
REVIEWS

Terrence Doody. *Among Other Things: A Description of the Novel*.
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PATRICIA LINTON
UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA ANCHORAGE

One of the responses of contemporary theory to the question “What now?” is renewed attention to modes of realism. *Among Other Things* advances this discussion by redefining realism, grounding it not in mimesis but in materiality. Terrence Doody argues that, having gone about as far as we are inclined to go in the direction of reading novels and worlds as systems of language, we should reconsider the quiddity of the novel as an object in the world. It is, according to Doody, precisely the tension between the novel as Barthesian text and the novel as object, a book read in time under a particular set of conditions, that distinguishes the genre. Because a novel’s materiality is inescapable, it keeps the novel — more than other literary forms — moored in the realm of experience, among other things.

For Doody, a novel’s treatment of character is the measure of its commitment to lived experience. A character, he insists, is not a person, not a subject, but a discourse. To the extent that a novel mirrors in the relationships among its characters the multiplicity of experience, it approaches realism: “the ideal of realism is not in its mimetic fidelity but in its belief in the world’s, in being’s recurrent abundance and in the matching plenitude of its human characterization” (184). Accordingly, Doody identifies as markers of realism a variety of rhetorical objectives that have often been seen as antithetical to realism — or more precisely, divergent from the conventions of the classic realist novel. These include the challenging of privileged discourse, the distribution of authority, a suspicion of wholes, and resistance to closure. Doody argues that it is only when characters are developed fully enough to contest one another’s authority, to function as signs of discrete interpretations of experience, that a novel can be considered realistic.

Doody’s analysis is elegant and taxing. He ranges through a broad cross-section of classic and contemporary fiction and theories of fiction, demonstrating what they have contributed to his own conception of the novel or in what respects they contest it. He offers an extraordinary range of examples drawn from the works of Austen, Barthes, Beckett, Bellow, Borges, Cervantes, Conrad, Derrida, Dickens, Eliot, Forster, García Márquez, Hemingway, James, Joyce, Kafka, Morrison,

Nabokov, Pynchon, Robbe-Grillet, Rushdie, Updike, and Woolf. One of the pleasures his study generally withholds, however, is the sustained reading of a particular novel. He is quite willing to let novels speak for themselves, incorporating full, well-chosen passages to illustrate his points, but his focus moves rapidly from one novel to the next. His preference for a sequence of examples, incisive but comparatively brief, seems surprising in light of the cautionary comment in his introduction that the novel itself should come before theory. Even so, Doody's attention to the complexity of particular novels sometimes seems subordinated to the march of argument.

On the other hand, the reader is unlikely to lose herself entirely in the by-ways of theory. In what may be a peculiarly fitting omission, the volume does not include a comprehensive bibliography. Although this lack of scholarly apparatus is annoying, one is, as a result, never unaware of the materiality of Doody's own book. To locate a title or publication date, the reader must flip back page-by-page through a series of chapter footnotes.

That said, I come to the characteristic of Doody's work that I most enjoyed: his enthusiasm for, even devotion to, the genre he studies. Doody is convinced of the primacy and value of the novel: "The novel has been many things throughout its history, but it has never been just another literary type.... The novel has been, as Lionel Trilling said, the chief agent of our moral imagination, the form that more than any other has taught us the virtues of understanding and forgiveness" (1). *Among Other Things* certainly does not lack rigor, but it avoids the kind of critical distance that too readily becomes aloofness or imperial command of the subject matter. I may have wanted more lingering and detailed discussions of particular instances, but Doody never fails to respect and honor the authors and novels he takes up. Even the rush from one example to another has an appealing exuberance about it — an eagerness to add this, and this, and this.

Among Other Things is a study for specialists. Without a thorough grounding in the history of the novel and its accompanying criticism, as well as familiarity with a broad spectrum of European and American texts, students would find Doody's argument hard going. Nevertheless, in reconfiguring the ideal of realism that he sees as fundamental to the novel, Doody realigns traditional and contemporary approaches to the genre in provocative ways. ✱