

# Justifications for Myself

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You're at a party and you find yourself sitting next to an rather geeky-looking fellow with thick black glasses. He looks like a nice enough guy and, after all, making smalltalk is only polite, so you ask him what he does. "I'm an entomologist," he explains. "Oh," you say, stalling for time. "An entomologist." You search your databanks for something you can say regarding entomology. "Doesn't it get boring pasting all those little bugs onto those little cards?" you say. He looks you straight in the eye. "Actually, no," he says. "It's not like that at all."

Michael Bérubé seems to often find himself as that man at the party. As an academic at a state college in Pennsylvania, he's surrounded by Republicans who want to cut off public support for tenured radicals like him. As a postmodern literary theorist who writes for public-interest journals, he's surrounded by those who think his field is meaninglessly obscure. As a professor of cultural studies, he's surrounded by those who think he's wasting his time researching trash. And as a cultural leftist with liberal political views, he's surrounded by friends who find his nuanced political views a personal affront.

In *Rhetorical Occasions*, Bérubé collects a series of essays, speeches, articles, and blog posts in which he tries his best to defend himself from all such charges. And while that doesn't sound like a recipe for good literature, he makes it work. Like my entomologist friend, Bérubé is such a kind-hearted, clear-spoken fellow that it's fun to simply hear him out. The result is a book even better than Bérubé's [2006 bestseller](#), *What's Liberal About the Liberal Arts?*

The difference is that this time Bérubé is writing for his fellow insiders, not outsiders, so instead of his cleaned-up defense of academic life and his tidied-up summaries of freshman classes, you get the real dirt on the way people dig knives into each other at MLA meetings and excerpts from graduate introductory courses.

The book isn't always perfect. Bérubé's writes clearly and well, but sometimes even his careful explanations assume a bit too much background from the reader. "It sounds almost like a Monty Python bit," he says at one point; "you expect to hear next that Alexander Kerensky was defeated by the experimental poetics of the Opoyaz group, and that the Battle of the Journals set the terms for the Second Congress of Soviets in October 1917." I have to admit, that was not what I was expecting to hear next.

And while Bérubé is fairly good about mentioning his opponents' arguments (and this is a book with a lot of opponents, from ice hockey players to Stanley

Fish), he sometimes responds to them with an obtuseness that borders on intellectual dishonesty. He notes that he was “derided on the far left [for] my craven desire to break into corporate mass media by repudiating Chomsky. I wrote it for *Context: A Forum for Literary Arts and Culture*, [a journal] not available for purchase anywhere in the country. It is distributed only to independent bookstores, in print runs of five thousand. So I wonder just how much further from the corporate mass media Chomsky’s fans would like me to get before I am permitted to disagree with them.” It’s one of the book’s best lines, at least until you get a couple essays later when you find Bérubé reprised the criticism for an op-ed in the *Boston Globe*.

But the meat of the book is not in Bérubé’s politics (which, reprising discussions between 9/11 and the war in Iraq, actually made me feel queasy), but in his academics. In even intellectual popular culture, it’s hard to find examples of postmodern literary theory that are anything other than critics taking a whack or exponents making it easy for them. Alan Sokal gets up and says that social constructionism is absurd and Stanley Fish fights back by insisting the rules of physics are just as manmade as the rules of baseball. Roger Kimball complains that postmodern theorists are being deliberately obtuse and Slavoj Žižek responds by wondering whether “Heidegger’s ‘deconstruction’ of the metaphysics of subjectivity ... undermine[s] the very possibility of a philosophically grounded resistance.”

But Bérubé manages to make such debates seem comprehensible and, what’s more, worth comprehending. Bérubé’s passing references to “Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Gallagher, nancy Armstrong, Even Sedgwick, and Judith Butler” makes you think that recognizing such names is as much a duty of an educated person as following Sokal’s references to Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, and (as in famous footnote 26) Rebecca Goldstein.

I just hope there are more patient teachers like Bérubé to help one finish the job.

- [Buy the book](#)