JOURNAL OF
CREATIVE WRITING STUDIES

REVIEWS

# Craft Through the Lens of Marginalized Identities

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Review of

**Carroll, Audrey T., editor. Musing the Margins: Essays on Craft. HumanKind Press, 2020. 228 pages.**

In the past 30 years, we have witnessed a surge of interest in diversity, inclusion, and equity. These are not mere buzz words. They name a set of complex issues related to race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, health, etc. that touch our lives in profound ways, issues that require thoughtful reflection and deliberate engagement. Many of us welcome resources that expand and deepen our understanding of privilege and power, especially as they relate to creative writing. To us, works such as *Writing Intersectional Identities* (Bloomsbury, 2019), *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop* (Haymarket, 2021), and *Craft in the Real World* (Catapult, 2021) are invaluable because they critique oppressive practices that have guided writers, readers, and teachers for generations. They also motivate us to reconceptualize ourselves as creative writers and enable progress and empowerment beyond the writing workshop and the written page. Audrey T. Carroll's new anthology, *Musing the Margins,* contributes to this growing body of work. The 14 essays collected in this volume scrutinize writing craft through the lens of historically marginalized social identities—i.e., nonhegemonic, disenfranchised, queer, transgressive, divergent, or dissonant—and suggest ways we may proceed as writers broaching these subjects with insight and integrity.

In her Introduction, Carroll identifies a deficiency in the received canon of craft books, namely the centering of normative social identities—white, heterosexual, cisgender, male, able-bodied, etc. —and the presumption that literary truth and value rest with the perspectives associated with these identities. Her aim is to "reconceptualize[e] narrative craft via marginalized approaches to fiction" (3). To that end, *Musing the Margins* brings together an array of authors who offer intelligent and incisive perspectives on liberatory creative practice and critical writing craft.

In the book's opening essay, "Writing the Self, Writing the 'Other'," Cooper Lee Bombardier points out that white male authors have historically felt entitled to tell stories that rightfully belong to the "Other," but he argues, "Perhaps it is time for this myth of the objective neutral white author to be permanently retired, and for us to walk away from topics and characters we might have been tricked into believing belong to us" (22). If authors with privileged social identity attempt to represent the perspective of an "Other" nationality, race, gender, etc., he suggests, "let's then ask ourselves if what we are about to say or portray contributes something or takes away, if it expands perception or contracts, if it complicates and layers, or if it reduces and mocks the Other who is not us" (22).

Andrea J. Johnson continues this direct address to privileged writers in her article "13 Reasons Why Your Novel Sucks at Diversity." In writing "across racial boundaries" (26), tokenism, colorblindness, misappropriation, cliche, and caricature are problematic. She offers suggestions for avoiding such pitfalls, and she provides examples of "how to do it right" (27). Johnson makes astute observations about the racist habits of some writers and posits a compelling argument for more authentic, realistic, and inclusive representations of racial diversity.

In a similar vein, "Pro-Tips for Speculative Fiction Writers Interested in Indigenous Themes: Possibilities, Pitfalls, Responsibilities" by Daniel Heath Justice, presents 36 bullet points that identify common problems in Indigenous representation, such as the cliché of the noble savage, generalizations about "native culture," the trope of the "white man gone native" (45), and flat, static, simple characterization. Ultimately, Justice warns speculative fiction writers against "violent and alienating colonial fantasies," which invariably alienate readers and perpetuate the dehumanization of Indigenous people.

Freeing ourselves of received stereotypes and oppressive expectations for cultural identities is no simple task. Angela Kariotis' essay "Putting the Story on the Body: Playback Theatre and Improvisation for Narrative Writing" suggests we abandon "white supremacist" standards for perfection, completion, individuality, and textuality and that we embrace creative processes of experimentation, improvisation, collaboration, or dramatic play. Furthermore, in "The Missing Link: The Impact of Finding the I in a Story," TAK Erzinger makes the case for reading "multicultural literature," which may engender greater understanding and empathy for diverse identities.

More to the point of craft, B. Tyler Lee proposes four strategies to move beyond stereotypes. In her article "On Queerness, Neurodivergence, and Nuance: Creating Authentically Complex Characters," Lee recommends revealing the origin or cause of a character's traits, presenting characters from divergent points of view, exposing character complexity with "self-narratives" (90) and "interior plots" (91), and ensuring characters are more than mere clusters of identifying (often stereotypical) traits. The goal, she emphasizes, is to render fully realized, "breathing, bleeding characters" (83) that are "nuanced" (85) and "whole" (100).

Shifting our focus to disability, Audrey T. Carroll's essay "Authenticating Detail and Disability Narratives" casts a critical eye toward fictional representations of disabled characters that pander to the expectations and desires of abled readers. In such narratives, disabled people serve as "inspiration" (104) or "objects of pity ... or disgust" (106). Carroll questions, "Do disabled characters need to be justified within the narrative for story purposes (such as inspiring the main character to live a better life)?" (107). The answer quite obviously is no. Carroll urges us to "challenge an ableist or ability-normative lens" that minimizes disabled people and utilizes them as mere plot devices.

Amara George Parker's "Wheelchairs and Wyverns: Where Are My Role Models?" suggests precisely how this may be accomplished:

> We need inspiration and role models, not inspiration porn. (Although some disabled sex in our fiction wouldn't go amiss). We need worlds created that demonstrate the reality of disability, and we need to imagine, for the sake of peoples' mental health and in order to create and shape reality, worlds where disabled people aren't required to fight against social constructs, perceptions, architecture, workplace operating procedures and medical practices in order to live. Let us fight against bad guys, climate change, and aliens instead." (123)

Parker's call to action is intended to avoid caricature and objectification of disabled characters in fiction.

Mental illness (often regarded as an invisible disability) figures in Mira R. Lee's novel *Everything Here is Beautiful.* In her essay "On Arriving at This Novel 'About' Mental Illness," she explains why she emphasized the role schizophrenia plays in the novel: "I gave the illness full rein: to complicate my characters' relationships, test their morals, expose their flaws, detail their goals" (128). In this way, "what seemed arbitrary at first grew to feel integral" (131).

When a certain identity is not emphasized but is sublimated in the text, the effect can be quite different. In "How Two Queer Brits Dodged Persecution: Firbank, Woolf, and Craft Innovation" Emily Donovan examines the "historical repression of queerness ... [that] inspired Ronald Firbank and Virginia Woolf ... to innovate new forms of fiction" (133). Firbank wrote nearly exclusively in dialogue and hid lesbianism below the plot line, while Woolf used techniques of biographical verisimilitude in her proto-magical realist representation of queer subjectivity. Literary achievements indeed.

On the other hand, in "Writing Queer: Away from the Body and Into the Interior," Kristen Arnett says repression caused her to write "stories that were so distanced from feeling that it was like looking at characters through a telescope. Far enough away you could see the movements but feel very little. These characters spoke in italics. They became caricatures" (161).

Other craft choices may make a fictional text inaccessible to certain readers too. For instance, in "Silence Is Seldom Still: Deafness, Sound, and Character in Fiction," Patrick Thomas Henry criticizes fiction that represents sound as merely an auditory sensation, "something to be heard, rather than as energy, as the product of force ... [because] this denies the importance of sensation to the deaf and the hearing impaired" (167), a sensation that is more accurately described and represented as the "embodied experience" (167) of vibrations, motion, pressure, etc. He also objects to the equivalency of deafness to silence, stillness, disconnection, or disembodiment. Deaf people do sense sound, though differently to those who merely hear it. A fictional text that omits the physical sensation of sound from its descriptive detail stands to alienate deaf readers.

Viewing issues of craft through the lens of marginalized cultural identities brings to light the ways texts often misrepresent, offend, and alienate people. It also teaches us as writers how we might make better choices for our own texts. After all, as Desiree Cooper says in her essay "Writing Into the Blindness of Race," we may "parse, deconstruct, analyze, and examine through fiction" (204) the very issues of power and oppression that concern us all. And as Rachel Marquez Jones reminds us in "They, Them, Us: Language and a Demand for Change," "[A]s we learn from each other, we can collectively create room for everyone in the way we speak and write so that one day everyone's story has a place on the shelf" (198). Ultimately, careful examination of the issues, thoughtful consideration of the diversity of our readers, and a willingness to depart from received or habitual craft choices will lead us in the right direction.