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Review of Gabriele Griffin, ed. Research Methods for English Studies. Research Methods for the Arts and Humanities. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005. ISBN 0 7486 2155 5. £17.99(pbk).

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Research Methods for English Studies is a collection of essays that sets out to address the silence of our discipline on the processes of conducting research and to suggest new methods that postgraduates and all English scholars might employ. In the introduction Gabriele Griffin notes a tendency of English scholars to keep their methods to themselves claiming that the method would differ from scholar to scholar and from project to project. She argues that the AHRB and the English Subject Centre leave the individual to discover his or her own methodologies as they pertain to each different project, and that the lack of a coherent model results in scholars doing merely what their supervisors taught them in postgraduate studies, never thinking laterally about alternative research methods.

Although the argument is persuasive, the rest of the book, (written by various authors, many of whom are not in the field of English studies) to this reviewer's mind, is not. Had it been followed by a guide to more practical methods, emphasizing those that are less well known, it may have been of more use to the postgraduate as a supplement to the research training courses that Griffin finds inadequate. However, what follows are several alternative (and may I stress the word alternative) research methods, similar to those used in the social sciences, which would be of marginal use to the majority of postgraduate English students.

Among the methodologies discussed are the use of sound recordings as oral histories, reading visual images using semiology ('the study of signs') and discourse analysis, particularly computer-aided analysis, ethnographic research

methods in travel writing and audience response criticism, interviewing, creative writing as a research method, and the use of ITC (Information and Communication Technology) for such purposes as text encoding and constructing tabular databases. Many of these are largely irrelevant to studies of literature prior to the twentieth century, though some may be useful for those studying contemporary literature, art, film or other media. Chapter eight, however, is frankly worrying. Entitled “Numbers and Words: Quantitative Methods for Scholars of Texts,” the author – an historian – laments the “virtual absence of statistical techniques and quantitative methods from literature studies” (131) and litters the chapter with an array of graphs, charts, diagrams and statistics that could be used to supplement textual analysis. Wading through the mathematics I shudder and am reminded of why I did not become an economist. Long may English literature relish the absence of this and indeed most of these research methods.

Despite being very fringe and relevant to few, the collection is not totally devoid of interesting and useful ideas, depending upon what you are studying. The chapter on techniques for interviewing authors might be of use to some studying contemporary literature, for example. However I think the first chapter is telling: entitled “Archival Methods” it reads like a romance novel, waffling on at length about the atmosphere of working in archives, then gives two or three useful sentences on the method, highlighting the inevitable – that research methods in English studies really are an individual thing.