

Kathleen Jones, *Katherine Mansfield: The Story-teller* (Edinburgh UP, 2010)

Biography is a tricky genre, and a wider one than most of us recall until we open another biography and find it utterly unlike the last. Even the biography of an author, with its well-ordered, just-before-birth to just-after-death coverage, might focus on humanising or demonising, might focus on making the work reflect the life or the life reflect the work, might seek to please the scholar or the fan. Like so many other biographies, Kathleen Jones's 2010 biography of Katherine Mansfield is like no other biography I've read before.

Mansfield, unlike modernist contemporaries and friends such as D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, is primarily known for her short stories (among them 'The Garden Party') and for being born in the colonies (New Zealand) rather than in Great Britain. The transnational aspects of *The Story-teller* root themselves in this outsider position, emphasising that even 'Katherine's childhood was spent on the insecure margin,' as coloniser occupying the space 'between a recent immigrant civilization and the encroaching wilderness, inhabited by an older, non-European culture that was being dispossessed' (14). Jones offers the position of the 'permanent outsider' (128) as a key ingredient in the making of this storyteller, whose 'double heritage' (19) and 'struggle for one definitive identity' (22) will only grow more important after she moves to England.

'Born across two cultures' (22), the Mansfield painted here will never feel quite at home. First, she'll become 'convinced that she will be unable to become a creative artist' unless she moves to London (75). Later, she'll insist that London destroys her ability to write, that she can only write in Paris, that she can only write in the country, that she can only write away from the country. She seems briefly at home as 'part of an expatriate social group' in Germany (117), where she will 'sing Slavic songs' (117), acquire 'a love of Russian novels' (118), and find that – in these surroundings – 'poems and stories are spilling out of her, almost faster than she can write them down' (118). This period spent with other outsiders is among the most productive of a career that will often stagnate for long periods.

Jones should be credited for allowing this key ingredient to emerge and reappear throughout the text as a sort of musical motif, rather than trying to use it to drive all 500-some of the book's pages. Even with section headings like 'The Two Katherines', 'In Search of Katherine Mansfield', and 'The Member of a Wandering Tribe', Jones's biography never seems overtly focused on this single aspect of Mansfield's life. In fact, Jones does not even restrict herself to the territory of the author's life, often leaving the subject of Katherine for whole chapters to talk about the lives of Ida Constance Baker or John Middleton Murry in the years after Katherine's early death.

And this is what makes *The Story-teller* unlike every other biography I've read. Structurally, the book is curious to say the least. It is non-linear, with Mansfield dying more than once. It plays with narrative time, speeding and slowing, sometimes understandably (with an entire chapter on 'The "Blooms Berries"') and sometimes less so (with multiple chapters on the second Katherine, Murry's next wife, Violet). The reader becomes less sure it is really all meant to be a portrait of Katherine.

One could argue that what results is a sort of modernist genre of biography, reminiscent of the definition of modernism put forth in Mansfield and Murry's collaboration on *Rhythm* magazine. Their modernism focuses on an 'idea of rhythm in art' we might tie to the unusual narrative rhythms of *The Story-teller* that, yes, now that we think of it, forgoes any 'capricious outburst of intellectual dipsomania' in favor of identifying 'essential forms

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... essential harmonies ... the essential music of [Mansfield's entire] world' (144-5). If 'Art is the true and only expression of reality' (145), perhaps the biography of an author must be more artistic than academic; perhaps the biography's key figures must become characters?

I'm not sure, but this theory would be one way to explain the sometimes unexpected judgments (one character 'writes bitchily' to others, [292]), assumptions ('if John had brought a harlot in off the street the reception could not have been cooler,' [204]), and moments of mind-reading ('John believed that Katherine's spirit lived on,' [166]) in the book. As a reader, I did not for a moment suspect Jones of the kind of 'not wholly false, [but] not entirely truthful' 'creative approach' Murry took 'to the editing of [Mansfield's] notebooks' (179), nor do I find any evidence of Jones following the 'natural liar' Mansfield's lead in "embroidering" everything' (72). But Jones does seem to exhibit 'Katherine's talent to become her characters and to see the world from within their minds' (90), a trait Mansfield fans might appreciate very much in a biographer.

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