

Harvester Wheatsheaf Book Review

Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative practice and feminist theory.

By Paulina Palmer

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Ansgar Nunning, Koln (1990)

The aim of Palmer's book "is to explore the interaction between feminist theory and narrative practice in a selection of works of fiction by contemporary Anglo-American women writers"(1). The topical organization provides a sensible format for exploring the fictional treatment of such diverse issues as sexual politics, patriarchal relations, motherhood, and sisterhood. Drawing on a host of works produced by academic feminism in order to establish a context in which contemporary women's fiction can fruitfully be read, Palmer's stimulating readings of a wide range of novels by Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Zoe Fairbairns, Eva Figes, Marge Piercy, Emma Tennant, and Fay Weldon, to name but a few of the better known authors dealt with in detail here, demonstrate how the authors experiment with, for example, narrative voice and the treatment of character in order to articulate their feminist stance.

The study marks a most welcome reversal of the tendency still prevalent in feminist criticism to concentrate almost exclusively of the content of works of literature, since it looks equally closely at the specific literary treatment of the themes the texts explore. The brief but illuminating discussions of such narrative strategies as intertextuality (10, 56, 137), discontinuous narrative (37, 105), the merging of different identities (118ff), authorial address and dialogic interplay of voices (149ff), and the endings of novels (160f) could each be the kernel of a much broader investigation. Of theoretical interest in the book is also the author's successful attempt to dispel simplistic normative dichotomies such as the one between 'realist' and 'anti-realist' texts (cf. 7ff., 45, 161f). Successfully exposing many of the misconceptions about contemporary women's fiction, Palmer coins the terms "fiction of ideas" (8, 45, 162) and "fiction of debate" (8f., 59ff.) to designate a new genre of fiction "which aims to problematize and debate feminist ideas and issues" (8f.). She is also one of the very few feminist critics who freely concede that male characters quite often emerge as "indistinguishable stereotypes" (56) in feminist novels.

Palmer's excellent investigation of the interrelationship between feminist theory and the themes and narrative strategies of contemporary women's fiction proves fruitful in shedding light on both the current variety in feminism and women's writing since the 1960s. This concise, well-argued, and wide ranging book breaks new ground in feminist criticism, both in terms of the insights it offers into the ways in which novels and short stories formally re-work the concepts and issues which feminist theory has generated and of the interest it manages to promote in the critical discussion of that contemporary fiction which has not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves.