

Book Reviews

Adam Guy, *The Nouveau Roman and Writing in Britain After Modernism*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019); 256 pp; ISBN-10: 019885000X; ISBN-13: 9780198850007.

Accounts of the relations between British and French literature are comparatively unusual and the assumption is that these traditions of fiction are therefore separate and exclusive. In contrast, Adam Guy's methodical, systematic monograph argues that in the late 1950s until the end of the 1960s, there was a tangible, significant relationship between the two traditions shaped by aesthetic debates about the novel's form and modernism's continuing legacy.

The experimental *nouveau roman* and its key *romanciers* such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor and Robert Pinget, may be partly forgotten now, but Guy broadly suggests that the *nouveau roman* was important not just in itself, but because of the way it became an aesthetic 'touchstone' for the British avant-garde writers of the 1960s such as B. S. Johnson, Ann Quin, Maureen Duffy, Alan Burns, Alan Sheridan, Rayner Heppenstall, Eva Figs and Christine Brooke-Rose. It is the current revival of interest (since the turn of the millennium) in these avant-garde/late modernist British writers that has arguably brought back into focus the importance of the *nouveau roman*.

The British avant-garde were once seen as a kind of impasse within the British novel, uncritically repeating the strategies of earlier modernists. Andrzej Gasiorek in *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Hodder Education, 1995, p. 19) called them "the fag-end of a decaying tradition," while David Lodge depicted them as procrastinating at the crossroads between realism and fabulation in his celebrated 1969 essay, 'The Novelist at the Crossroads' (Lodge, *The Novelist at the Crossroads: And Other Essays on Fiction and Criticism* [London: Routledge, 2021]). However, these writers have recently undergone a remarkable reversal of fortune, shown in such books as Julia Jordan, *Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde British Novel: Oblique Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) and Kaye Mitchell and Nonia Williams (eds), *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). Novelist Jonathan Coe's *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2005) was arguably the key biography that started the ball rolling.

Guy performs a kind of literary archaeology in his initial two chapters, as he offers the first history of the dissemination, circulation, and reception of the *nouveau roman* in Britain, by unearthing a history largely forgotten by critics and readers alike. Guy draws on numerous reviews in mainstream publications and literary ‘little’ magazines, as well as letters and notes from important, overlooked publisher archives such as that of John Calder (who published many of the *nouveau romanciers* in English translation), to show how the *nouveau roman* was not marginal in Britain, but rather the multi-faceted site of literary controversy and conflict. Strange as it may seem in the 1960s many believed the *nouveau roman* would enthuse British readers in the way that Sartre and Camus had. Guy’s selection of materials, events, ‘case studies’, and examples is extremely varied and frequently fascinating in bringing the period back to life. In this respect, the book fills a significant hole in our critical understanding of British literary culture in the 1960s as it was perceived at the time, by demonstrating how the *nouveau roman* became entangled and embroiled in British debates about the opposition of realism and modernism, the place of the avant-garde and the possible future of the novel. As Guy argues: “the *nouveau roman* modelled vanguard aesthetics and the theorization of such aesthetics for a generation of British writers” (p. 22).

While Guy’s preference for the avant-garde is clear, he also shows that the *nouveau roman* as a negative example served as a primary means for supporters of realism like C. P. Snow to critique avant-garde British writers, a continuation of the crucial debate between realists and modernists begun in the 1930s that often had political connotations. Similar charges had been levelled at fiction writers like Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf (see Nick Hubble, *The Proletarian Answer to the Modernist Question* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017]). If this all seems old-fashioned to readers now, it is probably because of the triumph of magical realism in the Anglophone literary world in the 1980s and the prominence of authors such as Salman Rushdie and Angela Carter, which suggested writers could combine realism and anti-realism to political effect.

In Chapter Three, Guy offers an effective and informed account of the way the *nouveau roman* was translated into English, which draws on contemporary translation theory to help explain how it was shaped to be read in Britain. In Chapter Four, Guy demonstrates the perhaps surprising ways in which British writers such as Muriel Spark and Rayner Heppenstall approached the debate about realism and the *nouveau roman* in strikingly different fashions; Heppenstall read it as a continuation of modernism and

Spark as something far more contemporary. Chapter Five attempts to argue that Robbe-Grillet's fiction is a product of the Imperial 'end time' and provides insightful readings of avant-garde literary fiction (Christine Brooke-Rose's *Out*) and 'New Wave' SF (Brian W. Aldiss's *Report on Probability A*). Guy argues successfully that the *nouveau roman* had both some 'popular' and literary appeal. This change in the terrain of our understanding of the *nouveau roman* is arresting and attempts to supersede its conventional literary history, more usually seen in terms of the intricacies of Marxist politics, a theorization of modernist textual productivity, or the influence of the critical group *Tel Quel* (see Anne Jefferson, *The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980] and Danielle Marx-Scouras, *The Cultural Politics of Tel Quel: Literature and the Left in the Wake of Engagement* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

Instead, Guy emphasizes that fictional anti-humanism is a post-colonial, decolonising gesture provoked by the crisis of the Algerian War (1954-1962). Even if this argument regarding French anti-humanism and the *nouveau roman*'s historical moment is valid, for British writers the end of empire was probably differently experienced when compared to the *nouveau romanciers*. There is no real equivalence to the Algerian War in British history and Algeria was seen as part of France rather than a colony. In contrast, Britain seemed eager to withdraw from Empire after 1945 and if the independence of India in 1947 did not state Empire was over, then surely the national humiliation of the Suez Canal occupation and withdrawal in 1956 did so unequivocally? In addition, the most celebrated British writers concerned with the interrogation and dismantling of Imperial narratives were, in fact, historical novelists practising literary realism, such as Paul Scott or J. G. Farrell. In addition, consider the numerous post-colonial writers of the period. Apart from Wilson Harris, all preferred realism as a literary mode. In contrast, avant-garde British writers, such as Johnson or Quin, were much less concerned with this theme.

Guy's final chapter argues British avant-garde writers such as B. S. Johnson, Alan Sheridan and Eva Figes share Butor's desire to collapse the distinction between artistic production and its subsequent interpretation to determine aesthetic value, an argument derived from Sianne Ngai's conceptualisation of the 'interesting' to discuss conceptual art in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015). However, I felt Butor's notion of the novel as a

research laboratory to enable narrative to meet the needs of emergent cultural forms might have more productively linked these different writers as they responded to the specific conditions of the post-war period, such as new technology and changes in social structures. In the final analysis, however, this is a fascinating book which will prove informative for anyone interested in the history of the European avant-garde and modernist literature in the second half of the twentieth century or the relationship between French and British literary culture in the 1960s.

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Anne Dublin, *Jacob and the Mandolin Adventure* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2021); 226 pp + 7 pp of black and white photographs + 1 map; ISBN-10. 1772601624; ISBN-13. 978-1772601626.

A novel for adolescents and young adults, with both a Jewish and Canadian link, Anne Dublin's *Jacob and the Mandolin Adventure* deserves careful attention and discussion. It raises moral issues which a good teacher could help direct. As with her other novels for young people, Dublin puts her characters—whose names, lives and experiences are based on history—through the paces of important issues. The last section (pp. 203-226) provides a guide to historical documentation, titles of books and articles for further reading, a long list of acknowledgements, and seven pages of photographs which further root the novel in Jewish history of children rescued from Europe and brought to Canada before the Holocaust and its aftermath on the people it affected.

The Holocaust lies a decade ahead of the narrative, set in 1927 and 1928, and is barely mentioned except by implication. In their little town (*shetetl*) in Poland, the orphans face street bullies who mock their Jewishness, and their orphan status. Poverty also marks their condition, and a sensitive reader will glimpse echoes of what untoward events will come within the next decade. Already, too, the gates of escape are closing down, and when there comes an opportunity to travel overseas to start a new life, immigration quotas block them from the United States. By a small technicality the children are accepted to work on a training farm in Canada. On the rail ride across Poland, they start to hear further taunts of Jew hatred, and aboard the ship that carries them across the Atlantic those discordant notes become shriller.

The narrator, Jacob, is one of thirty-eight young orphans taken from Mezritch, Poland through Warsaw and to Danzig where they board a ship across the Atlantic Ocean to Halifax. From there they travel by train to Georgetown, Ontario, where the boys stay for training in farm labour and the girls for domestic service. After nearly two years at the training centre, they go by train to New York City and perform as a mandolin band in Carnegie Hall, the high point of their adventures. Along the way they are transformed from Old World children of a Polish shtetl into modern youths and Canadians.

But what lies at the heart of the novel are the moral questions Jacob and his friends have to confront, and find a way to answer that is both legal

and safe, humane and Jewish. A few smaller dilemmas come up when Jacob must face how to answer questions about his friends' status as orphans; the regulations for entry into Canada require that both parents be deceased, that living relatives give signed permission for the child to make the journey and that the would-be Canadians agree to play in the mandolin orchestra organized by the orphanage in Poland and supported by the school in Ontario. Jacob is naïve enough to make errors in these reactions and has to be spoken to, as do other children from time to time, by the guardians along the way. It is not strict adherence to the rules, however, that he learns to submit to, but through circumspection to find a balancing of childish whims and reflection on how to read between the lines and create necessary strategic white lies.

The biggest test comes when Jacob stumbles upon Nathan, who had not been chosen for the group going to Canada because his father was still alive though estranged from the rest of the family. He is hidden in a storage room aboard the ship. A decision about whether or not to report the stowaway to adult authorities onboard seems to be easy at first. Jacob brings his old friend bits of food and drink for a few days. But when he notices that Nathan had stabbed his foot on a rusty nail while sneaking on the boat, matters turn more serious. If Jacob does not bring medical attention to his friend, tetanus will set in, which left to fester could cause death. Though Jacob takes on the consequences of his actions, he notifies the ship's doctor, the leader of the orphans and the captain. All this takes courage, since he himself may be sent back to Poland for breaking the regulations. Nathan's situation changes the view of how the adult world can work through situations the young adolescent children cannot conceive of, though Jacob especially takes on a sense of responsibility to his very ill friend.

By the time, two years later, when the mandolin players prepare for a concert in New York City, they are almost all decided upon staying in Canada after this visit in America, and Jacob must deal with another moral question also related to Nathan. Overhearing the adults speaking in hushed words about Nathan's death back in Halifax, he needs to choose if he will tell his fellow immigrants and risk spoiling their ability to perform at their best in Carnegie Hall. On his own, he keeps quiet until after the performance, the success of which will ensure sufficient money to keep the training school in Georgetown open another few years.

How Jacob reaches the decision is an indication of his growing maturity over the two years since he left Poland, and how he will shape the rest of his life, with the Depression looming, the imminence of Nazi

dominance in Germany, the coming of World War Two and the Holocaust. Brief hints are given of the future for the boys and girls from the Mezritsch, their adult leaders on the journey to Canada, the owners and guardians at the training farm and the Jewish communities the mandolin players perform on their way over and in the New World. Young readers should be shown the way to connect this small story of a few Jewish refugees from the disaster about to hit Europe and the whole world and the fate of the Jewish people swept into the ugliest crimes ever perpetuated on them.

For adult readers, this is a pleasant, light novel which offers some interesting background to Jewish migration to Canada. There is no condescending to naïve young readers and no cloying sentimentality. It might be fun to compare it to Louis de Bernières's *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, a sprightly novel which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best *Book* in 1995.

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Janet Delphina Jaeck-Woodgate, *But it all rhymes: Poems 1967-2016*. Collected and edited by Rubymaya Jaeck-Woodgate (Monee, IL: 2021); pp. 380; illustrated; ISBN 9798581008386.

This volume is a tribute and a gift from a loving daughter to a cherished mother. Janet Delphina Jaeck-Woodgate (1949-2016) grew up in post-war London in a German-English family, and in 1967, aged seventeen, went travelling. She began writing poems at the same time as her discovery of the world and ceased to write only at her death. The poems (organised into thirteen chapters) are a window onto her life and a glimpse of five decades of a rapidly changing world. Her early works record impressions of London ('Misadventure' paints a picture of night in Camberwell, and 'High Elms' is a mystical depiction of the house she lived in), but in late 1969 and early 1970 Janet is in Morocco and Tangier, and with every delighted observation there are shrewd, critical comments. Thus, 'Small Poems' begins: "My fresh orange juice in my glass / a womans face on the plastic tablecloth / I love breakfast time in Tangier / (and I'd love to rub that womans face off)" (p. 54); and 'Friends' (written when she returned to London), asks "Were we builders of castles / creators of kindness / our golden gates open to all? / Or did we build prisons / glistening with visions / that could not jump over the wall?" (p. 65).

Photographs of Jaeck-Woodgate punctuate the volume, and testify to her feminism, commitment to alternative lifestyles, determined zest for life, and positive attitude. By 1972 she was in Australia, first Perth, then Sydney and Brisbane, and the poems reflect this new environment, not always happily. 'Round the World Poem' opens with: "I've come a long way, I'm half way around / I'm twelve thousand miles from my own home town / Twelve thousand miles is so far, so far / And I work in an instant hamburger bar" (p. 84). The second and third chapters, 'A few poems, 1981-1985' and 'Poems for the small warriors' contain poems about her love for her daughter, who was born in 1980, and the changes maternity brought to Janet's life. 'The Christening' is one example: "Rubymaya / Holy water / crossed and blessed / blessed daughter / Every night / I speak your name / and pray you won't / know much of pain / and pray that you / will always love" (p. 186).

Chapter 4, 'Living dangerously, dying young', is harder-edged, containing poems about post-war London, returned soldiers, dead friends, her upbringing in Peckham Rye, and how the city has changed. The language is stronger, unguarded. In 'Bread and Dripping (London-post-war-pre-

AIDS) she laments: “The bomb-sites are gone / and some live quite well / atop the shell of my childhood / but they didn’t do the post-world-war-two / and their bomb-site apartments / and lifeless and new / And nobody fucks anymore/ they just screw” (p. 211). Chapter 7, ‘Going to Bethlehem (poems for Sonny)’, collects Jaeck-Woodgate’s poems for her father Louis Woodgate, known as Sonny, who was an ambulance man in World War II, and met his wife Gerda Jaeck in Berlin at the end of the war. Janet’s poems cover many subjects in this lengthy book; nature, travel, food, family, animals, mysticism, psychology, sex, memory, and death. This book is a rich record of a life, and a testimony to a thoughtful and perceptive woman, who wrote her impressions of life down in poems for fifty years. I enjoyed reading it very much, and it conveyed a strong flavour of Janet Delphina Jaeck-Woodgate (usually called Jenny) whom I think I met only once, though my two decades’ friendship with her daughter Rubymaya meant I heard much, much more about her, and to an extent thought that I knew her a little. This book reinforces that feeling, which is welcome.

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Prophecy, Fate and Memory in the Early and Medieval Celtic World, eds Jonathan M. Wooding & Lynette Olson (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2020); 292 pp; ISBN-10: 1743326734; ISBN-13: 978-1743326732.

The year 2020 is indelibly inscribed in the minds of many as one of paradoxes and contradiction; of separation and connection; of cloistered living and yet also of discovery. So, it is rather fitting that in 2020 the Sydney Series in Celtic Studies sought to renew and “reboot,” in the words of co-editor Jonathan M. Wooding, and be witness to how “innovative approaches to traditional questions” can benefit the long-standing discipline of Celtic Studies. *Prophecy, Fate and Memory in the Early and Medieval Celtic World* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2020), edited by Wooding and Lynette Olson, is the eighteenth publication in the Sydney Series in Celtic Studies. It is a well-crafted and dynamic collection of eleven papers representing diverse academic disciplines and topics, written by early career scholars and established professors hailing from both the antipodes and Celtic-speaking nations.

The sometimes startlingly array of approaches and topics are artfully woven together, linked by the themes of prophecy, fate and memory, and interlaced by the golden thread of religion and its significance in the lives and worldview of early and medieval Celtic-speaking peoples. The papers canvass a broad scope of Celtic-speaking regions and eras, starting with Bernard Mees’s article exploring the socio-cultural importance of some Lepontic inscriptions from the Celtic Alps dated to the end of the Roman Republic, and finishing with Carole M. Cusack’s consideration of the fifteenth-century Rosslyn Chapel, and its reimagining through the eyes of modern tourists in search of hidden and alternative narratives.

The volume opens with an acknowledgement by Wooding that one of the challenges for scholars of early and medieval Celtic cultures is the fragmented nature of the surviving evidence, and the obvious difficulties that this presents for historical interpretation. These papers carefully apply different inter-disciplinary approaches to a range of sources and have the courage to challenge some long-held assumptions and status quo interpretations. In some ways, the compilation illustrates another of the great challenges for the discipline of Celtic Studies: that it is preoccupied with the culture of diverse groups of people speaking related languages but without necessarily having a sense of a connected Celtic identity, historically-speaking. As Wooding notes in the introduction: “what connections can we

draw between sources that are separated by considerable distances of time, space and language?” Thus, some readers might not wish to read this collection cover-to-cover, but rather might dip in and out as their fancy takes them. Equally, it is a strength of broad collections that insights into new aspects of Celtic Studies might be brought to some readers—whether specialist or student—by encouraging reading beyond one’s typical fields of inquiry.

A sub-theme of the volume is that of monuments, landscape and memory, and how non-narrative data, such as inscribed monuments, can help us to better understand early Celtic worldviews. Following Bernhard Mees’ examination of select Northern Italy inscriptions and their potential insights into the process of Romanisation in Celtic antiquity, Thomas Ó Carragáin looks at first-millennium Ireland and what landscape archaeology can reveal about how ecclesiastical landholders staked their claim over both the land and its pre-Christian past. Jonathan M. Wooding considers an inscribed land transaction in Llanllŷr, Wales, dated to around 800 CE, placed on a stone cross considerably older in date. Wooding uses this inscription to explore the early British church and religio-cultural inheritance from the late antique era, as well as processes for reimagining landscapes’ narratives over time.

Continuing with the theme of memory, interwoven with concepts of Christian prophecy, Meredith D. Cutrer asks what role Irish *peregrini* (strangers, pilgrims, self-exiles) and their journeying played within a broader medieval narrative of Christian salvation history. Penelope Nash examines insular Celtic influences on Carolingian and Ottonian literature and art, including through the *peregrinatio*, and highlights the complex and multi-directional nature of intercultural influence. Here, readers are encouraged to use the URLs provided to view the discussed folio pages in digital high-resolution form to appreciate their finer details and coloured splendour.

Constant J. Mews in his study of the seventh century Hiberno-Latin text *De xii abusivis* (‘On the Twelve Abuses of the Age’), explores the influence of Gildas on medieval concepts of law and ethical behaviours for different groups in society. Stephen Joyce delves further into the influence of Gildas on the right of episcopal authorities and Christian law to shape the authority of kings, through analysis of the eighth-century collection of Irish canon law, the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*. Lynette Olson also explores the legacy of Gildas and his prophetic historical approach, as well as the ‘chosen trauma’ of lost sovereignty in the tenth-century Welsh poem, *Armes*

Prydein ('The Prophecy of Britain'), which sought to motivate contemporaries to unite against the English invaders.

Continuing with the themes of prophecy and fate, and interlaced ideals of womanhood in medieval and modern Irish literature, Roxanne T. Bodsworth analyses literary depictions of two early Irish female protagonists, Deirdre and Gráinne, and their contrasting treatment throughout the centuries.

The complexity of relationships with the imagined past and future, and of secular and religious influence, are further explored by Cynthia J. Neville, who considers the influence of both canon and secular law in reshaping thirteenth-century concepts of Scottish kingship. Cusack touches on similar themes in her examination of the changing treatment of the Rosslyn Chapel, from a small, fifteenth-century Catholic church, to Romantic delight and now, thanks to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, a global esoteric attraction. Thus, the practice of reimagining the meaning of monuments and historical texts continues today, just as it did in ancient and medieval times.

As a 'reboot' of the Sydney Series in Celtic Studies, *Prophecy, Fate and Memory in the Early and Medieval Celtic World* holds true to the high quality expected of the long-standing series and will be of interest to students and specialists alike. One can hope that it augurs many more fine publications from the series in the years to come.

Bronwyn Ledgard