

Book Reviews

Soňa Šnircová

Girlhood in British Coming-of-Age Novels: The Bildungsroman Heroine Revisited
Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017

Though first coined in 1819 by the philologist Karl Morgenstern in his university lectures, the term *Bildungsroman* has lately been frequently used in literary criticism. The term itself refers to the literary genre that relates to the growing-up or coming-of-age of a male or female individual and describes various difficulties on the path to maturation. The classic 18th- and 19th-century examples of the *Bildungsroman* have obviously left a great impact on contemporary writers, as 20th- and 21st-century literature witnessed a proliferation of male and female coming-of-age novels. However, female *Bildung* narratives have attracted the attention of both literary scholars and the reading public because they depict current issues of female self-discovery and emancipation. For this reason, the book *Girlhood in British Coming-of-Age Novels: The Bildungsroman Heroine Revisited* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017) by Soňa Šnircová represents a significant contribution to recent academic studies exploring this complex matter.

As the title of the book suggests, Šnircová's field of study relates to contemporary transformations of the classic *Bildungsroman* in British literature. The author explains that researchers' interest in British coming-of-age novels by female authors "was motivated by the need to fill in a blank page in the existent academic studies of coming-of-age narratives in English" (2). Šnircová validly notes that a great number of academic studies have lately been devoted to North American examples of the genre, whereas British examples have largely been overlooked by literary scholars.

The theoretical framework of the study is substantially based on the works of feminist critics (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 1983, Labovitz 1986) who contributed to the notion of the "female Bildungsroman" by introducing gender into studies of coming-of-age narratives. Though the feminist perspective on the genre which was developed in the context of second-wave feminism is adequately represented in the book, it is the postfeminist outlook that underlies the basic theoretical approach used when researching the most recent developments of the female coming-of-age novel. The book should be praised for adopting an interdisciplinary approach (literary studies of the *Bildungsroman* and its contemporary variations are combined with postfeminist cultural studies), an approach which makes it a remarkable contribution to the newly emerging academic field of girls' studies.

Surprisingly, a rather traditional close reading approach to selected novels of development is applied in the study. Although at first sight this might seem an outdated method, the individual analyses of each female protagonist purposefully reflect on the impact of the myriad new cultural impulses in post-war and post-millennial Britain. The coming-of-age novels analyzed in the book exhibit conspicuous thematic and structural similarities with the classic female versions of the genre (for instance, liberating trends in female sexuality coexist with traditional patriarchal expectations of women).

Bearing in mind the fact that feminist and postfeminist phases in the development of Western cultures have not automatically improved the situation of women in general, but rather concentrate on white middle-class women in their representations of the “New Woman” and the “can-do” girl, Šnircová intentionally focuses on various representations of the white middle-class heterosexual heroine in British novels of development in order to discover potentials that feminist and postfeminist discourses have opened up to the traditional coming-of-age heroine. Hence, the “selection of novels includes texts whose dates of publication range from 1949 to 2014, opening a possibility to study the changes of the traditional genre in three different periods of the post-war British literature: the pre-second wave feminism period, the decades dominated by feminist debates (1960s-1970s) and the postfeminist turn-of-the millennium period” (5).

The book consists of six chapters. Apart from outlining the theoretical framework of the study, the author in the first chapter also tracks the development of girl heroines in the British coming-of-age novel by emphasizing the prevalent interest in girlhood – a phenomenon recently detected by cultural scholars in numerous social and cultural discourses.

The second chapter is dedicated to a comparative analysis of two novels, Dodie Smith’s *I Capture the Castle* (1949) and Rumer Godden’s *The Greengate Summer* (1958). Although both these texts represent intersections between the classic genre of the *Bildungsroman*, children’s literature and young adult literature (a characteristic which may be rather interesting to present-day readers), Šnircová reveals that their topics basically depict a traditional perspective related to the role of romance and sexuality in the process of women’s maturation: the focus is on the presentation of the heroines’ relationships with father figures (reflecting their position in society) and the description of the female solidarity/rivalry binary.

The representations of girlhood in Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and Jane Gardam’s *Bilgewater* (1976) are discussed in the third chapter of the study. Šnircová claims that these novels portray the same issue of the heroine’s relationship with the father figure, but also vividly present the central concerns of second wave feminism: “demand for gender equality in all spheres of life, rejection of the public/private divide along gender lines and vigorous critique of brutal and subtle forms of patriarchal dominance” (7).

Two more recent coming-of-age novels, Helen Walsh’s *Brass* (2004) and Caitlin Moran’s *How to Build a Girl* (2014), are explored in the fourth chapter as instances of literary appropriations of Girl Power media discourse. The main issue that Šnircová is interested in resolving is related to the subversive quality of these narratives: “do they undermine the ideological implications of the traditional *Bildungsroman* or can they be read as contemporary variations of the genre, reifying, in a typical postfeminist way, the gendered social roles that they apparently reject?” (62). Šnircová perceives these novels as “the conundrum of the Girl Power discourse” (60) and refers to the studies of Zaslow (2009) and Harris (2004b) to portray their ambivalent anti/pro-feminist character. The representations of what Harris (2004b) termed the “at-risk girl” and the “can-do girl” can be found in the aforementioned novels; however, Šnircová concludes that the usual class determinants of the two versions of Girl Power are potently ignored in both of them: “Walsh creates the former through her middle-class protagonist’s descent into the underworld of crime, drugs and prostitution, while Moran appears to draw on the latter through the focus on the suc-

cessful career efforts of her working-class heroine” (60).

The fifth chapter focuses on the images of “new traditionalism” and the criticism of victim feminism in Susan Fletcher’s *Eve Green* (2004) and Tiffany Murray’s *Happy Accidents* (2004). *Jane Eyre* is used as a central intertext in both novels, with the function of producing “interesting contemporary variations of the classic female *Bildungsroman*” (8). Special attention is paid in this chapter to these authors’ attempts to “move beyond the accepted feminist interpretations of the novel and offer postfeminist ‘rewritings’ of the famous narrative of female development” (8).

In the final chapter of the book, Šnircová rightly claims that cultural changes which have occurred in the 20th and 21st centuries have not substantially influenced literary representations of girlhood. The four postfeminist coming-of-age novels discussed in the book deal with identical themes to those identified by feminist critics in the currently popular chick lit genre, so the author finally alludes to the potentially reactionary character of these texts. “As a result”, Šnircová concludes, “the postfeminist coming-of-age novels do not simply try to seduce the reader with the idea of an escape into the world of heterosexual romance and safe domesticity, but also encourage her to imagine some new, utopian forms of girls’ liberation that will overcome the limitations of both the radical feminist and Girl Power versions of female emancipation” (100).

Girlhood in British Coming-of-Age Novels: The Bildungsroman Heroine Revisited is both readable and intellectually challenging. The detailed and extensive bibliography, as well as its scholarly style and content, testify to Šnircová’s immense understanding and knowledge of the subject. Although primarily intended for scholars and students in the field of literary, gender, women’s and girls’ studies, the interdisciplinary character of the book represents a valuable resource to readers interested in the intersections between post-millennial media culture and young adult literature.

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Ed. Renate Haas

Rewriting Academia: The Development of the Anglicist Women’s and Gender Studies of Continental Europe

Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015

Women’s and Gender Studies have a very specific position within the context of European academia. Mostly propagated and represented by women, these fields have been steadily growing and finding their way into English Studies curricula, despite the fact that they are often looked down upon. While there are many papers discussing the “gender gap” in academia, few of them provide a solid basis for quantitative research. Moreover, the

national data that can be obtained from various studies often do not address the distribution of female professors in universities. *Rewriting Academia* provides such an overview from a national perspective, and it also traces the history and development of Women's Studies. One of its goals is to point out the discrepancies between the number of female students and junior staff and female holders of leading positions within English Studies. This subject is also very topical, as is documented in various newspaper articles researching the biases that prevent women from becoming professors (see e.g. "Why Universities Can't See Women As Leaders" (*Guardian*, Wednesday 8 March, 2017); it is argued that women usually do not progress beyond Ph.D. level, and are mainly directed towards teaching. The authors of *Rewriting Academia* ask similar questions, documenting the statistical representation of women in higher academic positions in individual European countries.

The collection is an outcome of an ambitious and unprecedented project that strives to map and interconnect European scholars sharing an interest in the field. In the introduction to the volume, entitled "Basic Concepts and Realization," Renate Haas explains that the volume has been a result of a long discussion, including the title. The resulting subtitle of the volume – "The Development of the Anglicist Women's and Gender Studies of Continental Europe" – is broad enough to include feminism and Queer Studies without sounding too revolutionary or liberal for the general public (12).

As Women's and Gender Studies have been heavily influenced by Anglophone culture, most research in the field is published in English and/or relates to English departments; that is why the book reflects the state of research and teaching in English Studies only. The book seeks to avoid the association of the field solely with social sciences, realizing the importance of literary studies for the development and awareness of these subjects.

This informative introduction is then followed by detailed national surveys from Southern Europe, namely Portugal, Spain and Italy; Western and Central Europe, featuring France, Belgium, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic and Croatia; Northern Europe, including Sweden, Finland and Lithuania; and finally, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, mapping the situation in Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Armenia. The volume thus presents national surveys that address local and regional struggles, issues and victories and places them into the broader context of the role of English departments throughout Europe, presenting both local concerns and more global perspectives.

All papers follow a similar structure where applicable, outlining the history of feminism and Gender Studies, mapping their institutionalization and main directions, and finally describing important achievements. The historical context provides a valuable background for the present-day feminist issues Europe is currently facing. As soon becomes clear, most countries struggle with a lack of women in leading positions, including women professors (and associate professors); this is true especially for the Czech Republic.

The chapter mapping the position and development of Women's and Gender Studies in the Czech Republic was written by Věra Eliášová, Simona Fojtová and Martina Horáková, who all have their background at Masaryk University in Brno. In the introduction, they point out the challenges of introducing Women's Studies in the Czech Republic, which is "not supported by any faculty lines or other forms of institutional commitment and is mostly propelled by personal initiatives" (196). While the historical overview is short and selective out of necessity, it nevertheless serves its function and highlights the essential

features and roots of Czech feminism. Interesting and insightful is also a subchapter on Medúza, Brno's Gender Studies circle. Yet the part of the chapter that should map the current state of teaching and research at Czech English departments is sadly limited. The authors chose to explore the situation at three major universities, namely Charles University in Prague, Masaryk University in Brno, and Palacký University in Olomouc. Yet despite its narrow focus, the overview is far from complete, especially when it comes to the English Department at Palacký University.

While the statistics concerning women in higher positions (either full professors or chairs of Women's and Gender Studies) may look bleak for the Czech Republic, it cannot, however, be said that there have been no female heads of English departments. Prof. PhDr. Jarmila Tárníková, CSc. (appointed professor in 1997 and not mentioned in the paper), an expert in the field of syntax, pragmatics and discourse analysis, was the head of the Department of English and German Philology at Palacký University in the period 1986–1991, and served (among other positions) as an associate editor of *Linguistica Pragensia*. Doc. Mgr. Šárka Bubíková, Ph.D. runs the Department of English and American Studies at the University in Pardubice, and was named docent (associate professor) in 2014 at Palacký University. The Department of English and American Studies at the University of Ostrava is also led by a woman, Mgr. Andrea Holešová, Ph.D., and so is the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at Tomáš Baťa University in Zlín, with the head being PhDr. Katarína Němčoková, Ph.D. and the deputy head Mgr. Dagmar Masár Machová, Ph.D.

When it comes to research within the field of Gender and Women's Studies, it is mainly the Ph.D. researchers whose work should be supported or at least mentioned: Mgr. Ema Jelínková, Ph.D. from the Department of English and American Studies of the Faculty of Arts at Palacký University publishes on Scottish women writers, while Mgr. Andrea Hoffmannová, Ph.D. from the English Department of the Faculty of Education at Palacký University focuses her research on women's rights and feminism.

Despite the limiting (though understandable) emphasis on three major universities, other English departments also produce significant research in the field that should be acknowledged if only for the sake of a connection on a national level, which is a partial aim of the book: Mgr. Karla Kovalová, Ph.D. from the University of Ostrava publishes in the field of Gender Studies and (black) feminism and sexual politics. Similar topics are the focus of PhDr. Veronika Portešová, Ph.D. from the Silesian University in Opava, while Mgr. Markéta Johnová, Ph.D. (from the same department as Portešová) publishes on the issue of gender on the internet. Of course, this list is far from complete.

Rewriting Academia as a whole provides insightful data and helpful information for everybody interested in the field, and it can serve as a tool connecting both academics and other groups. Moreover, the data it collected seem alarming when it comes to the number of female professors and chairs – especially in Cyprus, Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic.

The project and the book also greatly benefitted from the involvement with the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE), which highlighted the necessity of cooperation and networking. The annual conferences and the organization website provide an indispensable platform for new projects and exchanges of experience and information. Overall, the volume provides an invaluable source of data concerning not only the state of

Gender and Women's Studies, but also of English Studies as a whole.

The volume proves that the goals of higher visibility and involvement of women in academia (setting aside other areas, as such politics) are still far from reached, and the issue is still highly relevant.

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Adam Kirsch

The Global Novel. Writing the World in the 21st Century

New York: Colombia Global Reports, 2016

Adam Kirsch, poet and literary critic, addresses the power of literature to represent the world. He argues that the global novel is the most important means that we have today of speaking for and about human nature. This is not a new notion, of course, but unlike earlier novelists, who focused on the unity of human nature, novelists today plot 'local experience against a background that is international and even cosmic' (p. 13). Because their themes are often pessimistic – they tend to focus on alienation, violence and 'reckless exploitation' (p.13) – it may appear that world literature is a prescription for disappointment and mediocrity. Kirsch questions this assumption as he examines eight popular novels produced during the twenty-first century. They are all by popular authors: Orhan Pamuk, Haruki Murakami, Roberto Bolaño, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, Mohsin Hamid, Margaret Atwood, Michel Houellebecq, and Elena Ferrante. These authors span six languages and five continents. Their narrative strategies are highly diverse. In fact, at first sight, there is very little that unites them apart from their contemporaneous nature and their status as global novels.

Kirsch addresses the unifying factors that unites the works of the above eight authors, i.e. the global dimension, and the authors' power to depict both contemporary experience and imagination. The novelists discussed in Kirsch's study are not driven primarily by the desire for commercial or critical reward. Rather, their concern is to depict individual lives as they are lived in a global world. This approach presents challenges both in terms of representation and homogenization. These challenges can, however, be turned to good effect and prove both stimulating and productive. Kirsch claims that in studying the global novel of the twenty-first century is to be hopeful for the 'capacity of fiction to reveal humanity to itself' (p. 26) – wherever you are.

The six chapters of *The Global Novel* address issues as diverse as climate change, sex trafficking, religious fundamentalism and genetic engineering. They also focus on the more traditional themes of literature, including morality, society and love. Two of the chapters, two and six, are particularly interesting as they discuss the issue of choice and the

notion of a collective conscience. Chapter two, which focuses on Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*, brings out the consequences of literary, religious and political choice. It concludes that it can be necessary for an author to retreat to the margins in order to address such sensitive issues. In so doing, Kirsch concludes that the author can 'belong to no camp or party, . . . he can be the medium through which all people find expression' (p. 39).

Chapter six, which addresses Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, highlights the unanimity of authors globally when it comes to the significance of misogyny and sexualised violence in society today. Kirsch concludes that '[t]his convergence suggests that the global novel may be, not the homogenizing and coercive force it has often been called, but the herald and agent of a dawning collective conscience. Everyone must strive to hasten its approach' (p. 103).

The Global Novel is thus not only an exploration but a challenge. 'Everyone' in the above quotation comprises not only authors but also readers, who, by buying global novels, spur on this development. The stakes are high, making the academic and journalistic discussion of world literature impassioned. Kirsch goes as far as to argue that '[s]urely world literature is a perfect demonstration of the liberal values on which all intellectuals depend for their existence – values like tolerance of difference, mutual understanding, and free exchange of ideas' (p. 13). Global literature is thus all about what it means to be a human being in a fast-changing and highly diverse world.

Kirsch's study is compact, provocative and highly eloquent. *The Global Novel* is persuasive; it encourages us to see the role of literature today in a fresh light as it brings together the works of diverse authors from different parts of the world. At the same time, it also reminds us that we are all human-beings, and we are all connected – not least through literature.

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