

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Radical Mansfield: Double Discourse in Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories by Pamela Dunbar

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Source: *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring, 2000), pp. 137-139

Published by: University of Tulsa

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/464413>

Accessed: 12-02-2018 18:18 UTC

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REVIEWS

RADICAL MANSFIELD: DOUBLE DISCOURSE IN KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S SHORT STORIES, by Pamela Dunbar. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. 198 pp. \$55.00.

It is encouraging to see the growing interest among feminist critics in the writing of Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923), who for too long remained in the shadow of her famous contemporary Virginia Woolf. Several fine books on Mansfield have appeared recently, including two particularly interesting comparative studies of Mansfield and Woolf.¹ Pamela Dunbar's book is not as theoretically sophisticated as these, but it makes a useful contribution to Mansfield studies nonetheless. Its title, *Radical Mansfield*, may mislead readers who hope to see the writer situated in a "radical" political context. (That would be hard to do: Mansfield did not align herself with any political movements, nor did she write feminist manifestoes such as Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*.) Dunbar uses the word "radical" rather loosely, disengaging it from its more typical political connotations and applying it to nearly any deviation from the conventional. She asserts that Mansfield "is far from being the 'safe' writer the lyrical surfaces of her most famous stories proclaim her to be" (p. ix). Her intention is to uncover the subversive nature of Mansfield's fiction by focusing on its frequently "dangerous" and even forbidden subject matter, such as "child abuse and neglect, prostitution and procuration, murder within marriage, wife-beating, sexual deviation, child sexuality" (p. ix). In order to do so, Dunbar takes into consideration a good many less familiar stories and sketches, as well as diary entries and juvenilia, which provide rich material for analysis of Mansfield's feminist concerns. She also reveals how controversial material is encoded in the subtexts of well-known stories, such as "The Garden Party," "Prelude," and "At the Bay."

The need to insist on Mansfield's radicalism, however, sometimes leads to exaggerating the significance of a particular artistic choice. For instance, Dunbar refers to stories such as "Miss Brill" or "The Canary" as "[challenging] conventional notions of the romantic heroine by focusing on an ageing and socially disregarded figure and making her the vehicle for a meditation on art, love and death" (p. 71). Yet, in itself, Mansfield's choice of such a figure as the protagonist of her story would not have seemed very "radical" by 1920, when she wrote "Miss Brill." A considerable amount of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writing was concerned with "lives of the obscure," as fiction by the Naturalists, such as Zola or Arnold

Bennett, or Mansfield's beloved Chekhov, or even the experimentalist, Gertrude Stein (in *Three Lives*), gives strong evidence.

Dunbar looks at a great many individual stories and sketches in this book—I counted fifty-nine in her index—many more than are covered in most studies of Mansfield, who wrote more than a hundred (if one counts the unfinished stories) in her short life. Since it would have proved tedious to treat each one of these in chronological order, Dunbar wisely organizes her book into five general topics—alienation, isolation, the self, couples, and the family—which allows her to move both chronologically and thematically in each chapter. Dunbar's book is very good, therefore, in this matter of "coverage," and it provides a fine overview of Mansfield's work that would be particularly useful for undergraduate students, especially since it is clearly written and refreshingly free of academic jargon. I had a good sense of its author's lively engagement with her subject matter and her ability to bring fresh insights even to stories that have been much discussed by other critics. For instance, her reading of "Something Childish But Very Natural"—which some critics have taken as a straightforward rendering of Mansfield's early relationship with John Middleton Murry—emphasizes instead how Mansfield subverted the title of Coleridge's poem in order to draw "particular attention to the logical consequences of the Romantic/Victorian obsession with children and childhood" (p. 98). Dunbar demonstrates how "its pastiche of Romantic/Victorian sentimental attitudes fronts fundamental criticism of them" (p. 98).

One of the most interesting features of this book is the inclusion in its appendix of a previously unpublished story of Mansfield's, "His Sister's Keeper." This story, with its intimations of brother-sister incest, is a fascinating find and certainly contributes to Dunbar's general argument. She says that "despite Mansfield's strategies of displacement the content of the story remains plainly dangerous, and it may well be partly because of this that it, unlike many of the other early writings, has remained unpublished and unknown even to this day" (p. 100). Dunbar's necessarily brief analysis of "His Sister's Keeper" undoubtedly will lead to further critical approaches to it and efforts to incorporate the story into the Mansfield canon.

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NOTES

¹ See, for example, Patricia Moran, *Word of Mouth: Body Language in Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); Angela Smith, *Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf: A*

Public of Two (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); W. H. New, *Reading Mansfield and Metaphors of Form* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999).

BONE DEEP IN LANDSCAPE: WRITING, READING, AND PLACE,
by Mary Clearman Blew. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999.
208 pp. \$22.95.

The work of Mary Clearman Blew—her fiction, her nonfiction—is consistently and imaginatively informed by specific dominating concerns. Chief among these has been the question of the woman-in-place: what is the nature of the relationship between a woman and the landscape she inhabits or has inhabited? how does that woman come to terms with the individual, familial, and cultural histories that invest that place with so much of its meaning? how does that woman *be* a woman within that place?

For Blew, that place, that landscape, has long been the American West and more precisely the Highline of north-central Montana. Her previous works of nonfiction—*All but the Waltz: Essays on a Montana Family* (1991) and *Balsamroot: A Memoir* (1994)—both examined, in splendid flights of vision, the sinuous paths by which Blew's family came to and established itself in their particular part of the western landscape. And in this new book, Blew again comes back to the Highline, but with a slightly different purpose; having left Montana in 1987 for a teaching position in Idaho, Blew here looks at the ways in which her past within that Montana geography now shapes her existence as a woman-out-of-place, as a woman seeking a new identity within a new place. Among their several achievements, the essays in *Bone Deep in Landscape* powerfully chronicle Blew's physical and emotional crossing into a new world and a new life, both as a woman and as a writer.

Without a doubt, the substance of the past—the homesteading of the Highline by Blew's family, the experience of growing up female within the ranchworld of that landscape—is an ineluctable part of Blew's womanly and writerly identity. Time and again in these essays, Blew retreats to that physical and temporal landscape, looking to construct a serviceable, meaningful story from that material; indeed, argues Blew, identity and meaning can be derived only from story, only from the shaping of truthful, transforming narratives growing out of a deep sense of place. As a writer—as a *woman* writer—of the West, Blew also studies her relation to other western storytellers and to the western literary tradition. In her essay “Mother Lode,” Blew situates herself among three of Montana's best-known fiction writers (and three of Blew's artistic foremothers)—Bertha Muzzy Bower,