

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Katie Ritson (2019) *The Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*. Milton Park, Routledge. 168 pp. Hardback ISBN: 978-1-138-59110-3

The long slow tidal creep of waters across the lowlands of the North Sea evokes sweeping notions of the liminal. Ritson's 2019 contribution to the Routledge Environmental Humanities Series analyses selected literature from the past 170 years in a timely venture, expanding literary and historic understandings of ocean rises around the North Sea. This is a book about threshold places. Each of her selection of novels, short fiction and a long narrative poem express the ever-changing relationships between land and sea, between humans and the forces of tides and ocean currents, and between the humans that inhabit these shifting places. Her discussion of mid-nineteenth century writing through to contemporary novels and speculative works about 'petrospectral futures', which explore human interactions with the petrochemical industry, enables readers to see through a sharply focused lens the long-term effects of climate change and global warming. The author's positioning at time of writing, with the Rachel Carson Centre for Environment and Society credentials the work firmly amid environmental scholars, enabling her to build from her PhD this impressive analysis of key texts that represent the shifting sands and human struggles to inhabit such liminal, risky and dynamic zones. The North Sea Basin is skirted by England on the west and the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark on the east. Ritson discusses selected literatures from each of these countries in the context of the Anthropocene.

The Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands provides a 'literary exploration' of the landscapes of the edges of the North Sea Basin. Some places around the lowlands are tens of metres below sea level. Ritson uses the term landscapes, not only for the large scale of places skirting the North Sea Basin, but because the word 'landscapes' infers the capacity of literary texts to explore 'the tension between the objective place and the subjectivity of its framing' (2019: 5). She goes on to explain how literary texts 'engage with the human experience of space' as well as the effects of different time periods. (5). Concerns of the Anthropocene, specifically ocean level rises, are played out in a literary arena, focussing our attention on the liminality of the North Sea lowlands. A growing scholarship is responding to the effects of global warming that has led to the catastrophes of sea level rise, increasing droughts, storms and cyclones and species extinctions, among the litany of anthropogenic planetary damages. Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016) and Clive Hamilton's *Defiant Earth* (2017) are examples. Ritson focuses on water and floods and the effects of seas and oceans encroaching more and more upon land.

Ritson threads her discussion throughout the book with the insights of Chakrabarty's renowned essay, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses' (2009). Chakrabarty critiques the concepts and paradoxes

implied in the term Anthropocene. His case rests firmly on the scientific consensus that ‘climate change is man-made’ (Chakrabarty, in Ritson 2019: 10). Ritson builds from Chakrabarty’s critique of the term Anthropocene to construct five overarching themes. She analyses her selected range of literatures according to four theses discussed by Chakrabarty: the collapse of distinctions between natural and human history; the Anthropocene as a critique of the Enlightenment; the role of multi-scalar thinking, and; the limits of historical understandings. This structuring of the book enables a thorough examination of the ideas of literary imaginations of significant environmental tensions represented around the North Sea basin.

Starting with texts that convey the risks and difficulties of engineering to protect human occupation in precarious flood-prone areas, she unpacks Theodore Storm’s novella, *Der Schimmelreiter* (1888) and Jim Shepard’s short story, ‘The Netherlands Lives in Water’ (2011) particularly contrasting nature’s agency with human efforts to engineer the control of rising tides. Ritson’s themes explore concepts of space, place and time, using Sebald’s *Rings of Saturn* (1998) as a key textual example. She also turns to the layering of New Nature Writing in the UK, showing how it builds from the long tradition of British nature writing. In this chapter, Ritson primarily discusses essays by Robert Macfarlane to exemplify how New Nature Writers position their works against the backdrop of contemporary environmental threats (Ritson 2019: 95). She moves her discussion to two contemporary novels that interrogate littoral spaces that offer liminal alternatives to inland, mainstream cultures: Meg Rosoff’s *What I Was* (2007) and Kjersti Vik’s *Mando* (2009). Ritson invites the reader to consider places ‘Under the North Sea’ (Chapter 6) by examining two contemporary speculative works that embroil humans with the petrochemical and oil industries. Described as ‘Petrospectral’ futures, Ritson argues that China Miéville’s short story, ‘Covehithe’ (2015) and Norwegian poet, Øyvind Rimbereid’s long poem “Solaris korrigeret” (Solaris Corrected) (2005) exemplify how ‘petro-writing is another aesthetic iteration of the North Sea coasts that draw us into the imagination of the Anthropocene’ (Ritson 2019: 132).

Of the selected short stories, essays, novels, novella and poems, some are well known in the English-speaking realm. Others hark specifically from European traditions and would be less known in other regions of the globe. Each text follows literary and historically relevant themes to build Ritson’s positioning of the importance of literary imagination in the environmental humanities.

Ritson shows readers how history and literature combine to be forces by which we might understand human connections to wide watery shorelines. Around the edges of the North Sea, population movements have long responded to the seeping tides and slowly shifting sands that regularly change the boundaries between land and water. The literary works that Ritson examines show widely different human responses to these liminal forces through different time periods. Her central consideration is how different stories of the North Sea lowlands have evolved in different histories to show human hubris, and more recently the escalating effects of global warming and ocean rising on vulnerable communities. The threats of high tides and inundation of large tracts of land around the shallow basin of the North Sea have existed for centuries.

Ritson presents the book in three languages, either presenting published translations in excerpts or translating originals of the novels herself from German and Danish into English. The blocks of text, where Ritson quotes each author’s original language text, followed by the English translation,

deterred this reader from fully following what is otherwise a smoothly constructed line of argument. This shows my own limits as an English speaker, coming from Australia. I was forced to skip paragraphs to find the excerpts I could read. If I were picky, I would say that the index is sparse, with few key terms. However, these two small hiccups do not distract from the significance of the ideas presented.

Ritson's discussion sits comfortably with other like texts that explore anthropocentric narratives that respond to climate change, including Gregor Andersen's, *Climate Fiction and Cultural Analysis: A New Perspective on Life in the Anthropocene* (2019), Tom Bristow, Thomas Ford and Linda Williams' edited collection, *A Cultural History of Climate Change* (2017) and Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (2015). Siting her book in a specific, if expansive location, enables Ritson to apply ecocriticism to the effects of climate change in ways that escape more generic texts.

The Shifting Sands focuses on the littoral, the ephemeral nature of shorelines, and is inherently about thresholds. The literary works she analysed give a sense of fixity to the human response, the inherent belief in engineering of ocean walls to withstand ocean rising. How far have and can humans go to preserve habitation in these changing, ever shifting zones, where nature's forces express the potency of environmental agency?

The book shows how understanding human relationships to places can be perceived through engagement with literatures from across many decades. The material catastrophes of global warming can be understood in multiple ways, not only through scientific information. Ritson's book demonstrates how the role of humanities and specific literatures are crucial for comprehending the complexities of human contributions and responses to climate change. It is significant that the shifting sands of the North Sea Basin have the last word. Ritson asserts that 'these vulnerable landscapes will continue to reflect the state of a human-nature relationship that is as transient and migratory as the shifting sands on which it is built' (Ritson 2019: 168). Through hearing and presenting stories of specific places skirting the North Sea Basin, the authors represented in Ritson's book show definitively the potency of ephemeral places as a source of stories which may better equip humans for life in rapidly changing environments. The shifting sands and tidal pulls of the North Sea lowlands speak loudly – it is up to readers to listen and respond to their voices.

Works Cited

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