LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

The Cube of Loneliness:
Literary Geographies in Isolation

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What happens to literary geographies when academic and social spaces are radically constricted by social distancing and isolation? While experiences of the pandemic differ according to personal, local, and national circumstances, regulations, and practices, the crisis must surely have affected almost everyone's ways of living and working. Many of us have been shut out of classrooms, bookshops and libraries; our conferences and meetings have been cancelled; caring for others has often had to take precedence. How do we teach now? How do conduct our research and writing? How do we collaborate? How do we support early career researchers?

Alongside these practical matters – and for those of us fortunate enough to have had time and energy to reflect on matters beyond daily practicalities – there is also the question of how these suddenly imposed new ways of living in the world might affect our ways of thinking about theory and practice in literary geography. What kind of literary geography is possible and helpful now? As a 'highly vulnerable' person under benevolent house arrest I have had time to think, and so I've been considering the question of where fiction happens, and how our ideas about this – and about literary geography more generally – might provide a way to respond to social isolation.

In the history of literary geography, the idea that "all stories happen somewhere" has usually been taken to refer to fictional setting. Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park,* for example, has been commonly understood to 'happen' in Northamptonshire, London and Portsmouth – even though, as Edward Said famously pointed out, the comfort of the Bertram family's Northamptonshire estate depends on the unremarked exploitation of their property in Antigua (Said 1993). Where Franco Moretti's literary geography emphasises the 'place-bound

nature of literary forms' (Moretti 1998: 5), Said highlights the importance of issues of space and geography beyond setting, drawing our attention to an unbound literary geography in which physically distant places and lives are inextricably connected. Perhaps in a time when we are all more place-bound than usual, this more unfettered way of thinking about literary space might be liberating.

In contemporary literary geography, the idea that 'all stories happen somewhere' has also been taken in a second direction, one which focuses on the text as something which happens in collaborations across space and time: not so much place-bound, as extended through space and time. Various explorations of the idea that literary texts 'happen' in the interaction of dispersed actors (Hones 2008, 2014; McLaughlin 2016; Saunders 2013) and the development of a 'relational literary geography' (Saunders and Anderson 2016) have together established this second way of approaching the idea that 'all stories happen somewhere.' In this second sense, *Mansfield Park* 'happens' not only in Northamptonshire, but also over and over again, in many different times and places, in the interaction of variously located collaborators: author, editors, publishers, critics, readers and places.

In the spring of 2020, *Mansfield Park* happened in this second sense in Bath, in a flat on Walcot Street, just down from St Swithin's church, where Jane Austen's parents were married and her father buried. Living in 'shielded' lockdown, I was doing a lot of reading, and with *Northanger Abbey* I was doubly, strangely, in Bath: literally in the Bath of contemporary lockdown life, but also, by imaginative extension, in the late 18th-century Bath of Catharine Morland – with her, I could take a stroll along the Royal Crescent, while in real life I was stuck at home. At the time, I was also re-reading Colum McCann, drawn back especially to his short story 'What Time Is It Now, Where You Are?' – probably because I was asking myself that question several times daily, checking my desktop world clock as I thought about talking to friends in different time zones.

The establishment of connections across time and space, and also between characters, writers and readers, is central to McCann's 'What Time Is It Now.' The story of the writing of a story, it happens simultaneously in the world of the fictional author (in New York, in Normandy, and in his memories of his Dublin childhood) and in the world of his characters, fictions within a fiction, (in Afghanistan and in South Carolina).[1] Commissioned to write a story for the New Year's Eve edition of a newspaper magazine, the narrator gradually develops the character and the story of Sandi Jewell, a 26-year-old marine on deployment, who spends the last night of the year on a solo lookout mission, high above the Kerengal valley, in the bitter cold. She has been given a satellite phone so that at midnight she can call her partner Kimberlee, comfortably at home in Charleston. As the writer's deadline approaches, gradually – and then, as is the way with deadlines, suddenly – he begins to sense a shape to his story: 'a certain mystery has begun to join things together' (McCann 2015: 152). He wants to 'capture the essence of what it feels like to be far from home, to be in two or three places all at once' (151); he wants the reader, wherever they might be, 'to *feel* the cold that claws Sandi up there on the 308-meter ridge.' As he works the story out in his mind, the writer admits that as yet he has no idea what Sandi will say, when her call finally connects with Kimberlee at midnight. 'What he does know is that the sense of cold seclusion is important:

not because it is a New Year's Eve story, but because it freezes Sandi in her cube of human loneliness' (150).

I returned to this story at a time when I was also isolated and cut off, living in my own cube of loneliness, but also like Sandi and the writer quite often in two or three other places at the same time – in 18th-century Bath with Catharine Morland, or with my brother in the Pacific Northwest. The distinctions separating far and near, now and then, real and fictional, had lost much of their meaning: people were halfway round the world, or just up the road, but in both cases they were physically inaccessible, untouchable, while the places and people I read about felt real and present. I did feel the cold clawing at Sandi, and I could smell the thyme, the lemon, shrimp, the garlic, heaped on Kimberlee's counter top as she prepared to cook a New Year's Eve feast.

Like the fictional author of 'What Time Is It Now', McCann wants his audience to feel, to hear and to smell, to engage with his writing, to complete the circuit: his work, he says, "is completed only when it is finished by a reader' (McCann 2009: 360). Famously interested in questions of empathy, McCann has talked about the ways in which literary fiction 'can promote empathy and understanding by allowing the writer and the reader to form deep connections with a novel's characters and so to see the world from their perspectives, and to grasp the profound interdependence of human society.' (Berkley Center 2014) 'How do we sit with Sandi in her lonely outpost?'. McCann's fictional author asks his readers and himself. 'How do we look out into the dark?' (McCann 2015: 158). It seems to me that the fact that all stories happen in multiple places – not only somewhere, but many somewheres – provides literary geography with a useful response to a time of lockdown and isolation, a way to sit with other people, other places, and other times, a way to look out into the dark, even when we are inhabiting cubes of loneliness.

Notes

[1] I am referring to the writer here as 'he' although there seems to be nothing explicit in the story indicating gender. However, I think there are enough similarities between the writer's life history and that of the actual author (Colum McCann) to allow this.

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