
Carol DeBoer-Langworthy, ed. *The Modern World of Neith Boyce: Autobiography and Diaries*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003. 321p.

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The modern world of *who*? And why should anyone care about said world?

In her fascinating introduction to *The Modern World of Neith Boyce: Autobiography and Diaries*, editor Carol DeBoer-Langworthy with commendable clarity answers both questions. Enjoying critical acclaim at one time, Neith Boyce (1872-1951), named after an Egyptian goddess, published no fewer than ten books (including novels), plays, poetry, dozens of short stories, and unorthodox “articles,” which DeBoer-Langworthy notes, “we now call creative nonfiction” (2). This argues for Boyce as a pioneer of the genre. The scope and volume of Boyce’s literary accomplishments alone justify examination of her life and work. But DeBoer-Langworthy offers even more reason to know the now obscure writer. Boyce not only serves as “a one-woman exemplar of the ideas that we now group together under the name ‘modernism’” (3), but “[o]nly recently has [she] been recognized for her involvement with several other women writers who, according to some of the scholarship, actually invented the characteristic forms of modernist writing” (4). By the end of page ten of DeBoer-Langworthy’s introduction, I was longer asking why I should know about Neith Boyce. Rather, I was questioning why I had not heard of her sooner.

DeBoer-Langworthy takes the road less traveled in assessing Boyce. Eclipsed by her husband, writer Hutchins Hapgood, Boyce is known today if at all largely in relation to her marriage. But rather than focusing (as some scholars have) the engaging details of Boyce and Hapgood’s modern “open” marriage, DeBoer-Langworthy instead takes on painstaking transcription and research to present the reader with three previously unpublished works: an autobiography and two diaries, both written in Italy, one in 1903 and the other in 1914. All three works rivet the reader’s interest in numerous ways. The diaries, filled with references to artists and intellectuals of the era, provide personal glimpses of some of the most influential people of the modernist movement. Speaking of Gertrude Stein in the 1903 diary, for example, Boyce writes, “We enjoyed Gertrude’s visit, though she rather got on my nerves at times by her habit of not bathing and wearing the same clothes all the time” (250). The 1914 diary documents the panic of visitors in Italy during the outbreak of the First World War, even as it speaks about fussy children and Florentine villas.

In her autobiography, Boyce provides fascinating written snapshots of turn-of-the-century life in Illinois, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, Boston, and New York. But Boyce's autobiography also experiments with form to express the isolation of an intelligent and introverted girl traumatized by the deaths of all four of her young siblings. Boyce's experiments with form invariably succeed. First of all, Boyce speaks of herself not as Neith but as Iras (surely no coincidence that "Iris" is another Egyptian goddess). Remarkably, Neith's autobiography is written in the third person. Perhaps future scholarship will suggest the convoluted ways in which Neith's strategy serves to spin the mirror of the literary gaze back onto itself in order to erase the boundary between the self and the Other. In any case, Boyce's "quest for authenticity" (DeBoer-Langworthy 5) employs distancing devices (such as writing of herself in the third person) that paradoxically result in an intensely intimate view of the writer. Yet without DeBoer-Langworthy's unobtrusive yet scrupulous annotation and without her vigorous investigation of Boyce's life, our appreciation of Boyce's work surely would be diminished, if not absent.

Devoting nearly thirty years to the investigation of Boyce, DeBoer-Langworthy serves as "an exemplar" not of modernism as Boyce does, but as an exemplar of the indefatigable scholar willing to study a non-canonical subject and willing to bring an original voice to that discussion. Taking an all-but-forgotten writer as her subject, DeBoer-Langworthy furthermore "dares" in her introduction to interject her own tenuous conclusions about Boyce: "I think," "I believe," "I suspect," DeBoer-Langworthy writes. Even while upholding the highest standards of documentary editing (which mandates unflinching accuracy and an explanation of all emendations of the primary texts), DeBoer-Langworthy's introductory remarks, quietly enthusiastic, seem to match Boyce's own "quest for authenticity." Is it as our mothers always told us? Does it take one to know one? Or are we confronting the exhilaration (rather than the anxiety) of influence?

The dust jacket promises that DeBoer-Langworthy's work on Boyce will result in our receiving "a lost treasure," which surely will be "engrossing." How delightful it is that the writer of such high praise actually understates the value of *The Modern World of Neith Boyce*. ❀