

**Bradway, Tyler. *Queer Experimental Literature: The Affective Politics of Bad Reading*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Lxiii + 268 pp. £22.99 (softcover).**

**Review by Amy Brown**

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In *Queer Experimental Literature*, Tyler Bradway stakes the claim that ‘by eliciting uncritical affective responses in readers, queer experimental literature ... strikes at the disembodied model of critical reading and its heteronormative social imaginary’ (p. xxxiv). Experimental literature, for Bradway’s purposes, covers a range of authors from William S. Burroughs to Jeanette Winterson, whose works breach norms of conventional literary aesthetics. In the main, the texts are postmodernist ones, although Bradway disclaims that postmodern literature should not be treated as the truest form of queer literature.

Bradway’s work will be most interesting to scholars of affect theory, as that is where his chief theoretical grounding lies. He draws heavily on Deleuze and Guattari, and on Grosz, in defining affect as a component of reading as an ‘event’ rather than a property of the content read (xxxv-xlii). He also draws on Sedgwick and Felski in his theory of reading, particularly in reference to Sedgwick’s turn away from ‘paranoid reading’ (xxix-xxxv). However, Bradway does not reject the discipline of criticism, nor negative criticism in itself, arguing that many attempts to turn away from interpretation toward affect serve to obfuscate relations of power which undergird and shape affective responses. In *Queer Experimental Literature*, Bradway offers readings of his key texts which are not focused on ‘queering’ the text or reading against its grain, but which examine ways in which the texts themselves invite affective responses which are orthogonal to those of critical reading. He is primarily concerned with what he calls ‘bad reading’ – reading experiences that foreground potentially excessive sentiment, disgust, erotics, fears, and strong identifications with narrative (v). These responses, he argues, are antithetical to critical reading, even in the field of affect studies, which he defines as prone to prioritising particular models of literature (primarily the novel) and particular functions of affect and emotion (such as the provision of educational and appropriate emotional models). Despite this objection to literary hierarchies, Bradway does not engage in significant depth with genre fiction studies. *Queer Experimental Literature* offers methodologies and insights that deserve to be more fully explored in relation to genre fiction, although Bradway’s strong investment in postmodern

fiction at times implies that fragmentary and postmodern prose styles are uniquely likely to invite 'bad' or radical affects.

A unifying theme across the book is Bradway's case that academic criticism has underestimated the queer potential of experimental fiction, and of his chosen authors in particular. I am not the first to note that his argument here seems to be stretched a little too far: all of his key authors (Burroughs, Delany, Acker, Winterson, and Sedgwick as memoirist) are well known to academic criticism,[1] and only Sedgwick is not often classified as a 'queer author', in that her work is primarily engaged with as criticism and she herself did not identify as queer. However, in each case Bradway addresses a key facet of the author's work which has been negatively received by some queer critics, and argues for a reconsideration. For instance, he reads William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, alongside the earlier-written but later-published novel *Queer* (pp. 1-50). Here Bradway argues that Burroughs' shift from the realist portrait of homosexual loneliness in *Queer* to the fragmentary narrative and obscene spectacle of *Naked Lunch* represents a powerful implication of the reader in the homoerotic, scatological and drug-inflected events of the narrative, effectively breaking down the barrier between the reader as voyeur and character as spectacle as he makes the distinction between hallucination and narrative event porous.

Of most interest to readers of the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, I believe, will be Bradway's reading of the works of Jeanette Winterson (pp. 145-182). Bradway finds the wholehearted sentiment of Winterson's work, and its focus on individual experience, to be at odds with the deconstructive mission of critical queer theory. However, he argues that, rather than enlisting the reader in an assimilationist project of romantic sentiment, Winterson's work – especially *Written on the Body*, with its amorphous narrator – invites the reader into strongly emotive encounters which proceed to queer the reading experience itself, by refusing to stabilise categories of gender, embodiment and social function. The reader can enter into the affect and emotion of Winterson's protagonist, but cannot confidently identify *with* them on any particular axis of gender or physical embodiment.

However, Bradley's argument for experimental literatures as queering the affective experience of reading is not solely dependent on that instability; he also argues for a project of affective reading which invites encounter and sense of radical community. He does not make any strong argument for why these radical community-oriented affective experiences should be generated particularly by experimental literatures. The book makes a case for 'bad reading', but does not address the long history of queer pulp fictions and genre writing. He includes one 'genre' author, Samuel R. Delany (pp. 51-93), but analyses his work primarily in relation to academic literary theory, without taking into account the science fiction genre context with which Delany was also in conversation. Bradway defends Winterson's work against assumptions that fictions of romance are necessarily conservative, but does so without engaging with the established feminist scholarship on the readership of (heterosexual) romance novels.[2] More contemporary developments, like the burgeoning gay and lesbian romance novel market, or the increasing presence of science fiction and fantasy which challenges and inverts norms of gender, class and sexuality, are not addressed at all. Could Bradley's arguments about Winterson's *Written on the Body* implicating the reader in a queered experience of gender be extended, for instance, to the ways in which Ann Leckie's Imperial Radch trilogy both requires the reader to enter into the gender system of its universe and highlights the insufficiency of English grammatical gender and number in expressing that system? Bradway's case for 'bad reading' is potentially generative, but those

wishing to take it further will need to work around or against the limitations of Bradway's implicit biases against a range of fiction which lies outside of his specified 'experimental' scope.

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[1] See Michael Trask's review of Bradway in *College Literature*.

[2] See Janice Radway and, for a sample of current scholarship and methods building on Radway, Jessica Matthews.

## Works Cited

- Matthews, Jessica. "Studying the Romance Reader: Then and Now: Rereading Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2014, [http://jprstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/STRRTAN\\_Matthews.pdf](http://jprstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/STRRTAN_Matthews.pdf).
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