an outsider because he or she did not exactly fit in based on differences in custom, race, language, religion, class, gender, age, nationality, or sexual orientation. **Write an essay about the challenges of someone who felt him- or herself to be or saw him- or herself as an outsider in a group/community/culture.** Describe the details of the situation, including why the person felt himself to be an outsider. What part(s) of his/her own identity did the person choose to hide or be evasive about and why? What were his/her motivations? What strategies did that person use to fit in and what challenges did he/she face in trying to do so? (For example, did the person go partially or completely undercover?) What were the consequences of these coping strategies? What lesson(s) did the person discover about group conformity or the need to belong to a group from this experience? If you like, instead of referring to your own experience, you may write about something you have read about. In the course of writing your essay, you must relate each of your points to what Roose's chapter (or other part of his book) says, explain what he is basing his statements on, and how they compare to what you have written.

You may address this question in any order, but be sure to respond to all parts of this assignment and to connect your thoughts into a single, clearly organized essay.

B. In his introduction chapter "Prepare Ye," Kevin Roose describes the gaffe he made in his initial conversation with a group of Liberty University students. At that moment he realizes he is not fluent in their "evangelical argot" (9). When he thinks back on that failed conversation, he feels frustrated that he could not connect with his peers. Partly out of this frustration, and partly out of intellectual curiosity, he decides to do a "domestic study abroad" (10) in order to learn about what to him is a foreign but fascinating religious culture. He contacts his friend Laura, who becomes his "evangelical Yoda" (14) and gives him a "crash-course" lesson before his immersion experience begins. **Think of an experience you've had in which you chose to immerse yourself in another culture or language. Write an essay about the challenges and frustrations you faced (and perhaps also the excitement you felt) in the immersion process.**

Describe the details of the situation, including your motivations and strategies, what steps you took to overcome your frustrations and who you turned to for coaching. Consider perhaps focusing on a particularly embarrassing or hilarious gaffe you made and explain the consequences of the gaffe on you and others. What lesson(s) did you discover about yourself from this experience? How were you changed by this immersion in a foreign culture? If you like, instead of referring to your own experience, you may write about something you have read about. In the course of writing your essay, you must relate each of your points to what Roosevelt's chapter (or other part of his book) says, explain what he is basing his statements on, and how they compare to what you have written.

You may address this question in any order, but be sure to respond to all parts of this assignment and to connect your thoughts into a single, clearly organized essay.

Roosevelt essay questions, short forms:

Think of an experience you've had (or someone you know has had):

A.

–in which you felt you had to go “undercover,” perhaps because, like Roosevelt, you wanted to experience another culture authentically or perhaps because you felt you needed to protect yourself, or

–in which you felt you needed to hide some part or parts of your identity for a particular reason;

OR

B.

–in which you immersed yourself in another culture or language.

Building on Roosevelt's concepts, language, and experience, write an essay about the challenges and frustrations you faced in such a situation. Describe the details of your experience, including, as Roosevelt does, your motivations and your coping strategies. For #1 and 2, explain why you felt you had to go undercover (or hide parts of your identity) and what coping strategies you adopted. For #3 explain why you wanted to learn this foreign culture or language, and what strategies you used to gain “the bread of knowledge.” **Use Roosevelt's experience, concepts, and language to help you analyze your own experience and see it in a new light.**

Peer Review/Essay Assignment (Kevin Roose)

Professor C. Harris

Today in class (Oct. 15), read and comment carefully on one fellow student's papers. For homework (due at the start of Wed's class), do the same on a second peer's paper. First number the paragraphs and read through the paper as a whole. Then go back and reread. Please do the following on each peer's rough draft (you can write directly on the draft):

I. End comments: Write a letter to your peer—three or four fully developed paragraphs—with specific comments on the following:

- a. One full paragraph: What is missing from the student's Introduction? Review the three requirements on the back of this sheet and discuss.
- b. One full paragraph: Where do you have genuine questions about the student writer's own experience? Write down three genuine questions and explain what you want to hear more about.
- c. One full paragraph: **Suggest one new quotation from Roose** you think will help your writer. Copy it down and give the page number. In a few sentences, say why you think the quotation might help.
- d. active connections between student's own experience and Roose: How does the student writer's experience connect with Roose? Does the writer ever use Roose's own words to explain something about his/her own experience?

II. Marginal comments (directly on the draft): write questions you have directly on the draft as you read.

Especially helpful:

- a. point out passages where you genuinely want to learn more. Ask specific questions in the margins to let your writer know where to develop.
- b. Body Paragraphs—Does the writer follow the Paragraph Model we've worked on in class? Give comments in particular on topic sentences. Underline each one and check: is it specific? Clear?
- c. "Unpacking" quotes from Roose: Circle words and phrases in quotations that the writer needs to "unpack"—ask questions about this word or words.
- d. "ARMS" (editor's guide)—add, remove, move, substitute

Checklist as you revise your work:

What to pay attention to in your own paper (and thus in your partner's paper):

1. Introduction: As always, you need provide:

a. Basic information: full name of Kevin Roose, full title of his book ("Main Title: Subtitle"), publication date

b. "Map": give a brief summary of Roose's project, plus a brief introduction of your own experience, detailing setting, time frame, and conflict. Let the reader know: how will you use Roose's experience/language to examine your own experience?

c. Thesis: actively use Roose's experience/language to shed new light on your own experience (or vice-versa): what lessons do you learn by applying something from Roose to your own experience? What is similar between your experience and his? What is different? What is **consequential** about those differences?

2. Body Paragraphs:

a. Using quotes from Roose: Does the writer follow the Paragraph Model we've worked on in class? Give comments in particular on topic sentences.

b. Writing about your own experience: consider it to be your second "text." Let the reader know the "who? what? when? where? why?" of your experience. To make your experience vivid to your reader, consider the following:

-Include dialogue.

-Include specific scene or examples.

-"Show; don't tell."

c. After you describe your experience, you also want to reflect on it—analyze it. Consider using Roose's quotation to help you analyze some part of your own experience. At some point in your paper, **you must make (and develop) active connections between Roose's words and ideas and your own experience.**