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Editor: Brian Burton

Review of Crossing Boundaries: Thinking Through Literature, ed. Julie Scanlon and Amy Waste (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); £14.85, 200 pp.

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Crossing Boundaries: Thinking Through Literature was borne out of the editors' (Julie Scanlon and Amy Waste) desire to "boost morale" amongst postgraduates often "toiling away in daily isolation." The quirky collection of essays were first presented as conference papers targeted solely at an audience of postgraduate students who went away from the conference "fortified with a new perception of themselves as a group paradoxically bound by dissimilarity." The anthology can be read in any order, but the articles are presented in loosely defined groups relative to their subject matter.

This collection has strengths and weaknesses, and both are readily apparent to the reader. Even considering the constraints on length, there is a tendency towards pure exposition and description rather than analysis and argument. In some cases, however, this still serves the reader. For example, within the first grouping, which focuses on science and literature during the nineteenth century, Sally Shuttleworth necessarily has to include an explanation of 'idiocy' in the context she provides; further, she must then frame the specific works of four different authors in order to communicate with her reader. The problem is less apparent in articles that dealt with narrowly defined borders, exemplified by Gowan Dawson's piece concerning Walter Pater.

Further, the book jacket describes a collection of essays spanning academic genres, but there are only two articles which do not deal with literature in some manner, Annette Davison's "Music to Desire By: Crossing the Berlin Wall with Wim Wenders" and Helen Freshwater's "Performance Theory, Practice and the

Intrusion of the Real." Both articles are well constructed and interesting in their own right, but they seem sorely out of place in this collection. One cannot help be struck by their divergence from the rest of their grouping, yet if there had been more than just two articles away from the 'mainstream,' continuity could have been preserved. Freshwater's imagery, however, is shocking and vivid, easily the best in this book.

The strongest aspect of this collection is its refreshing concentration on recent history and the present, and it is in these areas that the finest essays are found. Elizabeth Leane's "Popular Cosmology as Mythic Narrative: A Site for Interdisciplinary Exchange" is at once timely and historically relevant. She couples the public's thirst for knowledge of the universe and the scientist's desire to have a "theory of everything" with creation myths that have always been included in the study of literature. From the outset, she compares and contrasts Stephen Hawking, Steven Weinberg and others; her argument rarely strays from the forefront of the reader's mind and her conclusions offer pieces for scientists, theologians, ordinary individuals and literary scholars. This piece balances poignantly the characteristics described by Scanlon and Waste of "flexibility, diversity and change."

In a totally different but equally brilliant essay, Brendon Nicholls pursues Robert Frost's poem 'The Wood-Pile' through a paradigm so radically unique that it brings to mind a Neil Gaiman book. Starting with a disclaimer statement for his use of the word "nigga," Nicholls then sets his argument out in very categorical fashion. He follows the text of the poem intricately explaining and posing questions about its interpretation, its history and the cognitive reaction to it. Transitioning smoothly, he enters a phase of explanation, familiarising us to the educational world of Black South Africa. Finally, through poetry, politics, sociology, history, story and education, he does truly cross boundaries by documenting the massive power differentiation inherent in one poem.

An interesting and promising read, this collection combines a focus on the postgraduate existence while maintaining a great deal of professional strength and integrity.