

CRITICAL BLINDNESS—WITHOUT THE INSIGHT

The Seed and the Vision: On the Writing and Appreciation of Children's Books. Eleanor Cameron. Dutton Children's Books, 1993. 362 pp., \$29.99. ISBN 0-525-44949-3.

It's true, as Thomas Wolfe says: "you can't go home again." Whoops. Cliché. Eleanor Cameron wouldn't approve. She devotes a whole chapter, "The fleas in the cat's fur," to policing the clichés in fiction, though she pays scant attention to the ones in her own critical text. Someone must have forgotten to remind her that to praise a novel, in this case, *The House in Norham Gardens* by Penelope Lively, as being accomplished "in subtlety, in depth, in symbolic meaning ... as well as sheer accomplished artistry ..." (189) doesn't really convey much about the book. And as the rest of her lengthy discussion of the novel is little more than an appreciative plot summary, I didn't learn anything I didn't already know. Worse, I felt keenly the absence of current theoretical discussions on post-colonial theory that would have offered helpful insights into Lively's story of the follies of imperialist nostalgia.

It wasn't until I read *The Seed and the Vision* that I understood just how impossible it was to "go home" to ahistorical, atheoretical criticism. Eleanor Cameron denies emphatically that she is in sympathy with the mid-century fashions of New Criticism, but it is difficult to read her book without feeling frustrated by what is missing. She doesn't appear to recognize how her choices of discussions (characterizations for example), or choices of terms (a fuzzy division between "thought" and "emotion" as critical oppositions without any mention of reader-response theories which attempt to locate the instability of those terms), reflect the totalizing discourses of mid-century. And she doesn't appear to realize that "objectivity" is no longer regarded as desirable, or even possible. What she's written is not really a critical book at all. It is more like a "commonplace book": a collection of interesting observations and passages recorded in a journal.

Despite Cameron's protests, theory—or lack of same—is the main issue of the book. To her credit, she invites American scholar, J.D. Stahl, who is theoretically knowledgeable, to critique her work. And to Stahl's great credit, he is unfailingly patient and sensitive to where she's "coming from" (couldn't resist). He provides her with guidance on critical discourses, like feminist theory, which she only peripherally understands. Like the naive viewer of an abstract expressionist painting who claims that a six-year-old could do better, Cameron is bemused by feminist discussions on "clitoral hermeneutics." In a footnote she includes her response from J.D. Stahl, who explains to her that the discussion is part of "a theoretical debate that begins with Freud and continues through Lacan, Cixous, Kristeva, Irigaray, and others about how to 'read' and more recently to 'write' the body (133)."

"Clit crit" (as one of my friends cheerfully used to call it), is partly a joke, an

ironic way of exploding the seriousness of traditional criticism—from which emerging feminist critics recognized they were excluded. Though Cameron finds “clitoral hermeneutics” bewildering, she makes no connection with a masculine equivalent: “the pen is mightier than the sword” (another cliché), normally treated with deadly earnestness, yet open to at least two sexual jokes. “Pen is” without the space becomes “penis”; and both “pen” and “sword” are, of course, phallic symbols. None of this is in Cameron’s book.

It is not just in accounts of esoteric terms like “clitoral hermeneutics” that Cameron reveals her lack of scholarship. She criticizes Roland Barthes’s uses of “bricolage” and “Dasein” without recognizing the historical contexts of either term: “bricolage” from Levi-Strauss’s theories of structuralist anthropology; and “Dasein” from phenomenology.

Even when I put aside Cameron’s lack of theoretical knowledge, and try to look for some insights into the authors and books under discussion, I still find disturbing gaps. For example, when she tries to praise Sylvia Townsend Warner’s constructions of metaphor, she cites two which have musical elements: one, about listening to Schubert and feeling “as though one were holding a wild bird” (95); the other on two cats sitting on a chair, looking like “they might have been composed by Bach for two flutes” (96). As Cameron focuses on what’s on the page, she misses something that’s important about Warner’s use of those, and other, musical metaphors. Warner defines herself as a musicologist. Before she was a novelist, Warner was a gifted musician, and she was one of the original compilers of the first collection of Tudor Church Music. Surely, that bit of biographical information is helpful in understanding Warner’s particular motives for metaphor. Cameron, consistent with formalist practices, is not particularly interested in contexts for texts, though it is impossible to speculate on the precise reasons for her omissions.

As I write about what Cameron doesn’t know, I am annoyed with myself for being so ungracious. After all, Cameron is a respected American novelist and critic, and was one of the pioneers of children’s literature criticism. It is because of her work, and the work of others from her generation like her, that children’s literature exists as an academic discipline. Her 1969 collection of critical essays on children’s literature, *The Green and Burning Tree* was highly regarded. In fact, the reason I’m reviewing an American book of criticism like *The Seed and the Vision* at all in *CCL* is because Cameron is so prominent. As a critic, I’m of a different generation, and, in my turn, realize that I will probably be displaced by critics with new sets of radical ideological concerns, ones that haven’t been invented yet. I hope someone as sympathetic as J.D. Stahl will be there to chart my way through unfamiliar critical waters.

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