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Samuel Frederick and Valerie Heffernan, eds. Robert Walser: A Companion. Northwestern UP, 2018.

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Abstract

Review of Samuel Frederick and Valerie Heffernan, eds. *Robert Walser: A Companion*. Northwestern UP, 2018. ix + 298 pp.

Keywords

Robert Walser

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For all the burgeoning interest in Swiss author Robert Walser (1878-1956) since the 1990s, for all the ink spilled making the case for his significance to German and European modernism, his reputation remains as an author of the small and marginal. This balancing act between scholarly arguments for Walser's canonical worth and his outsider tendencies is convincingly performed by the contributors to *Robert Walser: A Companion*, emphasizing the modernity of Walser's writing and its influence on figures such as Walter Benjamin and Franz Kafka, as well as dwelling in the author's self-chosen peripherality to modernist networks and debates. The volume offers close readings of different aspects of Walser's eccentric oeuvre, designed to introduce major formal and thematic aspects of his work and to then draw connections to more well-known contemporaries as well as to important social developments, cultural innovations, and intellectual and aesthetic movements of early twentieth century German-speaking Central Europe. Reading the tea leaves of the recent spate of English translations and critical acclaim for Walser in the Anglo-American literary world, the volume positions itself as a standard-bearer for a new era in Walser scholarship amidst this unprecedented attention.

In the introduction, editors Samuel Frederick and Valerie Heffernan aim to persuade readers of Walser's underestimated meaning for modernism, critiquing the overshadowing dominance of canonical greats like Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht. They review previous efforts to establish Walser as an equal figure to these literary giants, while claiming for the volume the distinction of being the first English-language scholarly work that spans Walser's life and oeuvre in investigating his idiosyncratic modernism and why it matters today. Although Frederick and Heffernan welcome both those familiar and unfamiliar with Walser, the book as a companion is nevertheless fraught with a tension regarding its audience: are these essays aimed at experts or newcomers? The contributors come commendably close to fulfilling the needs of both audiences. They follow through on their promise to cover the different aspects of Walser's output across genre (poetry, short story, drama, novel), form (fiction, letters, biography), topic (from castration to nature walks and food), and the cultural-historical contexts that inflected the man and his work. Each essay offers English translations of all German titles and quotations, only occasionally lapsing into obscure theoretical jargon or straying too far from otherwise impressive close readings into woolly abstraction that may be inaccessible to those not familiar with the arcana of German cultural history or German studies.

Each contributor reads a specific set of works to get at something emblematic of Walser's writing. Susan Bernofsky places an analysis of Walser's

first poems within the biography of his early adulthood, identifying patterns, motifs, and styles that would come to characterize his mature writing. Together with Elke Siegel's essay on the author's correspondence with his companion Frieda Mermet, both Bernofsky and Siegel argue for the importance of Walser's overlooked epistolary archive as a site where he explored new ways of writing that would come to fruition in his publications. Turning to Walser's lyric poetry, Frederick compares the author's conventional early verse with his more experimental late verse to trace a defining dialectic of convention and experimentation common to both and which enables Walser to celebrate self-erasure and the inanity of meaning. Anette Schwarz interprets how Walser, in his prose work *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze* (*Fritz Kocher's Essays*), inhabits the persona of a schoolboy to access childhood as a treasured realm of transformation, play, and invention, a playground for his writerly practice. Daniel Medin offers a fascinating look at Walser's connections to pre-1933 Jewish Berlin, explicating the author's relationships with prominent Jewish intellectuals such as Samuel Fischer and Paul Cassirer and their appearances in his writing. Embarking on a study of Walser's novels *Geschwister Tanner* (*The Tanners*) and *Der Gehülfe* (*The Assistant*), Paul Buchholz examines their autobiographical content regarding the issue of labor, focusing on the author's—and his characters'—penchant for negation through a refusal to work as a disruption of realist literary style and of social expectations. Reading Walser's most famous novel, *Jakob von Gunten*, as a tale of the titular protagonist's reduction of subjectivity, Peter Utz makes the case for the importance of the number zero in Walser's prose as a way to escape conventional meaning and language. Bernhard F. Malkmus concentrates on Walser's short stories "Kleist in Thun" and "Der Spaziergang" ("The Walk"), illustrating how both texts dramatize the loss and recovery of the self in the dual role of scenery as natural landscape and theater stage. Staying with the same stories, Jörg Kreienbrock sketches Walser's paradoxical hermeneutics of immersion into the surface of things, through which he scuttles the distinction between depth and shallowness and achieves a nullity of the self. Shedding light on Walser's understudied dramatic scenes, Heffernan argues that the self-referentiality and self-mockery of these pieces, as subversive acts, target and dismantle structures of social power. Similarly concerned with issues of power and violence, Kai Evers tackles Walser's notorious microscripts—over 500 pages of drawings, sketches, and writings composed in miniscule, nearly indecipherable script—and investigates how Walser wields violence to posit a notion of the self as malleable and everchanging. Anne Fuchs concludes the volume with an intriguing study of Walser's late novel *Der Räuber* (*The Robber*) through the lens of camp style, which works to undermine narrative, generic, and heteronormative erotic conventions.

An engaging introduction for newcomers to Walser that also breaks new ground in Walser scholarship, this volume is a worthy addition to a growing body

of research. For all its capaciousness, however, it suffers from a rather egregious absence of queerness, a strange omission considering the palpable homoeroticism present in Walser's novels and microscripts, as well as the resonances between "queer" as a concept of outsidership and Walser's devotion to marginality. Nevertheless, this effective and cohesive collection promises to bring new English-language readers to a long-overlooked author.

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