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Susan Watkins, *Contemporary Women's Post-Apocalyptic Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. Pp. 220. ISBN 9781137486493 (hardcover).

Susan Watkins's work promoting women's fiction has been stimulating and widely respected: books such as *Twentieth-Century Women Novelists: Feminist Theory into Practice* (2001), her study devoted to Doris Lessing (2010) and her edited volumes offer cogent and illuminating contextualisations and reading models. Her latest offering is no exception: *Contemporary Women's Post-Apocalyptic Fiction* (2020) approaches a genre that is still insufficiently studied and showcases women's distinct contribution to it.

In her new monograph, Watkins proposes that, unlike "conventional apocalyptic fiction (usually male-authored)," whose tendency is towards conservatism, similar novels by contemporary women writers "successfully transform and rewrite the apocalyptic genre to imagine different possible futures for humanity post-apocalypse" (1). With a generalisation that is well grounded in a rich and diverse reading list, Watkins points out that, in male-authored apocalyptic narratives, "traditional patriarchal and imperialist definitions of what civilisation is are central and the momentum after the imagined disaster is either towards the restoration of what has been lost during the apocalypse, or focuses on nostalgic mourning for the past" (1). Typically, these novels are set in a post-apocalyptic future in which "men ... are trying to survive, trying to protect women and trying to rebuild things the way they were before." Women's fiction, on the other hand, offers alternatives to this way of imagining the post-apocalyptic world. The most striking difference consists in the absence of the conservative, restorative effort. Instead, women "focus on analysing the ways in which patriarchy and neo-

colonialism are intrinsically implicated in the disasters they envision" (1). This disillusioned, critical stance of contemporary women's post-apocalyptic fiction is Watkins's primary object of study in this lucid monograph. Her secondary object is the representation of women's embodied experience as the site of this critique of the imbrication of science, history and narrative with patriarchy and neo-colonialism, and thus with the depletion of the planet.

The aim of the book, as stated by the author, is "to establish the distinctive ways in which contemporary women writers imagine the apocalypse" (2). Eschewing the essentialist view that women write differently "because they are *intrinsically* different from men," Watkins claims instead "that women writers' fictional engagement with apocalyptic ideas and forms is inevitably related to their specific subject positions in the contemporary moment" (2). In other words, the various trends Watkins distinguishes within the growing body of apocalyptic fiction by women are inflected by issues of nationality, race and ethnicity, which she addresses when and as they intersect with her primary interests in gender and sexuality. Her thesis is therefore that "contemporary women writers transform and rewrite the traditions of the apocalyptic genre in order to refocus our attention on its intrinsically gendered aspects and make apocalypticism resonate for the contemporary moment" (2).

The monograph engages chiefly with contemporary fiction from the United Kingdom and North America, but it also includes discussions of a number of novels by Afro-Caribbean, East-Asian, Indian and Australasian writers, men as well as women, from 2000 onwards. This diverse body of fiction is thoroughly contextualised within the century-long history of the genre, but also within the contemporary discussion of concepts such as Anthropocene, Capitalocene or Chthulucene, which have been coined and contested as the portentous names of an age marked by (some parts of) humanity's destructive propensities. Watkins describes her method as "a mixture of close critical analysis of literary texts and dialogue, conversation, or intra-action between relevant ideas from philosophers, theorists and critics and the fiction in question" (4). Her reading is extensive as it is thorough, and it covers, in addition to canonical and lesser-known novels, a diversity of thinkers, from Jacques Derrida to

Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, and from Luce Irigaray to Slavoj Žižek, as well as a plethora of topical critical trends, such as ecocriticism, trauma studies and the new materialist feminisms.

As Watkins notes, despite the novelistic and scholarly cornucopia that imagines apocalyptic futures, “there has been remarkably little critical work on women’s writing within the apocalyptic tradition that studies it as a sustained feminist intervention in that tradition” (7). Indeed, one might add, there has been even less critical work that considers it as an “important intervention in our present moment” (8), which is what Watkins’s monograph attempts. Hers is therefore a necessary and timely contribution to the debates surrounding the diversity of cognate subgenres that envision humanity’s precarious, possibly even doubtful future. In that, it joins a growing number of studies, such as Brenda Brasher and Lee Quinby’s *Gender and Apocalyptic Desire* (2006), Susan Chaplin’s *The Postmillennial Vampire* (2017), or Andrew Tate’s *Apocalyptic Fiction* (2017), to which it adds an understanding of how these various fictions might participate in the world and promote mindful and considerate attitudes towards the planet.

The book opens with an Introduction that offers useful definitions and distinctions, starting from the Atwood-Le Guin controversy over speculative versus science fiction and summarising the post-apocalyptic features shared by the novels under scrutiny, and provides a context, both literary and conceptual, for singling out women’s post-apocalyptic fiction as an emergent object of feminist study. The chapters are thematic, discussing gender in terms of “Science, Nature and Matter,” “The Posthuman Body,” maternity and particularly the relationship between mothers and daughters (in “The Maternal Imaginary”), as well as the concatenation of women’s identity with “Time, Narrative and History,” “Literature and the Word,” and “The Post-secular” of our current moment in time. The analysis weaves in and out of some novels, while others are mentioned in order to illustrate single points. Many of the novels discussed are by now canonical representatives of the genre (Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the *MaddAddam* trilogy, Doris Lessing’s *Mara and Dann* novels, Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy), but Watkins also includes other, more obscure or formulaic, examples,

such as Julie Myerson's *Then*, Tama Janowitz's *They Is Us* or Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last*.

While contemporary women's post-apocalyptic and speculative writing owes much to science-fiction, Watkins notes that in many such novels "there is a healthy suspicion of techno-science for its destructive complicity with patriarchal and colonial enterprises and an alternative interest in debating the relationship between nature, gender and matter in new ways" (41). This relationship is rethought via what she describes as "a demonstrable, but equivocal, attraction to ecological world views" (41). The ambivalence stems from the perception that "some environmental movements are conservative in gender terms" (42). Representations of women as "Mother Nature," "definitions of 'nature' that are implicitly gendered feminine in essentialist ways" (44), and women's relegation to domestic roles are instances of such attitudes. Watkins argues that, by foregrounding matter and materiality, women writers "refuse the binary opposition between masculinist techno-science as the cause of apocalypse and femino-centric nature as a putative place of safety post-apocalypse" (44). Her analysis draws on Karen Barad theory of the performativity of matter, Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality, and Donna Haraway's cyborgs, companion species and symbiogenesis. Contemporary fiction both frustrates and exceeds theory's celebration of the liberatory potential of body-enhancing and body-manufacturing technologies, famously illustrated by Haraway's idea of the cyborg. Watkins concludes that few fictions "are capable of pushing the posthuman body to recognise its alignment with the animal and the machine": although some, such as Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, have moved into "a genuinely new space of post-apocalyptic writing, in which conventions of gendered embodied selfhood can be questioned," for most, there are "residual concerns about the creative possibilities of this space" (94).

Unfortunately, the book suffers from the oddities of following a format that has become standard with many academic publishers, and which privileges collections of essays over unified monographs in order to commercialise chapters separately, at the expense of coherence and the development of a well-rounded argument. Thus, the Introduction is followed by "Chapter 2," and each chapter is followed by its endnotes and

list of works cited. The concluding chapter is a coda rather than a conclusion, as it introduces new material rather than summarise the monograph's argument. The book could have done with some serious proofreading by a professional editor, to sort out the non-standard contractions and the odd splitting of words into syllables (e.g., "has-n't" (17), "Sara Hal-l's" (42), tex-t's (151) etc.). Something might have also been done about the apparently random subdivision of chapters into subchapters, the titles of novels analysed alternating with themes that are discussed with reference to one particular novel or sometimes to several. Perhaps several levels of subdivisions would have made more sense? The absence of a full list of bibliography at the end of the book and the scant and inconsistent Index are further frustrations that make this reader feel that of late publishers are letting down both their readers and their authors in the interest of profit.

These minor structure and spelling peculiarities notwithstanding, this is a valuable addition to the study of a genre that seems to appeal to ever more women writers and readers. Watkins's insight into the conceptual intricacy of the representation of women's subjectivity in these fictions is prodigious and is sure to encourage further serious attention from scholars in the field. Her readings of the ironic parody of men's representations of women in Maggie Gee's *Ice People*, in contrast to Cormac McCarthy's judicious exclusion of the mother in *The Road* (in Chapter 4), the postmodernism of Atwood's play with ideas of fiction and utopia in *The Handmaid's Tale* (in the Introduction), and the use of sequels as ways of thematising alternative temporalities (in Chapter 5) are exemplary. Drawing on Greg Garrard's distinction of the tragic and comic "frames of acceptance" of ecological and apocalyptic narratives, in the concluding chapter Watkins shows that contemporary women's post-apocalyptic fiction "tries to avoid the tragic, fundamentalist narrative of blame, judgement, the sheep and the goats." Instead, it "stakes a comic claim for the importance of plural spiritual narratives" and embraces "post-secular spirituality" (200). This shrewd observation contributes to our understanding of women's place in the evolution of this genre.

In the book's blurb, critic Mary Eagleton summarises Watkins's twin achievement by emphasising the "productive dialogue" between

textual analysis and critical theory, and pointing out that “[r]epeatedly, we learn how the fiction of elsewhere and the fiction of the future urgently speak to our here and now” (back cover). Indeed, Watkins’s monograph meets its two objectives of showing how women’s fiction intervenes not only in the renewal of the apocalyptic genre but also in modifying attitudes towards women’s place in the planet’s present and potential futures. Most poignantly, it emphasises that contemporary women’s post-apocalyptic fiction foregrounds “the relationship that exists between structural inequalities generated by patriarchy, misogyny and racism and issues such as climate change, global capitalism and techno-science” (10). In doing so, women writers oppose critical resistance to the nostalgia and conservatism that are so central to traditional apocalyptic writing and thus rejuvenate a genre that is ever more relevant to our times, as Watkins persuasively argues.

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