# *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women* (review)


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closing chapter called "Baseball, Bricolage and the Beautiful," she argues that an imaginative reworking of myth makes for the best baseball stories; paraphrasing T. S. Eliot, she says that the best baseball fictions "steal" rather than "imitate" their models in literature and in sport. The highest echelon of her baseball literature canon includes August Wilson's *Fences*, Kennedy, Coover, and Malamud; for her, writers like W. P. Kinsella and Nancy Willard fall just short of the fusion of myth and artistic purpose reached by those writers. At some level, they import baseball motifs to dress up ordinary fiction rather than surrendering totally to the mythic impulses of the game.

*Ground Rules* will appeal to anyone interested in baseball literature; it is the most substantial book ever devoted to the subject. In the scope of this review, I cannot begin to address its readings of archetypal narrative, the dwarf figure, the Oedipal struggle, Babel and the "gap" (between word and thing), or crisis art. It will be very interesting to anyone working on myth, American studies, or postmodern fiction. I'd like to recommend Westbrook's study most of all to people who teach literary theory in upper division or graduate courses—especially those teachers whose Fall students begin to get a little distracted at playoff time, or whose Spring students suddenly develop the flu or car trouble on Opening Day. They should recommend *Ground Rules* to those students. Perhaps they should even surrender to our American obsessions and assign it as the main text in a theory course. It is high time to follow Deeanne Westbrook and start insisting in introductory theory classes that one is really addressing the larger issues—like baseball.

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Singley, Carol J. and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, eds. *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women*. Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1993. 400 pp. Paper: $21.95.

The essays collected in this anthology set out to explore the keenly felt and often expressed ambivalence that haunts the pages of women writers' texts. Many feminist scholars have analyzed the frustration of women who attempt to capture experiences particular to women's lives in cultures and therefore languages that trivialize such experience. These essays seek evidence of that anxiety in "narrative representations" of ambivalence (p. ix).

The subject matter to which these writers turn ranges widely across history and genre. Historically, the essays span seven centuries, beginning with a mystical allegory by the medieval writer Christine de Pizan and moving forward to contemporary works by such diverse authors as Toni Morrison, Clarice Lispector, Sandra Cisneros, and Maxine Hong Kingston. The diversity of genres — fairy tales, diaries, autobiography, and religious writing —

is also striking. Each essay seizes upon a literary form that has entranced yet stymied women writers: romance, sentimental fiction, the *Bildungsromane*, the *Kunstlerromane*, and such neglected forms as ghost stories and fairy tales.

The anthology divides into four sections. The first, "Anxieties of Authorship," focuses on the contradictions inherent in the work of pre-nineteenth-century women who wrote within an unrelentingly male milieu. To succeed demanded mastering a literary system which required an uneasy mastery of masculinity. This early section persuasively establishes a history of ambivalence threading through women's writing.

The two longer middle sections, "'My Book My Pen and My—Lover': Reading, Writing and Romance" and "Developing Narratives of Difference" concentrate on works by nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers. Essays in the first section zero in on romance and marriage plots as the paradoxical sites of pleasure and obstruction for Jane Austen, Mary Guion, Caroline Lee Hentz, Harriet Jacobs, Charlotte Bronte, Sarah Grand, and Edith Wharton. Elizabeth L. Barnes' "Mirroring the Mother Text: Histories of Seduction in the American Domestic Novel" argues that the nineteenth-century domestic novel often tethers the daughter-heroine to the very eighteenth-century seduction plot which the marriage plot sought to suppress. Romance contorts into grotesque exploitation and seduction into the overt threat of rape in Debra Humphreys' "Power and Resistance in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl*." Humphreys, along with several others, emphasizes that the sentimentalization of private life upon which the marriage plot depends collapses in accounts of unprotected women like the enslaved Jacobs. Instead, the private sphere becomes the source of anxiety and the space of abuse while communities formed by the exploited provide the only hope for safety.

The third section, "Developing Narratives of Difference," further complicates the nature of ambivalence by emphasizing the diverse conditions that spark women writers' anxieties. Bonnie TuSmith's "Literary Tricksterism: Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*" and Leslie S. Gutierrez-Jones' "Different Voices: The Re-*Bildung* of the Barrio in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*" are particularly instructive reminders that forms and tropes that ease one woman writer's anxieties—the domestic novel, the sense of "a" community, autobiography—may only complicate another woman writer's search for hospitable forms.

The final section, "Reading and Writing Empowerment," meditates upon the theoretical questions raised by the previous essays focused on the work of single writers or works. What holds the discrete pieces together is a sustained engagement across the volume with feminist narrative theorists and reader response critics as well as an unapologetic methodological commitment to formal analysis. Though the essays collectively argue for myriad causes of and responses to authorial ambivalence, the reader leaves the text with a pleasurable confidence that these essays initiate readers into the power of reworking and rereading recalcitrant forms.

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