

JOCHEN ACHILLES and INA BERGMANN. Eds. *Liminality and the Short Story: Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian, and British Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 282 pp.

The concept of liminality is rather expansive, a fact that many of the contributors to Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann's collection tend to convey. Predicated in part upon the premise that language and meaning are inherently fluid, Bergmann and Achilles assert in their brief preamble that the liminal presents a foundation for implementing "an innovative methodological perspective." However, with so much basic research about frequently-taught, oft-anthologized works yet to be completed, one must consider the value of applying a somewhat amorphous theoretical construct to tales both canonical and obscure. In other words, this "perspective," or set of perspectives, in some ways represents a return to the era of literary deconstruction. Thankfully, a number of the essays in this collection prove to be valuable contributions to the study of specific works as well as the short-story form itself.

In the opening section, the editors offer a relatively clear explanation of liminality and its uses within the context of the short story form. They mention Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* and Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* (3), works that are referenced frequently throughout the book, and then explain how common thematic building blocks such as initiation and transition coincide with the methodology. This approach to short story theory is freeing, and it opens up a number of interesting possibilities for further study, but it is also necessarily abstract. Criticism written through the lens of liminality seems most efficacious when the foundational elements of story, such as plot and characterization, are at their most indeterminate or suggestive. In many respects, therefore, the essays here each contain a kernel of the postmodern and at times present a common problem: a broad definition of what constitutes the liminal reduces the descriptive usefulness of the method. The most utile sections and chapters of *Liminality and the Short Story* are those that rely upon concrete, direct examinations of specific texts. In that vein, Achilles and Bergmann offer an excellent selected bibliography at the end of Part I, providing a valuable point of departure for future scholarship.

However, readers entirely unfamiliar with liminality would do well to begin with chapter

four, Florian Zappe's "In the Generic Interzone: On the Liminal Character of William S. Burroughs's Routines," an essay in which the author lucidly illustrates the nexus of literature and theory. Additionally, Zappe's discussion of what Burroughs termed a "routine" is rather engaging and carries a number of analytical possibilities for readings of other works of fiction. While it seems to be a category remarkably similar to another liminal form, the prose poem, Zappe's description communicates its specific content-based uniqueness (64, 67). More broadly, his exploration further develops Achilles and Bergmann's assertion that "the short story occupies a middle ground in many respects as it develops out of, and mediates between, essay and sketch (Garcha; Junker; Stuckey-French); poem and novel (Poe), narration and discourse (Brosch), and elitist and popular culture (March-Russell)" (4). All of the chapters in the collection in some way address a type of *betweenness* or states of Chekhovian irresolution.

As a whole, the collection is a testament to the *malleability* of a methodological perspective predicated on the liminal. Alice Munro scholars, for example, will find considerations of her stories in essays by Michael Basseler, Ailsa Cox, and Katherine Orr, all of which focus on a different instantiation of the transitory. Oliver Scheiding's "'Small Tales': Brevity and Liminality in Early American Magazines" is a valuable consideration, or re-assessment, of "early publications as a space that embellishes the abnormal, eccentric, weird, and incredible in order to build a periodical business based upon liminal fantasies that could be freely tapped by readers" (121). Bergmann's chapter on the realist and Magical Realist elements found in the upstate-New York fiction of Washington Irving, T. C. Boyle, and William Kennedy proves a fascinating examination of stories that span a wide swath of time yet retain substantive thematic and stylistic connections. In sum, the pieces in the collection offer a range of possibilities, demonstrating that the liminal is not confined to a single era, national literature, or genre.

While all of the essays are to varying degrees insightful, there are a few unfortunate moments. In section four of her essay "Of Death, Dying and Disease: The Short Story and American Heterotopian Narratives," Carmen Birkle offers a reading of Ernest Hemingway's "Indian Camp," a valuable tale within a broader Adamic narrative of societal rejection. Birkle's

analysis of Dr. Adams's "questionable authority and ethics" is marred by the fact that she has either missed or ignored the "Three Shots" material, the section Hemingway excised from "Indian Camp," that was published by Philip Young in *The Nick Adams Stories* (1972). Because Hemingway's work conforms to his iceberg theory, or the notion that important elements are omitted yet present through implication, any exploration of Dr. Adams's moral choices requires an examination of all available context. Other missteps stem from poor choices of terminology. For example, in an otherwise structurally precise examination of stories by Edgar Allan Poe and George Saunders within the context of "madness," Susanne Rohr refers to autism as a "mental illness" (176), a designation that has been largely rejected.

Despite occasional missteps, *Liminality and the Short Story* is a valuable contribution

in that it provides the framework for yet another approach to an unduly neglected literary form. While reading these essays, scholars of the short story will no doubt construct a mental list of works that align well with this perspectival approach. One thinks of the final sequences of Anton Chekhov's "Lady with the Dog," Raymond Carver's "Vitamins," and Susan Minot's "Thorofare," moments that remind readers that the protagonists remain in a state of becoming, temporally removed from anything like a conclusion. On the other hand, given the breadth of possible usages, it is perhaps unduly difficult to identify brief narratives that do *not* somehow fit within the realm of liminality. If the short story form is indeed implicitly liminal, then perhaps the greater challenge is to find counterexamples.

Robert C. Clark (Brunswick)