

José Francisco Fernández, ed. 2013. *The New Puritan Generation*. Canterbury: Gulphi. xi + 203 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78024-015-2.

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José Francisco Fernández offers us a collection of critical essays, entitled *The New Puritan Generation*, which discusses the original impact and continuing cultural relevance of *All Hail the New Puritans*, a collection of fifteen short stories, published in 2000, and edited by Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne. A lot of critical interest in the collection was stirred by the provocative ten-point manifesto with which Blincoe and Thorne prefaced the book. While literary manifestos typically tend to emphasize experiment and aesthetics, Blincoe and Thorne attempted to achieve a sense of authenticity through aesthetic austerity. They invited their authors to eschew the poetic, avoid the historical, and to forego technical tricks such as flashback or authorial asides, in favour of textual simplicity and integrity of expression. Focusing on stories set in the present day, the manifesto's adherents claimed to be moralists, and affirmed that "all texts would feature a recognizable ethical reality" (12). As such, the manifesto forms part of a more general paradigm shift in the ethical turn experienced in the field of the humanities from the 1980s onwards, as well as in a move away from elaborate production models towards cultural productions that attempted to forefront authenticity and honesty, an example of which would be Lars von Trier's *Dogme 95* project, Fernández suggests.

This collection of essays is a valuable contribution to the discussion of contemporary Britain and the cultural transitions it has undergone in the last twenty-five years. Fernández provides an excellent introduction to the British and European cultural milieu from which Blincoe and Thorne's collection emerged, pointing to its antecedents in the concept of *blank fiction*—the flat, affectless, uncommitted prose of writers like Bret Easton Ellis and Dennis Cooper—in post punk aesthetics, in the inspiration found in Michael Clark's ballet entitled *Hail the New Puritan* (which also suggested the collection's title) and in the *Dogme 95* movement, particularly Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinerberg's cinematic manifesto entitled the *Vow of Chastity*. The *Vow's* ten points of film-making, asserting, for example, in rules seven and eight that "Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden [. . .] the film takes place here and now" and "Genre movies are not acceptable" (Trischak 1999, n.p.),

were an inspiration to Blincoe and Thorne's efforts to circumscribe literary form. Fernández, however, points out important differences in their approach to that of the cinematographers. For instance, while the *Dogme 95* group displayed a fairly strict adherence to their vow, the New Puritans were both serious and playful in their commitment to establishing precepts for literary production and yet being open to breaking their own rules as and when needed.

In the Introduction, Fernández offers a balanced analysis of the New Puritans' distinctive contribution to contemporary British writing while carefully assessing the early critical responses to their more outlandish claims to literary innovation, their "explicit rejection of tradition and also their ambition to make their narratives resemble film or TV" (16). He dismisses the accusation of blatant commercialism, while admitting the media-grabbing bravado of Blincoe's claim that his collection offered its contributors "a chance to blow the dinosaurs out of the water" (Clark 2000, 28). This image suggests that Blincoe and Thorne's book would destroy the London literary establishment, the "dinosaurs," in a spectacular way. However, while Fernández does provide an exceptionally thorough account of the responses to Blincoe and Thorne's manifesto and the ideas behind their collection, his assessment that "criticism was not directed against the stories themselves, which in general were praised as interesting instances of narrative" (15) seems, at the very least, to offer a generous view. He quotes a range of responses, including some strongly critical reviews, such as Wood's dismissal of the collection as "a manifesto for the New Philistinism" (2000, n.p.). Others, meanwhile, damn by faint praise. For example, Clark said of the stories that "[n]one of them is especially good, and none, bar a couple, especially bad. It is, however, difficult, verging on the impossible, to see any of them as the beginning of a new wave" (2000, 28). Challenging this to some extent, Fernández claims that the collection made a contribution to the debate on what writers should offer to contemporary British readers in order to reflect their reality, and "to shake off the complacency that surrounded English letters for more than a decade" (17). Of particular interest is the parallel he draws between the New Puritans and the *Crack* group in Mexico, a group of writers who shared a similarly iconoclastic attitude towards the established authors of their time, in the latter case towards the writing of the Latin-America Boom generation of the writers of the 1960s and 1970s. He further notes a connection with new Croatian writers, who enthusiastically embraced the impulse to innovate expressed in the New Puritan manifesto, despite the great differences between the cultural milieu of the London from which the New Puritans emerged and the specific character of the rising, post-Yugoslavian, Croatian literary scene.

Following the Introduction, *The New Puritan Generation* offers ten articles written by Spanish and British academics. The first five articles consider the New Puritan short-story collection and its writers as a whole, setting them in the political, cultural and social context of the time, as well as considering their overall effect from the vantage point of more than one decade from the original publication. The last five

focus on the work of single or pairs of authors, considering their contributions to the *All Hail The New Puritans* collection, and how this relate with their later work.

The contributions by Paul March-Russell and José Francisco Fernández investigate the early negative reviews according to which the New Puritans were commercially orientated and largely apolitical, considering their avowed intention of avoiding historical narratives and certain modes of postcolonial writing. More concretely, March-Russell in “The Jilted Generation? The New Puritans a Decade on” focuses on the marginalized, excluded, status of many of the stories’ central characters, in that they are searching for some sense of communal identity, to suggest convincingly that they represent the voices of a “jilted generation” (29). The New Puritans’ literary collaboration, as expressed by their manifesto (12), is also taken by March-Russell as a response to the desire for a collective identity, something that was felt, in 2000, to be lacking in contemporary Britain. Fernández’s article, “New Puritans/New Labour,” takes up the issue of whether New Puritan writing is indeed as apolitical as its manifesto would suggest. He draws an analogy between New Labour’s Third Way, as an attempt to reconcile market forces and state interventionism, and the New Puritan attempts to establish a middle ground between the elitism of so-called literary writing and the more popular modes of genre fiction, such as detective stories, ghost stories and romance. The parallel between the New Puritans’ insistence on morality, and “a recognizable ethical reality,” as the Manifesto puts it (12), and Tony Blair’s moralizing, proactive managerial style and aspiration to the cosmopolitan is strikingly well drawn by Fernández (94-95). He argues convincingly in a close reading of the stories by Scarlett Thomas, Ben Richards, Matt Thorne and Toby Litt that their basic ethical interests correspond to a more generalized concern with the manner in which New Labourites conducted themselves in office, in the exercise of power and governance, and particularly in the use of so-called “spin”—the practice of promoting public favour for government policies by presenting them in an artfully persuasive and calculated manner. The stories reveal the reality of contemporary Britain, with its dysfunctional families and general sense of a lack of social solidarity or shared values, in direct contrast to New Labour’s call for a refounding of society based on “values of responsibility and solidarity” (100). March-Russell and Fernández’s essays are among the strongest in the collection, and they both offer new insights into New Puritanism by showing very clearly how both the form and content of the stories can be seen as a response to the sociohistorical milieu of the time in which they were written.

In the third article (“Writing by Numbers. Disavowing Literary Tradition in *All Hail the New Puritans*”), David Owens provides a thorough point-by-point commentary on the manifesto, and then assesses the extent to which the stories uphold these points. He finds, as previous critics did, that the most successful stories adhere to the rules set out in the manifesto only when it appears to suit them. Owen’s criticism of what, in his opinion, are the least successful stories hints at his own rather strongly held views of what a good short story should offer us: psychological realism, an interest in

exposing character motivation, and a sense of narrative closure. Notably, in his analysis of Matt Thorne's contribution to the *New Puritans* anthology, the short story "Not as Bad as This," he complains about the story's shortcomings in these aforementioned areas. However, as the ninth precept of the manifesto states, "[w]e are moralists, so all texts feature a recognizable ethical reality" (12), so perhaps Thorne's story deserves a more sympathetic reading. With its joint themes of voyeurism and non-disclosure of its characters' motivations, and its paucity of material description, it would have benefitted from an analysis which considered the possibility of its being a narrative which intentionally presents itself as an act of resistance to the contemporary cultural media's obsession with transgressing the boundaries of the private.

Other essays in this volume trace the wider influence of the New Puritan contributors on the British literary scene and their later writings. They include Sara Martin's excellent analysis of Alex Garland's work, which highlights how his New Puritan pared-down prose style is nonetheless countered by an intensely poetic visual sense ("New Puritanism between Page and Screen: Alex Garland"). Bianca Leggett's essay "Brits Abroad: The Travelling Perspectives of Geoff Dyer and Alex Garland" sets Garland beside Geoff Dyer to compare their stories, which share what Leggett describes as "a glamorous Continental location" (108). Laura Monrós-Gaspar's article—"“(Un)reality Bites’: Englishness in Toby Litt’s Fiction”—provides a fine overview of Toby Litt's writing as a multi-faceted study in Englishness in the contemporary world, though it only briefly discusses his New Puritan short story within the broader context of his *oeuvre*. Sonia Villegas-López offers in "Gender Traces in New Puritan Women's Fiction" an interesting overview of the four female writers who contributed to Blincoe and Thorne's collection, and follows Elizabeth Grosz's approach in *Space, Time and Perversion* (1995) in order to trace the ways in which the materiality of the female subjects in the stories has been effaced from the narrative by their authors, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Scarlett Thomas is the specific focus of Miriam Borham-Puyal's article ("Code-Breaking, Story-Telling and Knitting"), which pursues the metaphors of patchwork and knitting to reveal how the author adopts non-conformist strategies to highlight and challenge the conventional interpretative codes by which her work may be judged. Borham-Puyal asserts that to achieve this, Thomas customarily provides the reader with a mix of genres, placing "several unfamiliar things in the familiar container of the novel" (160). This is a point that David James picks up in the "Afterword," in connection with Geoffrey Dyer's later fiction, saying that this could be considered an indicator of how New Puritan writing has developed, long after the original contributors ceased to be considered a coherent unit. In his comments on Dyer, James brings together the themes raised in this collection to argue convincingly that the New Puritan generation was indeed not a mere marketing ploy, but a diffuse collection of artists. While not shaping themselves into a unified literary movement, the New Puritan writers did share an aesthetic approach by "investing in a collaborative creative process" that could "trigger

the advent of an alternative critical practice" (194). As James puts it, in doing this, a "one-off incident in the history of contemporary fiction [is turned into] the premise for debating how we apprehend writerly collectives and shared aesthetic values in an age of artistic individuation and celebratory authorship" (194).

In conclusion, the volume under review fulfils its dual purpose, of both discussing the *All Hail the New Puritans* anthology as a collection, and assessing the impact of its accompanying manifesto on the collection itself and on the book's critical reception, as well as discussing the later artistic development of certain of the New Puritan authors. By dividing the collection equally between these two points of focus, Fernández's *New Puritan Generation* makes a strong, balanced case for at least some of the New Puritan generation of writers to be considered notable literary figures emerging at the turn of the millenium in Britain, and for the short-story collection which momentarily brought them together to be considered a clear and impactful reflection of the British literary scene during the later years of Blair's New Labour government. For students of contemporary British fiction, it is well worth their consideration.

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