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**Anna Branach-Kallas and Piotr Sadkowski. Comparing Grief in French, British and Canadian Great War Fiction (1977-2014). Brill, 2018.**

**Abstract**

Review of Anna Branach-Kallas and Piotr Sadkowski. *Comparing Grief in French, British and Canadian Great War Fiction (1977-2014)*. Brill, 2018. 251 pp.

**Keywords**

grief, French fiction, British fiction, Canadian fiction, Great War

Anna Branach-Kallas and Piotr Sadkowski. *Comparing Grief in French, British and Canadian Great War Fiction (1977-2014)*. Brill, 2018. 251 pp.

Anna Branach-Kallas and Piotr Sadkowski's investigation of contemporary First World War fiction identifies several cultural trajectories that continue to play out in contemporary life. The authors assert that the patriotic myths of France, Great Britain, and Canada emphasized different aspects of the memory of the war. The French focused on familial losses and the male combat experience, the British on artifacts, and the Canadian on the country's place in the British Empire. These myths fulfilled society's needs at the time, and the fiction analyzed here reworks these older myths and memories. The authors' project examines twenty-three novels from France, Great Britain, and Canada written between 1977 and 2014 from well-known British authors like Pat Barker to lesser-known figures writing in a French or Canadian context. Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski identify five themes in these novels: "Faces," "Women," "Communities," "Mourners," and "Post-Memory." Of the five sections, the first two are written by Branach-Kallas, the third and fourth are co-authored by Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski, and the last section is by Sadkowski. In working through the issues raised in these themes, fiction serves as a kind of psychological sequel to war as writers address and reassess the trauma of war. This idea, that novels are "documents of cultural trauma" (5), is the rationale for the book's periodization.

"Faces" analyzes five novels about the *gueles mutilés*, soldiers whose facial disfigurements caused functional, social, aesthetic, and emotional crises. The novels explore the double meaning of such wounds, i.e., they bring shame and stigma to those who suffer them, but also become markers of courage and dignity. This ambivalence also plays out in veterans' symbolic status as states often sought to use them for political ends, a cooptation that some veterans resisted. In several novels, relationships with women are particularly problematic for facially wounded veterans, often sparking a masculinity crisis. For example, Frances Itani's *Tell* (2014) emphasizes the negative effects on a wounded veteran's family as the relationship is strained by the veteran's shame and anger.

The section on women builds on feminist scholarship that focuses on women's participation in war efforts and the gendering that war performs. In exploring men's and women's experiences of war, Branach-Kallas applies the idea of asymmetric similarities (74) and differentiated solidarity (78), to explore the depiction of women's traumatic experiences. In Angélique Villeneuve's *Les Fleurs d'Hiver* (2014), Dominick LaCapra's concept of "empathic unsettlement" is used to explore the relationship between women and men, as women's own suffering brings them to feel greater compassion and empathy for war veterans while they recognize men's alterity and the limits of their own understanding. Indeed, Louisa Young's works point out parallels between women's suffering under patriarchy and

men's experiences at the front. In *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You* (2011), a woman undergoes plastic surgery (a practice indebted to reconstructive surgery) in order to more closely adhere to a feminine ideal as well as to inflict suffering on herself.

War both can bring people together and tear them apart. In *The Heroes' Welcome* (2014), Young explores the aftermath of the war through a family's experiences she already introduced in *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You*. Building on the historian Jay Winter's work on fictive kinship, the author shows how the family transforms as it adopts people unrelated by blood into its ranks, as many historical families did. This hybridization of families led to new social bonds and domestic arrangements. On the flip side, the Canadian Jack Hodgins's *Broken Ground* (1998) and *In Desolate Heaven* (1997), respectively set in a resettlement camp and a Swiss sanatorium, question the viability of any collective meaning or bond as trauma tears groups apart. In discussing the strongly contextualized French Canadian works *The Draft Dodger* (1977) by Louis Caron and Daniel Poliquin's *The Secret Between Us* (2006), the memory of World War I is juxtaposed with that of the Vietnam War. In particular, French Canadian nationalism is framed as an anti-colonial struggle that can divide families with split loyalties.

The last section, on post-memory, is among the strongest as it presents the most coherent analysis. Post-memory is defined (after Marianne Hirsch) as the mediated, indirect transfer of memories between generations. In these works, a tension between the archaeological impulse to unearth the historical truth exists with the narrative and imaginative imperatives of fiction. As fictional family members often seek to reconstruct their ancestors' experiences, Sadkowski suggests, the past lives on in the present. Many of the fictional works' circular narrative structures further underline this point.

The chapters generally suffer from introductions that do not introduce a critical apparatus and thereby seem to adopt historical notions without any distance. In the chapter on mourning, for example, the authors apparently accept Sigmund Freud's strong prescriptions in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917). They thereby unwittingly re-pathologize various expressions of grief, especially in the cases of taboo relationships, such as adulterous or homosexual ones found in the novels. It is only after Jane Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* (2001) and Pat Barker's *Toby's Room* (2012) have been subjected to a heavy-handed application of Freud's thought that a more contemporary and critical view, such as that of Judith Butler and other interpreters of Freud's seminal work, is employed to interpret fictional mourning.

The book introduces the audience of twentieth-century literary scholars to several intriguing novels that address important themes. The authors often provide background to the novels, such as how they were written, i.e. with intensive historical research, interviews, or family history. They also mention any notable uses of genre, such as Gothic, or the subversion of generic conventions. The book would have benefitted from more direct comparisons between the five themes. The

conclusion does offer some important observations about homosociability, and in particular repressed or stigmatized homosexuality, as well as anti-colonialism, the importance of gender and inclusion of women, and the trauma of all survivors. However, the analysis often fails to distinguish between actual historical currents and beliefs and their depiction in the fiction under examination in this uneven book.

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