

Mueller, Andreas K. E., and Glynis Ridley (eds.). 2021. *Robinson Crusoe after 300 years*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press. 234 pages.

This collection of articles on the legacy and cultural fallout of Daniel Defoe's novels *The Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* was published in 2021 as part of Bucknell University Press's *Transits* Series. Edited by Andreas K. E. Mueller and Glynis Ridley, the texts in this volume offer an elegant interrogation of our repositioning of the Crusoe myth, both in terms of its generic reiterations, as well as the seepage of its iconography into the collective western consciousness. For the twenty-first century reader, *Robinson Crusoe* is a text which comes mired in interpretive responses, whether that be the conceptualisation of Crusoe's island as proto-colony, or of Crusoe's own archetypally Protestant attitudes. While the essays in this volume do not necessarily cast doubt on those assumptions, they offer alternative filters through which the text may be encountered, thus providing a platform for further research into the cultural legacy of the novel in the twenty-first century.

The collection also provides us with a reminder that in reading *Robinson Crusoe* in isolation, we do not receive the text as Defoe's eighteenth-century readers would have done. That is to say that a reading of the first novel alongside its sequel, *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, further highlights the substantial inconsistencies in Crusoe's behaviour. It also invites us into Defoe's world of trade and travel in ways that the first volume, by itself, does not. Furthermore, many of the authors in this collection root their readings of both volumes in Defoe's own non-fiction, as well as in texts ranging from Protestant literature of the seventeenth century to contemporary records of environmental phenomena. This approach affords us some startlingly new insights into the text, which refine, and in some cases challenge, earlier readings of the novel.

The volume is divided into three sections, addressing issues related to genre, themes, and structure respectively. The first section considers the

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way the Crusoe myth has been recontextualised within different genres over the past three hundred years. Part Two addresses the paired themes of ‘Mind and Matter’—establishing materialist readings which both link Defoe to his contemporaries in the field of physical science, as well as to Protestant practices and spiritual rites. The third section—‘Character and Form’—posits readings of *Robinson Crusoe* alongside *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, which encourages recalibration of interpretive approaches to the first novel.

The end result is both timely and insightful. Taken as a whole, this is a volume which makes a strong case for further research into Defoe’s texts and their subsequent impact based on innovative critical approaches. It also reflects on the way myths continue to filter into cultural products centuries after their creation. Finally, it provides a platform for the way we consider Defoe’s oeuvre, and his positioning as a writer within the matrix of eighteenth-century English commerce, trade, and culture.

The volume begins with an essay by Glynnis Ridley on the potential connections between the Crusoe myth and twenty-first century science fiction in the form of Andy Weir’s bestseller *The Martian*, which became a film in 2015. While, as Ridley points out, Weir has denied the influence of Defoe’s texts on his own writing, the hallmarks of the original narrative are in evidence: Mark Watney’s character is stranded on Mars and forced to rely on his own ingenuity in order to survive. As Ridley observes, ‘[w]herever and whenever an individual or group of fictional protagonists is up against the odds and struggling to survive in an inhospitable landscape, the shade of Crusoe will surely always be present’ (12). Ridley emphasises the way the myth of Crusoe has seeped into the western popular imagination almost by stealth, a theme which is revisited in the final article of this volume.

Geoffrey Sill analyses earlier iterations of the Crusoe myth in ‘Robinson’s Transgender Voyage: or, Burlesquing Crusoe’. While we once again encounter a sense of Crusoe as a figure who surpasses genre, we are also invited to consider the way burlesque reconstructions in the nineteenth century render this character a liminal one, particularly with respect to gender. This literal restaging of the narrative, Sill suggests, both challenges and subverts the markedly masculine tradition of the Robinsonade.

The final essay in this section addresses the Crusoe narrative with respect to children’s literature, and particularly those texts which

anthropomorphise key characters in the novel. ‘Animal Crusoes—Anthropomorphism and Identification in Children’s Robinsonades’ by Amy Hicks and Scott Pyrz refers to texts from the twentieth and twenty-first century in which Crusoe becomes (among other iterations) a pig, an elephant, and a mouse. The authors suggest that such anthropomorphised versions of Crusoe may in fact reflect adult perceptions of childhood, and they set out to interrogate those constructions, claiming that the lack of scholarship in this area may be due to ‘[an] assumed natural association between children and animals’ (63). This is another example of the way this volume opens up potential for further research, not only into the re-conceptualisation of the Crusoe narrative, but the implications this has for other fields of literary and anthropological research, such as studies of children’s literature.

Part Two of this volume (‘Mind and Matter’) takes the concept of ‘new materialism’ as its point of departure, with studies by Laura Brown, Daniel Yu, and Jeremy Chow addressing Crusoe’s interaction with physical matter—whether through his urge to manufacture artifacts on the island or his relationship with the environment itself. In her article ‘Defoe and Newton—Modern Matter’, Brown reads *Robinson Crusoe* alongside Isaac Newton’s ‘Queries’ from the *Opticks*, in order to isolate a pivotal juncture in western history with regard to the conceptualisation of force and matter. This invites a new materialist approach to reading Defoe’s text, shifting from the focus on Crusoe as an economic individualist, towards a reading of the character and his environment which rethinks the relationship between human and material agency. As Brown observes, ‘This encounter—between the “inexpressible” energy of *Robinson Crusoe*’s things and Newton’s experiments with force—reflects the scope and impact of the modern engagement with matter’ (95). This is an essay which highlights changing approaches to Defoe’s text and enables the reader to consider *Robinson Crusoe* as a testing site for further explorations into the relationship between scientific paradigms and literary texts.

Daniel Yu’s ‘Crusoe’s Ecstasies: Passivity, Resignation, and Tobacco Rites’ offers a similar, materialist reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, but links this to the main character’s spiritual inclinations. Tobacco, Yu argues, is the medium through which Crusoe’s religious conversion takes place: the moment at which, having ingested tobacco in order to recover from illness, he first reaches for a Bible. As Yu points out, this somewhat undermines

the view of Crusoe as pragmatic, hard-nosed survivor, and the religious fervour he displays carries overtones of ‘Catholic rites involving incense’ (104) as well as associations with non-Christian practices. Yu roots his article in readings of religious texts from the period, in which pietism (with its emphasis on individual spiritual experience and fervour) is a more likely model for Crusoe’s behaviour than that of strict Calvinism. This materialist approach clearly displays the need for close reading of contemporary texts alongside Defoe’s novels.

‘Taken by Storm: *Robinson Crusoe* and Aqueous Violence’, written by Jeremy Chow, demonstrates the potential for ecocritical readings of the novel. Chow reads the environment itself (and the sea in particular) as imbued with agency. In doing so, he refers to contemporary texts—including Defoe’s journalistic piece *The Storm* (1704), as well as the anonymous *A Wonderful History of All the Storms* (1704)—in order to better understand Crusoe’s relationship with the sea and the way it may be indicative of attitudes to sea voyage in the early eighteenth century. The aqueous violence of the ocean, Chow convincingly argues, both infects and infuses Crusoe’s own behaviour, and is then reflected in the violence he displays, particularly in his bid to dominate and then leave the island.

The final contribution in the ‘Mind and Matter’ segment of this volume is Pat Rogers’s ‘Life Gets Tedious: Crusoe and the Threat of Boredom’. This highlights an often-overlooked aspect of Defoe’s novel, as Crusoe’s inevitable boredom on the island is not mentioned specifically in the text. Yet as Rogers asserts, the level of activity displayed by Crusoe emerges as a form of ‘coping mechanism’ (146). This is particularly apparent in Crusoe’s references to his work on the island as a ‘diversion’ which keeps him occupied, and often performs no actual or practical purpose. Rogers roots this observation within a discussion of the changing conceptualisation of boredom, from its late medieval sense of the deadly sin of sloth, to the nineteenth century aesthetic of ennui. Crusoe’s projects, Rogers argues, ‘ape the mores of the leisured classes’ (142), mimicking the rise of middle-class aspirations amongst the English bourgeoisie.

Finally, as mentioned above, the third and final section of this volume presents essays on structure, character, and form in Defoe’s texts. Articles by Benjamin Pauley and Maximillian E. Novak particularly impress on the reader the need to read *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* alongside *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. As Pauley asserts, ‘While *The Farther Adventures* is a sequel, [...] it is not

simply an addendum, but belongs to Defoe's original (though not necessarily initial) conception of his larger work' (151). Bearing this precept in mind, he suggests, will enable the reader to disentangle the book from some of the assertions of earlier critics such as Ian Watt, whose insistence that Crusoe encapsulates a model for the 'economic individualist' (152) has not been sufficiently challenged. In fact, Crusoe's tendency for self-contradiction—particularly in the second volume—gives us cause for a greater interrogation of the model of Crusoe as confident, self-sufficient survivor.

Novak's text deals exclusively with *The Farther Adventures*, considering Crusoe's attitudes to justice and ethics within the various legal systems he encounters as he travels through foreign territory in China and Russia. In this respect, Crusoe reveals himself to be an 'unreliable narrator' (168), whose take on justice veers markedly from that displayed in Defoe's non-fictional writings on travel and geography. Novak's article clearly displays the advantages of embedding Defoe's seminal texts in a knowledge of his wider oeuvre.

The final essay in this volume, "'To Us the Mere Name Is Enough": Robinson Crusoe, Myth, and Iconicity' by Andreas K. E. Mueller is revelatory in its analysis of the 'linguistic sign "Robinson Crusoe"', as it 'has assumed iconic status in modern Western culture' (185). Mueller considers the way the idea of Crusoe has become disconnected from its narrative origins. Thus, the image of a lone survivor on a desert island has been recontextualised in the twenty-first century in media ranging from computer games to software. '[I]f Robinson Crusoe lives on in contemporary popular culture', Mueller observes, 'it does so predominantly through the iconicity of the name' (199). This of course transports the reader back to the first essay in this volume, and Glynnis Ridley's observation that while contemporary writers such as Andy Weir refute the influence of Defoe's story on their work, this does not imply that shades or ghosts of the original text do not live on in some form or another in the modern world.

Overall, this significant volume provides some compelling insights into the way the myth of Crusoe lives on in various guises and forms. One might perhaps expect, given the range of approaches on offer here, that the collection could have been further extended, as it so clearly demonstrates the need for interrogation of orthodox analyses of Defoe's novels. However, this volume marks a pivotal moment in the way *Robinson*

*Crusoe* is received—as both text and cultural legacy—and provides a solid platform for further scholarly research into this field.

*Rachael Sumner*

Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz