

“For Was I Not Born Here?” Identity and Culture in the Work of Yvonne du Fresne. Anne Holden Rønning (2010). *Cross Cultures 124. Readings in Post/Colonial Literatures and Cultures in English.* Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi. ISBN: 978-90-420-2957-6. 187 pp.

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We wouldn't know that we are a multicultural society by looking at our literature. Maori writing has gained much more focus now, but there is still a lot missing from people of other backgrounds. I think it would be good to be more proactive about encouraging writers from all sorts of backgrounds as New Zealanders, because until that happens, our literature is not showing fully who we are in this country. (Patricia Grace, in Fresno 2003: 115)

As Patricia Grace argues above, New Zealand literature has not fully managed to reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity that has characterized its society from the beginning of the colonial period. Although, as she points out, Maori literature is now firmly established and has been subject to numerous critical studies, the same does not apply to the literature produced by writers of other backgrounds, whose works have tended to be ignored as constitutive of the body of New Zealand literature (Nola 1999). The tendency to present debates on New Zealand national identity as exclusively affecting Pakeha and Maori derives from the official bicultural policy established in the 1980s and has resulted not only in the homogenization of these two communities—in themselves internally diverse—but also in the exclusion of other ethnic groups as alien to this dichotomy and apparently unrelated to these national debates. This has had a direct reflection in literature, affecting writers of Asian and Pacific backgrounds, but also of European but non-Anglo-Celtic origin.

Holden Rønning's monograph engages in this neglected area of study by looking at the works of Yvonne du Fresne, a New Zealand novelist and short story writer of Danish and Danish-Huguenot descent whose literary production had not previously been the object of such a detailed study, with the exception of Nina Nola's PhD thesis (2000a).

In this sense, Holden Rønning's book has come to fill an important gap and will hopefully pave the way for subsequent studies on writers like du Fresne who, as Nola argues, "have been relegated [...] to a marginal position in New Zealand literature, [although they] have enjoyed a considerable degree of reader support and popularity" (2000b: 204). Holden Rønning's work attempts to solve some of these deficiencies by focusing on du Fresne's complete literary output with a double purpose in mind: to fill existing gaps in critical studies of what we might call New Zealand's multicultural literature and to illuminate the use of du Fresne's postcolonial narrative strategies; although not all chapters are equally successful, the book will nevertheless be of interest to scholars working in the field of New Zealand studies, as well as to researchers of postcolonial or diasporic literatures.

Chapter 1, "Identities in Dialogue in the Work of Yvonne du Fresne", traces the main aspects and preoccupations of du Fresne's work by establishing a basic division between her short stories, mainly concerned with "depicting identities in dialogue" (1) and her novels, centered on issues of memory, history and mythology. As the author explains, du Fresne's work contributes both to a discussion of New Zealand's national identity and to more general debates about multicultural and hybrid identities in this age of global movement and of national uncertainties. The author discusses these aspects drawing from a number of well-known postcolonial critics, like Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha or Helen Tiffin, to analyze –in a perhaps insufficient way– the most relevant building blocks of du Fresne's project of social reconstruction as well as the narrative strategies employed by the author to develop this project. She considers, for example, du Fresne's need to secure a sense of belonging, inscribing the self "in place", and her simultaneous search for roots in her past. Although the theoretical and critical sources employed in this chapter are suitable for the further commentary on du Fresne's work, my impression is that some of the points are merely hinted at, but not fully developed. Considering that this introductory chapter is meant to position du Fresne's work within contemporary debates on identity, I miss, for instance, a more detailed discussion of the development of New Zealand's bicultural policy in the 1980s and of how these official measures intervened in du Fresne's own conception of biculturalism. Likewise, I would have liked to read a more pertinent contextualization of her latest works as related to the events that, from the mid 1990s, have resulted in a growing multicultural awareness and prompted official measures to finally acknowledge and recognize the multiethnic make-up of New Zealand's society.

A more detailed and pertinent contextualization is nevertheless found in chapter 2, where Holden Rønning offers an interesting historical exploration of the Danish settlement in New Zealand. This is a necessary introduction to du Fresne's work, in particular to her novels, where she fictionally reworks some of this historical material. The chapter begins with an account of the first Danish migrations and engages in details related to the settlers' lives in the Manawatu and Dannervirke regions. This chapter also

considers the relevance of the church in the process of settlement and the role played by the Monrad family, 19th century migrants who joined a small but well-established community of Danes and struggled to make a living while keeping the cultural links with their homeland. The chapter concludes with a section on Danish books and collections kept in New Zealand as evidence of that effort to maintain those cultural and linguistic connections, a constant preoccupation in du Fresne's works, as the author explains in subsequent chapters.

The rest of the book is devoted to the discussion of these individual works, starting with her first two novels *The Book of Esther* (1982) and *Frédérique* (1987). *The Book of Esther*, discussed in Chapter 3, tells the story of a middle-aged woman who tries to make sense of her life by looking back at her family history and tracing the lives of her migrant ancestors. Du Fresne thus reshapes and fictionalizes the historical material to illustrate Esther's personal and contemporary predicaments. The novel reflects some of the most common features of exilic and diasporic writing in its investigation of "intergroup relations and the concomitant conflict of values and customs, as well as the balancing of confusing and clashing emotions, resultant on a transference from one culture to another" (58). Among these features, Holden Rønning comments on the problematic view of the often idealized exilic memory, the temporal and spatial shifts in the narrative, or the relevance of the New Zealand land/scape to illustrate Esther's sense of dis/placement. Chapter 4 moves on to consider du Fresne's second novel, *Frédérique*, about a 19th century Danish woman who is forced to migrate to New Zealand with her Huguenot father, leaving her childhood love behind. The novel thus explores the more historical dimensions of the exilic experience, employing narrative strategies inspired by Victorian literature and engaging, as Holden Rønning effectively demonstrates, in interesting linguistic games to reflect social and cultural diversity and to explore how identity and biculturalism are negotiated through language. Du Fresne also articulates these issues through the use of folklore and mythology, in particular through the legend of the Snaveskind, used to illustrate the separation of Frédérique from her Danish fiancé and operating at a symbolic level to show "how the protagonist is entrapped between and imprisoned by conflicting cultures" (107). The chapter ends with a reflection on how the very specific cultural predicaments of the protagonist can refer to contemporary conflicts of un/belonging common in our globalized world.

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with du Fresne's short stories, compiled in the volumes *The Growing of Astrid Westergaard* (1985), *Farvel and Other Stories* (1980) and *The Bear from the North: Tales of a New Zealand Childhood* (1988). Holden Rønning departs from the assumption that the short fiction genre serves the author to employ the form as vehicle for a distinctively female expression and a useful way to "reverse and subvert traditional stereotyping, not only of nationality but also of gender" (111). Chapter 5, in my view the most comprehensive and interesting, starts by briefly outlining the defining features of the short story form, and then moves on to look in more detail at the New

Zealand short story, a format that seems to be specially suitable for a country with a small population and little resources for the full time writer, but also one where the short story tradition has allowed aspiring authors –of Pakeha, Maori and other ethnicities– to forge a specific New Zealand style which consists in “the presentation of a situation, interwoven with comments on identity problems and cultural difference [...] expressive of the relation between textual space and topographical space, as brief impressions of an emotional response to what is strange, exotic, foreign” (116). Holden Rønning considers du Fresne’s childhood tales as sketches rather than conventional short stories which differ from her novels in that “they are not concerned with the problem of cultural identity as such directly [...] but instead deal with the child’s positioning of the ‘self’ in a semi-hostile world” (128). The author then comments on du Fresne’s use of interior monologue, humour, strategies of narrative delay and mix of thoughts to reflect Astrid’s way of thinking and the personal dilemmas she faces. Although issues dealing with cultural identity are important in her childhood stories, it is in the adult stories, discussed in chapter 6, where these aspects acquire a greater relevance. With their focus on women, these stories “foreshadow the themes in her later novels [and] illustrate the feminist issues in du Fresne’s work” (140). Holden Rønning classifies these stories into two groups, those dealing with the older generation of Danes, and those dealing mostly with second generation female characters who are “highly conscious of their biculturalism” (140), a situation reflected in recurrent topics like intermarriage, the pain of un/belonging, the sadness of ageing and death, and the exploration of grief as a result of different personal and social conflicts.

After the analysis of du Fresne’s short stories, the book concludes with a study of her last novel, *Motherland* (1996), a fictional autobiography in which the episodic structure of earlier works gives way to a more conventional chronological narrative. The novel is narrated by an adult Astrid who returns to Denmark and tries to reconcile herself with the state of cultural ambiguity in which she lives; as Holden Rønning concludes, the novel eventually demonstrates “her ability to come to terms with this sense of the incompatibility of her two worlds and to find coherence in her life” (158). The novel reiterates some of du Fresne’s preoccupations and creative choices, such as the focus on female characters, the exploration of cultural differences between Denmark and New Zealand, and the topic of teaching as constitutive of her characters’ experiences and personalities. This last novel “represents the culmination of the themes taken up in [du Fresne’s] writing about the Danish immigrants, at the same time as it poses salient questions about aspects of life at the end of the twentieth century” (153).

Holden Rønning concludes her analysis by pointing at some of these salient questions, thus reinforcing the multiple reasons that justify the relevance of her study: the need to start looking at New Zealand as a country that “has been multicultural for over a hundred years” (175), although this is a point that evidently needs further elaboration; the urge to increase scholarly work on authors who have been neglected by the critics

until recently, and the necessity to incorporate the works of writers like du Fresne in courses on postcolonial and diasporic literatures. Holden Rønning's monograph undoubtedly contributes to all three aspects in an appropriate manner.

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