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Posthumanism Come Home

Review of *Entanglements: Tomorrow's Lovers, Families, and Friends* by Thomas Connolly

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# POSTHUMANISM COME HOME

Review by Thomas Connolly

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**Williams, Sheila, editor. *Entanglements: Tomorrow's Lovers, Families, and Friends*. The MIT Press, 2020. Short story collection. 240 pp.**

There was a time when the term 'posthumanist' might have conjured images of Donna Haraway's cyborg and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). Thanks to a growing body of critical and cultural discourse dedicated to tearing down the old humanist guard, this term is now imbued with a much wider significance, examining topics as diverse as gender pronouns and climate change. In this context, *Entanglements: Tomorrow's Lovers, Families, and Friends* (2020) is an appropriate and timely collection exploring the subtleties and challenges of living in a posthumanist age.

*Entanglements* features ten original stories by a diverse array of Science Fiction (SF) authors. Established names such as Nancy Kress and Xia Jia sit alongside up-and-coming writers to offer an assortment of insights into posthumanist experience. Connecting the stories is a selection of arresting artworks by Moscow-based artist, Tatiana Plakhova. The collection roots posthumanism in the here and now – not as theory but as lived reality. The stories aim, as editor Sheila Williams notes in her introduction, to explore "the effects that scientific and technological discoveries will have on all the relationships that tie us together" (ix). Hence, for example, in Kress's "Invisible People," genetic engineering is explored in the context of the family: in this case, a couple discovering that their adopted child was subjected to illegal gene altering to make her more altruistic. All the familiar shades of a classic SF tale are present: the shady corporation, the black-suited FBI agents, the dogged investigative journalist. But these take a back seat to the emotional ramifications of two parents discovering that their child is genetically conditioned to risk her life for others. The implications of this, the conflicts that arise as the parents struggle to understand and protect their child from her own selfless nature, are the elements that drive the story.

Indeed, the most successful stories are those that shift the explicitly posthumanist themes to the background, clearing the way for more familiar explorations of love, identity, relationships, gender, and sexuality. Reading Mary Robinette Kowal's "A Little Wisdom," for example, you might be forgiven for overlooking its SF elements entirely. This tale explores themes of ageing and generational conflict between a museum curator and her young manager. It also features "eDawgs" – canine robots that provide support to differently abled individuals – but these feel almost incidental to the story. A similar example of this is offered in James Patrick Kelly's "Your Boyfriend Experience." The story, although it centrally features a "playbot" that offers romantic experiences both in and out of the bedroom, is really about the precarious conditions that define modern working life. When roboticist Jin is presented with a bonus cheque from his boss, a reward for his work on the playbot, he sees it as his ticket to home-ownership – but at the price of a brutal work schedule that threatens

his relationships with partner Tate and mother Hani. The solution is the playbot itself, which comes to act as a surrogate partner for both Jin and Tate, neither of whom can rise above the malaise, demands, and disconnection of twenty-first-century life.

These are the stories that feel most true to the lived experiences of posthuman realities. For those raised in the gig economy, in which the connection between hours worked and quality of life attained has been slowly whittled away and in which the flow of capital has demanded the uprooting of an entire generation from their networks of support, Kelly's story will resonate on a level that goes far beyond its SF trappings.

"Your Boyfriend Experience" is also unusual within this collection for engaging with themes of class, which represents perhaps one blind spot in the collection. Technology is not concerned merely with questions of ability and agency, but also of access. New technologies – and with them new modalities, experiences, and ontologies – are always wrought with questions of inclusion and exclusion. These stories, while keenly aware of the body as a key material space on which technology acts, are less explicitly concerned with social materiality and technology as a site of concentrated privilege that excludes those without the means to access it.

This lack of interest in class is surprising given the keen sensitivity that the stories demonstrate towards other sites of potential social exclusion. Throughout the collection, there are polyamorous couples, non-binary individuals, same-sex relationships. The stories are not 'about' these themes any more than a conventional love story is 'about' cis-genderism or heterosexuality – or, rather, they are as much about those themes as any conventional love story *is* about cis-genderism or heterosexuality, albeit without acknowledging or recognising it. In this way, these elements form part of the posthumanist project of the collection: the inclusion of gender-neutral pronouns, in this context, itself constitutes a radical act of normalisation. If humanist discourse has historically been concerned with logicising, controlling, and hierarchising, then to mix and blend those categories is already to challenge the "Father Tongue" (to use Ursula Le Guin's term) of humanism.

While there is not a bad story in the collection, some of the tales perhaps lack the same finesse in balancing narrative intimacy with technological exposition. Sam J. Miller's "The Nation of the Sick," for example, features two twinned narrative arcs: one focusing on a revolutionary figure, Cybil, who reforms the world through open-access technologies, the other on a drug addict who is saved from an early drug-related death by that same revolutionary. The parallel is just a little too forced and the celebration of technology as the cure to the world's ills just a little too uncritical. The story is thought-provoking, but as a utopian vision rather than grounded reality – a technocrat's vision of a world without politics.

Suzanne Palmer's "Don't Mind Me," too, falls into the SF trap of elaborating a technological conceit at the expense of character. The story focuses on a group of teenagers forced to wear "minders," censorship devices that prevent children from seeing or hearing anything deemed by their radical conservative parents to be inappropriate. The idea is a fascinating one, and the story

takes on pleasing tones of *1984*-meets-*The Breakfast Club* as the teens form an after-school rebel group to study forbidden material. Ultimately, however, the story does not quite ring true: the characters talk about little other than the central technology of the story, which is, I would suggest, directly contrary to the way in which most people experience technology. The smartphone, once a revolution, is now an icon of how technology becomes normalised, and with it all the changes it brings to the way that we communicate and interact. We are, as the title of the collection suggests, entangled in technology, in culture, and in discourse – and just as the stars appear more brightly in our peripheral vision, so the exploration of technology is made more effective by placing it just off-centre.

*Entanglements*, then, is a very far cry from the colliding of bodies and (literal) borders in classic posthumanist texts such as *Neuromancer* or Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy. It is a quieter, more thoughtful posthumanism – one that is concerned not with sudden and radical upheavals but with gradual shifts and slow realisations of the profound effects of technology on the experience of everyday life. It is posthumanism come home – and forces us to consider not the cyborg in the laboratory, but the one in the living room mirror.

#### BIONOTE

**Thomas Connolly** is an independent researcher based in Dublin, Ireland. His research interests include Science Fiction, posthumanism, disability in literature, and popular culture. He is the author of *After Human: a Critical History of the Human in Science Fiction from Shelley to Le Guin* (Liverpool UP, 2021).