

THE BRITISH AND IRISH SHORT STORY HANDBOOK

David Malcolm

Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. 349pp. £19.99

This book is part of the Blackwell Literature Handbook series which is aimed at introducing students to different literary periods, movements or genres rather than a general readership. Nevertheless, it is not without interest to the non-specialist readers of short stories.

It is a well-structured book of five parts: the first gives a history of the British and Irish short story, and this is followed by parts on issues in short story criticism and genre respectively. These general sections are followed by two more detailed parts, the first of which is on key authors (arranged alphabetically) and the second covering key works (arranged chronologically). The end result is a handbook which gives the literary and historical contexts of the short story in an easy to use format, although one does occasionally feel that David Malcolm has been given a template which doesn't quite fit his material: his brief discussion of marginality (Part 2 Issues in Short Story

Criticism), for example, concludes that marginality is not of any real significance in the short story. That being so, it would seem more sensible not to address this issue at all unless that were necessary to create uniformity across the series of which this is part.

Malcolm's history of the short story begins at 1880, which he notes is the generally accepted starting date of the short story as a literary form, but rightly questions the validity of the argument before ultimately accepting it. This is, however, to devalue the many short stories published before this date and to ignore the role of journals such as *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* which published such work from its foundation in 1817 onwards. The problem is, of course, the one of self-fulfilling prophecy, for the more 1880 is quoted as the most appropriate starting date (even with the caveats entered here by the author), the more entrenched that date becomes and the less attention is paid to earlier work, thus reinforcing 1880 as the beginning of the short story form. The advantage of using this relatively late date is that it carves out a manageable portion from an unwieldy mass of material from which a student-friendly handbook can be created, and this probably outweighs the loss of nuance entailed in truncating the history of the short story.

Another difficulty Malcolm faced is the problem of the Irish short story which, as he notes, followed a substantially different developmental path from that of the British short story. Given the strength of the Irish short story it is a pity it wasn't given a separate volume, but such decisions often rest with the publisher, rather than the author. As it is, Malcolm has slotted in his discussion of the Irish short story at the end of his history of the British short story, but there is an inevitable lack of integration which emphasises the two different traditions.

Both the Irish and British histories are covered well, with general points being illustrated by reference to specific stories and authors, making this section of interest to general readers as well as to students faced with an essay on short stories.

Part 2 deals with 'Issues in Short Story Criticism' and is probably of less interest to the general reader though useful to students. Malcolm's discussion of definitions is thorough but succinct, although it is unlikely to contribute substantially to the knowledge of a reader with a particular interest in the short story form. One of the issues identified is the role of collections of short stories and the way in which stories within a collection interact and create a reading context for each other. Here one would have liked to see a discussion of Warner's *The Cats' Cradle-Book* as a particularly coherent collection in which stories are bound together within a narrative framework.

Genres are the focus of Part 3, and while short story enthusiasts are unlikely to learn much they didn't already know (although what they know may be more clearly articulated here), this part is likely to prove helpful to the students for whom this handbook is intended. It is a thorough discussion of a range of genres with specific examples being used to back up general points.

The final two parts are concerned with key authors and key works respectively, with Sylvia Townsend Warner figuring in both. Although this is certainly an encouraging move, I nevertheless have a couple of reservations. The first is that she is listed as 'Townsend Warner' and is found between Robert Louis Stevenson and William Trevor, where she is liable to be missed by anyone looking quickly through this alphabetical section.

While it is true that she was occasionally referred to as 'Miss Townsend Warner' during her lifetime, she never hyphenated her names, and it is clear from a diary entry of 7th January 1954 that she thought of herself as 'Miss Warner'. It therefore seems discourteous to ignore her own preference on this matter. More importantly, however, since she is normally indexed and catalogued under 'Warner' to change this is to create unnecessary difficulties in finding information on her, especially for students whose bibliographic skills tend to be embryonic.

My other reservation is Malcolm's choice of 'The King of Orkney's Leonardo' (1976) as a key work,

excellent though this story is. Let's be fair here: choosing a single STW story is impossible, and whichever story is chosen is sure to displease some Warner enthusiasts so Malcolm really cannot win.

In his brief history of the short story Malcolm argues that in the twentieth century the most important conventions governing the British story are those of realism, but he identifies a strong counter-current of fantasy and locates Warner's post-war stories within this alternative tradition (p.17), citing *Kingdoms of Elfin* as the basis for doing so. This is clearly the rationale for his choice of 'The King of Orkney's Leonardo' as a key work. This is, however, to disregard the large number of other stories she wrote and thus to distort Warner's contribution to the history of the twentieth-century short story. It is not that I dislike the Elfin tales (far from it) but that they seem to me not representative of her work as a whole, and there are other stories of an equally high standard which are more representative. Malcolm does, however, give a sensitive and helpful critical account of the story which draws attention to its satirical aspects as well as its bravura writing and to its status as a created artefact.

Overall *The British and Irish Short Story Handbook* is an excellent introduction to the short story as a literary form, but is of greater interest to the student than to a general reader, and my reservations on the entry on Warner should not detract from the fact that her inclusion in it draws her closer to mainstream literary fiction as it is taught in schools and universities. And for that we should be grateful.

Helen Sutherland