

Joanne Saul. *Writing the Roaming Subject: The Biotext in Canadian Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. Pp. vii, 175. \$45.00.

The best scholarship should engage with and contribute to an ongoing discourse about a particular subject, and *Writing the Roaming Subject* definitely qualifies. It makes a considerable contribution to its particular subject and to the larger area of Canadian literary studies. As an introduction to the concept of the biotext, Saul's book is excellent. It is clear and concise in its explanations, and the four texts under discussion clearly support her argument. While Saul's chapters periodically lose focus, the information in the book is still an excellent starting point for a reader looking to gain not only an understanding about the concept of the biotext but also new insights into four works of Canadian literature.

Saul begins her work by establishing the genesis of the term biotext and describing the scholarship that has preceded her work. In doing so, she places her work clearly within this scholarly discourse. She begins her introduction by stating that her work grows out of "the critical attention brought to bear on constructions of race, ethnicity, and gender in relation to a Canadian national imaginary as well as to a growing interest in the theorizing of life writing in Canada over the last four decades" (3). She goes on to explain that other proponents of the biotext, such as George Bowering, have argued that previous terms, such as memoir or autobiography, tended to limit how the literature was viewed. She concludes that the biotext allows critics to open texts and "provide [...] useful models for thinking through limited and limiting definitions or national, ethnic, gendered, and raced identities, toward social and cultural assumptions that allow for flexibility, negotiation, and ultimately more inclusive notions of difference" (12). Saul is suggesting that the biotext is a form that allows marginalized writers to tell their stories more fully without the restrictions of the traditional life-writing forms of the centre. In the end, Saul's opening chapter provides an excellent introduction to the current scholarship, before moving on to define the term and to outline her approach.

Saul defines the biotext "as a way of theorizing the writing of displacement in Canada, and as a tool for thinking through these particular texts in relation to other texts by these authors, both creative and critical" (13). She goes on to clarify that the biotext has a "dual impulse (the putting together and taking apart) [that] reflects the impetus both to voice experience and to reflect the challenges to articulation the authors confront" (23). Throughout

the chapter “Introducing the ‘Biotext,’” Saul provides a wealth of information. However, at times, it appears to be more of a catalogue of scholarship than a contribution to scholarship. That said, once she has defined her terms of reference, she goes on to present compelling arguments that the four texts are all clear examples of the biotext. It is in these chapters where Saul makes her contribution to the scholarship.

The four texts under examination are Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*, Daphne Marlatt’s *Ghost Works*, Roy Kiyooka’s *Mothertalk*, and Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill*. Even though the works can be classified as poetry or fiction, Saul makes a strong argument that the texts are best defined as biotexts. For example, in the Ondaatje chapter, she argues that his work is best seen as a biotext because it crosses genre borders and foregrounds the act of writing in the text. She describes the book as part “memoir, part travelogue, part fictionalized biography, and part autobiography interspersed with poems and photographs, it is a text that focuses on self-representation, while still defying autobiographical expectations” (38). She argues that the “polyvocality” (35) of Ondaatje’s work forces it out of traditional definitions. Because he is allowing the voices of his family into the text, along with his own, she argues that the book becomes a larger exploration, by the writer, of identity and an attempt to place himself not only into a geographical and historical context but also into a Canadian literary context. Similarly, in her exploration of the other three texts, she goes on to explore and explain how each one creates a different model to explore the marginalized positions of their authors.

In the epilogue to *Writing the Roaming Subject*, Saul writes that the book was “intended as a contribution to the critical discussions of both subjectivity and difference in Canadian literary studies” (129). It is safe to say that the book has done exactly what its author intended. Saul has added to the critical discussion of the topic, and she has provided new insights into four Canadian works. Saul finishes her work by acknowledging the possibility that the biotext might “fall through the cracks, both in terms of critical and pedagogical attention” (132). However, given the contribution she has made to the topic, it seems less likely that it will.

Greg Doran