

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Alison Booth (2016) *Homes and Haunts: Touring Writers' Shrines and Countries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 300pp., \$85.00 (hardcover) ISBN: 9780198759096.

The concepts of hospitality and reception are key themes in Alison Booth's monograph *Homes and Haunts: Touring Writers Shrines and Countries*. She aims to model the biographical and spatial encounters of host and guest that occur more metaphorically in most criticism (5). For Booth, the ambiguous metaphors of hospitality and reception point to a structured social exchange between host and guest which underpins 'the practices of literature as a profession as well as of the histories we write about literature' (1). She notes that a text seems to invite readers to enter its 'originating milieu' whether this place exists in reality or not.

Booth claims that her book is about responses to literature that embed the text in its writer's life and seek out places associated with the text and life, an approach is often seen as 'a critical error' or a 'digression from the real task of interpreting the text' (1). Booth argues that for a century, more or less, advanced approaches to literary study have parted company with tourism, museums, and even biography. There's a degree of embarrassment for academics involved with the visitation of literary sites, as if this is an amateur activity which is beneath serious consideration. She recounts the thrill recalled by a professor who was permitted by archivists to run his hand through the beard of Walt Whitman. The urge to handle a relic in this way is only natural but the English professor felt obliged to write about it using a pseudonym for fear of professional repercussions (20-1).

The study of literary tourism itself has become newly invigorated partly due to greater interest in affect and reader response in particular. For instance, in *Uses of Literature* (2008), Rita Felski has reaffirmed the value of reader responses that include 'recognition' and 'enchantment' (Felski 2008: 60). *Homes and Haunts* provides a comprehensive survey of the field, noting the contribution of Nicola Watson's *The Literary Tourist: Readers and Places in Romantic & Victorian Britain* (2006), the first full-length scholarly study of its kind. Booth also cites two American examples which take a tongue-in-cheek light-hearted approach to writers' properties, Anne Trubek's *A Skeptic's Guide to Writers Houses* and *An Arsonist's Guide to Writers Homes in New England* (2007). Another title in this genre is Simon Goldhill's shamelessly under-researched *Freud's Couch, Scott's Buttocks, Brontë's Grave* (2011) which privileges Goldhill's own subjectivity over the literary places he visits. In addition to these cynical projects, Booth notes that there are numerous pieces of journalism about literary shrines in the form of rants against 'sentimental journeys' and 'uncritical fans' indicating that the practice can often be treated with derision in the popular press (26).

Literary tourism, by its nature, is always belated. As Booth has argued elsewhere 'the very openness of an author's house to the public is a proof of that author's absence' (Booth 2009: 151).

Similarly Wolfgang Barthel has exclaimed 'WRITERS' HOUSES ARE HOUSES WITHOUT WRITERS' (63). Nevertheless their 'spirit', or the dominant interpretation of it, can live on in various exotic ways.

The authors covered by the book include some of the usual suspects of literary tourism including Irving, Longfellow, Hawthorne, James, Mitford, Howitt, Martineau, Carlyle and Woolf. The same people are often discussed in works of this type repeatedly because there is already so much material available (partly for this reason, other lesser-known writers remain neglected). Booth says that she chose these authors they were 'objects of pilgrimage', or contributed to topobiography, established a 'country' or designed a residence in a historic house that became a museum (15).

Many works on literary tourism are organised according to single authors however Booth says that this format didn't work for her: 'The real estate in this study has simply refused to be surveyed in single-occupancy lots, one author's home per chapter' (12). She has deliberately combined literary sites in order to show the interrelations between writers, homes and the writing produced about them.

Broadly, the sequence of the book moves from practices, to spaces to things. Booth's approach to the study of writers' shrines and countries involves cultural studies techniques and a multidimensional 'against-the-grain reading' of books and 'thing theory' to discuss the relics of writers (4). Her attention to the detritus of writers' houses is commendable given that it's difficult to cover such minutiae. Objects belonging to authors can become, posthumously, symbols for the departed author themselves. Items that represent the act of writing – the pen, the typewriter, the paperweight – are especially favoured by tourists. Humans sometimes find themselves envying the longevity of objects which can outlast flesh and blood beings. Booth exclaims: 'How enviable to have been an object that really was there!' (56).

The death of the author, like bankruptcy, 'threatens to demote possessions to junk' Booth notes (57). There is a dangerous interval between the death of the writer and the efforts to preserve their legacy — sometimes this can begin immediately with the production of death masks, moulds of hands and locks of hair, which can result in the dispersal and destruction of (potentially) precious relics.

In Chapter 3, 'Ladies with Pets and Flowers; with graveyards and Windswept Moors', Booth connects the obsession with female celebrities and their domestic locations with the interest in a restricted cast of women writers over the last two centuries. She emphasises the role of the audience in the curation of these sites. The reception of certain women authors thrived on anecdotes of hospitality especially descriptions of fashion, appearance, manners and pets as in innumerable media items on celebrities and their homes. There are exceptions of course — the popularity of the Brontë sisters and their domestic environment does not revolve around their style or hospitality — instead it's the austerity and impoverishment (not to mention the tragic biographical details) which most capture the imagination.

Booth has undertaken many 'ventures' in literary tourism around the world, with the exception of South America or Asia. She comments that fee-charging house museums are more prevalent in Britain, Ireland, and the United States than in Australia or Canada (New Zealand is not mentioned)

(14). I note that the early days of this book project included visits to May Gibbs' and Christina Stead's houses, a tour of proposed literary plaques in Hobart, Tasmania and plaques in 'Sidney' (misspelled) and Melbourne, partly using smartphone apps (27). These encounters do not appear in her central readings, because all the featured writers originate from the United Kingdom or North America.

Necessarily selective in its range, *Homes and Haunts* welcomes us into some well known houses of literature presenting the 'familiar and uncanny scenes' that take place there (14). By interweaving her personal observations and experiences with scholarly reflections, she brings together the amateur and the academic, reminding us that literary tourism is always a subjective experience, no matter how observant and systematic the visitor may be.

Booth recalls a moment of unexpected emotion at the Brontë Parsonage Museum in 2004 when she was reading a label on the wall and then glanced at a sofa in a little parlour to the left of the front hall: 'And then I could not see or breathe or speak: sudden grief for a young dying body that had been there.' It's curious that Booth had this strong reaction even though she claims not to be enamoured with Emily Brontë. Although she knew intellectually that the role of the sofa in Emily's death had been disputed, it still resonates for Booth as a visitor (157). Here we are presented with an instance of the scholar being affectively engaged — yet it's not analysed in any depth and reads as an odd eruption in the text. This speaks of the persistent tensions between the scholarly and amateur with which this book, and other works of its sort, must continually contend.

Works Cited

- Booth, A. (2009) 'Time-Travel in Dickens' World.' In Watson, N. (ed) *Literary Tourism and Nineteenth-Century Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 150-163.
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