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Mariadele Boccardi. *A.S. Byatt*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pb. x, 172pp. $ 20.00. ISBN 978-0-230-27571-3.

Mariadele Boccardi, Senior Lecturer in English at the University of the West of England at Bristol, and author of *The Contemporary British Historical Novel* (Palgrave Macmillan 2009), has recently published a book on A.S. Byatt in the Palgrave Macmillan series *New British Fiction*. The aim of the series according to its two editors, Philip Tew and Rod Mengham, is to reach students and general readers at a critical time, at "a stage of survival of the novel" (viii). So far it encompasses volumes on Jeanette Winterson, Hanif Kureishi, Julian Barnes, A.L. Kennedy, Salman Rushdie, Pat Barker, Zadie Smith, Ian McEwan, with a forthcoming one on Martin Amis, since these writers all reflect in their works "a rapidly changing cultural and ideological reality" (viii). The central terms in the series title, namely "new" and "British," highlight "the originality and freshness of such writing" as well as "the cultural identity of the authors included, who nevertheless represent through their diversity a challenge to any hegemonic or narrow view of Britishness" at "a millennial and postmillennial moment [...] of fluctuating reading practices and of historical events whose impact is largely still unresolved" (viii).

Boccardi's slim volume on A.S. Byatt, contemporary British novelist, short story writer, essayist, "cultural commentator and [...] public intellectual of an Arnoldian, Eliotesque or Leavisite kind" (15), has a very clear structure: its three main parts and total of nine chapters are dedicated to biographical and cultural analyses of the author's "key texts" such as *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and *The Children's Book* (2009), a discussion of the full range of Byatt's literary output including her novels, novellas, short stories and critical writings, a survey of

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selected "landmark" interviews, and finally a comprehensive overview of the critical reception of Byatt's work. The volume ends with a bibliography and a combined index of names and subject matter.

Boccardi focuses on questions of periodization, i.e., on a discussion of Byatt's oeuvre as a special case of "morally weighted and somewhat unfashionable" (14) realist writing with conspicuous postmodernist features which express themselves mainly in Byatt's formal experiments and the metafictional self-referentiality of her work. Boccardi bases her effort to position Byatt as a representative author in a series defining "new British fiction" on demonstrating that her importance "begins precisely in the resistance found when attempting to co-opt her into the prevailing explanatory models of post-war and contemporary literary periods" (20). "[Byatt] provides, in the early twenty-first century" – so runs Boccardi's main argument – "a national continuity with the literary models of the past, most notably the Victorian realist tradition in England. At the same time, her writing is informed by and, in its turn, contributes to shaping contemporary trends, from the concern with narrative to the exploration of alternative forms of representation; from linguistic play to the ultimate desire to find some solidity in language's referents" (14). The second central interest of Boccardi's study is one of genre: Byatt's specific, "[u]nrepentantly elitist" (14) use of the historical novel but also of popular forms such as the romance and the fairy tale, arising from the writer's interest in the Victorian period as reflected in the 1990 Booker Prize winning *Possession: A Romance*, *Angels and Insects* (1992, comprising two novellas) and *The Biographer's Tale* (2000). Like so many other critics, Boccardi has a particular interest in *Possession*, the phenomenon of national identity and the recuperation of the past in the form of "Neo-Victorianism and its close cousin, cultural memory" (153) as well as in the canonical status Byatt has acquired through *Possession*, but she also rightly points out that future research also needs to focus more on Byatt's short story collections.

With her concentration on issues of periodization and genre, Boccardi fails to consider central research questions regarding contemporary culture as such, amongst them questions of visuality, intermediality, ekphrasis, and paragone that have been a rich field of analysis for many Byatt scholars over the last 15 years. To give an example: the so-called 'Frederica Quartet,' which consists of *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985), *Babel Tower* (1996), and *A Whistling Woman* (2002), chronicles post-war English life in the 1950s and 1960s by engaging with a wide spectrum of its scientific, linguistic, medial, and artistic aspects. The tetralogy is replete with characters such as photographers, linguists, TV directors etc., testifying to the fact that Byatt's interest in questions of representation goes way beyond that of language whose prowess in representation is actually fathomed against the role of other media such as painting, photography and TV. The almost

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complete omission of any analysis of the role of text-picture relationships and the strong pictorial undercurrents in Byatt's novels and short story collections (e.g., *The Matisse Stories*, 1993) is most likely explained by the fact that Boccardi has hardly taken into account the rich body of research that has been done on Byatt outside the UK. In addition to the lack of attention paid to the conspicuous intermedial, visual characteristics of Byatt's writing, cognition is a central interest of Byatt's (see for instance her extended discussion of Marcus Potter's synaesthesia in *Still Life*) which could have been discussed against the backdrop of the results achieved in the field of cognitive poetics over the last 20 years.

There are three additional points of criticism I would like to raise: first, the overuse of the term landmark, see e.g., the heading of chapter 7 "A Survey of Landmark Interviews," which is followed by a discussion of "that landmark novel" *Possession* (129), which makes one wonder why such canonizing gestures are necessary and whether they are sustainable; second, the construction of national history and cultural memory are not exclusively "textually informed entities" (50), but rely also, and to a considerable extent, on the visual, on images (e.g., the coronation ceremony of Elizabeth II as the first big national TV event, creating an imagined national identity); third, each of the series' volumes starts out with a timeline, listing the important dates in the life of the respective writer and situating them within the context of British and global history. In the case of Byatt, the timeline begins with the years 1960 and ends in 2011 (1–12). While the given key dates are very helpful as they remind the reader of important historical and cultural events, the juxtaposition of world events and minor events in a writer's life makes sometimes strange bedfellows, as is the case under "1962," where we read "Cuban missile crisis/Marilyn Monroe dies/Independence for Uganda; followed in this decade by Kenya (1963), Northern Rhodesia (1964), Southern Rhodesia (1965) and Barbados (1966)/A.S. Byatt becomes extra-mural lecturer at the University of London (until 1971)" (1).

Within Byatt scholarship Boccardi's compact book is certainly an admirable, up-to-date introduction for students and general readers to some of the relevant topics of Byatt research such as periodization, genre issues, neo-Victorianism and cultural memory. Here readers certainly profit from Boccardi's profound knowledge. The fact that her book on Byatt covers the narrative fiction as well as Byatt's other critical writings and her interviews makes it all the more valuable. However, there are also important aspects not touched upon in the study, aspects which prove important in today's academic negotiations with one of the "landmark" British novelists who keep the novel alive – although it remains to be seen whether the novel indeed is such an endangered species as the series editors would wish us to believe.

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