
Joseph Pivato, ed. *Sheila Watson: Essays on Her Works*. Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2015. Pp. 245. US\$20.

There is a rare modesty to Joseph Pivato's introduction to *Sheila Watson: Essays on Her Works*, the first collection of essays devoted to the author's output as a novelist, a pioneer of literary modernism in Canada, and a mentor to emerging writers in Edmonton's art scene in the 1960s and 1970s. "Sheila Watson would not have approved of some of the essays in this collection" (7), Pivato writes, framing his mandate to situate some of the major critical appraisals of her short stories and novels, including her masterpiece *The Double Hook* (1959), against Watson's scarce comments on her writing. Famously reticent about discussing her personal life and skeptical of the value of authorial intent, Watson might well have balked at the collection's refusal to separate Watson the figure from Watson the clipped, elliptical prose stylist who adapted the aesthetic tenets of international modernism to Western Canada. At its most rewarding, though, Pivato's selection makes the case for seeing Watson's public life as a teacher and her public comments about her work not as distractions from but as fruitful outcroppings of her writing.

One of the collection's goals is to offer an assortment of the most compelling analyses of Watson's work "beyond *The Double Hook*" (18), the text with which she is inextricably linked. That is not to say that Watson's second novel is underrepresented. The volume appropriately charts a number of major and frequently cited critical trajectories into the text, from Margot Northey's thematic approach to Watson's employment of the grotesque, to the poet E.

D. Blodgett's comparative study of Watson's and Laure Conan's idiosyncratic discourses, through to Margaret Morriss' exhaustive account of the novel's thorny revision process, which saw it reshaped from a regionally specific novel to one anchored in a more amorphous "universal and archetypal pattern of action" (96). While *The Double Hook* is understandably the focal point of the collection's critical pieces, Pivato also presents Glenn Wilmott's absorbing work on the embodied modernism of Watson's first novel *Deep Hollow Creek* (written in the 1930s but first published in 1992) and, in an exclusive to the collection, Sergiy Yakovenko's lively take on silence and speech in Watson's lesser-known short story "Rough Answer."

Taken together, these chapters delineate Watson's ties to cosmopolitan modernism and the work of Marshall McLuhan, Watson's graduate supervisor at the University of Toronto, among other affinities. There are nevertheless some omissions that keep the book from offering a fully representative overview of Watson's work, perhaps owing in part to the volume's illuminating but limiting focus on the author's ties to Alberta. Multiple articles gesture to the curious position *The Double Hook* holds with respect to its international modernist aesthetic—its setting resembling T. S. Eliot's mythical landscapes more than Lawren Harris's abstract paintings of specific landmarks like Lake Superior—and its specific landscape, the Cariboo country where Watson worked as a schoolteacher. Yet the collection could use a more sustained analysis of the text's grounding in its particular linguistic and cultural locations, particularly concerning its representation of First Nations people who live there and who live on, albeit ambivalently, in the novel.

Pivato recognizes the relative dearth of Indigenous scholarship in both his introductory remarks and in a comparative essay on *The Double Hook* and Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*, which somewhat brusquely acknowledges that "most critics have ignored the Indian dimension of the novel" (193). The novel's peculiar cultural situation is also obliquely treated by Morriss, who observes that the published version scrubbed the Indigenous identity of several characters, made transparent in the early drafts, in the interest of achieving a more "universal and archetypal pattern of action" (96)—a claim that could use further glossing, either in footnotes or in subsequent articles. Given the centrality of Indigenous (or once Indigenous) characters like Coyote and the enigmatic Old Lady to *The Double Hook's* narrative as well as its gothic aesthetic, the subject merits a more serious consideration, one that grapples more completely with the novel's construction of an ostensible white settler narrative in a First Nations community. Instead, this lacuna is exacerbated by the essays that casually address it, including Blodgett's metaphorical reading of Watson's contention that she treats her characters as "figures in a ground,

from which they could not be separated” (164). Essays like Blodgett’s go some way toward unpacking the symbolic interpretations of that “ground” while leaving the literal ground of the remote British Columbian valley in which the novel is set largely untouched.

Still, there is a freshness to Pivato’s alignment of Watson’s works with her loyalty and service toward students and protégés, and a method to his effort to embed her in a culture of letters in Alberta where other critics have emphasized either her international exportability as a modernist author or her remoteness as a commentator on her own writing. Watson’s writing has previously been flatly characterized as a lofty exception to Canada’s otherwise parochial modernist tradition in the dark years before postmodernism—a high-toned alternative to fiction too mired in its dour regionalism to appeal to readers south of the 49th parallel. In offering delicate personal accounts from friends and collaborators like George Melnyk and Caterina Edwards, clips from Watson’s select interviews (a bit haphazardly excerpted), and selections from an introductory essay Watson wrote on *Ulysses* for undergraduate students, Pivato does the important work of demystifying his subject while still celebrating her. The result is a surprisingly personal and humane critical anthology that establishes Watson herself as a figure in a ground from which she cannot be separated.

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