

Josep M. Armengol 2010: *Richard Ford and the Fiction of Masculinities*. New York: Peter Lang. xi+138 pp. ISBN 978-1433110511

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In an interview with *The Paris Review* in 1996, Richard Ford is asked, "Some critics have said that they consider you a particularly male writer. Do you see yourself that way?" Ford's reply is emphatic: "I think that's a load of crap" (Lyons 1996). As Michael Kimmel states in his article 'Invisible Masculinity', "to men ... gender often remains invisible. Strange as it may sound, men are the 'invisible' gender. Ubiquitous in positions of power everywhere, men are invisible to themselves" (1993: 29). The great project of the burgeoning field of Masculinity Studies, therefore, is to make the invisible visible. With this task in mind, Josep M. Armengol's *Richard Ford and the Fiction of Masculinities* (2010), the winner of the 2010 AEDEAN Literary Scholarship Prize, is a landmark text. In the act of 'gendering' the writing of one of the heavyweights of contemporary American fiction, Armengol is not only breaking new ground in the field of research on Richard Ford, but he also, and some might say even more importantly, affirms the value of literary representations of masculinity in the study of social construction of (American) masculinity.

Masculinity Studies, a branch of the diverse and dynamic field of Gender Studies, has enjoyed steady progress for the last three decades within the disciplines of sociology, psychology and cultural studies (Lea and Schoene 2002: 319). Challenging the universal belief of a masculine essence, scholarship within the field has demonstrated that masculinity is a historically contingent construction (Foucault 1981; Connell 1987, 2005; Butler 1990; Kimmel 1996, 2000). Despite these advances within the fields of sociology and psychology, it is only in the last ten years that the field of Masculinity Studies has begun to recognise the wider cultural and social value of literary representations of men and masculinities. Studies such as Ben Knight's *Writing Masculinities* (1999), Berthold Schoene-Harwood's *Writing Men: Literary Masculinities from Frankenstein to the New Man* (2000) and Alice Ferrebe's *Masculinity in Male Authored Fiction 1950-2000* (2005) have demonstrated the ability of the novel to elucidate, illustrate and critique the social condition of masculinity. Josep M. Armengol's *Richard Ford and the Fiction of Masculinities* not only builds upon the emerging awareness of the wider social value of the literary text, but also points towards the potential of the American novel to offer new models of manhood in contemporary American society.

The main body of the text is made up of five chapters of material previously published as journal articles in *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies*, *Journal of Men's Studies* and *Revista de estudios norteamericanos*. In the preceding introductory chapter, Armengol offers a succinct summary of the main critical approaches to the study of Richard Ford. Recognised as a writer of American realist fiction alongside Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff, we learn that Ford's fiction is either deemed an illustration of working-class experience (Folks 2000), a rumination on

southern attitudes (Hobson 1991), or a reflection upon feelings of alienation (Guagliardo 2000). Armengol's argument that critics have focused on "epistemological, ontological, and/or stylistic questions" (7) and have therefore overlooked the "perhaps less philosophical and more materialist, gender issues in his works" (7) is crucial – both to Armengol's study of Ford and the growing scholarly interest in the literary representations of masculinity. Drawing on a range of feminist critics that shape his theoretical approach to the study of masculinity, Armengol is intent on displaying that the deconstruction and reconstruction, or indeed the decentring and recentring, of the modern man is not an abstract theoretical notion but is fundamental to the very fabric of society. And it is Ford's fiction that proves to be the ideal case study to explore this hypothesis.

Chapter one, 'Masculinity as Success? Self-Made Manhood in *A Piece of My Heart* and *Rock Springs*', targets one of the fundamental ideals of American masculinity – self-made manhood. Setting Ford neatly into a historical lineage of American authors who have challenged this myth, including Mark Twain, Herman Melville, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Arthur Miller, Armengol argues that Richard Ford "has deconstructed the American myth of self-made manhood by re-presenting it as a fictitious, damaging, and ultimately, unattainable ideal" (26). Armengol reads Ford alongside the revolutionary ideas of the Liberationist Movement of the 1970s that identified the restrictions and oppressions of the male sex role, and Michael Kimmel's writing on male power. Ford's contemporary revision of this American myth is characterised by three distinct yet interrelated features. The first is Ford's illustration of "the liberationist claim that men's obsession with money and success ends up having a detrimental effect on their lives and bodies" (31). *A Piece of My Heart* proves to be the ideal case study. The father of Sam Newel, one of the novel's main characters, strives towards this unfeasible projection of true masculinity until both his physical and mental health deteriorate and he suffers a fatal accident at work. In his attempts to become a 'self-made' man he pays the ultimate price. The second warning given by Ford illustrates "how the obsession with wealth can easily turn into moral irresponsibility, and ultimately, into family dissolution and emotional isolation" (35). Earl Middleton, the protagonist of the short story 'Rock Springs', is a man who believes that he can fulfil his American Dream by stealing cars as he makes his way to Florida to start a new life with his girlfriend and daughter. As his dream turns into a living nightmare, Ford makes it clear that Earl's inability to recognise what is real in his life will force those that love him to leave him. Armengol suggests that these stories demonstrate that the American male's sense of his own masculinity is shaped in the juxtaposition of his 'public' and 'private' masculinities. This conflict is played out by Ford with these opposing masculine types represented by the two male characters of 'Fireworks', Eddie Starling and Louis Reiner. Unemployed after being fired at work, Eddie has moved to a poor neighbourhood with his wife Lois. One day Lois happens to meet her ex-husband, Louis Reiner, a man whom Eddie despises for his financial wealth and success. Ultimately it is the feminine voice of Lois, the woman who connects these two men, who "repeatedly undermines the mythical image of Reiner as a self-made man" (39) and outs Reiner as a fraud. Armengol puts forward the character of Eddie Starling – a man who accepts the reality of having to depend, both financially and emotionally, on his female partner – as Ford's proposition of another fulfilling masculine identity that is obtainable and achievable.

In the second chapter, “‘The Buddy as Anima?’ Men’s Friendships in *The Sportswriter*”, Armengol attempts to ‘move beyond’ what he identifies as the binary opposition of literary and empirical male homosocial relationships. Beginning with a historical overview of literary depictions of male friendship, Armengol introduces Leslie A. Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960). This is undoubtedly sound judgment. Fiedler identifies the main theme of American literature as the male figure’s rejection of women and (hetero) sexuality in favour of male comradeship away from the ‘civilizing’ nature of society. Armengol sets this almost mythical fictional representation of male friendship against the social reality of homosocial relations between men. Citing a range of scholars, including Michel Foucault, Michael Kimmel and Lynne Segal, who identify the birth of the modern homosexual as the point at which homosociality took on its modern form, Armengol states, “when the term ‘homosexual’ changed from an adjective to a noun, homophobia came to play an increasingly central role in men’s lives” (47). The relationship between the protagonist of *The Sportswriter*, Frank Bascombe, and a man he meets at ‘The Divorced Men’s Club’, Walter Lockett, appears as the ideal case study. Armengol underlines the key aspects that define their relationship: Frank’s uneasiness in the role of the ‘listener’, his fear of emotional attachment, and a rejection of intimacy.¹ Armengol’s argument throughout is measured, well structured and lucid. The only concern I would have is that on two occasions in this chapter Armengol accuses Frank Bascombe of portraying “blatant homophobia” (49, 56). I am not entirely convinced that this is the case. *The Sportswriter* is certainly a text that “illustrates the specific influence of masculinity ideals, particularly male homophobia, on the gendered construction of male friendship” (49), but I wonder if Armengol is overstating the influence, or indeed appearance, of manifest homophobia in Frank’s relationship with Walter. Walter is not rejected by Frank because of his homosexual encounter with Warren, nor even when Walter later kisses Frank. Walter is rejected by Frank for not conforming to Frank’s idea of the traditional definition of masculinity. Frank and his ‘friends’ in the Divorced Men’s Club maintain a strict code of ‘masculine’ behaviour. Frank sees masculinity as defined by isolation, rationality, self-control and a non-display of emotional feeling. Does this, however, make him ‘blatantly’ homophobic? I can’t help feeling that this reading of Frank is a leap too far.

The third chapter of the book, ‘Where are Fathers in American Literature? Fatherhood in *Independence Day* and *The Lay of the Land*’, addresses an area of American literary studies that is characterized by a distinct lack of research. With his overview of representations of fatherhood in the American literary tradition, Armengol identifies two major themes: the absence of the father in American fiction or, if the father is present, his existence as a figure enforcing patriarchal authority. The two novels analysed in this chapter, *Independence Day* (1995) and *The Lay of the Land* (2006), challenge these established patterns and offer a contemporary model of fatherhood. The role of the absent

¹ It must be said that Armengol, dedicating a substantial paragraph to Frank’s issue with intimacy, repeatedly quotes from Ford’s 1995 novel *Independence Day* but incorrectly attributes these lines to *The Sportswriter*. Armengol repeats the quotation at a later point but sources the quotation correctly on page 69.

father that Frank Bascombe played in *The Sportswriter*, the first instalment of the trilogy that these two novels complete, has now evolved. Frank still believes in a certain masculine code of behaviour, which is demonstrated when he gives his son Paul a copy of Emerson's *Self-Reliance* and the Declaration of Independence, and yet we see Frank undergo a transformation in *Independence Day*. Armengol offers a perceptive reading of the pivotal scene with Frank and his son Paul when Paul is struck in the eye with a baseball at a pitching range. As Armengol argues, "Paul's accident is also the catalyst that begins to push Frank out of the Existence Period" (71), a time characterized by isolation, cynicism and emotional disengagement into the 'Permanent Period' with his new role as "an emotionally committed, nurturing, closer father and man" (73). Frank's journey reaches its conclusion in *The Lay of the Land*. Frank's self-awareness and acceptance of his, perhaps necessary, self-transformation is complete. Frank feels he must move on from the Permanent Period and embrace what he calls the *Next Level*, a state of mind characterized by acceptance – acceptance of his frailties as a father, and acceptance of who his son and his daughter have become. Armengol's analysis of the second and third parts of what has now become the 'Frank Bascombe Trilogy' is extremely significant. Through his careful reading of the effect of fatherhood on Ford's famed American 'everyman', Armengol underlines the force of fatherhood in shaping contemporary American masculinity. It is ultimately fatherhood that makes Frank's masculinity visible to himself. It is fatherhood that offers Frank the opportunity to question his traditional masculine beliefs and reconsider what it is to be an American male in the 21st century.

The majority of research into sexuality within the field of Masculinity Studies is focused on what are considered marginalised sexualities. Armengol's book affirms itself as a pioneering piece of scholarship by concentrating its efforts on denaturalising the dominant category of heterosexuality. Armengol achieves this by presenting masculinity and male sexuality as a product of sociohistorical processes. The seminal study on sexuality in American literature is undoubtedly Leslie A. Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) and this text anchors the overview section of chapter four, 'Sexing Men: Male Sexualities in *Rock Springs* and *A Multitude of Sins*'. Despite its influence upon the field of American literary studies, Armengol attempts to follow on from Fiedler's canonical contribution to reach a contemporary reading of male sexuality in American fiction. It would appear that Ford's fiction upholds the American novel's dismissive or immature treatment of sexuality and masculinity identified by Fiedler. However, Armengol argues that "Ford's fiction is centrally concerned with depicting, and rewriting, the traditional connection between masculinity and male sexuality in American literature" (89). Armengol offers a solid and persuasive argument that suggests that selective pieces of Ford's fiction, particularly his short fiction, do subvert traditional notions of masculine sexual behaviour whilst pointing to new alternative images of male sexuality. Armengol presents Ford's short story 'Privacy', from the collection *A Multitude of Sins*, as the ideal case study of a central element of heterosexual masculinity – the male gaze. Citing the feminist critics Lynne Segal and Laura Mulvey, particularly Mulvey's work on 'scopophilia', Armengol argues that in the story 'Privacy' "Ford challenges the traditional gender dichotomies between activity/passivity, looking/to be looked at, and masculinity/femininity" (91-92). The second short story analysed in this chapter, 'Winterkill', from *Rock Springs* (1987), also revises concepts of patriarchal masculinity.

Applying the theory of Eve Sedgwick on the power relations at play within male-male-female love triangles, Armengol argues that the rivalry between the two male characters over the female character proves a method for Lester Snow and Troy Burnham to display their superior masculinity to each other. Although Les and Nola have a sexual encounter in a car, it is Troy, disabled from the waist down, who takes Nola Foster to his room as the story ends. In doing so Armengol declares that “moving beyond reductive phallic notion of sexuality, Ford opens up the world of male (hetero)sexuality to different bodily pleasures and sensations, as well as to a new world of feelings and emotions” (96). Ford’s fiction is often considered asexual and therefore Armengol’s argument appears as a new starting point for further research on the effect of Ford’s subversion of traditional conceptions of male sexuality on American masculinity.

In the final chapter of the book, ‘Richard Ford’s Revisions of Violence as a Test of Manhood’, Armengol demonstrates Ford’s subversive approach to male violence by setting him alongside the author whom many would consider the father figure of literary representations of masculinity and violence: Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway’s posthumously published piece of short fiction, ‘An African Story’ (1954), serves as the perfect example for Armengol to demonstrate that masculine acts of violence in Hemingway’s fiction are associated with bravery, virility and heroism. Although it would seem that Ford, in some ways, follows Hemingway within the lineage of American literature, Armengol identifies a major distinction. Rather than violence being celebrated as a fundamental element of masculinity as in many of Hemingway’s novels, acts of violence in Ford’s *Rock Springs* lead to imprisonment (‘Sweethearts’), loss of love and affection (‘Empire’) and family dissolution (‘Optimists’) (108). Violence is therefore rejected as a form of masculine self-definition and is re-appropriated as a form of self-destruction. Armengol’s case study of choice, ‘Communist’, not only reaffirms this view but demonstrates the theoretical findings of Masculinity scholars, namely Myriam Miedzian, Lynne Segal and Michael Kimmel, who have identified that “male violence does not occur when men feel most powerful, but when they feel relatively powerless” (113). The protagonists of these short stories, both younger men witnessing the negative impact of the violent acts committed by the father figures in their lives, embody “the possibility of a new, alternative, and nonviolent model of manhood” (116). Armengol’s hopeful conclusion of Ford’s fiction offering “positive images of boys and men who manage to move away from violence, leaving abusive fathers and aggressive friends behind” (119) connects directly to the overall premise of this study. In gendering the fiction of Ford, a writer, it must be said, who considers his work as genderless, Armengol has skilfully and persuasively posited that Ford’s writing displays changing patterns of masculine performance. As such Ford’s fiction suggests the possibility of the American male embracing new forms of masculinity as we settle into the 21st century.

As this book is a collection of previously published material on a diverse range of issues that underpin the study of contemporary American masculinity, it might be expected that the text would lack a strong sense of cohesion. On the contrary, Armengol’s text displays the depth and range of scholarship required for a successful study into literary representations of masculinity. In the foreword of the book Michael Kimmel states that the critical study of masculinity is in its earliest stage, calling Masculinity Studies “an offshoot of Gender Studies” (ix). The question remains,

therefore, of when Masculinity Studies will be recognised as its own stand-alone area of research. Will it forever be the younger brother of Gender Studies? In my estimation it is only a matter of time before further academic investigation of the quality demonstrated here by Josep M. Armengol will lead to this burgeoning academic discipline becoming a fully formed, dynamic and innovative project. The greatest accolade that can be laid upon *Richard Ford and the Fiction of Masculinities* is that it will surely be recognised as a seminal text in the continuing development of Masculinity Studies. The text undoubtedly achieves its own specific aims and objectives in gendering the fiction of Richard Ford whilst, arguably even more significantly, affirms the value of literary representations of masculinity in sociological investigation.

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