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For a Wider Weird

A Review of *Women's Weird 2. More Strange Stories by Women, 1891-1937* (2020)

Reviewed by Steen Ledet Christiansen

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FOR A WIDER WEIRD

Review by Steen Ledet Christiansen

Edmundson, Melissa (Ed.). *Women's Weird 2: More Strange Stories by Women*. Handheld Press, 2020. Ebook, Short Story Collection.

Melissa Edmundson continues to delve into the histories of Weird literature with a continuation of *Women's Weird*. Weird fiction, whether we want to use the term 'New Weird' or not, has seen an incredible expansion over the past few decades. While much of that is focused in an aesthetic and critical re-evaluation of H. P. Lovecraft's writing, there is also a strong movement that has returned to Lovecraft's ideas with the express purpose of revisiting his misogynistic and racist impulses. Many of these writers are women, among them N. K. Jemisin, Kij Johnson, Caitlín R. Kiernan, and Ruthanna Emrys. A broader conception of Weird fiction is necessary if we are to move away from the misanthropic impulses of much early Weird.

Women's Weird and now *Women's Weird 2* forcefully reveals that women were always already part of Weird fiction and that previous genre histories and genealogies must be reconsidered. Edmundson's collections serve two purposes: to broaden the Weird tradition beyond cosmic horror and to position women writers squarely within that broader field. Both aspects are much needed corrections for readers and scholars of the Weird; it is too easy for both fans and critics to become too myopic in our tastes and inclusions, or to think that only contemporary literature brings in revisions of literary traditions. Edmundson wards off such easy assumptions.

Women's Weird 2 starts off with an essay by Edmundson which provides an eminent historical overview of early critical work conducted on supernatural literature. Starting with a discussion of Dorothy Scarborough's *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (1917), Edmundson also underlines the importance of early critical interest in supernatural fiction. Scarborough's work is not widely known but has recently been re-released, indicating a growing interest in the work of female critics of the supernatural as well. Edmundson continues through various introductions of short story collections to show the early critical interest in these supernatural and Weird stories. In itself, this overview is valuable as a context in which these aforementioned traditions emerged and many of the discussions of these early critics are close to ideas of the sublime that are typical touchstones in Horror and Weird studies. Alongside Scarborough, Marjorie Bowen's editorial work is included and used by Edmundson to reinforce the idea that supernatural fiction was a fecund culture in the early twentieth century and that much work is required to fully outline this literary era.

We may recognise both differences and similarities in these earlier speculations: the difficulty of categorisation remains a constant concern even today and the strange fascination that

these types of stories elicit still remains hard to put into words. The excessive psychologising of the motivations for why we read these stories may strike the reader as somewhat simplistic, however. These early critics' recourse to humanity's darkest desires made manifest in supernatural stories comes off as quaint today. Is the presence and popularity of the Weird and the supernatural really based in human psychosis? Are all Horror stories based in universal fears? Do Horror writers really 'ardently feel' a desire 'to relate the terrible, the monstrous, or the incredible'? These quibbles aside, the inclusion of these discussions does much to situate a proto-genealogy for studies on the Weird.

Still Edmundson locates the Weird equally in contemporary terms, drawing both on the VanderMeers and Sean Moreland's ideas of the Weird as hybrid. She also argues for the expansion beyond female stereotypes of fainting damsels or objects of desire and rescue. As this collection is a follow-up to 2019's first *Women's Weird*, also edited by Edmundson and published by Handheld Press, the stories range further in their geographic spread, although this remains an English-language collection. Bringing in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and Ireland means that colonial themes unsurprisingly emerge as well. All in all, the Weird is revealed to be a bigger place after Edmundson's collections and contextualisations.

As for the stories, they are diverse in form and thematics; although the domestic sphere is often present, many of the stories range far beyond clichéd ideas of feminine interests. The first story, Edith Stewart Drewry's "A Twin Identity," (1891) speaks explicitly to this idea of gender with its cross-dressing detective. A variation on the Sherlock Holmes murder mystery, the story features a crossdressing female detective and psychically linked twins as the supernatural element. No domestic sphere here, but rather an example of the close relations with crime and the supernatural; one insists on a rational world-order, as the other one works to undo it. Drewry's detective fails to rationalise the supernatural element, creating exactly a hybrid form of crime and weird. Mysteries are also evident in Mary Elizabeth Counselman's "The Black Stone Statue" (1937) and Lucy Maud Montgomery's "The House Party at Smoky Island" (1935). Montgomery's tale is mostly a traditional ghost story, with enough humour to make it stand out. Montgomery is of course best known for *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and her inclusion here is another testament to the many tendrils of the Weird. Framed as a party on an evening with bad weather that results in the telling of ghost stories, there are even associations to Henry James' "The Turn of the Screw" (1898). Counselman's story is a far more traditional Weird tale, complete with a bizarre alien creature that turns people to stone. This creature is the perfect thing for a sculptor who otherwise struggles to make an impact. Originating from the deep, dark jungles of Brazil, this story also contains shades of colonial fears of degeneration and devolution.

Such colonial anxieties are evident in other stories, most notably Bithia Mary Crocker's "The Red Bungalow" (1919), set in India. The colonisers, in the story, built their titular red bungalow on a temple site but are literally incapable of seeing the horrors that swirl around their house. Only their son is able to see what haunts this place, with tragic results. Less colonial is Barbara Baynton's "A Dreamer" (1902), set in Australia. Colonial themes here emerge from the threatening landscape and the strangeness of its inhabitants. Baynton's story places its characters in an uncanny non-home

location; they have moved to Australia, yet do not feel welcome there. No overtly supernatural elements are present, but intense sensations of the uncanny still place this story well within Weird territories.

Two stories sit squarely within the cosmic horror tradition, but on either side of Lovecraft. Lettice Galbraith's "The Blue Room" from 1897 and Stella Gibbons' "Roaring Tower" from 1937 are examples of untrammelled weirdness that introduce alien forces and reality-sliding scenarios. Although also couched in Gothic trappings, these stories show that cosmic horror has a long lineage and that there is much potential for research into how Weird stories construct their worlds.

Women's Weird 2 is a stellar collection of overlooked stories that rightly deserve a place in the Weird tradition. Furthermore, Edmundson has gone a long way to make this collection useful both as a scholarly and teaching resource. An extensive glossary explains archaic words and culturally specific terminology, which will certainly be a great help in the classroom. From a scholarly perspective, the collection helps the reader recognise the Weird as a much broader tradition from its outset. The Weird is concerned with a broader range of thematics than simply cosmic horror and its writers include a much larger number of women than has typically been included. With the explosion of New Weird (or New New Weird), the range of Weird writers has expanded considerably. Edmundson's collection demonstrates that this diversification has its roots in much early Weird examples too.

BIONOTE

Steen Christiansen is Professor of Popular Visual Culture at Aalborg University, Denmark. He is currently working on weird cinema and television, with particular interest in how atmospheres are produced in these audiovisual works. He is also working on ideas and concepts of time in visual culture, with particular interest in Alfred North Whitehead's ideas of time and temporality. His books include *Drone Age Cinema* (2016), *Post-Biological Science Fiction* (2019), and *The New Cinematic Weird* (2021). He has also published broadly on visual popular culture, particularly in terms of affect, posthumanism, and post-cinema.