

Journal of American Studies, 44 (2010), e73. doi:10.1017/S0021875810002082

Ellen McWilliams, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009, £45.00). Pp. xii + 170. ISBN 978 0 7546 6027 9.

In her useful and timely treatment of Margaret Atwood's work, Ellen McWilliams asserts her intent to read Atwood's work within a framework of the *Bildungsroman* as a literary tradition. Specifically, she focusses on how Atwood's own "coming of age" in the 1970s as a writer is "inextricably related to her reclamation of a colonized national and female identity" (1). McWilliams is also concerned with how Atwood's reclamation impacts the next generation of Canadian women writers. As she does this, the author locates Atwood and her work not only within the context of Canadian literature and writers, but also within the broader field of literary and cultural criticism. McWilliams quite seamlessly shows how "Atwood replaces conventional narratives of cohesive, singular development, with sometimes outrageous narratives of multiple identity" (1), and in so doing traces Atwood's impact and influence on other Canadian women writers.

McWilliams divides her book into three main sections. In the first, very comprehensive, section, she provides a thorough presentation of the *Bildungsroman*, tracing its origins in German literary theory and moving towards an understanding of the genre within postmodern and feminist writing practices. Towards the end of this section, in chapter 2, she advocates a more inclusive understanding of the *Bildungsroman* and seeks to locate Atwood's work within her broader understanding of the genre.

The next two sections then investigate Atwood's "mode as a writer interested in and capable of challenging and reshaping categories, whether national, gendered, or literary" (53), and her relationship with Canadian identity and "survival" as important thematic concerns. Using Atwood's early fiction, *The Nature Hut*, *Surfacing*, *The Edible Woman*, and *Lady Oracle*, McWilliams follows Atwood's coming of age and proceeds through to what is presumably her present-day "maturity" in her discussion of *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Blind Assassin*, and *Moral Disorder*. McWilliams also skilfully uses texts of Atwood's speeches and letters, as well as unpublished material from the collection at the University of Toronto. These secondary sources provide invaluable support for many of McWilliams's arguments. That said, I find it surprising that she makes no mention of Atwood's poetry. Nor does she open up the possibility for reading Atwood's poetic works through the lens of her more inclusive *Bildungsroman* framework. I would have liked to see a little more engagement with Atwood as a poet and cultural representative, if even in the form of a caveat explaining why it remains untouched over the course of her study.

In her final chapter, "Postscript: New Departures: The Life and Times of the Contemporary Canadian Female Bildungsroman," McWilliams traces what she calls "the afterlife of the genre" (vii), essentially providing a balanced survey of Canadian women writers, their engagement with and their transformation of the *Bildungsroman*.

Any reservations aside, I found this study to be both well crafted and thorough. In a veritable sea of scholarship on Atwood, McWilliams's study is original in its approach and thought-provoking in its application.

University of Nottingham

ZALFA FEGHALI