
REVIEWS

Maximillian E. Novak and Carl Fisher, eds. *Approaches to Teaching Defoe's Robinson Crusoe*. NY: Modern Language Association of America, 2005. 243p.

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As a story, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* struck a cultural nerve upon its publication in 1719 that still resonates today: as many contributors to this collection point out, students tend to be familiar with the central figure of the castaway on a desert island, attempting to construct himself and his world anew. When they encounter it in college, however, the novel itself often seems remote, a perception exacerbated by its 18th-century diction and pacing. The challenge for the teacher seeking to present *Crusoe* in the classroom is therefore laid out. In their Introduction to this volume, the editors promise that the essays included in it "address how to make *Robinson Crusoe* a living text and not merely a document of the past" (xii). As a college professor about to teach *Crusoe* for the first time in a survey course, I took their words to heart and read the contents with the double purpose of reviewing them for this publication and gaining some insights into presenting Defoe's novel to undergraduates.

I will say up front that I was not disappointed. Both the content and apparatus of this recent addition to the MLA *Approaches to Teaching* series are helpful and informative for the would-be teacher of Defoe's groundbreaking text. The cumulative effect of the essays collected here is to show not only that *Crusoe* indeed broke new ground when it appeared but in what ways this was, and continues to be, so. The volume is divided into two sections titled "Materials" and "Approaches." In addition to items such as an overview of the novel's publishing history and a brief biography of Defoe, the "Materials" section situates *Crusoe* in an international context, one established almost immediately upon its publication as the novel was translated and adapted in various languages, giving rise to a genre called the Robinsonade. The international context sketched out in the "Materials" section is reinforced by many of the essays that appear under "Approaches"; for example, Carl Fisher's "The Robinsonade: The Cultural History of an Idea" (129-139) discusses the thematic approaches of British, French, and German works appropriating elements of *Crusoe*, including modern Robinsonades and bibliographies, while Charles W. Pollard looks at modern takes on

Defoe's novel in "Teaching Contemporary Responses to *Robinson Crusoe*: Coetzee, Walcott, and Others in a World Literature Survey" (161-168). Other essays, even some of those not specifically concerned with international contexts, nevertheless treat the topic in the course of their own discussions. Indeed, this complementarity between the two sections is characteristic of the entire volume, and is one of the factors that make it so satisfying for the reader who is attempting both to get a critical/historical handle on Defoe's text and to gather some ideas about teaching it. The lengthy discussion of *Crusoe* in its generic context in "Materials" also finds echoes in various essays in "Approaches."

The Introduction does an excellent job, as good Introductions should, of adumbrating many of the social and cultural issues addressed in the collected essays as well. *Robinson Crusoe* is a rich text, speaking both historically and thematically, for managing to raise questions about broad issues such as race, gender, class, materiality, economics, and self-construction, among others. The "Approaches" section is consequently divided into subsections whose titles indicate the range of topics under consideration here: "Defoe and the History of English Narrative," "Intellectual and Ideological Contexts," "Formal and Thematic Approaches," "Comparative and Intertextual Approaches," and "Classroom Contexts for *Robinson Crusoe*." Gender issues are treated in essays as disparate as George E. Haggerty's "Thank God It's Friday: The Construction of Masculinity in *Robinson Crusoe*" (in the "Intellectual and Ideological Contexts" subsection, 78-87) and Laura M. Stevens' "Reading the Hermit's Manuscript: *The Female American* and Female Robinsonades" (in the "Comparative and Intertextual Approaches" subsection, 140-151). The interspersion of themes and issues among the subsections helps make this a volume perhaps best read holistically, though each subsection can also stand on its own.

Nearly every essay in this volume discusses *Crusoe* in relation to other works, including travel narratives, parodies, female Robinsonades, other 18th-century texts, philosophical treatises, literary criticism, and film. This intertextuality is particularly helpful in providing insights into the many various contexts in which *Crusoe* may be profitably studied. Suggested clusterings of *Crusoe* with other texts additionally provide pedagogical approaches for the would-be teacher of this novel. The subsection on classroom contexts contains essays concerning the inclusion of *Crusoe* in specific courses such as the survey, or even in a business school. Neither is children's literature neglected, since the figure of Crusoe has many descendants in that field.

Space does not permit the listing and discussion of every contribution to this collection, but without exception they provide useful insights into the presentation

of Defoe's novel to students. Reading through the essays gives one a strong sense of Defoe's time and the ways in which we can show, through his novel, how its concerns live on in our own. This is a volume that admirably succeeds in fulfilling its stated purpose. ✱