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## Mette Leonard Høeg, editor. *Literary Theories of Uncertainty*. Bloomsbury, 2021.

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**Mette Leonard Høeg, editor. Literary Theories of Uncertainty. Bloomsbury, 2021.**

**Abstract**

Review of Mette Leonard Høeg, editor. *Literary Theories of Uncertainty*. Bloomsbury, 2021. xi + 295 pp.

**Keywords**

uncertainty, literary theory, deconstruction, literary criticism, semantics

Mette Leonard Høeg, editor. *Literary Theories of Uncertainty*. Bloomsbury, 2021. xi + 295 pp.

Readers approaching this edited collection may initially be fittingly uncertain about what they will find. It is difficult, after all, to write with certainty about uncertainty. This is something editor Mette Leonard Høeg acknowledges in the introduction. She excellently and proficiently discusses the meaning of considering literature through a lens of uncertainty and describes the value of studying the potentially opaque topic. While on the surface this collection seems daunting, Høeg and the contributors detail different facets of uncertainty from multiple perspectives and with diverse approaches, resulting in an approachable and comprehensive volume that facilitates an understanding of the subject.

On a topic such as uncertainty, it is essential for readers to understand exactly what writers and literary critics mean when they use the term. In the introduction, Høeg emphasizes that the volume considers uncertainty as a criterion of finding meaning and authenticity and ultimately designates it as a fundamental dimension of literature and literary theory. She dispels the notion that uncertainty is mutually exclusive from knowledge and asserts that it is, conversely, a pathway to finding and producing meaning. The authors argue overall for a multiplicity of truth and discuss a compelling series of methods to demystify the indeterminacy of subjective literary meaning.

This text is divided into three sections: (1) a look at post-structuralist legacies of uncertainty; (2) uncertainty in the genre of life-writing, biographical ethics, and autobiography; and (3) uncertainty in contemporary literature and contemporary critical discussion. Part one begins with two diametrically opposed chapters, the first a deconstructive examination of suspension by Patrick French and the second a formalist chapter by Christopher Norris. The juxtaposition of these two chapters and these two scholars illustrates the variety in this volume and the seamlessness with which contrasting ideas interact in the body of the collection. Norris's chapter is written as a series of poetic 'verse essays' in which he subverts the conventional format of a book chapter in order to elucidate how poetry can function as a mode of discourse in addition to an art medium. Max Saunders, in a chapter on temporal undecidability, discusses the effects of ambiguity in terms of textual analysis and illustrates that contrast—even conflict—in genres can reveal facets of the text that would be missing if they did not require the reader to confront the ambiguous impetus of the text. These and other chapters make artful use of ambiguity in order to illustrate the authors' interventions. Multiple times, this reviewer was surprised at the accessibility of new and complex ideas and was equally impressed that each of the contributors provided clarity in their respective chapters despite their innovative experimentation with form.

The collection touches on uncertainty as it appears in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida, Wolfgang Iser, Werner Heisenberg, Niels Bohr, and Hélène Cixous to name a few. As such, individual chapters rely on a foundation of knowledge about these theorists that goes beyond the brief explanations of their philosophies that appear in the chapters themselves. This is, after all, an examination of uncertainty, not a primer in literary theory. The contributors examine the very notion of ambiguity, especially as a textual phenomenon oriented toward meaning; an exercise that depends on a comprehension of topics from modernist psychoanalysis to Derrida's notion of undecidability as necessary to find determinate meaning.

One potential pitfall of such a volume is the redundancy of ideas, as there is surely a limit to the number of ways to talk about uncertainty. Instead, Høeg's collection is delightfully diverse. The introduction claims that the volume aims to establish a background—both theoretical and historical—for theories of uncertainty as well as to provide a broad base for understanding of uncertainty's value as a subject of critical study. The chapters in this volume explore a wide variety of topics and source materials which I predict will be helpful in bridging knowledge gaps for readers who are new to the study of uncertainty. Chapters span topics including psychoanalysis, quantum physics, ethics, temporality, collage, and art history.

Throughout this volume, the authors emphasize that conceptualizing and discussing uncertainty does not need to be vague and elusive, but instead that embracing uncertainty can lead to a better understanding of meaning and to help us consider how meaning is determined. Høeg and the contributors conclude that uncertainty plays an indispensable role in the creation and identification of literary meaning, and the chapters encourage readers to further interrogate certainty in texts as much as they interrogate uncertainty. This text is a valuable tool for readers looking to expand their ideas of meaningful literature, and I would consider it a useful text both for personal study and for discussion in graduate classrooms. *STTCL* readers especially interested in French scholarship would find French's chapter on undecidability quite useful, and those seeking excellent scholarship on German literature and fragmentary forms of historical trauma literature would enjoy Hannah Vinter's chapter on the work of Emine Sevgi Özdamar. The contributors include diverse perspectives that provide the reader with a comprehensive, global look at theories of uncertainty. The book delivers on its promise to argue for uncertainty's place at the center of ascertaining and creating literary meaning through a volume that is thoughtfully rigorous and cleverly structured to facilitate the reader's understanding.

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