

Franková, Milada

**[Šnircová, Soňa. Girlhood in British coming-of-age novels: the Bildungsroman heroine revisited]**

*Brno studies in English*. 2018, vol. 44, iss. 1, pp. [185]-188

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2018-1-11>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/138675>

Access Date: 03. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.



## REVIEW

**Soňa Šnircová:** *Girlhood in British Coming-of-Age Novels. The Bildungsroman Heroine Revisited.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017. ISBN (13) 978-1-5275-0304-6, 110 pp.

The matter of growing up and maturation appears to be a perennial theme in literature since bygone ages. In the Introduction to her slim but wide-ranging study of the British female *Bildungsroman*, the author Soňa Šnircová sets her book in context encompassing the development of the *Bildungsroman* as a genre since its emergence in the Age of Enlightenment and the state of the art in contemporary, twentieth- and twenty-first-centuries British coming-of-age novels by women authors as well as relevant (feminist) theory and criticism, the latter largely including the North American scene though (Bubíková 2008, 2015, McWilliams 2009, Millard 2007, Rishoi 2003, Saxton 1998, White 1985, or more recently e.g. Bolaki 2011, Kolář 2015, Buráková 2015 and others, looking at young heroines from ethnic, religious and sexual minorities). This is where Šnircová finds a niche for herself to fill a gap she sees in academic research into British female coming-of-age narratives. Her research covers the second half of the twentieth century and the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century through eight novels by eight different authors, thus tracing the development of the modern girl against the background of changing social attitudes influenced by the rise of feminist consciousness and the debate of second wave feminism and postfeminism. The selected novels neatly fall within three phases in relation to the impact of feminist thought in the period: the postwar decades of the 1940s and 1950s; the second wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s; the postfeminist 1980s to 2010.

In the introductory, theoretical Chapter One, Šnircová treats the reader to a full and thorough overview of critical approaches to the *Bildungsroman* as a genre and its varieties from its rise in the eighteenth century to debates about its male and female distinctions in the twentieth century, including the classic and feminist developmental variety of the latter – the female *Bildungsroman* – to the yet unresolved positions on postfeminism as the millennial development of the feminist movement, thought and context of the most recent variety and criticism of the female *Bildungsroman*. Alongside, she also usefully tackles what may be seen as the millennial crisis of feminist ideology, pointing out the clashing positions of “victim feminism” and “power feminism” and the parallel rift between academic postfeminism and postfeminism of popular culture. In addition, she then goes on to show how the contrasts and contradictions of the contemporary feminist debate resonate with the literary practice of and critical attitudes to the popular but disputed chic lit genre, however viewed as another offshoot of the female *Bildungsroman*.

For her own study Šnircová has opted for the variety of the female *Bildungsroman* termed the coming-of-age novel with its defining parameters primarily focused on the age of the heroine between twelve and nineteen, the years of adolescence with their process of maturation and loss of innocence. Unlike in the classic *Bildungsroman*, the time span of the coming-of age narratives need

not fully cover the gradual development, but only depict some turning-point experience(s) gained during a shorter period of time without bringing the story of maturation to a closure. In agreement with the majority of theoreticians and critics, Šnircová connects the absence of completion, both of the coming-of-age process and the novel's ending, with the postmodern notion of provisional and fluid construction of subjectivity in contrast to the sense of the goal of social integration achieved by the classical *Bildungsroman* hero/ine. Nevertheless, Šnircová admits to reading the eight novels of her selection as variations of the classic female *Bildungsroman*, to foreground the shift in the interest in girlhood, the self-making of the young woman in contemporary discourses, whether media, cultural, popular, third-wave feminist or postfeminist, and discuss and assess how the novels reflect them.

The earliest novels analysed come from the 1940s – 1950s context and are gathered under the “Loss of Innocence” heading. Their authors, Dodie Smith (*I Capture the Castle*, 1949) and Rumer Godden (*The Greengate Summer*, 1958), often classified as in-between adult and children's writers, offer stories of girls' maturation which Šnircová traces along several significant pathways as “romantic apprenticeship”, artistic activity/literary authorship and the role of father figures, all linked with the issue of sexuality, thereby suggesting hints of a shift in attitudes from the traditional female *Bildung* towards the change inspired by second wave feminism.

From Šnircová's vantage point, Smith's novel first takes the form of artistic maturation in terms of literary authorship, with a complex range of references to its modernist context and a particular Woolfian focus on the restrictions of the female space; the familial rather than the modernist male universal. Then the romance motif of the novel's love story takes over and while it also develops towards the heroine's maturation, both strands of the coming-of-age process remain in Šnircová's view arrested at a point where the heroine's independence does not shed the father-figure influence. Godden's *The Greengate Summer* debates the heroine's development from childhood innocence to adult experience in sexual terms although, as Šnircová points out, the theme of sexuality in the 1950s context with a sense of new radicalism still remains here under the disguise of middle brow, middle class respectability. Like in Smith's novel, the role of the father figure comes into prominence, even more complex by there being three (surrogate) fathers, one of them an almost Gothic evil character although not unproblematically so. Šnircová identifies his role in the heroine's maturation as her growing realization of the complexities of adult life. She also points to Godden's critical perception of the abuse of power by men over women however not yet articulated in feminist terms.

Concerns with “The Rule of the Father” are continued under this title in Chapter Three, where Šnircová discusses Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and Jane Gardam's *Bilgewater* (1976) as differently affected by the rising context of second wave feminist ideology although drawing on the same literary traditions of female *Bildung*. Šnircová interprets Carter's well-known and critically much acclaimed novel in tune with its magic realist game with symbols and metaphors taken from fairy tales and Gothic romances to create the grotesque world for her feminist debate. In it the evil patriarch Uncle Philip turns women into silent, obedient puppets, but although Melanie runs away to freedom, her saviour Finn is far from a romantic or fairytale hero. With such a twist to the “happy ending”, Šnircová endorses Carter's lack of optimism for clear-cut, simple solutions of second wave feminism. Apart from a hint of an allusion to fairytale princesses waiting in castle towers for their prince, Gardam's *Bilgewater* is firmly rooted in credible contemporary realism of a young girl growing up in the isolation of a boy's boarding school with a kind, scholarly, but incompetent father and practical help with “women's work” from the school matron. Šnircová theorises this household set up as still in tune with the Enlightenment ideal division of the male and female spheres, leaving the girl to grapple with her modern conflict between intellectual ambitions and traditional female concerns. In the seemingly fairly balanced resolution of Marigold's coming-of-age process, particularly her intellectual, academic achievement, Šnircová still notes a dissonant tone of things unfulfilled.

The somewhat longer temporal jump to growing up at the turn of the millennium is illustrated in Chapter Four “The Conundrum of Girl Power” on Helen Walsh's *Brass* (2004) and Caitlin Moran's

*How to Build a Girl* (2014). Šnircová's intention is to debate literary appropriations of the Girl Power discourse in its ambivalent anti-/pro-feminist character and the impact of its dualist image of the "can-do girl" and the "at-risk girl" with links to class and gender issues.

Šnircová argues that the young heroine cum narrator of Walsh's *Brass* may seem to subvert the form and ideal of the *Bildungsroman* genre by questioning the traditional stereotypes of gender identities and constantly reenacting her own desires, but in fact goes through the maturation process of the female *Bildungsroman* tradition. Despite her experience of drugs, drinking, sex and pornography in search of male identification, hers becomes an end-of-the-millennium version of the traditional female coming-of-age story, when she eventually accepts the identification with her mother. In Moran's *How to Build a Girl*, critical feminist and postfeminist reflection is partly done by the narrator heroine herself as she recounts her coming-of-age experience from the 90s with the benefit of adult hindsight. Šnircová shows how the young heroine combines in herself both aspects of the Girl Power image and how she negotiates her romantic apprenticeship and the apprenticeship to her vocation with masculine overtones, eventually to turn to traditional female qualities in the vocational public sphere, thereby challenging the stereotype of the patriarchal role for the woman in the domestic sphere. Moreover, as Šnircová argues, the romantic apprenticeship not only parallels and participates in the vocational apprenticeship, but moves Moran's novel forward in the modernization of the romantic narrative by today's compulsory focus on the heroine's sex life, both physical and emotional. Nevertheless, Šnircová concludes that the heroine's conscious process of self-invention from a fat, working class "at-risk" girl to a successful career woman, while it follows the postmodern freedom-of-choice paradigm and leads to a happy ending, is not unproblematically and completely removed from the old pains of female growing up.

The last two novels, Susan Fletcher's *Eve Green* (2004) and Tiffany Murray's *Happy Accidents* (2004), are joined under the heading "Growing up Postfeminist", but contrasted as one reflecting the new traditionalist longing for domestic bliss and the other as postfeminist response to victim feminism respectively.

With *Eve Green*, Šnircová starts from the paradigmatic resonances with *Jane Eyre*, foregrounding the romantic relationship with the older man. In second wave feminist criticism of the nineteenth-century novel, as Šnircová notes, romance and marriage are seen as the termination of the heroine's quest for independence and therefore, Fletcher's ending of the postmodern heroine's self-realisation in the domestic sphere aligns her with the postfeminist new traditionalism. After a story of growing up involving not so romantic aspects of heterosexual relationships such as desertion of the woman in pregnancy, rivalry, hatred and pedophile murder, Fletcher openly rejects through the narrator heroine the academic feminism of her brief university studies although not the relevance of feminist concerns. In contrast to Fletcher, Murray in *Happy Accidents* pursues rather the Gothic line of the *Jane Eyre* paradigm in tune with second wave feminist analysis of the woman repressed by patriarchal society. The male figures are marginal and Murray's eleven-year-old narrator heroine turns her attention to her mother and grandmother to explore their complicated, dark histories of failed marital and mother-daughter relationships and maternal hostility which participate in her own coming-of-age process. Šnircová reads Murray's negative representations of motherhood as part of the 1970s feminist context and as Murray's warning against uncritical acceptance of this aspect of victim feminism. The shift to the postfeminist position, as Šnircová claims, only comes with the ending, when also the two father figures reappear on the scene, and the heroine arrives at seeing women and men more openly and justly, without idealization or demonization.

Soňa Šnircová's conclusions confirm her initial suppositions and other critics' findings that the female *Bildungsroman* has not undergone a radical change although considerable innovations have been identified in the movement towards higher levels of emancipation and sexual behavior in parallel with the changing times. On the other hand, the prominence and importance of a father figure seems to persist just as the minimal role of mothers. If this paradigm happens to be overturned, Šnircová suggests reading it as a sign of a postfeminist response to emancipation in its new traditionalist trend and a departure from the discourse of victim feminism, which she, however, does not consider to be antifeminist backlash. In the book as a whole of course, and much more than

the conclusion can state, Šnircová brings in a wealth of critical and theoretical views researched in depth in a broad range of sources and approaches. Of not negligible importance is also her choice of authors and works analysed, because with the exception of Angela Carter they have so far been little included in literary and cultural criticism. For all these reasons, besides being a joy to read, Soňa Šnircová's book makes a welcome and substantial contribution not only to studies of the female *Bildungsroman*, but also to the contemporary state of the feminist debate in general.

## References

- Bolaki, Stella (2011) *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.
- Bubíková, Šárka (2015) 'Everywhere else is America, but in this house it's China!': The Role of house and street in American female ethnic bildungsromane. In: Šnircová, Soňa and Milena Kostić (eds.) *Growing Up a Woman: The Private/Public Divide in the Narratives of Female Development*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 178–203.
- Bubíková, Šárka, et. al. (2008) *Literary Childhoods. Growing Up in British and American Literature*. Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart/Univerzita Pardubice.
- Buráková, Zuzana (2015) Double trouble: Female bildung in Jewish American fiction – Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers*. In: Šnircová, Soňa and Milena Kostić (eds.) *Growing Up a Woman: The Private/Public Divide in the Narratives of Female Development*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 145–158.
- Kolář, Stanislav (2015) The spiritual transformation of Jewish women in the fiction of four Jewish American woman writers. In: Šnircová, Soňa and Milena Kostić (eds.) *Growing Up a Woman: The Private/Public Divide in the Narratives of Female Development*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 120–144.
- McWilliams, Ellen (2009) *Margaret Atwood and The Female Bildungsroman*. Surrey: Ashgate.
- Millard, Kenneth (2007) *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Rishoi, Christy (2003) *From Girl to Woman: American Women Coming-of-Age Narratives*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Saxton, Ruth O., ed. (1998) *The Girl: Construction of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- White, Barbara A. (1985) *Growing up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction*. Westport and London: Greenwood Press.

Milada Franková

Address: prof. Mgr. Milada Franková, CSc., M.A., Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Arne Nováka 1, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic. [email: frankova@phil.muni.cz]