

THE GENERIC VERONICA TRANSGRESSIVE FICTION: THE NEW SATIRIC TRADITION

REVIEWED BY MOLLY HOEY

It seems that any discussion of subversive fiction begins with someone dutifully pointing out that there is nothing new about subversive fiction; its content, topics, language and devices are all old hat. Yet since its popularisation in the early 1990s a range of scholarly texts have been published that attempt to tackle and make anew the finger trap that is transgressive fiction.

The temptation to write on transgressive fiction is understandable; it's still a relatively under-studied genre and it has the old controversy banner to bring in interest. Who doesn't want to have the mysteries of the human psyche revealed to them in a logical and reasonable voice?

The proclivity for readers to fight against these texts is matched only by the fixation of theorists to try and decipher them.

Theorists have insisted on taking the finger trap apart, some with blades, some with shotguns, either insulted by the audacity of the nasty little prank or driven to demystify its purportedly simple mechanics in order to prove that it is no great thing, concealing their elemental horror at its momentary, unyielding grip. A few manage to push deeper on and through to find themselves released and unharmed. Fortunately Robin Mookerjee is one of the latter.

In *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition* (2013) Mookerjee has put a great deal of effort into not domesticating the affective potential of the transgressive texts, but while he has not dismembered the text, attempting to divine meaning from its entrails, there is still something of a performance in this ritualistic display of textual submission.

In an attempt to wrestle the transgressive paradox (how do you analyse this material without neutralising it) Mookerjee has opted for allocating transgressive fiction into the satiric tradition. This is a reasonable statement, and well evidenced. But like many other analytical attempts to examine transgressive fiction, it feels like Mookerjee has performed a generic veronica.

By placing transgressive texts within the satiric tradition Mookerjee has offered literary immunity to the paralogic content of transgressive texts, which their defenders may claim is no bad thing. But I argue that anything that negates the affective and violating nature of transgressive fiction removes its potency

and power. This is an issue that covers all studies of subversive material and Mookerjee clearly indicates the way in which transgressive fiction belongs to the satiric tradition; but I am left wondering whether anything as ambiguous, reflexive and slippery as transgressive fiction can really be considered satire.

Mookerjee claims that transgressive fiction is about examining systems, but he needs to go further and acknowledge that in its analysis of systems transgressive fiction is always unfolding itself, always presenting a Janus face, because the moment it settles upon a pedagogy it instantly undermines itself. How, for example, can you make claims of escaping overarching systems when you function within the greatest of all organising media: language?

The reading of transgressive fiction is problematic in its very nature; even if one treads very lightly elements will be broken and conceived underfoot. What is so often overlooked is that transgressive fiction, like the finger trap, works by playing on assumptions and appearances, and that it is a little joke at the reader's expense.

Anthony Julius has noted in his work *Transgressions: the Offences of Art* this correlation in regards to visual transgressive art: "One risks under-interpreting the work if one overlooks this baiting of the spectator" (Julius, 16).

Mookerjee notes the role of the trickster narrator in transgressive texts:

While oral tradition, myth and

secondary epic are composed as an assurance of safety and consistency in the face of a hostile, unpredictable natural world, satire skeptically takes on art and language. It therefore has a double consciousness, to borrow the Emersonian concept, and one which joins the thematic and the formal. It proposes a Kantian (or proto-Kantian) insistence on the freedom of aesthetic play and employs this freedom to represent the chaos tamed by establishment literature. (19)

However, this can be taken further: it is the text itself, by its own essential nature, that is the trickster. The trick is on the reader, the narrator, the critic and the theorist. Perhaps there is no "reason" at all apart from the play of language and an invitation to pointless and endless journeys of analysis and a slight feeling of Stockholm syndrome?

As Mookerjee notes, "the trickster muddies high gods," but these gods include the genre, the reader, the theorist and itself. After all, it is the ultimate trickster that can make you sit through a visceral yet detached depiction of a prepubescent boy being sodomised in a cinema whilst he tries to watch *Friday the 13th*, and then tell you it's really all about aesthetics and modern guilt.

The rest of Mookerjee's argument also displays some small inconsistencies. In one chapter he makes three reasonable claims:

Many critics misread Menippean satire precisely because they read it through the lens of a specific belief system.

Alternatively, critics focus on the insult suffered by the body—sometimes only suggested—viewing this as a form of sensationalism. However, satire is constructed to frustrate attempts to read through any moral or philosophical system and to frustrate attempts to identify the author’s intent ... (159)

Firstly, Mookerjee makes the succinct claim that transgressive fictions cannot be analysed through “the lens of a specific belief system” and then, elsewhere, recommends they be read as a form of social commentary, which tries to draw attention to any “systems which unify experience” and a “truth behind culture.”

The second claim about critics focusing on the violent or violating elements is shrewd. However, after claiming that transgressive fiction “attempts to frustrate attempts to identify the author’s intent” he then proceeds to discuss these authors’ beliefs: “Menippean and transgressive fiction may be seen as regressive, but its authors view it as revelatory of a truth that emerges in the absence of frameworks, theories, ideologies, and formulaic beliefs” (16).

He then adds to this confusion by referring to authors and narrators interchangeably. This becomes almost maddening when he constantly refers to *The Don* (from Will Self’s 1992 work *Cock and Bull*) and Will Self as though they are interchangeable (this thankfully stops when he considers the work of Bret Easton Ellis and Irvine Welsh). He also has a tendency to use an author’s earlier work to fill in gaps and flatten out the ambiguity of these texts. This sits awkwardly with statements such

as, “The withdrawal of the author as an identifiable presence places the emphasis on the form of the story itself by draining the epic of the authority of testimony” (25). In comparing the narrator to the author Mookerjee also invites other critics to start down the slippery path of responsibility and censorship.

Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition places transgressive fiction in a social/historical framework, rather than a literary theory one. What Mookerjee has contributed to the study of transgressive fiction is a solid history into its development and an examination of its multiple manifestations, though some of the texts selected don’t really shelter under the transgressive umbrella.

Mookerjee emphasises a “transgressive legacy” within these books, implying that a text becomes transgressive simply for containing abjection or “transgressive elements.” For a text to don the transgressive label it must be transgressive in its very nature. It must play with the expectation of analysis as well as violate and confront. Simply because a text deals with abjection and the grotesque does not make it transgressive; therefore selections like Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1993) sit awkwardly.

Mookerjee has done a service in cooling a few myths about the nature of transgressive fiction: that it is not simply about shock value or controversy and that the ambiguous and mocking nature of transgressive fiction is essential to its appeal. Mookerjee also provides the reader with an informative and well-considered

section on *American Psycho* (1991) and makes some insightful comments on the discrepancy that is shown between transgressive fiction and supposedly romantic work such as Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976). He also takes great effort to show why critics are often so appalled with these texts, and describes methods to get beyond the initial shock factor.

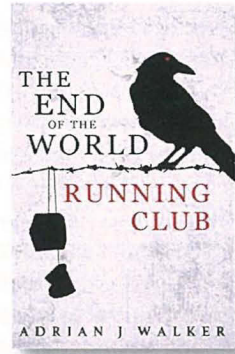
But a scholarly analysis of transgressive fiction is always going to be a tragic yet addictive act. The power of any object is removed when it is demystified: when the monster is shown to be simply disfigured and the subversive texts just words.

I am not claiming I could have done a better job.

Abjection brings us back time and again—with scalpel and shotgun, with politics and linguistics—in an attempt to take the beast down, to show the finger trap as woven straw.

Mookerjee has done a service in trying to counteract much of the sensationalist bad press that subversive texts often create. He offers us a history within which subversive writing is given context and he has attempted to look at these texts objectively, and at the book's end we have a well-executed display of competency and a decent death, but as we stand, looking at the beast, we must admit that we still know nothing of its nature.

The Generic Veronica. Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition by Mookerjee, Robin. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. ISBN 0230294022. RRP \$115. pp. 503.



THE END OF THE WORLD RUNNING CLUB

REVIEWED BY KYNAN ISOKANGAS

The End of the World Running Club (2014) comes from Scottish author Adrian J. Walker. It is self-published, and initially I found it quite hard to gain access to a copy, but once I started reading the book, it was impossible to put down. The novel's protagonist is Edgar Hill, a 35-year-old father of two who is an overweight boozehound, bored of the everyday, struggling through life, and in need of a change; the end of the world certainly shakes things up.

Ed and his family are trapped in their cellar after thousands of devastating asteroid strikes across the United Kingdom. After a few weeks they are rescued and taken to an army barracks in Edinburgh where the extent of the damage is finally revealed. The world as Ed once knew it is all but finished; the countryside now consists of cloud and ash, destroyed buildings, canyons and craters. But, Ed's life seems to be working out post-apocalypse; he even has a salvaging role looking for food and