

■ book review

The People and Promise of California

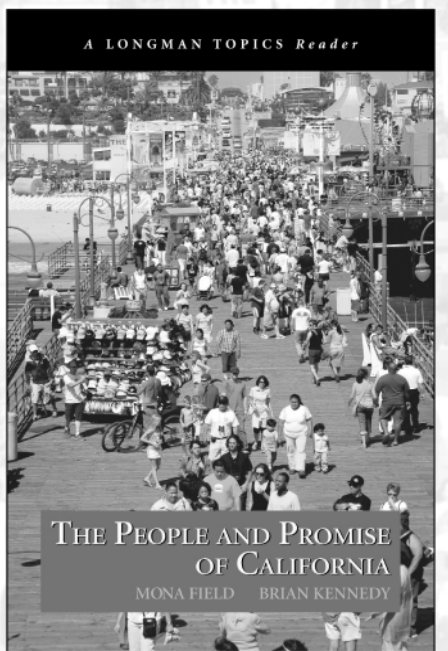
By Mona Field and Brian Kennedy. A Longman Topics Reader published by AB-Longman, 2008.

Those tried and true textbook readers that recycle essays and articles on immigration and cultural identity, media and culture, gender and race, and other familiar subjects never seem to capture first year students' interest. Sensing this years ago, I decided to assign a text with a more local focus on California. Student interest definitely perked up as they learned about topics and issues closer to home.

Now a new text, Mona Field and Brian Kennedy's *The People and Promise of California*, provides another textbook choice that focuses on California in selections that originated as newspaper and periodical articles, opinion pieces, book excerpts, and personal essays. The readings cut across different academic disciplines, taking a historical view of specific California themes or addressing topical state events and concerns. The diversity of the authors ranges from well known writers such as Lewis Lapham, Joan Didion, and DJ Waldie to little known local writers like Alizah Salario writing for the *Eagle Rock Post* and Machiko Yasuda who published in *L.A. Youth*.

Each of the book's chapters is introduced by an interest grabbing title, such as the first chapter, "The Lure and Letdown of California." This opening chapter focuses on aspects of California history that relate to the myths and realities that inform California residents' experiences. "A Nation-State," by Kevin Starr, California's former state historian, opens the chapter by discussing these myths and realities, and then looks at California's relationship to the rest of the country. This article and those that follow provide a reference point in thinking about the issues presented in the ensuing four chapters.

The next chapter, "Arrivals, Departures, and Culture Clashes," transitions well from the opening chapter by addressing topics related to the "experiences of people who live in the state, whether they be immigrants or lifelong residents." Local, often personal, examples of ethnic identity struggles, cultural misunderstandings, and the difficulties of adapting to living in California illustrate how people are affected by the state's changing demographics.



The following chapters also promise to pique student interest. In Chapter 3: "Getting Our Fair Share," students learn about "the complexity of politics and social change" that affect the state, including how politics have molded California's culture and unusual political alliances that cross racial lines. Chapter 4: "Safety, Security, and Sustainability" addresses questions arising from "how California's people and environment interact." And, in Chapter 5: "From the Center to the Edges," the selections range over the entire state, "across a number of cultures, subcultures, and geographical areas of the state, not all of which are outside the mainstream," and focus on topics ranging from the Central Valley's diversity to the clashing environmentalists and pro-growth advocates on the northern coast.

To promote discussion, the authors have provided thought provoking questions at the end of each reading selection: "Questions for Discussion" and "Ideas for Writing." In addition, two sets of questions are provided at each chapter's end. "Connecting the Essays" poses questions based upon thematic connections between two or more readings, which can be used as either discussion or writing prompts. To promote students thinking beyond the text, several essay prompts under "Extending the Theme" then ask students to relate what they have read to a film, additional research, site research in a neighborhood, or other suggested sources. These provide an excellent starting point for student research projects.

For those of us who are Californiaphiles in the classroom, Field and Kennedy's *The People and Promise of California* is a

welcome California-focused reader, which is also more compact and affordably priced. The fresh, lively reading selections look at what's going on in California, with discussion questions and writing prompts to further student thinking. Curious, interested students tend to ask more questions. And this kind of engagement with the text is what leads to students responding more thoughtfully, both in discussion and in writing – which is, after all, our objective. ■

Sandra Tarling Powazek has taught English composition courses at Santa Monica College for nine years. For the first time this fall she is also teaching a developmental reading course. Her essays, articles and book reviews have appeared in various publications such as inside english, Poets & Writers, and Calyx: A Journal of Art and Literature by Women. She has graduate degrees in both English and Education.