

Book Reviews

Christine Daigle. *Jean-Paul Sartre*. New York: Routledge, 2009. 179 pp.

Routledge Critical Thinkers is a useful and reliable series that focuses on major theorists, from their motivations to their impact on other thinkers. Each volume offers a broad introduction to the author, exploring his/her biographical background, main texts, significance and recognition. These do not aim towards specialists in the subject but are intended for either beginners who want to plunge right into the depths of philosophical or critical intellectual concepts, or for those who need their memory quickly refreshed. Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, but also Martin Heidegger and Sigmund Freud, as well as feminine icons such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, are examples of figures that one can find in this collection. Each book is organized in the same way: they first open with a biographical and intellectual summary, before exploring the main ideas in their context, their evolution, and then, their reception. Conclusions focus on the legacy of the featured thinker, how s/he has been followed, and by whom. Finally, a detailed list of additional works is provided to further direct the reader's research. These clearly written and smartly approachable volumes benefit from a very well organized presentation, with a particular text divided into short paragraphs, and grey boxes highlighting new terms or on other influential thinkers. Moreover, the user-friendly structure of the guide itself makes it very agreeable to skim through.

In this volume, Christine Daigle deals with the key figure of the Existentialism movement, Jean-Paul Sartre, and achieves the difficult task of helping the novice penetrate into what could appear a hermetic world of unintelligible thoughts and concepts. The first part, "Why Sartre?" answers its own question introducing Sartre as a "total intellectual," philosophical thinker, political historian, and conscious existentialist. The second and main part is divided into eight chapters, each of which introduces one of Sartre's "Key ideas" presented through examples and definitions, and is put in relation to other thinkers' works. "Consciousness" is the first concept uncovered through, for example,

Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, Freud's view on human subjectivity, or Franz Brentano's intentionality. Thanks to a brief diagram of the topology of consciousness and a quick reference to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), the author explains how Sartre revised the infamous "I think, therefore I am" into "There is consciousness, therefore I am." Next, her second chapter is devoted to the philosopher's definition of "Being" as it pertains to the human being—for whose presence on earth there is no legitimate explanation. Daigle not only establishes a parallel between similar thoughts or theories, such as Sartre agreeing with Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics (38) but also shows Sartrean ideas on how they diverge from his predecessors. Here a connection is made with George Berkeley and how atheism separates the two thinkers. The reader is directed towards the third chapter, "Freedom," which, according to Sartre, is not only a gift, but also a burden, as it comes with total responsibility for one's acts. Being "absolutely free" also means being "absolutely responsible" (44)—as *No Exit's* (1944) character Garcin embodies; there is no God to turn to for an answer, no guidance, and no salvation. Chapter 4 focuses on "Authenticity" versus bad faith, and illustrates how human nature is inclined to deceive itself and others, through excerpts of *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and his *War Diaries* (1939-40), thus introducing the subject of "Interpersonal relations" pursued in Chapter 5. If one is aware that "Hell is other people," it is because relationships revolve mainly around seduction, sex, and power, and can therefore only gravitate to deception and destruction. With other diagrams, references to Simone de Beauvoir, and Sartre's relationship to feminism, the emphasis is placed on how "conflict is the essence of our relations with others" (85). The antepenultimate chapter, "Ethics and the human condition," discusses then the ethics of existentialist philosophy as in the public lecture delivered in October 1945, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," referring to the previously explored notions of authenticity and freedom. Still addressing the matter of authenticity, the author explores this question investigating concretely the case of Frantz in *The Condemned of Altona* (1959). In the same vein, Chapter 7, "Committed literature," gathers war experience, such as Resistance and Socialism, and political duty as a writer. *Les Temps modernes*, a review he fathered in 1945, exposed in the introductory essay how "the writer is responsible for the meaning of the piece he has created" and how he cannot adopt passivity or indifference (103). As a conclusion to Sartre's main thoughts, the last chapter, "Politics," through the ideologies of Karl Marx and Søren Kierkegaard, unveils Existentialism and shows how essential the battle for freedom is, whatever the cost. The third part of the book is dedicated to "After Sartre." When Sartre's political and philosophical legacies make no contestation, Daigle establishes the correlation between Existentialism and movements such as Structuralism and Poststructuralism, and briefly discusses the state of Sartre's critics today. Finally, the fourth and last part, entitled "Further reading," gives a detailed bibliography of Sartre's works,

and another detailed list on secondary literature on Sartre, including the recent *Sartre Explained. From Bad Faith to Authenticity* by David Detmer and *Sartre* by Katherine Morris, both released in 2008.

According to my reading, *Jean-Paul Sartre* primarily targets novices, who wish to be introduced to the philosopher's main ideas, quickly and easily. Clearly presented and well written, each chapter gives a summary of its predecessor and an overview of what is to come and makes it very easy to navigate. Thus, one is not obligated to read it from beginning to end; the chapters can be read independently. If not a fundamental tool for research, this short overview of one of the most famous French thinkers of the Twentieth Century could certainly be a useful accompaniment to students as an additional resource for outside the classroom. Recommended.

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Anna Marie Sandoval. *Toward a Latina Feminism of the Americas: Repression and Resistance in Chicana and Mexicana Literature*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2008. xvi + 129 pp.

Toward a Latina Feminism of the Americas is an engaging and nuanced literary study of contemporary Chicana and Mexicana narratives. In keeping with current trends in American Studies, Chicana/o Studies, and Feminist Studies which have gravitated toward more transhemispheric approaches, Anna Marie Sandoval reads Chicana and Mexicana literatures "across borders" and in dialogue with each other. Central to the author's comparative analysis are the works of well-known Chicana authors Sandra Cisneros and Helena María Viramontes, and the Mexicana writers Carmen Boullosa and Laura Esquivel.

Chapter 1, "Unir los lazos': Braiding Chicana and Mexicana Subjectivities" details Sandoval's conceptualization of how to read these two sets of literatures together, whilst also providing a general overview of the political, cultural, and historical differences and similarities that characterize Chicana and Mexicana authors and their writing. As Sandoval suggests, Chicanas do not have the benefit of writing within a national discourse as do their Mexicana counterparts since the United States often fails to acknowledge Chicana national identity. Both groups of women, however, reveal political and theoretical agendas in their narratives which contest dominant and patriarchal ideologies, one of the most noteworthy being the re-visioning of myths, legends, and cultural symbols such as La Llorona, La Virgen the Guadalupe, and La Malinche. It is these commonalities and shared articulations of resistance which, according to Sandoval, mark Chicanas and Mexicanas as part of the same Third World feminist community and show them to be engaged in a broader struggle for liberation

and social democratization.

Chapter 2, "Crossing Borders and Blurring Boundaries: Sandra Cisneros Re-Visions the Wailing Woman," is an engaging exploration of Cisneros's award-winning novel, *The House on Mango Street* (1988), and her short story, "Woman Hollering Creek," from the collection by the same title, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1990). Sandoval's analysis addresses two key aspects of Cisneros's fiction: one, the way Cisneros re-writes history so as to allow otherwise silenced voices to be heard like that of Esperanza, the adolescent narrator of the *House on Mango Street*; and, two, Cisneros's re-visioning of La Llorona as a figure of resistance in "Woman Hollering Creek," a story about domestic abuse and female liberation. For Sandoval, Cisneros's stories—commentaries on the everyday lives of women—do more than simply evince a critique of patriarchal norms and ideologies. They also constitute a form of theoretical practice in keeping with arguments by Third World feminist scholars like Gloria Anzaldúa who posit that theory by women of color is to be found in unconventional places and arises from lived experience.

In Chapter 3, "No dejen que se escapen": Carmen Boullosa and Laura Esquivel," Sandoval turns her attention to two contemporary Mexicana authors whose writings also refute patriarchal structures and practices. Central to Sandoval's exploration of Boullosa's writing is Boullosa's creation of the rebellious woman-child, "La Salvaja," a figure who appears throughout much of Boullosa's literature, most notably her poetry book, *La salvaja* (1989), and her works of prose *Antes* (1989) and *Mejor desaparecer* (1987). Sandoval argues that "La Salvaja" breaks with traditional notions of femininity, thus constituting a feminist re-visioning of traditional cultural symbols akin to those found in Chicana narratives such as that of Cisneros. In her analysis of Esquivel's highly popular novel, *Como agua para chocolate* (1989), Sandoval addresses Esquivel's critique of the familial institution and representation of female sexuality. Though she admits that Esquivel's novel does not espouse the same radical feminism as that found in Boullosa's writing, she contends that Esquivel does propose a form of "cultural feminism" through her parodies of traditional models of women.

Sandoval's fourth and final chapter, "Acts of Daily Resistance in Rural and Urban Settings: The Fiction of Helena María Viramontes" examines the fiction of this Chicana author within the scope of Third World feminist praxis. As Sandoval argues, Viramontes's fiction engages with global issues and underscores the importance of international coalitions as is the case in her short story, "The Cariboo Café" (*The Moths and Other Stories*, 1985). The fact that the main characters are undocumented immigrants and that they are not given a specific nationality is paramount since, as Sandoval claims, it exemplifies Viramontes's attempt to break down geopolitical boundaries and to establish links between Chicana/o communities and other marginalized groups in the Americas. Viramontes's representation of Estrella, the adolescent protagonist of her

novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), evokes yet another Third World feminist concept, that of “the personal is political.” By “telling” Estrella’s coming-of-age experience as a member of a farm-working family, Viramontes enacts a form of political resistance.

Overall, Sandoval’s book is a noteworthy study. Perhaps one of its only drawbacks is the fact that it is rather succinct (the actual textual analysis is less than 100 pages) and could have allowed for a more extensive exploration of Mexicana authors and their narratives. That said, this is an extremely accessible book about a timely and engaging subject matter that will no doubt appeal to a diverse reading public. Undoubtedly, it constitutes an invaluable model for future comparative studies seeking to bridge the gap between Third World women writers and scholarship, and, more broadly speaking, the “Americas.”

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Ruth Cruickshank. *Fin de millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 290 pp.

Fin de millénaire French Fiction examines the problematic of the notion of crisis in end-of-the-millennium French fiction by studying several texts published in the 1990s and written by Christine Angot, Jean Echenoz, Michel Houellebecq, and Marie Redonnet. Ruth Cruickshank also dedicates the first section of the book to general considerations of “crisis discourses” and “the trope of the turning point.” Early on, Cruickshank summarizes her ultimate goal, that of teasing out “how prose fictions intervene in debates about the mass media, neoliberalism, global market economics, and sexual and postcolonial identities, while also gauging the enduring agency—critical and creative—of literature itself” (4).

Cruickshank first presents an overview of French culture at the very end of the twentieth century and reflects on the fact that while the French literary scene of the 1990s is a busy one, it lacks *grands écrivains* ‘great writers.’ In short, end-of-twentieth century France misses the relative comfort enjoyed by past generations of writers, and is imbued with a sense of crisis. She notes that with a considerable increase in the presence of mass media and global markets, the literary scene is also recuperated by all kinds of discourses and largely treated as a commodity. Therefore, fiction writing in the decade preceding 9/11 has been caught, according to Cruickshank, in a discourse of crisis which engenders tropes, in particular that of the turning point. She adds that “whilst crisis endures as a sense-making trope, it is also a primary product, generating an economy of desire for novelty that can never be satisfied” (40). Writers of that decade experience a sense of fear towards the relentless manipulation of images

and the selling of unrealizable desires. Their fiction, faced with the “ethics and aesthetics of mediatized intimacy,” (183) is also one that manifests difficulties in dealing with gender representation.

Dedicating a chapter to each of the above-mentioned fiction writers, Cruickshank begins with Echenoz and reminds the reader that his work shows a manipulation of genres, in particular that of the detective novel. His fiction stands for an overt and often ironic criticism of the news media. Echenoz’s well-known play on names and his consistent destruction of hopes for happy endings allow Cruickshank to make a compelling point when she states that “Echenoz’s enjoyment for language is palpable, and ... his *fin de millénaire/end of the millenium* prose fictions at once celebrate the materiality of language and self-reflexively point to its inherent crisis” (110).

Houellebecq, well-known for his politically incorrect pronouncements, does compare to Echenoz in so far as his works are, although to a much greater extent, derisive towards consumer society. Cruickshank also underscores Houellebecq’s attempts at bypassing the desire-producing machinery of turn-of-the-century French society but shows how provocation does not necessarily mean that his writing cannot be considered to perpetuate a certain form of violence (about sexuality, in particular) by narrating it and promoting it in a sensationalist manner.

Similarly to Houellebecq’s, Angot’s autofictions have increasingly challenged society, namely society’s refusal to discuss incest openly. However, she too, in her intense media exposure, has in some way been part of the literary establishment game while simultaneously accusing it of responsibility for some of the negative coverage her publications have received. In fact, in Angot’s work, Cruickshank sees two features common to the other writers’ work: “a meta-textual blurring and questioning of established genres; the exploitation and questioning of the status of fiction” (171). Another characteristic that Houellebecq’s, Echenoz’s, and Angot’s fiction share is that they are caught in a problematic representation of women. Echenoz’s misogynist stereotypes, Houellebecq’s exhibitionism, and Angot’s autofictions “neither [foreground] women’s choices nor [challenge] the social construct that women should become mothers” (202). All represent discourses which propose no alternative to society’s inequalities when it comes to gender construction.

As for Redonnet, her writing clearly outlines her lack of confidence towards the *fin de millénaire*’s ability and willingness to confront past national, cultural, and personal traumas. Despite the presence of such leitmotiv in her works, it is also clear that her desire to write and publish reveals her belief, also present in the above-mentioned authors, that literature may have after all some redemptive value as well as some sort of resisting power.

In conclusion, Cruickshank summarizes her findings as such: “Intersecting with contemporary literary trends from autofiction and minimalism

to ‘women’s writing’ and the *roman noir*, Angot, Echenoz, Houellebecq, and Redonnet destabilize the homogenizing labeling of the French literary field” (258). More importantly, Cruickshank believes that these writers are all unfortunately caught in a double bind—they show and narrate the symbolic violence conveyed by end-of-the-century consumer culture while risking the potential of reproducing it.

Cruickshank’s book starts out with an interesting premise. Her close attention to a few writers with distinct personal voices makes for a perceptive analysis, although it is challenging to prove a theory or even a point as broad as what the title and subtitle of the book indicate, based on only four narrative voices. As an example, other prose fiction writers of the 1990s, such as Sylvie Germain, J.M.G. Le Clézio, Marie Ndiaye, and Pascal Quignard, to choose a purposefully disparate group, may be viewed as building other sorts of tropes. Their books have worked on conveying their sense of alienation and an old story in literature—that of passing time and family relationships. Thus, while we might easily agree with Cruickshank’s analysis that *fin de millénaire* French writers incorporate in their fiction multiple considerations about consumer culture and the apparent death of “humanities,” it may be difficult to assert that there is much more here than a progression in the topics dealt within French prose fiction before the 1990s. In the end, Cruickshank closes *Fin de millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis* with much honesty, admitting that *fin de millénaire* French prose fiction is not always clear in its confrontation of “the problematic of the generation and manipulation of crises and crisis discourses” (268). Such acceptance of the limitations encountered by a theoretical approach based on the concept of crisis discourse alone is probably one of the strongest points in the book.

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Sanna Turoma. *Brodsky Abroad: Empire, Tourism, Nostalgia*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2010. xi + 292 pp.

Sanna Turoma’s book—based on her Ph.D. dissertation and still often reading like one—is about Joseph Brodsky’s perceptions of both familiar and new geographical terrain. It therefore traces Brodsky’s poetic and prose responses to places he had inhabited and then went back to in his imagination (Leningrad), as well as ones to which he subsequently traveled: Mexico, Rio de Janeiro, Istanbul, and Venice. Brodsky did travel a lot, voluntarily and otherwise. Born and raised in Leningrad, the former imperial capital of Russia which is now again called St. Petersburg, he was in his youth a member of geological expeditions which took him through Siberia. Later, after his trial for “social parasitism,”

where he was denounced as “a pseudo-poet in velveteen trousers,” Brodsky was sent to the Arctic White Sea region near the town of Archangelsk. Expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972, he settled in the United States, from which he traveled widely. And yet, in a traditional sense, Brodsky was not a great travel writer. When he wrote about Mexico, for example, there was no desire on his part to understand its ancient customs and rites, the kind of excited curiosity that Sergei Eisenstein exhibited so amply in *Que Viva México!*. Rather, there was just the lament, which Turoma aptly calls “Euroimperial,” that Mexico was no longer colonized by Spain. Likewise, when he wrote about Turkey, he regretted, in the same Eurocentric vein, that Istanbul was no longer Constantinople and the center of Christian Byzantium.

Why then publish a book on Brodsky as a tourist (accidental or otherwise)? It is a good question. Turoma justifies her decision by stating that while Brodsky “was not a travel writer... he was a traveling writer” (6), but that is hardly a convincing rationale. She at times also evokes Paul Fussell’s monograph *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (1980), but in her book she does not emulate Fussell’s wise approach of choosing only writers whose unique and vibrant perceptions of the visited places bring these places, not just the writers’ musings, into a sharper focus. In the case of D. H. Lawrence, Fussell approvingly quotes the writer’s friend who called him “a delicate sensorium... quivering and vociferating to every physical fact” (*Abroad* 143). Alas, there is rarely an analogous quivering in Brodsky’s reaction to locales that are outside his cultural comfort zones.

Ironically, *Brodsky Abroad* mirrors Brodsky’s own blind spots when it comes to being excessively “centric.” It tackles this cosmopolitan topic in a strangely parochial manner, suitable mainly to specialists in Russian (since so many poems are quoted at great length in the original while the prose English translations which follow obviously do them no justice) and, more particularly, in Brodsky (the monograph largely assumes the reader is familiar with the general contours of the poet’s wandering life). It is a missed opportunity: there are so many books that should be still written about Brodsky for the English-speaking readers: about his poetry, which the western world is yet to begin to comprehend, despite his fame as a Nobel Prize Laureate and a US Poet Laureate; about his hauntingly beautiful and nostalgic prose with Leningrad at the center of it (he never went back to Russia, even after it became safe for émigrés to return; “you can’t step twice... on the same asphalt,” he said in one interview); or about his belief in the absolute power of Poetry and Art over tyranny, which he shared with so many of his famous countrymen, including his mentor Anna Akhmatova.

In a poem dedicated to his fellow exile Mikhail Baryshnikov, Brodsky, after admiring the virtuosity of his friend’s ballet movements, exclaims that Baryshnikov’s soaring flight is really all that matters, while where he lands is

hardly relevant: “earth is firm everywhere; I recommend USA.” He also liked to quote Heinrich Böll’s sentiment that the writer’s home is where his desk is. Yet, there were definite “homes” in Brodsky’s life—his birthplace, Leningrad, and his cultural mecca, Venice, where he is now buried. Not surprisingly then, his best travel writings are about them. “I would argue,” he wrote in *Watermark*, “that the idea of turning Venice into a museum is as absurd as the urge to revitalize it with new blood. For one thing, what passes for new blood is always in the end plain old urine. And secondly, this city doesn’t qualify to be a museum, being itself a work of art, the greatest masterpiece our species produced” (*Watermark*, 116). Not coincidentally, Turoma’s best chapters are also the two dealing with Brodsky’s imaginary tours of Leningrad and his frequent visits to Venice. It would have made the book so much stronger if these two locales, so meaningful to Brodsky and about which he definitely “quivered,” were the book’s main focus, while Brodsky’s disappointingly Eurocentric impressions of Turkey, Mexico, and Brazil were left by the roadside.

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Svetlana Alexievich. *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*. Trans. Keith Gessen. London: Dalkey Archive, 2005. vii + 240 pp.

In June 2009, while walking through the Ukrainian National Chernobyl Museum in Kiev, I had the unsettling feeling that I was experiencing a scene from a work of Russian post-apocalyptic fiction. Taking in the exhibits, reading and hearing about the short and long-term aftermath of Chernobyl, I had the impression I was witnessing the exclusion zone and “stalkers” of the Strugatsky brothers novella “Roadside Picnic” (1972, 1977, the progenitor of the popular “S.T.A.L.K.E.R.” computer game). Or perhaps I was living the aftermath of the “Blast” and seeing the genetic mutations (the “Consequences”) described in *The Slynx* by Tatyana Tolstaya (2000). A month later, reading Svetlana Alexievich’s oral history *Voices from Chernobyl* and recalling my visit to the museum, I was once again struck by the truth of the old adage that reality is indeed stranger than fiction.

First published in Russian in 1997 as *Tchernobylskaia Molitva (Chernobyl Prayer)* by Editions Ostojie, this work is a collection of many interviews conducted by Alexievich in 1996 with survivors in Belarus of the Chernobyl accident. She weaves a compelling narrative from the various interviews and develops several themes. The catastrophe is likened to both the experience of war and to a terrorist attack: a returnee to Chernobyl says “Chernobyl is like the war

of all wars. There is nowhere to hide. Not underground, not underwater, not in the air" (45). There is a surreal sense that activities that are ordinary (hunting, eating, dusting, drinking vodka, etc) are, in fact, extraordinary and even deadly—translator Keith Gessen suggests that in the aftermath of Chernobyl in a quasi-Gogolian way, we see "ordinary human activities gone terribly berserk" (viii). Even the ordinariness of death is abnormal. One dying army captain says: "They even bury us separately, not like they do other people. It's like we're aliens from outer space. ...In Afghanistan death was a normal thing. You could understand it there" (83). One of the most compelling themes Alexievich offers when speaking about the victims of the disaster is the inter-relatedness of love and death. One Chernobyl evacuee, wife of a deceased Chernobyl firefighter, mused: "I don't know what I should talk about – about death or about love? Or are they the same? Which one should I talk about? ... (5). Bemoaning the fact that the stories of the Chernobyl evacuees are ignored, she comments: "No one's asked what we've been through. What we saw. No one wants to hear about death. About what scares them. But I was telling you about love. About my love..." (23).

In fact, *Voices from Chernobyl* is the first book that gives the personal accounts of people who lived through the Chernobyl disaster. The wide range of voices includes fire-fighters and liquidators (clean-up workers) and their families, as well as doctors, policemen, journalists, psychologists, military, scientists, and of course, ordinary citizens—the evacuees, the re-settlers.

Organizationally, the volume is arranged in three parts: "The Land of the Dead," "The Land of the Living," and "Amazed by Sadness." Within each of these sections, like vignettes, are many monologues, each with its own title, many of which are contemplations on universal and eternal human questions—good and evil, beauty, truth. For example, "About a Whole Life Written Down on Doors" and "About How a Person is Only Clever and Refined in Evil" are the voices of a female and a male re-settler; "About a Man Whose Tooth Was Hurting When He Saw Christ Fall" is the voice of a liquidator, and "About How We Can't Live without Chekhov and Tolstoy" is the voice of a woman called Katya P. Finally "About How the Frightening Things in Life Happen Quietly and Naturally" is the voice of an environmental inspector and "About Answers" are the words of an historian. Each of the three sections ends with a monologue of blended voices: in "Soldiers' Chorus" we hear the voices of seventeen people—liquidators, police officers, army privates. In the "People's Chorus" that ends Part Two, we hear seventeen more voices including doctors, midwives, a hydro-meteorologist. And in "Children's Chorus" at the end of Part Three, seventeen children from ages nine to sixteen speak. (I will leave the reader to speculate as to the significance of the number seventeen).

A gifted journalist and essayist, Alexievich here has developed a highly effective method of blending multiple voices speaking on like themes and topics

into monologues that have a distinctly poetic, even lyrical, quality. It appears that the structure of the volume and its contents have been shaped musically, perhaps akin to a prayer set to music. The book begins with a single voice speaking in *pianissimo* (“Prologue: A Solitary Human Voice”); voices steadily gain in number and crescendo to a *fortissimo* at the end of the second part. The third part represents a coming to terms with what has happened at Chernobyl and forward movement; in it voices are less strident, sadder. There is a gradual decrescendo in the third part that concludes with the sweet, innocent soft voices of children and finally, once again, a single voice speaking in *pianissimo* concludes the book: “A Solitary Human Voice.”

Given the fact that this book is an “oral history,” the reader might expect a documentary-like narrative. This expectation is quickly dashed as we become immersed and emotionally engaged by Alexievich’s poetic prose. Her stylized rendering of the voices of a multitude of Chernobyl survivors finds a consistently appropriate balance between the two extremes that might otherwise make this just another rendering of the Chernobyl horrors—it is neither sentimental nor coldly factual. In the “epilogue” to the book, Alexievich articulates her approach: “Why repeat the facts—they cover up our feelings. The development of these feelings, the spilling of these feelings past the facts, is what fascinates me. I try to find them, collect them, protect them” (240).

Voices from Chernobyl is important and accessible reading for all of us who live amidst the consequences of ever-increasing human-caused calamities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries within which, like at Chernobyl, we see examples of the very worst and very best potentials of humankind.

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Leslie Raymond Williams. *A Companion to Gabriel García Márquez*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Tamesis (Boydell & Brewer), 2010. xv + 183 pp.

Williams is, without a doubt, the best scholar writing in English to provide reliable, intelligent, and well-documented interpretive criticism on the contemporary Latin American novel; his writing is useful for both general readers and academic audiences. Williams is primarily a Colombianist, and his book on the Colombian novel (*The Colombian Novel, 1844-1987* [U Texas P, 1991]) is the best book on the subject and the only work in English. But Williams has also written extensively on the Latin American novel in general, and his *The Columbia Guide to the Latin American Novel Since 1945* (Columbia UP, 2007) is the best available source on the subject and has the additional merit of providing

an appropriate representation of Brazilian authors.

Williams writes with an authoritative command of his subject, eschewing tendentious critical postures, with the goal of providing an urbane analysis of fiction within the best academic tradition of the discussion of the complexities of narrative fiction. His *Companion to García Márquez* exemplifies well this overall scholarly project.

Williams published in 1984 the Twayne World Author Series volume on García Márquez. The series had as its goal providing a solid orientation on a particular author. The *Companion to Gabriel García Márquez* is less of an update on that volume and more of a Derridian supplement, in the sense that it overlays the former book with a totally new look at García Márquez, one that takes into account the immense body of critical writing his work continues to generate, his continued iconic role as regards contemporary Latin American fiction, and the controversies that have surrounded his place in Latin American fiction. Of particular interest is Williams's dual interest in the Colombian novelist vis-à-vis Latin American writing, as opposed to his identity as a world-class, Nobel-prize-winning author.

Organization of the *Companion* is grounded in the implied assumption that readers will find it most useful in terms of the characterization of the master texts, including pertinent major critical essays. It is for this reason that the two principal master texts, *Cien años de soledad* and *El otoño del patriarca* have particularly extensive chapters, while "Recent Writing" tends to be more of a quick survey. There is an introductory chapter on "García Márquez, the Modernists, and the Boom," which contains, in addition to the sociohistoric contexts of García Márquez's writing, the important biographical information. An excellent "Epilogue" has the virtue of describing Williams's personal engagement with the author and his writing. For those of us who came to scholarly age with the so-called Boom and *Cien años de soledad*'s enormous impact on the study of Latin American literature and its international projection, there are many details here that remind one of personal experiences.

Companion is exactly that, a companion to the Colombian author and, among other uses, it will certainly accompany graduate students preparation in the field.

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