

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher (eds) (2017) *Island Genres, Genre Islands: Conceptualisation and Representation in Popular Fiction*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 202 pp., £80.00 (hardback) ISBN 978-1-78348-205-4.

Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher declare that some of their happiest experiences of reading popular fiction have been ‘*on* islands as well as *with* islands’ (xii). In this volume, which is part of the ‘Rethinking the Island’ series, they interrogate how prevailing ideas about ‘islandness’ are produced and circulated within genre fiction.

As residents of Tasmania, the authors are well placed to consider the ‘happy association’ between books and islands. They argue that ‘islands provide immediately recognizable, even stereotypical, locations for pleasurable reading’ (xiii). Yet Tasmania also has a dark, bloodstained history as a prison island for England’s convicts. Elizabeth McMahon (2003) argues that Tasmania ‘has long epitomized the utopian/dystopian dilemma of the island within both the Australian imaginary and boreal projections of the antipodes more generally’ (195). She argues that Tasmania’s role as exotic imaginary within national and colonial conventions requires analysis of the historical function of the island as a miniature commodity – ‘it is both a focus of proprietorial desire and yet so very easily overlooked’ (195).

This volume might be read in the context of island studies, or ‘nissology’ – a group of writings about island locations, characteristics, biologies, inhabitants and cultures — which has steadily developed in the last thirty years. Yet there is a much longer history of discourses about islands, as Matthew Goldie (2011) has recently shown. He demonstrates that island history extends beyond the work of Thomas More, William Shakespeare and John Donne, noting that Greek and Roman theories of islands have always troubled rather than affirmed fundamental geographical definitions of place. Alternative ideas about islands derived from the Greeks and Romans survive into later centuries and the present day, complicating our understanding of islands (13).

Pete Hay has asked whether a coherent theory of ‘islandness’ is even possible. He argues that the debate about the textual life of islands has been hindered by a preoccupation with the distinction between ‘real’ islands and ‘islands as metaphors’. In response, Crane and Fletcher claim that genre rather than metaphor is a better starting point for rethinking the island in literature’ (xv). They make a case for attending more closely to the significance of setting in popular fiction, by analyzing the conceptualization of small islands across a wide selection of novels – by doing so they hope to add ‘genre’ to the critical lexicon of island studies (177).

As this book shows, islands are commonly used as locations for popular fiction but there’s an ever-present risk of homogeneity in the representations of islands. Islands can provide passing

exoticism for the purposes of plot but they must eventually be left behind. As Gillian Beer (2003) suggests, ‘the triumph of most island fiction is, after all is said and done, to leave the island’ (42).

James Kneale (2017) has identified three related characteristics of literary islands: possession, separation and transformation. Possession depends on the island’s initial separation from other spaces but as Kneale observes, this separation is ‘relative’ rather than ‘absolute’ (204). He argues that the transformative potential of islands – to be transformed and also to transform characters – is present in many island narratives, including the archetypal island text *Robinson Crusoe*.

Although much popular fiction actually serves to reinforce habits of thinking about islands, they are not always one-dimensional or stereotypical in genre fiction. Island-based narratives in popular fiction sometimes display self-referential, meta-textual dimensions. If, as Scott McCracken argues, ‘the reader of popular fiction likes reading about readers’, then – if island-set novels are anything to go by – they also like reading about what Sheila Hones calls the ‘spatial event’ of reading and the attendant experiences of writing, buying and living with books (xiii). Crane and Fletcher demonstrate that popular fiction set on islands is replete with references to books and reading which are metafictional and metageographical in their effects. The novels which are their primary focus reflect, in many and various ways, on the ‘coincidence of literary and geographical forms’ (xiii).

Given the impossibility of covering all ‘genre islands’, the authors focus on four major forms — crime, thrillers, romance and fantasy. In chapter one, the authors state that ‘islands are everywhere in crime fiction’ and then go on to list a huge number of examples, taking up almost two pages. This confirms that they have done their homework but it’s difficult to for the reader to wade through. However they make useful points about the unique potential of the island’s insular geography to act as a crime scene. The relationship between the detective and the island is the ‘foundation stone’ of island crime fiction, as any avid reader of crime fiction would no doubt agree (14).

Chapter five discusses the use of islands in the James Bond series by Ian Fleming. Using Meaghan Morris’ term ‘Bondspace’ which denotes ‘the luxury hotels, resorts, and hi-tech communications command centres’, the authors claim that islands are iconic settings for spy thrillers. Bondspace is a ‘refined’ zone inaccessible to mere mortals, inhabited by powerful heroes and dastardly villains such as James Bond, Jason Bourne and others (57). Crane and Fletcher point out that *Robinson Crusoe* is frequently invoked in relation to Bond’s sexual conquests. In this series, they argue, islands tend to function as zones of sun, sand, sea and sex and locales for Ian Fleming’s ‘fantasies of male power’ (67).

Chapter seven explores the emotional geography of popular romance in relation to islands. It begins with a list of ‘old ideas’ from a guide to romance writing, which have been used ‘countless times’. At the top of the list is ‘Man and woman stranded together on an island’. The authors argue that most scholarship about popular romance focuses on character and plot but misses the fact that scenery is clearly more than the backdrop to the action. For writers of romance, islands offer the type of close social proximity that invites the possibility of intimacy which is crucial to every successful romance narrative.

Chapter ten explores ‘Archipelagic Geography’ through readings of fantasy fiction. Crane and Fletcher argue that fantasy fiction has been open to archipelagos for decades, exemplified by Ursula

K. Le Guin's Earthsea series which features a world of islands surrounded by an uncharted ocean. Similarly Robin Hobbs' *Liveship Traders* trilogy (1998-2000) eschews insularity in literary history and asks us to appreciate islands in the context of a water world, through a 'wet ontology' (173). As Johannes Riquet (2017) argues, adopting a watery perspective can draw our attention to the many ways in which island texts complicate the appearance of bounded insularity (221). Overall fantasy fiction seems to experiment with notions of the island more than the other genres covered in this book, possibly because it's in the business of inventing worlds.

James Kneale has described island studies itself as an 'archipelago' of loosely connected ideas. This has also become a keyword for perceptible shifts in the direction of island studies. For Jonathan Pugh, archipelagic thinking moves beyond a focus on a singular, bounded, isolated island, focusing instead on island to island movements. In their introduction to *Islands in History and Representation* Vanessa Smith and Rod Edmond maintain that 'islands are linked by networks of exchange', necessarily leading to a sense of expansiveness rather than enclosure (5).

The overarching premise of *Island Genres, Genre Islands* is certainly not a new one to literary geographers or geocritics. They argue that 'geography can help us understand literature and literature can help us understand geography' (xvi). Their emphasis on popular literature is a fairly new development within island studies which has not yet done justice to the myriad forms of genre fiction. The popular fiction texts they explore both reiterate clichés and stereotypes about islands but also complicate 'island essentialism', arguing for a new openness to genre islands and their possibilities.

In the epilogue, Crane and Fletcher suggest that the next step in a better understanding of islands in the popular imagination might be to look towards film, TV, video games, documentary, social media. The GeoHumanities also provide opportunities for adding digital mapping to the toolbox for island studies. The use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can provide knowledge about where islands fit into our world. They gesture towards the Peter May trail in the Outer Hebrides — complete with GIS coordinates — which is based on locations in his Lewis trilogy that 'exploit the voyeuristic desire of readers to see the locations of crime in paradise'. Arguably these technologies enable closer reader identification with place but they would not be possible without the originating texts. Given that the connections between islands and popular fiction are only now being examined in depth, the authors' enthusiastic call to look beyond books seems premature.

Works Cited

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