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**Sara J. Brenneis. Genre Fusion: A New Approach to History, Fiction, and Memory in Contemporary Spain. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue UP, 2014. viii + 241 pp.**

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**Abstract**

Review of Sara J. Brenneis. *Genre Fusion: A New Approach to History, Fiction, and Memory in Contemporary Spain*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue UP, 2014. viii + 241 pp.

**Keywords**

Spanish Literature, Spanish Civil War, 20th Century Literature, dictatorship, postwar, Transition, genre, history, narrative, collective memory

Sara J. Brenneis. *Genre Fusion: A New Approach to History, Fiction, and Memory in Contemporary Spain*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue UP, 2014. viii + 241 pp.

Sara J. Brenneis's recent volume, *Genre Fusion*, wrestles with the continuing critical and theoretical discussion about the quality of the boundaries between history and fiction. Brenneis's work takes up this debate, questioning the reasoning behind the dogmatic retention of these categorizations in the face of textual evidence that suggests that it is the porosity of these boundaries, rather than their rigid impenetrability, that is more the rule than the exception. From this rather contentious field of inquiry emerge the hybrid categorizations of "fictionalized history" and "narrative historiography," both of which flout traditional understandings of genre, but which nonetheless have flourished in recent years. Brenneis avails herself of this critical debate in order to introduce her unique methodology, one that addresses and dismantles the profound limitations that a strict adherence to the requirements of each genre implies. She proposes an analytical model that she terms "genre fusion," in which texts of different genres, but by the same author, are paired and read both with and against each other. In identifying the fact that history and fiction do not easily conform to their own theorized models, Brenneis opens the door for a process of paired reading whose objective is to further break down the divide between historiography and fiction. Brenneis's approach through genre fusion identifies the diverse narrative processes that writers employ to illuminate a singular lived experience. She states that her hybrid approach "is not simply a way to describe the confluence of history and fiction, but rather a critical lens for rethinking narrations of the past. Genre fusion promotes the consideration of history and fiction in conjunction, as two sides of the same story, drawing new insight from the juxtaposition of examples from each category" (2-3). By reading in tandem two works from the same author—a historiographic text and a work of fiction that have the same thematic content—a richer narrative will emerge that can address not only the experience of the author, but also the very ways in which history and fiction have been employed (and manipulated) to great effect so as to inform the functions and shifts of collective memory.

As the discovery and elaboration of said collective memory would naturally be the objective and product of this strategic type of reading, Brenneis's analysis finds fertile ground in the literature of late 20th-century Spain. Brenneis chooses as her textual and historical territory the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), and the writers in Spain who, after Francisco Franco's death in 1975, sought to examine and reconfigure the "official history" that the Francoist regime had put forth over the span of nearly 40 years. As Spain moved from dictatorship to democracy in the 1970s and 80s, Spanish writers flooded the market with

narratives about the war and its aftermath, narratives that had been silenced for decades. Many of these were written by those who had either themselves or their families been marginalized by their participation in the war on behalf of the vanquished Second Republic. Brenneis chooses from this field four authors from a variety of backgrounds, all of whom felt to some degree a targeted oppression by Franco's dictatorship. In her second chapter, she studies the historiographic and fictional works by Catalan author Montserrat Roig, writing in the 1970s about the experience of Catalan prisoners in Mauthausen, a Nazi concentration camp. In the following chapter, Brenneis logically includes the well-known, canonical author Carmen Martín Gaité in her analysis, focusing on those works that address the social history and oppression of women under the Franco regime. She then turns from these strictly Peninsular authors to the lesser-known writer Carlos Blanco Aguinaga, who, as a child, was exiled to Mexico during the Spanish Civil War, and later wrote of that experience. The final chapter focuses on the contemporary author Javier Marías, whose family felt the brutal effects of being denounced as communists to the Franco regime. Brenneis presents these four authors as agents of the need of many to understand and undo the effects of decades of imposed silence, as well as the subsequent distortions of collective memory experienced as its consequence.

Following a masterful introduction, Brenneis's second chapter on Montserrat Roig brings to light the unique and particular qualities of the Catalan experience of the Spanish Civil War. The author makes it clear that Roig plainly deserves a wider audience due to her sensitive yet thorough treatment of a lesser-known chapter in history, that of the horrific aftermath of the Civil War for the vanquished Catalonians. The following chapter on Martín Gaité, while clearly well-researched, treads what feels like familiar ground. Brenneis spends several pages discussing how other prominent literary critics have approached Martín Gaité's work in a similar fashion, but a complete distinction between her analysis and that of others does not fully materialize despite the great pains she takes to distance her theoretical approach from that of her predecessors and her peers. That said, in her final two chapters on Blanco Aguinaga and Marías, her skill and creativity as a critic reemerge to great effect. Taking up the issue of the legacies of exile, the discussion of Blanco Aguinaga's largely unknown work is convincing in two aspects, the first being that this is an author who deserves further critical attention, and the second, that Brenneis's approach—very successful in this chapter—would be well-suited to other literary and historical contexts that similarly reflect and prize the exile's testimony and narrative. Brenneis acknowledges and describes with great skill the conflicted experience of Spanish exiles in Mexico in their first, second, and third generations. Similarly, her final chapter on Javier Marías is a masterful analysis that bears out her initial formulations of genre fusion, convincingly elaborating the ways in which

Marías's trilogy, *Tu rostro mañana*, even when its connection to 20th century Spanish history seems tenuous or fleeting, still in fact harbors a strong resonance not only with the repressions of the Spanish Civil War, but also the political tensions of present-day Spain. For Marías, when examined through Brenneis's construction of "genre fusion," it would seem that coming to terms with the injustices of the Civil War and the glaring omissions within Franco's narrative of Spanish history, informs not only his fiction, but also Marías's own assessment of contemporary Spanish and international politics. It is in this chapter where we most see the promise extended through Brenneis's concept of genre fusion: the author gives a strong argument for the benefits of reading fictional works alongside their essayistic or non-fiction counterparts, illuminating harmonies in both types of texts of which the reader may only be partially aware, if at all.

It would be possible to present the argument that Brenneis's approach is limited in scope to the literature she has chosen to explore. However, considering the universality of the experience of war and exile, it is safe to say that this analytical strategy could be well-suited to those literatures that have chosen to wrestle with their histories of oppression and forgetting. Latin American literature, so often informed by the repressions of dictatorship and with its emphasis on testimony, would be a natural and fertile ground for further development of Brenneis's theory. In her second chapter, Brenneis discusses the importance of testimonial literature in Latin America, and acknowledges that her work "adapts" the body of criticism regarding this genre to her chosen context of post-Franco Spain (40). It seems that, if Brenneis's approach is truly to be considered a theory, then it must expand beyond the borders of Spain. Should literary scholars choose to adopt it as a mechanism for analysis, they will have a hefty instrument at their disposal. Latin American and postcolonial literatures are strong potential candidates for exploration through this analytical model.

The author presents a convincing case for the usefulness of a tandem, hybrid reading of literary and historiographic works by the same author. However, the greatest strength of the book is one that the author herself does not choose to put at the fore, rather allowing it to flow steadily along with the argument she makes for "genre fusion." This element is the importance of the reader in negotiating the "truth value" of both types of texts. At the very beginning of the book, while outlining her method, she states that in order for genre fusion to work, "author and reader make a pact to put aside the distinction between a factual text and an imaginary text in the interest of communicating a story about the past, which is the ultimate goal of historical fiction and historiography" (3). This is a key point that Brenneis returns to with each reading, reminding the audience that in order to apply genre fusion, the reader must be active and informed, and must suspend any desire to categorize one text or another as an objective truth, or conversely, a complete fiction. In genre fusion,

the reader must remain alert but suspended, and must find a way through the discrete parts of the narrative in question in order to arrive at the whole of the remembrance itself. In this aspect, Brenneis's construction of genre fusion is holistic, emancipatory, and ultimately, yet another fruitful means by which the wounds of the past may be memorialized, understood, and, in due time, healed.

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