

Postgraduate Contemporary Women's Writing Network

# Newsletter

Volume 1, Issue 1, Spring 2010

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*This newsletter is the product of the collaborative work of the  
PG CWWN Steering Group:*

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If you have any questions or comments on this newsletter and its contents, please  
email us at [newsletter@pgcwwn.org](mailto:newsletter@pgcwwn.org)*



# Editorial

We hope that the biannual publication of the PG CWWN newsletter will not only remind you of the research community you have helped to establish but also provide you with valuable information on recent publications and forthcoming conferences in the field, as well as, of course, the PG CWWN's upcoming projects and events (see p. 8 of this issue for information on our 2010 networking event *Theory and Practice in Contemporary Women's Writing*).

This first PG CWWN newsletter marks both the end of a very successful past year for the network and the beginning of a hopefully even more successful time ahead. While the AHRC Student Led Initiative Funding enabled us to provide you with an opportunity to make new contacts, exchange ideas and, thus, at least temporarily break the isolation which so often accompanies research, neither our first two conferences nor our other activities would have been as successful as they were had not so many of you readily shown your enthusiasm for contemporary women's writing and a related postgraduate community.

As always, however, this newly created space will only maintain its value if you make use of and contribute to it: send us your conference reports, calls for papers, book reviews and short critical pieces for publication in the newsletter. Help to make the PG CWWN interactive and further your own research experience by creating and being part not only of a network for new and stimulating ideas on contemporary women's writing but also of a friendly and intellectual community.

We are looking forwards to receiving your comments and contributions!

The PG CWWN Steering Group

*Nadine Muller, University of Hull*

## CWWN Comment

Every few months some killjoy will announce in the media the end of feminism or the triviality of women's writing or the partiality of the Orange Prize. S/he needs only to look at the PG CWWN or CWWN website (<http://www.pgwwn.org>; <http://www.cwwn.org.uk>) or a copy of the Oxford University Press journal, *Contemporary Women's Writing* (<http://cww.oxfordjournals.org>) to appreciate how wide off the mark those observations are. Contemporary women's writing is one of the most diverse, vibrant and critically acute areas of current critical thought. As Susan Stanford Friedman and I wrote in the inaugural issue of the journal: 'We want to attest to the continuing difficulty and yet productiveness and viability of this phrase 'contemporary women's writing'.

There is no doubt about productiveness. The Network that I set up in 2005 is now a thriving international community, with a programme of activities and a biennial conference – the next in San Diego in 2010. The journal has just been awarded, at the 2009 MLA convention, the prestigious CELJ award for the Best New Journal. What has delighted those of us most closely involved in these projects has been the integral and active contribution of research students who have not only helped CWWN and the journal but, with initiative and imagination, have created their own Network. If you're looking for intellectual excitement and support, come and join us.

*Mary Eagleton, former chair of the CWWN, Leeds Metropolitan University*

# Conference Reports

## *Writing Bodies/Reading Bodies in Contemporary Women's Writing*

University of Oxford, 11th-12th September 2009

The event's panel sessions covered a wide range of international contemporary writing by women and, by focusing on the transgressive forms, themes, and political and social issues dealt with by a number of women writers, challenged head-on the notion that contemporary women's writing has been comfortably assimilated into the academy. The number of speakers who presented at the conference indicated the level of current interest and research in contemporary women's writing amongst the postgraduate community.



Writing Bodies/ Reading Bodies was attended by 60 delegates from all over the world, including Japan, the United States and India, helping to make the event a challenge to the perceived Anglocentric bias to paradigms of contemporary women's writing. The conference began with an opening keynote speech by Professor Lucie Armitt, focusing on traditions of women's writing and how each generation of women writers responds to those who have 'mothered' them, making the practice of writing as a woman perhaps an inherently feminist act, always defined by both a sense of community and autonomy.

The PG CWWN was pleased to present Christine Wilks as the event's featured author. Her media presentation *Underbelly* was met with enthusiasm and provided a stimulating extension of the boundaries of contemporary women's writing. The second keynote speaker, Dr Mark Llewellyn, gave a lively and absorbing lecture exploring the notion of 'incest' in terms of how contemporary women's writing is positioned in relation to a literary canon and considering the broader question of how 'taboo' is configured by female authors.



*Keynote speakers Lucie Armitt and Mark Llewellyn*

The conference closed with an engaging roundtable discussion, including both Dr. Llewellyn and Professor Sellers, as well as the postgraduate delegates. The debate was lively and focused on the notion that the body is still of central importance to women writers and that representations of the body still directly relate to social, cultural and political treatments of masculinity and femininity, as well as to the bodies onto which they are mapped.

Professor Susan Sellers gave a reading from her latest novel, *Vanessa and Virginia*, a work which fictionalises the relationship between Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell. Responding directly to issues raised in previous panels and keynotes, Professor Sellers addressed the fact that a feminist tradition of writing and a community of women writers have given us such a rich area of...

...debate and reading, and that this tradition is being perpetuated by new women writers who continue to cross the boundaries between the academy and popular culture.

The winners of the PG CWWN competition for conference fee waivers - Jude Roberts (University of Nottingham) and Mary Ryan (Mary Immaculate College, Limerick) - were also announced. Retrospectively, the PG CWWN steering group (with the help of delegates' recommendations) also awarded a prize for the best paper presented at the event, the winner of which is Melanie Graham (Lancaster University), who spoke on 'Voicing Violence: A Study of Violence Against Women in Poetry'.

The PG CWWN Steering Group would like to take the opportunity to thank all of the sponsors of Writing Bodies /Reading Bodies as well as the keynote speakers and delegates.

*Adele Jones, Swansea University*

## Member's Conference Report

The 2009 Postgraduate Contemporary Women's Writing Network Conference was held in the beautiful surroundings of Oxford University. It was a perfect setting for what proved to be a stimulating event full of diversely themed panels. My panel titled 'Maternal Bodies' was particularly exciting for my own research into the contemporary Irish author Anne Enright as it raised interesting issues concerning matricide and motherhood as a form of redemption, which actively connects with Enright's own construction of motherhood in her works.



*The cake!*

A recurring discussion point throughout the conference was the repeated use of tried and trusted feminist theorists such as Adrienne Rich and Alice Walker and the hence evident lack of more recent feminist theorisations of the body. Discussions such as these are vital for the sustainability and innovativeness of current research into contemporary women's writing. Through its well-structured panels the conference also provided a vital link for students to other researchers in their areas of expertise as well as fostering important international networking opportunities. By encouraging postgraduates to share their work in a relaxed, reassuring environment, the event enabled students to champion their work to date and to focus on questions which will stimulate their research in future. The conference created a space for delegates to re-connect with established colleagues and make new contacts. In short, the obvious success of the conference was achieved through a good organisational committee, a wide-ranging list of postgraduate presenters as well as captivating authors and plenary speakers.

*Yvonne O'Keefe, University of Limerick*

# Reviews

Charlotte Roche. *Wetlands*. Fourth Estate Ltd: London, 2009. ISBN: 978-0007296705

## *Wetlands*: Feminist Manifesto or Puerile Porno?

Charlotte Roche's debut novel *Wetlands*, published in 2009, explores and interrogates the social, cultural and political treatments of the female body and the dominant myths that pertain to women's body images and social roles. The novel, narrated by an unabashed eighteen year old called Helen Memel, takes place on the proctology wing of a German hospital after an intimate shaving accident. *Wetlands* follows Helen's pleasure-seeking thoughts and uninhibited activities, whilst also exploring her emotional insecurities and desperate desire for love and attention.

*Wetlands* brazenly engages with haemorrhoids, halitosis, menstrual blood and masturbation. Helen describes instances of smearing her vaginal secretions over dirty public toilet seats, swapping used tampons with a friend and masturbating under a hospital table. The novel is sensationalist and frank; its publication caused a stir in the public domain receiving mixed reviews. *The Independent* called *Wetlands* a book to either 'love or loathe', Rowan Pelling of the *Daily Mail* described it as 'profoundly unsettling', whilst Alice O'Keefe of the *New Statesman* called it a 'taboo-busting' work which has been 'mistaken for feminist literature'.

Roche seems to advocate female liberation from hygiene hysteria, but is *Wetlands* a feminist manifesto or a puerile porno? Helen flirts with the male nurse on her ward, persuades him to take pictures of the open wound on her anus, and, finally, is rescued by the nurse leaving the hospital in a fairy tale ending. It is here that *Grant's* comparison of Roche's novel with Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* loses its persuasiveness. Helen becomes an object of patriarchal power structures and is imprisoned by her own preoccupations with body image. Alarm bells ring when we discover that the novel, originally written in German, has been translated into English by Philip Oltermann - a staff editor at *Playboy* magazine.

Putting aside weaknesses in the lacklustre plot and repetitive narrative, Roche should be praised for a brave attempt to shift the social, political and cultural boundaries attached to female hygiene and body image. In addition, *Wetlands* raises other themes important to contemporary women's writing: the mother-daughter dyad, female sexuality, and mental health. Overall, Roche succeeds in renewing debates about the female body as well as attitudes and preconceptions towards it.

*Fran Pollard, University of Leicester*

## Reviews

Susanne Gruss. *The Pleasure of the Feminist Text. Reading Michèle Roberts and Angela Carter*. Rodopi: Amsterdam, 2009. ISBN: 978-90-420-2531-8.

In her introduction to this work on Angela Carter and Michèle Roberts, Susanne Gruss notes that it was not until her death in 1992 that Carter's work prompted the abundance of critical writing that exists on it today. Ironically, as Gruss notes, the acceptance of Carter's writing into the canon and her designation as the "Feminist Subversive" created a dearth (until recently) of academic attention to other feminist writers such as Michèle Roberts, rather than paving the way for women authors who share her focus on issues of identity, gender and sexuality. Gruss' exploration of the writings of both Carter and Roberts thus contributes to the ever-growing and increasingly diverse body of feminist inquiry that works tirelessly to create space for women writers in literary criticism.

*The Pleasure of the Feminist Text* is an in-depth and nuanced analysis of the work of these two influential authors. The monograph's chapters cover topics such as: "Exploring/Challenging Radical Feminism(s)", "Feminism and Faith", "History and Auto/biography" and "Writing Masculinities" and discuss the writers' uses of the popular genres of fairy tales, chick lit and romance. Gruss sets out to explore the mutual preoccupation of Carter and Roberts with the ways in which gender identities are represented in the realms of literature and culture, and interrogated in feminist discourse and theory. Although Gruss recognises similarities in these novelists' works, she also demonstrates a keen awareness of the differences between their feminist standpoints. For example, while her analysis of masculinities in the texts reveals a common concern with the denial of a stable and universal male identity, she does acknowledge a much broader focus on the subject in Carter's novels compared to Roberts.

This publication is an insightful and well-researched work on two highly significant contemporary women writers. Gruss proficiently acknowledges and references previous critical analyses of both Carter and Roberts, and builds on this body of work by offering a comparative analysis of the authors. This text will primarily be of use to scholars specifically interested in Carter and Roberts. To a lesser extent it may be of interest to those whose research focuses on literary feminisms and new departures in feminist research on contemporary women writers. In my opinion, the most important contribution of Gruss' analysis to contemporary feminist criticism is its ability to remind us of the many different ways in which women writers have called, and are still calling attention to women's issues in patriarchal, heteronormative societies.

*Louise Sheridan, University of Northampton*

# Calls For Papers

## **‘New Voices: Inherited Lines’**

University of Limerick

28th-29th May 2010

A predominant theme in Irish literature, and indeed in cultural discourse more generally, is the role of the family in Irish society. From the Quirks in *Castle Rackrent* via the Mulqueens in *The Ante-Room* to the Hegarty family in Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*, families and family structures have sustained the interest of most of our literary writers right up to the contemporary period, transcending all genres. This postgraduate conference seeks to explore literary and cultural representations of the Irish family, and consider the ways in which Irish families have shaped (and been constructed by) Irish literature and culture in the modern period. This conference will provide a forum for questioning whether traditional familial structures are in fact now outdated, and asking whether a new Irish family can be discerned in recent cultural representations, which is perhaps more reflective of contemporary Ireland. In addition to redefinitions of the nuclear family, we will also consider aspects of family constructions in Irish nationalist discourse, e.g. the symbolic use of the family and the interaction and the conflict between private and public roles of the family. Enquiries and abstracts of no more than 250-300 words (including affiliation and student status) should be sent to [newvoices2010@ul.ie](mailto:newvoices2010@ul.ie) by 1st March 2010.

## **‘Interse(x)ions: (Re)Valuing Marginal Identities Within Gender Discourse’**

Swansea University

3rd-5th September 2010

Over the last two decades radical claims about how gender(ed) identities are constructed have been somewhat diluted through their appropriation by mainstream discourses. This has perhaps led to Gender Studies and discussions of gender identities becoming closely linked with normative femininity and with white, hegemonic masculinity, using these identities as the point from which to begin discussion. This conference seeks to interrogate the reasons for the marginalisation of those Other to normative gendered identities, and will explore the importance of recognizing this ‘Othering’ process. Have Gender Studies moved from being a destabilising force to being a mainstream category? How do contemporary representations of gender reinforce or undermine normative gender discourse, and have subversive representations become silenced within discussions of gender? This conference welcomes submissions from all academic fields. Please send enquiries and abstracts of 250-300 words to both Adele Jones, [164037@swan.ac.uk](mailto:164037@swan.ac.uk) and Sophie Smith, [scsmith1982@hotmail.com](mailto:scsmith1982@hotmail.com) by 31st March, 2010.

# *Theory and Practice in Contemporary Women's Writing*

*23<sup>rd</sup> October 2010  
University of Leicester*

## WORKSHOP LEADERS

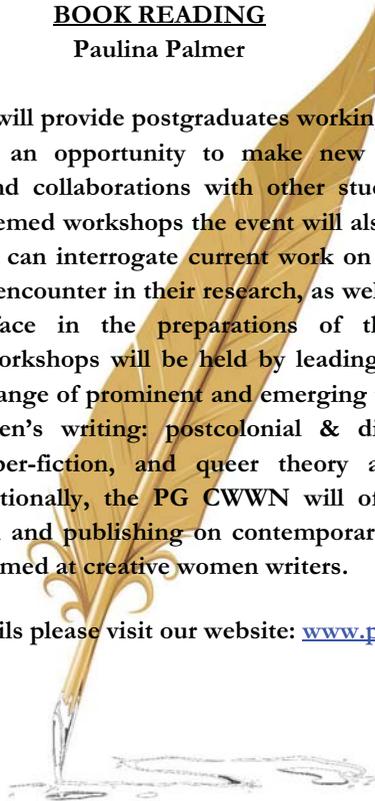
Lucie Armitt, Stéphanie Genz, Ann Heilmann,  
Nicole King, Sally Munt, Scarlett Thomas,  
Diana Wallace, Imelda Whelehan, Janet Wilson

## BOOK READING

Paulina Palmer

This PG CWWN event will provide postgraduates working on contemporary women's writing with an opportunity to make new as well as foster established contacts and collaborations with other students in the field. Through a variety of themed workshops the event will also serve as a forum in which postgraduates can interrogate current work on their topic(s), and discuss the issues they encounter in their research, as well as the challenges they simultaneously face in the preparations of their academic or professional careers. Workshops will be held by leading academics in the field and cover a wide range of prominent and emerging themes and genres in contemporary women's writing: postcolonial & diasporic literature, chicklit, science-/ cyber-fiction, and queer theory and feminisms in women's writing. Additionally, the PG CWWN will offer practice-based sessions on teaching in and publishing on contemporary women's writing as well as a workshop aimed at creative women writers.

For further details please visit our website: [www.pgcwwn.org](http://www.pgcwwn.org).



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