LIMINALITY AND ITS EPISTOLARY PROJECTIONS IN CANADIAN FICTION

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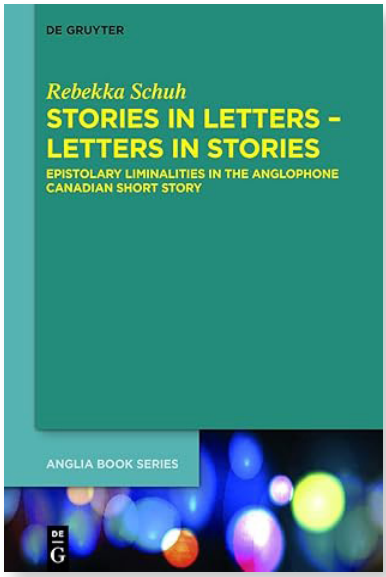

Rebekka Schuh, *Stories in Letters – Letters in Stories: Epistolary Liminalities in the Anglophone Canadian Short Story*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2021.

In Rebekka Schuh's book, *Stories in Letters – Letters in Stories: Epistolary Liminalities in the Anglophone Canadian Short Story*, she discusses the revival of the epistolary story form in novel and short story writing from the 1970s (Altman, 1982), and the revival in scholarly study of the form from the 1990s (Beebee, 1999). Schuh claims that not only has there been a resurgence in the form itself, and of the epistolary short story in Canadian Anglophone literature, but that epistolarity is a special feature of Canadian short fiction. So too is the prevalence of the traditional letter form over modern digitalized forms of communication, and this, in the author's view, makes the epistolary short story in Canadian literature a notable subject for research. Of the numerous short stories collected by Schuh for her study, only three examples feature modern, digitalized forms of communication such as emails and text messages. According to Schuh, this preference for analogue over digitalized forms in the Canadian short story is an expression of historicity (Loschnigg and Schuh, 2018) and a representation of de-familiarization through detachment

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from the pace and zeitgeist of modern life (ibid.), which adds a counter-cultural dimension to the genre.

While the book (Schuh, 2021) deals with letters and forms of communication in the epistolary short story in Canadian Anglophone literature from the 1970s till the present day, the focus of the study is the theme of liminality and its connection with letters. The author defines liminality as 'the experience of finding oneself at a boundary or in an in-between position' (Thomassen, 2015, p. 40), and the feelings of disorientation, ambiguity and freedom that come with such an experience. In addition, 'liminality is about how human beings deal with change' (ibid.). The author contends that, along with letters, liminality is the common theme by which all the stories in the book are united, and suggests that this liminality operates at the level of genre, as the Canadian epistolary short story is essentially a liminal genre due to the structural tension between the narrative as a whole and the individual letters within the narrative. In addition, the author claims liminality is a feature of epistolary narrative as the epistolary mode functions in between first- and second-person narration, and creates in-between characters, settings and mindsets in stories, including characters who are in-between centuries, states and homes. Through this epistolary lens, and the letter format, the author attempts to explore liminality in the Canadian Anglophone short story.

In the book (Schuh, 2021), Schuh discusses how liminality and its in-between nature are characteristic of Canadian culture and Canadian literature in general. As a 'cultural, geographical and political entity' (Brandt, 2017, p. 12) Canada encapsulates liminality because the Canadian 'self' is complex and contradictory (ibid.). According to the author, the prevalence of the letter format and its expression of liminality in Canadian literature of the twentieth and early twenty-first century suggests that liminality shapes the Canadian psyche. This reflects the author's view that narrative themes and forms within a particular culture or time-period reveal the moods and mindsets of that period or culture, and an analysis of the forms and functions of such narratives can contribute to the reconstruction of the culturally-formed norms and values of a society. In line with this, Schuh subscribes to cultural narratology – the belief that cultures are constructed, and that narratives are culturally dependent (Nunning, 2012) - and applies the principles and concepts of cultural narratology to her study.

While acknowledging the presence of epistolary forms in a variety of Anglophone literatures, Schuh argues that it is particularly in Canadian literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that the epistolary form has become prominent. To address what she perceives as a gap in the study of such forms, Schuh undertakes a critical reading of a number of short stories, and analyzes them through the lens of liminality. In her view, the Canadian short story is closely associated with the in-between nature of liminality. She reviews the current state of scholarship on epistolary writing, and examines the characteristics of the epistolary short story. She also discusses the concept of liminality, its

origins and uses, and the relationship between liminality and the letter form in a selection of Canadian short stories from the 1970s till today. There is a particular focus on the epistolary stories of Alice Munro, who, having written more than twenty such stories, is acknowledged as first raising the author's awareness of the epistolary short story form. Rather than an overview of the short story form in general, however, the study provides closer readings of a number of short stories, which, by the author's own admission, forces her to omit a number of compelling examples of the genre. However, this does enable her, in her view, to analyze more fully those examples which are most representative of liminality and her research interest. The discussion provides an overview of generic features of the epistolary short story, as well as a close reading of selected Canadian stories and an analysis of the role of letters within them.

Edited by Lucia Kornexl, Ursula Lenker, Martin Middeke, Gabriele Rippl and Daniel Stein, the book (Schuh, 2021) forms Volume 75 of the *Anglia Book Series (Buchreihe der Anglia).* Consisting of 335 pages, it contains eight chapters including an introduction and a conclusion organized into two main sections – Part 1: 'Theoretical Considerations', and Part 2: 'Analytical Case Studies'. There is also a list of cited works and primary and secondary sources at the end of the book. In addition to providing a brief summary of the chapters, the introduction (pp. 9-20) provides an outline of the scope and organization of the book, and a discussion of the main ideas and arguments of the author. It also introduces key terms such as liminality, epistolary, and short story genres, and the author's rationale for researching the topic. This is followed in chapter 2 (pp. 21-26) by a review of the current state of research on the topic. The two chapters in Part 1 fall under the general heading of 'Theoretical Considerations'. Chapter 3 (pp. 27-41), which is the first chapter in Part 1, is titled "The Epistolary Short Story in Canada and Beyond", and contains a review of epistolary criticism and an overview of the generic features of the epistolary short story form. Chapter 4 (pp. 42-88), "Liminality and the Epistolary Short Story", discusses liminality as a concept, and its origins and manifestations in the study.

Part 2 of the book comprises three chapters, and is called 'Analytical Case Studies'. It explores the relationship between liminality and letters in a selection of Anglophone Canadian short stories in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and is divided into three chapters. Chapter 5 (pp. 90-118), "The Epistolary Mode as First- and Second-Person Narration in the Single Letter Story", provides a critical review of liminality at the level of discourse in epistolary story forms. By challenging previous conceptions of the epistolary mode as a first-person narrative form, the author attempts to show that the epistolary mode is a liminal narrative mode which alternates between first- and second-person narrative modes. She argues that, while shifts can take place between first- and second-person narration within a single letter, the epistolary narrative form tends towards second-person narration, particularly in single-letter stories.

In chapter 6 (pp. 119-214), "Letters from Alice Munro, 'the Master of the Epistolary Short Story'", Schuh reviews the use of letters in Alice Munro's work, and the relationship between letters and women's liminality. The first sub-chapter, "Enveloped in Epistolary Illusion: Liminal States of Reading and Writing Letters", explores the propensity of letters for transporting Alice Munro's characters into liminal imaginative states in which they operate in a reality between the real world and a world created by letters, and in which they are transported forward and backwards between worlds. Schuh compares the imaginative state into which Munro's characters are drawn to 'aesthetic illusion' (Schuh, 2021, p. 128) – a concept in reader-response theory used to describe the state of immersion induced in the reader by the reading of fiction. The second sub-chapter in chapter 6, "Writing Back: An Epistolary Metaphor Applied", highlights liminality in narrative forms, and attempts to deconstruct what the author terms patriarchal 'master-narratives' by focusing on stories in which letters are used to 'write back' and deconstruct binary concepts of right and wrong and good and bad (Schuh, 2021, p. 190).

Chapter 7 (pp. 215-291), "Between 'Here' and 'There': Letters and the Experience of Migration", discusses letters in short stories about migration, with a focus on writers from the West Indian diaspora in Canada. In the first sub-chapter, "Letters as/across Borders: West Indian-Canadian Letter Stories", the author shows how letters can be used to represent the 'in-between' nature of migrant characters existing as they do between cultures 'here' and 'there', and in between their own cultural heritage and Canadian culture (Schuh, 2021, p. 216). The second sub-chapter of chapter 7 – and the final chapter of the book – is titled "Moving letters, Moving Identities: Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* as an Epistolary Self-Begetting Short Story Cycle", and analyzes Rohinton Mistry's '*Tales from Firozsha Baag*' as an example of an epistolary story frame in which liminality serves to forge identity.

The conclusion (pp. 292-297) of the book provides a summary of the previous chapters and reviews the ways in which what the author calls 'epistolary liminalities' (Schuh, 2021, p. 292) manifest themselves in the texts in the study, and the role of letters in putting characters into liminal states in stories. The author revisits her argument that the epistolary mode is a liminal mode between first- and second-person narration in the single-letter story, and states that the epistolary mode is a liminal narrative mode which should be seen as operating on a continuum from first-person to second-person narration. The author also restates her view that epistolary illusion relates to, and can be viewed as a variation of, aesthetic illusion. On this basis, she identifies opportunities for further research into the relationship between epistolary and aesthetic illusion, and what she calls 'extra-textual manifestations of aesthetic illusion' (Schuh, 2021, p. 294).

Rebekka Schuh takes the concept of liminality – originally coined by Arnold Van Gennep (1908) in the early twentieth century in connection with threshold states of mind and religious rites of passage – and uses it to explore what she calls 'epistolary liminalities' (Schuh, 2021, p. 293) in Canadian short fiction. Threshold

states and letter forms in narratives are an interesting lens through which to analyze Canadian short stories, but, as the study omits many examples of epistolary short stories, the book might not be best suited to students looking for a comprehensive survey of the epistolary short story form, or of epistolary writing in general. It might, however, be of interest to anyone interested in exploring the form and function of letters in epistolary writing, or the Canadian Anglophone short story as a sub-genre. As such, the book could perhaps make a valuable contribution to the study of epistolary forms, or the theme of liminality in storytelling.

The book is logically organized, moving from a theoretical discussion of generic features of epistolary short stories, and the application of liminality to the Anglophone Canadian short story, to a more analytical discussion of epistolary liminality in selected Canadian short stories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In her analysis of selected stories, Schuh illustrates the potential of letters to express liminality, and the connections she makes between epistolary writing as a literary mode, liminality, and the Canadian psyche are interesting and insightful. The study shows that the use of the traditional or old-fashioned letter in literature is not dead, and that the epistolary form – particularly in the Canadian Anglophone short story – is alive and well.

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