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Guest Edited by F. Elizabeth Gray and Nikki Hessel

Finishing School Fiction

[*Women's University Fiction, 1880-1945*](#). Anna Bogen. Pickering & Chatto: London, 2013. 240 pp.

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<1>The substandard fare provided by women's colleges, both culinary and scholarly, has been a subject for reflection and a source of humor since their establishment in the late nineteenth century. Virginia Woolf's famous description of her dinner at the fictional Fernham College – the beef “suggesting rumps of cattle in a muddy market” and the prunes as “stringy as a miser's heart” – has provided metaphor for more recent accounts of women's university education.⁽¹⁾ For instance, Mortimer R. Proctor explains that male undergraduates could only experience “instinctive, unyielding revulsion” as their colleges became “overrun by a race of bedraggled intruders”.⁽²⁾ Anna Bogen acknowledges that Proctor's study *The English University Novel* (1957) is both “dated and misogynistic,” but rather alarmingly it “remains the most thoroughly researched and historically accurate portrayal of the university novel” (204 n.11). Such a comment expresses the extent of Bogen's project in *Women's University Fiction, 1880 – 1945*, which is not only to “refute Proctor” (149) but to establish the critical groundwork for what is a hitherto unrecognized genre: the women's university novel.

<2>Bogen's book impressively bridges conventional periodization and categorization to reveal a body of fiction that wrestles with the dominating discourses of liberal education and intellectual maturity found in men's university fiction. The result is a text which assiduously identifies a number of thematic and formal continuities in women's university fiction across a period that has customarily been partitioned by the Great War and women's enfranchisement. Bogen's study uncovers the nineteenth-century ideological heritage of women's higher education and the ways that it bequeaths to this body of fiction the dissonances that these texts struggle with well into the twentieth century. The novels included here range from the popular fiction of L.T. Mead's *A Sweet Girl Graduate* (1886) and other school stories that would have originally appeared in periodicals such as *Atalanta* (1887 - 1898) or the *Girl's Own Paper* (1880 - 1956), to the formal experimentation of Storm Jameson's *The Pot Boils* (1919) and provocative sexual content of Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* (1927). There is one way however in which this book is rather limited in scope, one which the author herself acknowledges: for “[o]f the

fiction that is accessible, the vast majority is set at Oxford and Cambridge” (2). Bogen explains that she has only been able to identify three novels that include very brief reference to civic universities. This focus is not meant to indicate that these texts “should be read as broadly representative of women’s experience in higher education” (3) but rather that “the ‘abnormal’ conditions within the ancient universities often contribute to the fiction’s idiosyncrasies, confirming and complicating class issues with gender politics” (3).

<3>The book's first chapter introduces the structure of the *Bildungsroman* which Bogen treats as both concept and method, and which provides the interpretive scaffolding for the following chapters. Bogen’s purpose in doing so is not only to articulate what these novels reveal about “a very understudied area of women’s experience, but also how and why the novels structurally reposition and distort that experience in order to comment on the *Bildungsroman* itself” (3). It is for this reason, perhaps, that Bogen proposes that women’s university fiction should be read as not a genre in itself but as a subgenre of the *Bildungsroman*. The book is structured into symmetrical chapters that situate major themes like religion, liberal education, and sexuality in their historical and critical contexts before using these debates to establish a point of critical enquiry for the novels considered in each section. Importantly, these novels are also examined against a framework of men’s university fiction not for contrast, but to “demonstrate to the reader the generic elements that would have served as models for many women writers of the period” (4). Through careful, dialogic readings of these texts Bogen concludes that the “female university novel is indeed distinct from its male cousins, but this distinction lies in its radical *content*” which “throws into useful relief the hidden ideology within the male university novel and university discourse more generally” (166-7).

<4>Bogen identifies the authors of nineteenth-century juvenile fiction like L.T. Mead and Jessie Vaizey as the earliest participants in the subgenre of women's university fiction. Novels such as Mead's *A Sweet Girl Graduate* (1886) achieved popular success partly on account of their publication as serials and subsequent reprinting in book form for the “ ‘reward’ market” (22). These texts, read as they were by “middle-class girls and their mothers” (22), cultivated an audience that was considerably broader than the academic market. As a result popular novels like Mead's, Bogen suggests, can “function as an important corrective to the insular assumptions of the Oxbridge audience” (23). So pervasive were these stories that by the century's end parodies of women's university experience, like Tivoli's *Une Culotte, or A New Woman: An Impossible Story of Modern Oxford*, began to appear. Yet the narrative legacy of these college stories has been examined only as a variation of the school story which, Bogen argues, “ignore[s] cross-readings with more ‘academic’ texts” (21).

<5>One of the book’s most valuable contributions is its examination of how the war effort intervened in early debates about women’s education in ways that were not always progressive. While women students were receiving more attention and “consistently scoring better in examinations” (112), they were in an “ideological bind;” they were “urged to remain at university, but only within the separate sphere marked out for them, and surrounded by constant reminders of the “abnormality” of this situation and the temporary nature of their new privileges” (113). Bogen perceptively demonstrates how the representation of such ideological binds in women’s university fiction “adds a new dimension to

[the] self/society tension of the *Bildungsroman*" (117), one which ultimately works to redefine the *Bildungsroman's* theorization of a coherent self.

<6>The book's circular structure – the reader begins with nineteenth-century debates about liberal education and its penultimate chapter confronts representations of the Girton Girl and New Woman – is apposite, for like the history of liberal education itself the story of women's university experience is one of "continuity, not change, over time" (40). However, there are some points which would have been illuminated by sequential treatment. Drawing on previous work by Paul Deslandes, Bogen explains that from the mid-nineteenth century both Oxford and Cambridge were preoccupied with the "policing of women" (89). At Oxford women who were regarded as "suspicious" were "regularly arrested and imprisoned" by university police and later proctors, "both of whom required less evidence to detain a woman under suspicion of prostitution than was required in the rest of England" (90). At Cambridge, an eighteenth-century "Spinning House" served a similar function and "retained the nominal right to do so, over the wishes of the town, until 1983" (90). These examples inform her compelling discussion of the ways in which the figure of the prostitute haunts Vaizey's *A College Girl* (1913), an analysis which opens up questions about women's economic marginalization most often neglected from studies of this kind; this is just one of the ways that Bogen's method unearths issues around women's education that confront gender as well as class. This discussion would be generative seated alongside questions of sexuality and the body treated in roughly contemporary texts that appear later in the book – so generative, perhaps, as to yield material for another study altogether.

<7>*Women's University Fiction, 1880 – 1945* is a very welcome addition to a subject that has long been dominated by studies of school stories that, as Sally Mitchell observes, were often written by women who had no experience of university life for girls who would likely never make it there themselves.⁽³⁾ Important as this work on girls' fiction is, the sheer bulk of it has tended to distort understandings of women's university experience which are more complicated than such stories would allow. At the other end of the debate is of course Woolf herself who – on account of the canonization of texts like *A Room of One's Own* (1929) which generalizes women's university experience for the sake of its feminist argument – has swallowed up much more of the cultural imaginary surrounding women's university education than she would seem to have appetite for. Bogen's foundational work identifies a "great deal of as yet untapped material for analysis" and will no doubt prove formative in opening up discussion about material that promises to "shak[e] up" the "comfortable assumptions of [the] late twentieth-century heirs" (170) to university fiction.

Endnotes

(1) Virginia Woolf, "Room of One's Own," *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p. 16.^(^)

(2) Mortimer R. Proctor, *The English University Novel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), p. 135.^(^)

(3) Sally Mitchell, *The New Girl: Girls' Culture in England, 1880 – 1915* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 50.^(^)