



Newsletter

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Contents

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| Editorial | 1 |
| CWWA Comment by Susan Watkins | 2 |
| Maggie O'Farrell – <i>The Hand that First Held Mine</i> | 3 |
| Ellie Levenson – <i>The Noughtie Girl's Guide to Feminism</i> | 4 |
| Feminist Writing and the Book Market & Call for Papers | 5 |
| Conference Report: <i>Queer Manifestations</i> | 6 |
| PG CWWN Conference 2011: <i>Time & Space</i> | 7 |

This newsletter is the collaboration product 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.



Arts & Humanities
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Editorial

Welcome to the second issue of the PG CWWN newsletter. Coinciding with a new academic year, the latest issue marks the culmination of a number of achievements and projects within the network, as well as changes to our personnel, as some members graduate and we are joined by others. We would like to take this opportunity to thank Katy Gledhill, Adele Jones, Fran Pollard, and Louise Sheridan for their valuable contribution to the PG CWWN and wish them the very best for their future careers. We also extend a hearty welcome to Alex Pryce, who will be joining the steering group as of October 2010.

Of course, the PG CWWN is not the only organisation undergoing a period of change. Our parent group, CWWN, is soon to acquire association status as CWWA (see p.3 of this issue for chair, Susan Watkins's comments on forthcoming developments within CWWA). PG CWWN will retain its relationship with CWWA and two PG CWWN representatives will always sit on the CWWA executive committee. Students will now be able to join CWWA for an annual subscription fee of £15. However, membership of PG CWWN will remain free of charge.

The successful application for AHRC Student Led Initiative Funding enabled the PG CWWN to move forward with a number of projects and events, with the aim of further developing this dynamic and interactive research community. Our first biennial networking event, *Theory and Practice in Contemporary Women's Writing*, represents the exciting culmination of this series of activities. The support and acknowledgement we have received from the postgraduate and wider academic communities (see *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century* by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn for the authors' recognition of the 2009 PG CWWN conference as a platform for the discussion and dissemination of current research) has confirmed the value and significance of the network's activities. Therefore, we now enthusiastically move forward into a fresh academic year with a new series of initiatives (see p.8 of this issue for information on our 2011 conference, *Time and Space in Contemporary Women's Writing*). As always, the continued success of the PG CWWN and this newsletter is very much dependent upon the commitment and enthusiasm of you, our readers and members, so please do send us your calls for papers, conference reports, book reviews, as well as short critical and creative pieces, and help us to continue to develop this vibrant community

We look forward to your continued contribution
The PG CWWN Steering Group

Theresa Jamieson, University of Hull

CWWA Comment

The Contemporary Women's Writing Network has gone from strength to strength since its inception under the leadership of Mary Eagleton in 2005. When I took over as Chair of the steering group this time last year after Mary's retirement, one of my concerns was to ensure the continued longevity, inclusiveness and dynamism of the organisation she started. To that end, we hope shortly to become the Contemporary Women's Writing Association. On paying a subscription fee (£15 for unwaged and students or £25 to include a print subscription to *Contemporary Women's Writing*), members will be entitled to put themselves up for election to the executive committee and to list their research interests on our new website (currently in development). They will also be entitled to 20% reduction on the price of Oxford University Press books and a reduced registration fee for our biennial conference.

We hope that becoming an association will ensure that CWWA can be open, democratic and inclusive. Sustaining our work requires that we develop a funding structure to enable that, particularly in the current economic climate where we cannot rely on funding from universities and research councils. The collection of subscriptions will provide an income for future developments and events, particularly for our biennial conference, which has always been self-funding in the past, but has found raising sponsorship a challenge.

We also hope that becoming an association will enable this organization to become as international as possible and further develop international affiliations and connections. Postgraduate students will be able to join PGCWWN and CWWA and there will always be two student representatives from PGCWWN on the CWWA executive committee. As you become the next generation of scholars and academics in the field of contemporary women's writing I hope that you will be able to benefit in any number of ways, whether it be through making contacts via listing your research interests, applying for funding for an event you want to organise, or getting elected to the executive committee.

Susan Watkins, Chair, Steering Group, CWWN

Maggie O'Farrell, *The Hand That First Held Mine*

The Hand That First Held Mine is Maggie O'Farrell's fifth novel, the follow up to the critically acclaimed and bestselling *The Vanishing of Esme Lennox* (2006). As those familiar with O'Farrell would expect, *The Hand That First Held Mine* is another deftly plotted novel that carefully allows clues to blossom throughout the two (seemingly separate) narrative strands.

The first of these begins in the mid-1950s, when Lexie Sinclair leaves rural Devon for the excitement of London. Lexie's arrival coincides with the moment the capital was becoming *the* foremost cultural city for the next decade. O'Farrell's portrayal of that era is nostalgic yet also captures the melancholy of living in post-war London; a mood heightened by reminders that Lexie's life is to be a short one.

The present-day narrative revolves around the traumas of new parents Elina and Ted: Elina is coping with physical trauma after the difficult and bloody birth of their son, whilst Ted is behaving in a manner that suggests Post-Traumatic Shock. As Elina slowly recovers and becomes stronger, Ted becomes increasingly troubled by memories that appear to stem from his childhood. To Ted's confusion, these memories are at odds with those of his parents.

To be more specific would reveal too much. But *The Hand That First Held Mine* is further evidence of O'Farrell's remarkable ability to handle the repressed and secret histories at the heart of families. I maintain that there are few contemporary authors who rival her skill with writing "memory". Likewise, she has become a writer who gracefully captures the nuances of familial relationships, especially those between women. In this novel, however, O'Farrell subtly shifts the emphasis onto mother-son relationships, and, refreshingly for a work that dwells on unconscious memory and trauma, without resorting to customary Oedipal references. Despite O'Farrell's exploration of heightened emotions, her novels have never yet resorted to melodrama. Perhaps more subtle than *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox* in terms of plot and character, *The Hand That First Held Mine* is a beautifully written and meticulously researched novel that confirms O'Farrell's standing as one of the best British writers today.

Amy Rushton, Goldsmiths (University of London)

Ellie Levenson, The Noughtie Girl's Guide to Feminism

'This book itself looks like chick lit, and I am proud of that because I know that this in itself doesn't mean that I am not making important points' (Levenson 89). With its bright red cover, quirky font, and feminine cover image, *The Noughtie Girl's Guide to Feminism* does indeed look like chick lit. The association appears to be an important element of the author's strategy. As Levenson argues, chick lit heroine Bridget Jones was great because she 'helped the older generation understand the life of noughtie women' (166). I would suggest that this book is successful in helping noughtie women to understand feminists of previous generations: what they gained for us, and what we have left to fight for.

Levenson notes that many women now feel that feminism is somehow outdated and irrelevant to their lives; are even embarrassed by the very word feminism and its associated connotations. Certainly, it has been suggested that women often feel alienated from the language used in many feminist texts. Conversely, Levenson's informal tone and chick lit-esque style has the potential to open feminism to a larger audience. This book would be most beneficial to anyone previously unfamiliar with feminist theory, or those who think that feminism is no longer relevant in contemporary society. The largely informal, conversational style, engagement with issues ranging from chick lit and magazines, to relationships, careers and body image, provide the perfect introduction to feminism for those who thought it was a thing of the past. It even allows the most reluctant feminists to ease themselves into this still very current, and ever-changing, movement.

Levenson suggests that the lives of modern women are full of contradictions and argues that this is fine; women need not feel guilty about wanting different things. Noughtie feminism is a "pick'n'mix" from which, 'you take the parts of feminism you fancy from each thinker or movement. This [...] idea is ideal for noughtie girls. We choose the bits of feminism we feel comfortable with and reject other bits. [...] noughtie girl feminists reject [the] idea of being told what to think, whoever it is by' (209). Importantly, however, the informal tone does not detract from the seriousness of her arguments. Her discussion of domestic violence and rape is particularly striking, in part owing to the somewhat controversial claim that 'we have to move away from this idea of Irapel as the worst thing that can happen' to a woman, because 'we buy into the idea of it being about taking a woman's virtue and of that being her most important asset' (64). Although the author may be criticised for being unsympathetic, she is in fact reiterating earlier feminist calls for women to re-claim control of their bodies. Ultimately, Levenson asserts that feminism still has a long way to go. Until full equality between men and women is achieved, feminism will always remain a relevant topic.

Mary Ryan (Immaculate College, University of Limerick)

Feminist Writing and the Book Market

Where might a literature enthusiast look to find the latest feminist poetry? Obviously it will not be in the supermarket's paperback selection; but it is often as difficult to find in the best literary bookshops, and bewilderingly absent from most UK poetry journals.

Feminist poetry – that is writing which explores creatively the struggles of women's lives – has been taking a back seat in recent poetry publications. For emerging writers in the UK there is a plethora of reputable poetry journals which cover every niche from haiku to the long poem. However, in their commitment to either broad or narrow focus, journals seem to overlook any explicit feminism for fear of alienating their readership. This seems an odd conclusion, I know, in the generally positive climate created by our Laureate. Yet, place our publishing industry against that of North America where there exist outlets such as Vancouver based *Room*, a collective edited magazine in its 33rd year, and publications with links to MFA courses such as *So To Speak*, and it seems that there are models we could follow to our advantage.

It may seem a piffling concern amidst Arts cuts, but if emerging writers must repress their feminist concerns in order to have their work selected by editors, there will be consequences for writers, readers and critics today and in the future.

Alex Pryce, University of Oxford

Feminism and Teaching Symposium

8th-9th April 2011, University of Nottingham

This is a two-day interdisciplinary postgraduate symposium that will explore the relationships between feminism and teaching. Postgraduates, early career researchers, teachers, artists and activists of all genders are invited to propose sessions engaging with issues relating to feminism and teaching. This symposium aims to bring together people from a wide variety of disciplines and contexts to explore the ways in which these two fields relate to each other and the ways in which each term strengthens and/or troubles the other. We welcome proposals which engage with the relationships between feminism and teaching, from various disciplines and from outside academia. Presenters are encouraged to engage with these issues in a way that reflects the material being discussed. We would like to include a diversity of presentation styles, but we are particularly keen to encourage interactive sessions, including short film screenings, musical and dramatic performances, workshops, presentations about ongoing projects or works in progress, demonstrations, discussion sessions, or any other format conducive to exploring the relationships between feminism and teaching.

Please send proposals of 200-300 words, along with a brief biography (50 words) to feminismandteaching@nottingham.ac.uk by 20th November 2010. For further information please visit our website: feminismandteaching.org.

Conference Report

Queer Manifestations: Literature, Theory, History, Culture

University of Chester, 26th June 2010

Hosted by the English Department at the University of Chester, the conference 'Queer Manifestations: Literature, Theory, History, Culture' saw 50 delegates – academics and postgraduate students – come together from institutions all over the UK for a day of lively presentations and productive discussion.

The conference opened with the keynote speech, 'Queer as Fish', delivered by Professor Sally Munt (University of Sussex). Professor Munt gave a fascinating presentation on the queer affinities between marine and non-marine life, and the potential of 'otherness' under the sea.

Professor Munt's keynote speech reflected the emphasis of the conference on interdisciplinary interaction, and the six panels covered a wide range of film, literature, the law, and religion. Papers delivered considered queer bikers on acid, 'Bromance' at the OK Coral and asked questions such as 'What is it with gay men and Beaches?' Speakers were not limited by genre or period, exploring subjects as diverse as Will Self's *Cock* and the nineteenth-century nursing soldier. Two panels on masculinity centred on the male body; speakers considered Victorian hymnody, heterosexism in the law and the penetrated male. Other panels considered alternative fictions and lesbian representations, with speakers discussing slash fandom, the Hebrew Bible and lesbian historical fiction. Papers spanned a wide range of disciplines and many different individual research interests, demonstrating the diversity of scholarship currently being pursued under the 'umbrella' of queer theory. The emphasis on history, literature, and culture, as well as theory, initiated fruitful conversation and vigorous debate.

The plenary session included the subjects of pedagogy, otherness within the body, and selfhood, and in the best tradition of conference debate, discussions over drinks continued into the night. 'Queer Manifestations' is believed to be one of the first conferences of its kind in the UK, and we are keen to continue our exploration of cross-disciplinary queer interests.

Dr. Georgina O'Brien Hill and Louisa Yates, University of Chester.

Time & Space in Contemporary Women's Writing

8 - 9 September 2011, University of Hull (UK)



Contemporary women's writing continues to be preoccupied with and influenced by conceptualisations of time and space, both as separate and as inherently interconnected concepts. At the turn of the millennium, it is inevitable that feminist theory, politics and practice have been increasingly interested in the relationships between past, present and future, and have at the same time also become more global and diversified in their focus. This event seeks to explore the ways in which contemporary women writers - through fiction and non-fiction, short story and poetry, drama and critical theory - engage with and conceptualise notions of time and space in their work. Topics may include but are by no means limited to:

- Global, national, regional, urban and domestic geographies
- Narrative space and time
- Historical fiction and revisions of the past (personal, historical, national, etc.)
- Dystopian and utopian visions of time and space, including science and cyber fiction
- Transnationalism and diasporas
- Spaces of mind and body
- Travel writing
- Theorisations of the relationship between time and space.

Please send 300 word abstracts for 20 minute papers via email to time-and-space@pgcwwn.org. The deadline for proposals is 1st April 2011. If you have any further questions about the network or this event, please get in touch at the above email address.