

Rees, Ellen. 2012. *Figurative Space in the Novels of Cora Sandel*. Bergen: Alvhheim & Eide Akademisk Forlag. 194 pages. ISBN: 82-90359-87-7.

Known for her impressionistic style characterized by the subtle art of suggestion and irony and her depictions of marginal(ized) (mostly female) protagonists, Cora Sandel (1880-1974) is arguably one of the most significant Nordic writers of the twentieth century and a central voice in the Norwegian literary canon. As such, her authorship merits more critical acclaim and attention than it has received to date. New scholarly publications are therefore welcome additions to the field. In *Figurative Space in the Novels of Cora Sandel* Ellen Rees directs attention to some of the spaces that previously have been largely unexplored in Cora Sandel's writing, arguing that Sandel "used space figuratively in order to structure her novels in ways that break with traditional, realist narrative conventions" (11).

Initially understood within the boundaries of realism, Sandel's work is now often shown to break with this tradition, to experiment with genre, and to have affinity with aesthetic values and narrative strategies affiliated with modernism. Rees has been integral in effecting this shift and, with this publication, she makes another significant contribution to Sandel scholarship. Identified on the back cover as "the first major literary study of Cora Sandel in English," Rees' latest work is certainly the first important publication of length in English. (Quotations from Sandel's texts are provided both in English translation and the Norwegian original throughout the book. Access to Sandel's original Norwegian formulations is a positive feature, but Rees' quotation strategy presents a challenge for the reader, who might not wish to read the quotations in two languages back to back. A more reader-friendly strategy would have been to place the Norwegian quotations in endnotes.)

To begin with, Rees uses "space" to refer to the concrete geographical or architectural place or setting for the actions depicted in Cora Sandel's novels. Inspired by the insights of thinkers and scholars such as Gaston Bachelard, Michel de Certeau and J. Hillis Miller, she does not dismiss place as a neutral backdrop, but sees it as fundamentally shaping those actions. Indeed, physical space is the starting point for and tightly interwoven in her argument in approximately half the book. Her treatment of Sandel's trilogy about Alberte Selmer includes a discussion of the house of Alberte's childhood, the Northern Norwegian landscape and wharves (in chapter two), hotels, rented rooms and sleeping lofts in Paris (in chapter three), and the Paris studio as well as the beach and farm houses in France and Norway respectively (in chapter four) in which the narrative action takes

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place. In my opinion, these three chapters are the most convincing and rich in perspective: Space as place is shown to be integral to Sandel's depiction of Alberte's struggle with her class identity, sexuality, and artistic production. It is also shown to carry figurative meaning as, for instance, uncanny space, the space of penetration and the "oneiric house" (dreamed house) as they relate to Alberte's associations, dreams and memories.

The argumentation in chapters five and six is more loosely woven. Space as place is discussed to a greater or lesser degree, but Rees concentrates on "'spaces' that are not connected to (or representations of) identifiable physical locations" (8). One of these is the literary space of the novel, which she studies in the context of adaptation (chapter five) and jazz, silence and old age (chapter six). Although the discussion of adaptation does not seem to be as theoretically informed as the argumentation elsewhere, Rees shows herself to be an astute reader.

While Rees discusses Sandel's experimentation with genre and her rejection of the classification "novel" as a label for her last two published works, she refers to them repeatedly as novels without explanation or reflection. In addition, the incorporation of chapter one creates an additional structural weakness in the publication. It contains a discerning analysis of Sandel biographies and a careful exploration of what Rees suggests can be seen as a spacial project between Sandel's life and work. But since this chapter does not address any literary work whatsoever, it falls outside the scope of the book as indicated by its title. Given the shift in her discussions in chapters five and six as well, it is surprising and unfortunate that Rees has chosen such an ill-fitting and uninspired title for her book. *Figurative Space in the Novels of Cora Sandel* is uneven, but it is also insightful and should be of interest both to scholars of Sandel and scholars generally interested in modernism and/or space as metaphor. However, it would be better served by an altogether different title.

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