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Ransom, Amy. "Science Fiction from Québec: A Postcolonial Study." McFarland, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-7864-3824-2

Amy Ransom's *Science Fiction from Québec: A Postcolonial Study* is touted as the first book-length study of French-Canadian science fiction. It provides a fine, if in some ways limited, introduction to a field with which most scholars—including those who specialize in Canadian fantastic literature—will be unfamiliar. The book will no doubt become an essential foundational study in the field.

As her study's subtitle indicates, Ransom views her subject-matter through the prism of postcolonial theory. She exhibits a solid grounding in that critical perspective, yet is sensitive to the complications involved in applying the approach to Québécois literature. As she recognizes, French-Canadians in Québec were both colonizers and colonized; they formed a settler community on land wrested from Native-Canadians, and constituted a colony of France until New France was captured by Great Britain in the Conquest of 1760. Many in Québec would come to see these new colonial masters as only one source of oppression; domestic institutions, especially the Catholic Church, were also repressive forces to be resisted. With the Quiet Revolution of 1960, which replaced the Church with the State as the main institution responsible for protecting the language and culture of francophone Québec, the province's government took greater control over its development, modernizing its economy and society as a whole; at the same time, artists were freed to explore new forms of expression, including science fiction. Ransom reviews Québec's history throughout her study to contextualize her literary analysis and demonstrate how existing postcolonial theory needs to be modified in the light of Québec's special circumstances.

Yet her focus on Québec represents one of the problems with her coverage, and indeed she has stumbled into an area of great controversy among francophone writers of fantastic literature. French-Canadian SF authors living and working in Québec tend to view all francophone speculative literature as coming under the heading of "SFQ" ("Science-fiction québécoise"), but authors from outside the province who write in French, most notably Franco-Ontarian Jean-Louis Trudel, have often rebelled against such a presumptuous umbrella term. (Trudel now resides in Québec, but for many years lived and wrote in Ottawa and Toronto.) Ransom seems to accept the equation of "Québécois" and "French-Canadian," eliding the very different experiences, cultural backgrounds, and even languages of francophones in such places as Ontario, Manitoba, and the Maritime provinces. Ransom might have done better to indicate that the "Q" in "SFQ" is resisted and sometimes resented, and so requires qualification.

Ransom begins her study with an introduction outlining the strengths and weaknesses of current postcolonial theory as it applies to the context of Québec. She differentiates between "post-colonial" and "postcolonial," terms referring

respectively to historical and cultural conditions, and draws necessary distinctions between the colonial experiences of settler communities that later achieved their independence, peacefully or violently, and the experiences of Québec, which continued to experience colonialism after it was forcibly separated from its mother country while at the same time dealing with aboriginal peoples from the position of colonizer.

The main body of the study is divided into four parts. The first chapter surveys the history of science fiction in Québec, dealing almost exclusively with the rise of SFQ as a conscious cultural movement from the 1970s on. She demonstrates the ways in which SFQ reflected both domestic and international influences from its beginnings, and shows how certain key post-World War II events and cultural changes--above all fear of the Bomb, the New Wave in science fiction during the 1960s, postmodernist literary experimentation in the United States and elsewhere (i.e., the work of William S. Burroughs et al), and the Quiet Revolution in Québec--inspired and shaped the development of francophone SF. She traces the creation and evolution of Québécois science-fiction magazines and publishing imprints, providing essential basic information about authors, editors, scholars, and the literary institutions they founded—institutions that laid the foundations for the growth of science fiction in Québec.

The remaining three chapters are devoted to the multi-volume sagas written by Jacques Brossard (*L'Oiseau de feu* [1989-1997]), Esther Rochon (*Le Cycle de Vrénalik* [1974-2002] and *Les Chroniques infernales* [1995-2000]), and Elisabeth Vonarburg (*Tyranaël* [1996-1997]), novelists who are among the most important SF authors in French Canada. Ransom discusses how their sagas illustrate three main stages or features of postcolonial narratives: the struggle against colonialist oppression; the expression and occasional realization of utopian postcolonial visions; and the cultural and even physical hybridization that occurs as a result of colonial relationships. Ransom alternates (not always comfortably) between reading the sagas as allegorical representations of Québec's history and as challenges to colonialist narratives. It is undeniable that some features of the fictional societies are inspired by parallels in Québec's history, such as Brossard's depiction of the Périphériens in his *L'Oiseau de feu* saga as oppressed and docile, just like Québécois under Duplessis (see Ransom's analysis on pp. 84-85). Such parallels lead Ransom to make assertions like the following in reference to Rochon's novels: "The Archipelago . . . may represent not only Québec, but also other islands of French-speaking cultures scattered throughout the sea of Anglophone North America" (73); further on, she overtly calls the text "Rochon's allegory" (73). She stretches her point by seeing allegorical significance in Rochon's reference to "four centuries of unhappiness fallen on the land" (Rochon's translation), claiming it represents the Conquest; she then strains to read the "four centuries" in the light of Québec's celebration of its 400th. anniversary--a celebration that was in fact held many years after the Archipelago novels were written, let alone published (73-74). She also says of one of the protagonists in Brossard's cycle, "We can read Adakhan as the increasingly enlightened Quiet Revolution nationalist hero who seeks to liberate his people and establish a new society" (95). Even if such parallels exist, they do not mean that the texts must therefore be read allegorically. Ransom also needs to beware of regarding the texts as propaganda promoting colonialist or anti-colonialist views; she claims, for example, that in Brossard's cycle the "shift in the power dynamic [between competing groups] transforms the novel into a colonialist

fantasy" (98).

On the other hand, Ransom avoids a reductionist allegorical reading by showing how the works she discusses portray anti- and post-colonialist/postcolonialist rejections of the colonialist power dynamic. Her thesis is that the works emerge from, reflect, and represent Québec's colonial position but then offer utopian alternatives of the sort suggested by such theorists as Karl Mannheim and Ernst Bloch (see, e.g., pp. 121 and 172). In her study of hybridization in these novels, Ransom argues that all three authors envision new societies arising in which difference is accepted and even celebrated; on the other hand, none naively assumes that humans will entirely cease to think in terms of binaries and hierarchies. Ransom sees something pessimistic, or at the very least less-than-utopian, in the authors' tendency at the conclusions of their sagas to account for what has happened as the machinations of some manipulative and omnipotent alien entity.

The texts Ransom deals with are certainly among the most important in SFO; however, it appears that Ransom focuses on them mainly because of the degree to which they illustrate her thesis. She pays little attention to the many other texts that might reward study from a postcolonialist perspective, even when they are not about inter-species or clearly colonialist relationships, like Yves Thériault's *atomic war stories*. Works like the utopian texts she discusses in Chapter 1 would certainly lend themselves to postcolonialist readings, notably Jules-Paul Tardivel's *Pour la patrie* (1895) and Ulric Barthes' *Similia similibus* (1916), the latter an almost pro-British Empire, but certainly anti-German alternate history of World War I. One can only imagine how many other texts would have offered fruitful subjects for Ransom's analysis.

Because of her narrow focus, Ransom's text suffers from a degree of repetitiveness; she covers much of the same ground concerning the sagas in her introductory chapters and in the chapters devoted to them. Plot points and interpretations often recur as she looks at the postcolonialist significance of events, characters, and images in terms of the three stages mentioned above. For example, after clearly identifying the Périphériens with French-Canadians before the Quiet Revolution, Ransom repeats the point more explicitly on p. 97. She twice explains that the term "gadjes" in Vonarburg's novel cycle may be a pun on "gadget" and the Romany word for "alien" (see pp. 111 and 204). Many scholars will be grateful for Ransom's translations of the passages she discusses along with relevant French terms, although she sometimes repeats these, too; careful readers of her study will not need to be told more than once what "revanche des berceaux" ("revenge of the cradle") means.

A more serious problem is stylistic; while most of Ransom's prose is clear and accessible, there are also a number of words and phrases that are misused or odd: "Brossard embraces the Franks with the Celtic Gauls" (82); "differs with" instead of "differs from" (86); "wallowing into despair" instead of "wallowing in despair" (88). At times, sentences are much too long and convoluted, and occasionally lose their direction entirely. No editor, for example, should have allowed the following sentences to pass: A subject people, dominated in this first volume by an upper class of leaders, the second volume reveals that, indeed, another socio-economic, if not ethnic group exerts dominance over them and some elements of that group

obtain great pleasure from the sheer exertion of power. (86)One can only make an ambivalent reading of the fantasy in play here—with ambivalence being a trait of postcolonial discourse, then I will use this element to shore up my argument. (134)During this period it was felt that French language and culture were in a state of imminent extinction (a situation reflected metaphorically for the Asven in Rochon's early Vrénalik novels or for the Périphériens of Brossard's *Manokhsor*), has been transcended. (187)

In the context of Ransom's overall achievement, however, these objections must be viewed as quibbles. She has provided scholars with an invaluable study that offers insightful analysis of the texts on which it focuses and that lays the essential groundwork for future work in the field.