

Juanjo Bermúdez de Castro. 2012. *Rewriting Terror: The 9/11 Terrorists in American Fiction*. Alcalá de Henares: Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin. 235 pp. ISBN: 978-84-15595-97-7.

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In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many authors of fiction, filmmakers, journalists, public figures and scholars have attempted to narrate, recreate, explain, reflect on and theorize about the event and its aftermath. In the first decade after 9/11, over 164 fiction texts were published or distributed in the United States with 9/11 as subject matter, as well as 145 volumes of juvenile fiction and 1,433 non-fiction books, according to *Bowker's Books In Print* database in 2011. The number of fiction works (novels, comics, films, documentaries, etc.) has kept on growing and the corpus is indeed now very large. Likewise, many academic journals have devoted issues to 9/11, such as the *Journal of American History's* special issue "History and September 11" (volume 89.2, 2002), *The South Atlantic Quarterly's* 2002 issue "Dissent from the Homeland," edited by Hauerwas and Lentricchia (volume 101.2), and *Modern Language Studies's* "Nine Eleven + Ten" in 2011 (volume 41.1), to name but a few of those cited by Bermúdez de Castro. Not surprisingly, 9/11 is a thriving research topic that is seeing incisive and exciting contributions, and offers a wide variety of approaches, perspectives and subject matters. Politics, ethics, terrorism, war, violence, history, identity, literature... all are subject to analysis in relation to 9/11.

In spite of the extensive critical production on 9/11, Bermúdez de Castro's work acknowledges the need for a volume that gives "priority to the similarity of ideological messages conveyed or the similar narratological strategies adopted, over the specific medium employed" (206). Accordingly, his analysis disregards any grouping of fiction works into the categories of novel, short story, comic or film, and explores, instead, what these various texts on 9/11 have in common. This strategy is based on the author's conviction that there is a lack of theoretical frameworks, such as history, literature and ideology "within the existing analysis of how 9/11 popular fiction does actually reconstruct the event [which makes] the readers/spectators reconfigure their ideological positions towards it" (206). Therefore, Bermúdez de Castro adopts a Foucauldian approach that conceives of fictional texts as "battlefields of multiple forces" which "act as another ideological state apparatus and impose particular versions of the 9/11 events" (12). The author's main contention is that these versions aim, ultimately and in most cases, at paying tribute to the white victims, at demonizing the terrorists or at staging a call for war. It can hardly be denied that the

cultural and political climate in the US during the first years after the attacks may have fostered such responses, but still, it could be argued that post-9/11 fiction is doing more than just that. Indeed, the author himself acknowledges this in the last chapter, where he reviews the academic production on 9/11. Nonetheless, Bermúdez de Castro has carefully chosen his corpus and he convincingly argues his case: that there is a need for a comparative analysis of 9/11 fiction works vis-à-vis the discourses that shape them.

In consequence, *Rewriting Terror* does not seek to be an all-encompassing overview of 9/11 fiction themes, but rather an in-depth analysis of one theme in particular: how that “quintessential” Other, the figure of the terrorist, is represented and constructed in American post-9/11 fiction. The aim is to explore how the perpetrators of 9/11 have been represented, misrepresented or underrepresented in novels, short stories, comics and film, and to expose and trace the origins of the ideological assumptions upheld by these texts. Based on the premise that “fiction does not only reflect relations of power but it actively participates in the creation of history and in the consolidation of certain ideological messages” (12), the most relevant contribution of this volume is its narratological analysis of selected fiction works against the backdrop of ongoing discourses about 9/11 and the theories that support them, particularly in relation to the figure of the terrorist. The author seeks to show how such discourses have been recreated in fiction and how fiction seems to validate said discourses; among these, former President Bush’s rhetoric of “caves and evil,” Samuel Huntington’s theory of “The Clash of Civilizations” (1993), the analogy of 9/11 as the new Pearl Harbor, the framing of 9/11 as the new Holocaust, Bernard Lewis’s “The Roots of Muslim Rage” (1999), or the powerful strategy deployed by the government and the mass media of turning victims into heroes. Thus, the volume’s strength resides in its analysis of 9/11 fiction alongside the theories and discourses which shape (or aim at shaping) our response to the 9/11 events and the ongoing War on Terror, thus providing an insightful panoramic view of how the “official version” of 9/11 came to be—and is still being—constructed. Although “fictional terrorism” was prolific in the 1980s and 1990s, Bermúdez de Castro contends that September 11 set “in motion a whole ideological—and military—Western machinery which partly recovered that one-sided ‘evil’ portrait of the terrorist figure . . . this time even more racially, ethnically and religiously biased than before” (33).

Part one, “Minimal Portraits,” is an analysis of the underrepresentation of terrorists in post-9/11 fiction, ranging from texts in which they are almost absent (Rubram Fernández’s novel *September 11 from the Inside*; Frank Senauth’s novel *A Day of Terror*), through minimal representation which seeks to attribute to them a threatening and exotic undertone (Paul Greengrass’s film *United 93*; Peter Markle’s FOX TV film *Flight 93*), to texts in which their representation is stereotypical (Don DeLillo’s novel *Falling Man*; *The West Wing* episode “Isaac and Ishmael”). Bermúdez de Castro argues that this absence or minimal representation replicates the effects of the policies of racial profiling which were set in motion in the United States in the wake of 9/11 and which led to the effective disappearance of a frightened population from the streets due to the “intense wave of

racial crimes against Arabs, Muslims and whoever 'looked like' Middle Easterner in the weeks after 9/11" (60). This disappearance is, according to the author, significantly echoed in the pages of 9/11 fiction, which deals mainly with bereaved white widows or brave white firemen and policemen, and key in "the ideological production of each story" (39). This group of fictional works includes that most popular trend in 9/11 fiction, the heroic "plane narrative" about the events aboard the only plane not to hit its target (flight United 93, which crashed in the fields near Shanksville, Pennsylvania), which draws its popularity from representing an open confrontation between passengers and hijackers, thus giving meaning to "the ideological and discursive transformation of 'the 9/11 victims' into 'the 9/11 heroes'" (57). The claim of such films to be offering an "insider's perspective" of the tragedy and the pretension of telling the "truth" from the vantage point of the victim is their main advertising ploy, and this purported "veracity" leads, in the author's opinion, to the erasure of the terrorists, who only receive brief sketches which simply serve to demonize them (39).

One case in point that illustrates such erasure is, according to the author, Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man* where, even though the terrorists are part of the narrative, Mohammad Atta appears as a "spectral presence" and his portrait is stereotypical and made "despicable" both to fellow terrorists and readers (72). The author argues that the eight pages dedicated to the terrorist Hammad are poor and superficial in content, and that the "stylish change of focalizer" (from Hammad in the plane to Keith Neudecker in the World Trade Center) at the moment of impact are not enough to counter the stereotypical portrait of the terrorists that DeLillo constructs throughout the novel (72), while focusing so extensively on the white victims. While this reading is plausible, authors have suggested that this potted representation may respond to DeLillo's attempt to represent the workings of psychic trauma and the impossibility of narrating the events coherently, thus his resorting to disruption, fragmentation and repetition as a narrative technique (Baelo-Allué 2012; Cvek 2011). This section concludes with a trenchant analysis in chapter four of how the apparatus of indoctrination is set to work in *The West Wing's* special episode "Isaac and Ishmael" (aired in October 2001), which traces the root of the conflict back to Biblical times, upholding an inextricable and ontological confrontation between Christianity and Islam. The narratological analysis carried out in these first four chapters is revealing, and the author identifies and explains some of the narrative mechanisms used by these fictional works in order to achieve, successfully or not, that semblance of "veracity" that seeks to give credit to their ideological message.

After this probing analysis of how terrorists are under-represented in minimal, shadowy sketches, part two, "Terrorists in America," deals with terrorists' misrepresentation in the detailed portraits featured in John Updike's novel *Terrorist*, Martin Amis's short story "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta," Andre Dubus III's novel *The Garden of Last Days* and Stan Lee's comic "The Sleeping Giant." The inclusion of a non-American novelist, Amis, in the corpus to be analyzed responds to Amis's "canonical position in the US as 'the postmodern Anglo-Saxon writer'" (111). Furthermore, Bermúdez de Castro hints at the heated debates

Amis generated—most notably, with cultural critic Terry Eagleton—by the allegedly racist and Islamophobic comments in his collection of short stories, essays and journalism, *The Second Plane* (2008), which includes the short story reviewed in *Rewriting Terror*. The ideological assumptions put forth by the texts analyzed in this section, the author maintains, uphold that Islam is a culture of death opposed to a Western culture of life (Updike), that the terrorists are sexually obsessed maniacs (Dubus) whose sexual frustration (Amis) or animalistic nature (Lee) is to a large extent the motive behind their actions. In his analysis of *Terrorist*, for example, Bermúdez de Castro develops his argument against the theoretical works of Jean Baudrillard (*The Spirit of Terrorism*) and Slavoj Žižek (*Welcome to the Desert of the Real*), in an effort to explain why “a novel so negatively received by both press and academia was such a success in libraries” (108), a novel whose final message seems to be a celebration of American ordinary life and a warmongering appeal to the nation, when Updike concludes that “this is a country worth fighting for” (109).

Part three, “Terrorists in ‘Hystoerical’ Context,” analyzes four fictional works (three comics and one novel) “which attempted in different ways to trace the origins—and ultimately the causes—of the 9/11 terrorist attacks” (145) but which, according to the author, “committed terrible errors when reflecting upon [the attacks] and especially when contextualizing them into history” (145). Huntington’s West-centered theory of global politics as an inevitable cultural clash between the East and the West is replicated in David Swanner’s novel *The Fateful Cause*, while it is contested by, among many others, Edward Said’s essay “The Clash of Ignorance” (2001) and Hunt’s “In the Wake of September 11: The Clash of What?” (2002). The inclusion of Swanner’s biased text—if it can be classified as literature at all—in this analysis is somewhat baffling, but the whole section proves insightful in setting the tone of current contextualizations of 9/11 that serve to justify the ongoing War on Terror. The section is completed by the analysis of Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón’s *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*, Beau Smith’s “Soldiers,” and Sam Glanzman’s “There Were Tears in Her Eyes.”

Fortunately, Bermúdez de Castro does see some hope in 9/11 fiction’s ability to transcend racially and ideologically biased interpretations of the terrorist attacks, and in the brief chapter “How to Resist Demonizing and Generalizing Discourses” he lists a number of fiction works that seem to offer a space for critical reflection, such as Igor Kordey’s “Captain America Sheds His Mighty Tears: Comics and September 11,” Lynne Sharon Schwartz’s *The Writing on the Wall*, and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. To conclude, the bibliographical work behind *Rewriting Terror* is remarkable, and the reader will be glad to find three useful appendixes that list the most relevant works on 9/11 up to the date of publication of this volume: Appendix A on 9/11 fiction, which lists cartoons, comics, graphic novels, films, novels, performances, plays, poetry, short stories, series and docudramas; an extensive Appendix B on nonfiction texts; and Appendix C listing academic works (books, journal articles, newspaper reviews and articles) on 9/11 fiction. For anyone wishing to explore 9/11, Bermudez’s mapping of the production is indeed enlightening.

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