

Maria Holmgren Troy, Elizabeth Kella, and Helena Wahlström. *Making Home: Orphanhood, kinship, and cultural memory in contemporary American novels*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014. ISBN-978-07190-8959-6. 254 pages.

Growing up in the US during the Reagan era, my childhood was imbued with tales of orphans, misfits, and non-traditional families. From quirky family sitcoms such as *Punky Brewster* and *Diff'rent Strokes*, to diverse literary figures ranging from Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, and even Batman and Robin, many of my childhood heroes were, in fact, orphans. I even have fond memories of watching the 1982 musical adaptation of *Annie* and David Lean's 1948 version of *Oliver Twist* with my grandparents every year. In the community I grew up in, the annual viewings of these films felt almost like compulsory, nationwide events. Although the orphan figure is not unique to North America, it really seems to hold a special place there, particularly in the land's rich and diverse literary landscape.

For this reason, I approached *Making Home: Orphanhood, kinship, and cultural memory in contemporary American novels* with equal parts apprehension and curiosity: What was a study financed by the Swedish Research Council going to tell me about my own culture and its literary traditions? More importantly, how would such a study explore the orphan figure while taking into account the cultural and literary diversity unique to North America? A collaborative effort by Senior Lecturer in Gender Studies Helena Wahlström Henriksson, English Professor Maria Holmgren Troy, and Senior English Lecturer and expatriate Elizabeth Kella, *Making Home* approaches the extremely complex topic of American culture with refreshing clarity and insight.

While many literary studies tend to reinforce the established canon of dead white male authors, *Making Home* marks a refreshing and necessary departure. Don't get me wrong, the study certainly acknowledges the contributions of great writers such as Mark Twain, but ultimately focuses on the orphan figure in a more broad, multi-ethnic selection suitable for a country as diverse as the United States. This includes everything from contemporary novels about African American Vampires, to subversive Native American versions of the captivity narrative.

Focusing on the ways in which the literary orphan activates both normative and alternative ideas about kinship, *Making Home* argues that the orphan symbol is uniquely fit to explore social formations on both a familial and national level. Treating orphan literature as a refracted mirror of American society, the study not only examines traditional and alternative family arrangements, but also addresses current socio-political issues such as child welfare, mixed-race families, and even queer politics.

At the heart of this study is an attentiveness to the notion of *différance*, but unlike other studies influenced by postmodern ideas, the authors of *Making Home* never lose sight of the communicative role of language. In other words, they are able to keep *différance* at the center of their narrative without exacerbating it with jargon laden syntactic labyrinths and intellectual posturing. The result is an extremely well

structured and accessible study, whose depth lies in its approach to the many diverse texts it engages.

Chapter I, 'Orphans and American literature: texts, intertexts, and contexts' explores the notions of cultural memory and multiculturalism while grounding the study in earlier research on the orphan figure as it pertains to literary history, criticism, and socio-historical contextualizations. The first chapter does an excellent job establishing how orphans have played major roles in dominant Euro-American literary traditions, as well as in gendered and ethnic challenges to the status-quo.

Chapter 2, 'From Captivity to Kinship: Indian orphans and Sovereignty' explores how Native American orphans in contemporary novels are imagined in relation to their prior representations in Euro-American captivity narratives. What I found particularly interesting about this chapter was that it actually discusses the indigenous American perspectives on orphanhood and kinship: Historical scholarship reveals that no Native American language had a word for orphan or adoption prior to the 1900s, however, forms of adoption had long been practiced within tribes. More intriguingly, the idea of kinship was conceptualized differently by the tribes as a sort of psychic, social, and spiritual harmony. The chapter then discusses a wide range of texts, showing how the Native American orphan figure is used to explore the possibilities and limitations of American nationhood and Native sovereignty.

Chapter 3, 'Literary Kinships: Euro-American orphans, gender, genre, and cultural memory' delves further into the canonization of orphan tales, as well as the notions of mnemonic communities, memory construction, and competing ideologies. Drawing upon feminist countertraditions such as recovered cultural memory, the chapter discusses the various ways in which contemporary white orphan novels exhibit a kinship with the Euro-American canon, while simultaneously challenging the status-quo. According to the authors, even though white female orphan narratives such as Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1981) are often steeped in allusions to canonical literature, they also critique the nuclear family ideal and the dissolution of the American literary canon in the wake of feminism and multiculturalism.

The third chapter also examines two examples of what have been described as 'post 9/11 narratives.' Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days* (2005) and Jonathan Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) seem to use the orphan figure to problematize the ideas of nation and family, as well as respond to what many critics have described as a 'post 9/11 representational crisis.'

Chapter 4, 'Family Matters: Euro-American orphans, the *bildungsroman*, and kinship building' explores many of the same theoretical concerns found in the third chapter, but focuses more on actual socio-historical developments in the US, as well as the representations of non-traditional family arrangements in the *bildungsroman* genre.

The fifth and final chapter 'At home in the world?' represents a culmination of everything that makes the first four chapters refreshing and interesting. Here, questions

concerning home, family, and nation are explored in African American novels imagining feminist, queer, and multicultural forms of kinships. In what feels like a grand finale, the authors of *Making Home* not only move beyond the nuclear family ideal, but also turn the white hetero-patriarchal canon on its head with the inclusion of two queer African American vampire novels!

I only have one criticism of *Making Home*, but it in no way diminishes its status as a valuable and important literary study: The authors mention in their introduction that the orphan becomes an increasingly significant literary figure during times of perceived crisis (the most recent examples of this being found in post 9/11 literature), however, this rather bold claim is unsubstantiated throughout the study. I would argue that while most works of literature tend to reflect the times and conditions in which they were written, there have been very few moments in American history that have not been marked by some international or domestic crisis. Following this logic, the literary orphan is just one of many figures that appear during times of *perceived* crisis, and given the tumultuous nature US history, it is very difficult to find a time period or novel that proves otherwise. Today, everything from chick-lit novels like Candace Bushnell's *One Fifth Avenue* to superhero films such as Marvel's *Iron Man III* engage post-9/11 themes, but had these works been written twenty years earlier, they would probably have dealt with a litany of other issues relevant to post Gulf War America.

This one criticism aside, I would have to say that *Making Home* is a very worthwhile read, particularly for anyone interested in literary orphans and American culture. With its emphasis on *différance*, *Making Home* seems to find one commonality that might even help explain the orphan figure's prominence in American narratives: You see, the United States and Canada are a relatively young nations, comprised mostly of the descendants of recently displaced and/or migrated peoples. This seems to be true for all North Americans with the exception of the Natives, but even they have been displaced following the intrusion of white settlers and European culture. This might explain why even the most patriotic American still looks to the land of his or her ancestors for a sense of identity. It might also explain why the literary orphan is uniquely fit to explore social formations on both a familial and national level. Figuratively speaking, America is a land of orphans, all looking to make a new kind of home in a land marked by difference, conflict, and change.

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