

Bunch, Mads. 2009. *Samtidsbilleder. Realismen i yngre dansk litteratur 1994-2008*. Frederiksberg: Dansklaererforeningen Forlag. 180 pages. ISBN: 9788779963627.

In the introduction to this highly useful secondary source about realism in recent Danish literature, Mads Bunch succinctly establishes his book's purpose: to discuss and to draw attention to more recent literary efforts in realism and to address the movement's dominant themes and forms. Bunch lives up to his intentions with clarity and focus, making *Samtidsbilleder. Realismen i yngre dansk litteratur 1994-2008* [Contemporary Images: Realism in more recent Danish literature, 1994-2008] an excellent starting point for those with some knowledge of contemporary Danish literature or—perhaps even more importantly—for those who know very little about the subject matter and who want to discover what they have been missing. If Jan Sonnergaard or Helle Helle isn't currently on one's bookshelf, Bunch's discussions of these authors may prompt an immediate purchase.

Bunch's self-imposed time frame encompasses those authors who published their first "realistic" work (no genre novels) between 1994 and 2008—and before they turned 36. The author explains that he employs this boundary to level the playing field (at least somewhat), resulting in a discussion of some 200 works by 71 authors (a number he estimates as 75% of all fiction writers in this period). That number constitutes a diverse group from a brief period. Bunch sums up his intent by stating that he wants to bring a sociological, psychological, and historically conscious perspective to bear on this literature. The book is divided into chapters dealing with such topics as "Themes, Forms and Styles," "Realism and the Concept of Realism," "Minimalism," and "Perspectives on More Recent Danish Realism from the Turn of the 21st Century." There is even a section on realism in other media, including a cursory look at the *Dogme* film movement and reality TV. Bunch also briefly discusses Norwegian and Swedish efforts, addressing the notion of a broader "Nordic" approach to realism. He cites the pessimistic views of Swedish critic Gabriella Håkansson on this subject and argues that—on the literary front—"de tre nordiske lande" [the three Nordic countries] (151) have, indeed, developed similarly from the early 1990s postmodernism and minimalism to recent efforts in realism. Summaries of the discussed works published by year and, especially, by theme are particularly useful.

Despite the obviously limited space that can be granted to works in such a project, one of the strengths of Bunch's approach is that it is not isolationist, temporally or culturally. References to such diverse authors as Henrik Pontoppidan, Ernest Hemingway, H.C. Branner, Amalie Skram, Raymond Carver, Bret Easton Ellis, and Salman Rushdie ensure that more recent Danish literature is not interpreted within a vacuum, either temporally or culturally. For example,

an insightful reading of Kim Blæsbjerg's *Rådhusklatreren* [Town Hall Climber] (2003) draws parallels to Martin A. Hansen's use of the Cain and Abel myth and to Goethe, Blixen, and Ibsen. In a similar vein, an account of the contemporary efforts at the *kollektivroman* [collective novel] alludes to Hans Kirk's significant contributions to that genre in the 1920s.

Bunch's style is often conversational; he begins his fine discussion of Morten Ramsland's magic-realist, wildly popular *Hundehoved* (2005) [*Doghead*, 2009] with this comment: "Men lad os kaste et blik på Morten Ramsland's roman" [But let's take a look at Morten Ramsland's novel] (75). This casual tone is quite effective in drawing readers (and, assuredly, younger readers) further into the discussion. The book's overall tone is reflected in its design, which features large tabs of quotation marks, in different colours for each chapter, in the margins (using a design element from the graphic novel). The photographic illustrations, however, impart the look of a high school textbook.

Naturally, broad surveys often leave readers feeling as if they went too quickly through *det store kolde bord* [the smorgasbord]. For example, how can one sum up the *Dogme* movement in two pages? One unfortunate error occurs in the discussion of Helle Helle's much lauded, excellent novel *Ned til hundene* [Down to the Dogs] (2008). Bunch, confusing two characters, refers to the couple who takes in the narrator as Putte and Ibber—but it is Putte and John (Ibber is Putte's brother). Also, at times, one longs for a fuller discussion, particularly of works that one knows and admires. In the case of unfamiliar works, Bunch's treatments are effective in stimulating a desire to search and to find the literature readers have been missing, which makes this study a fine educational tool and a distinct service to increased interest in contemporary Danish literature.

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