

Jeremy Rosen, *Minor Characters Have Their Day: Genre and the Contemporary Literary Marketplace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 265 pp.

Reviewed by **Pieter Vermeulen**, University of Leuven

It is rare to encounter a book that forces you to revisit your English Literature 101 syllabus. The story we used to tell our students is that, since the 1960s or so, feminist and postcolonial literatures have started to write back to the literary classics—to a canon that is now revealed as a massive patriarchal-imperialist complex. Exhibit A in such courses is often Jean Rhys's 1966 *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which rewrites *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of Charlotte Brontë's Creole madwoman in the attic. Previous criticism has duly complicated such a reading of Rhys; for one thing, the longest stretch of her novel is narrated by the (unhelpfully patriarchal and imperialist) Rochester-character, nor can Antoinette's perspective simply be conflated with that of an implied author. Such dissenting interpretations do not necessitate an overhaul of the syllabus; at best, they require an additional footnote or an extra PowerPoint slide. Jeremy Rosen's *Minor Characters Have Their Day* is more unsettling: it complicates standard readings of widely taught novels, even as it also shows that the larger literary-historical narrative that a book like *Wide Sargasso Sea* is often meant to instantiate—basically, *subversion through rewriting*—is radically incomplete and essentially wrong.

Minor Characters achieves its encompassing revision of recent literary history through a judicious mobilization of the notion of genre. The brilliant intuition informing this study is that, when *neither* ever more interpretations of familiar texts *nor* all-too sweeping sociological pronouncements that remain tone-deaf to textual detail will alter our understanding of literary history, what is needed is a critical object *scaled* in such a way that it articulates individual texts with larger developments. Rosen's extensive Introduction compellingly argues that genre provides such a scaled object that can appeal, as he elsewhere puts it, "to the scholar who wants to reach for the breadth of social significance without abandoning the nuance of close reading" (181). The rest of the book demonstrates the affordances of genre by theorizing and contextualizing the recent history of one particular genre—that of what it calls "minor-character elaboration."

Minor-character elaborations develop characters from existing works, typically from the literary canon. The emphasis on character is crucial, as it distinguishes minor-character elaboration from, for instance, fan fiction, sequels, and spinoffs, which also take inspiration from existing works, but tend to develop new plots while taking characters for granted. The genre is also contiguous with other newly prominent genres such as multiprotagonist fictions and novels about famous novelists (182-86). The soft borders and overlaps between these genres is a strength of Rosen's approach: for one thing, it makes some of the book's grander sociological claims more convincing. Rosen correctly

argues that one of the constitutive limitations of the genre studies of scholars like Franco Moretti is that they consider each member of a genre category as equally salient, thus remaining blind to differences between core constituents and borderline cases, and even more to works that combine features from different genres. The members of Rosen's genre categories are held together through a kind of Wittgensteinian family resemblance, which makes fuzzy boundaries entirely unproblematic and makes his categories both flexible and resilient. Rosen calls his approach a "qualitative empiricism" and admits it is "purposefully anecdotal" (122); it enlists strategic focused readings for a more encompassing account of the literary and the social field.

Minor Characters situates genre "at the nexus of form, cultural history, and material conditions of production and consumption" (viii). This last aspect is crucial: it moves beyond studies that see genre primarily as indexes of a political unconscious (I am thinking of Caren Irr's authoritative *Toward the Geopolitical Novel*, which like *Minor Characters* was published in Columbia University Press's "Literature Now" series) and aligns the book with a recent tendency to emphasize the institutional ramifications of postwar literary activity (a tendency often associated with the Post*45 network and with Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*). Rosen makes the all-important point that genre is, among other things, a canny business strategy: in an age marked by an almost consolidated conglomerization of publishing, genres "serve as indispensable technologies for minimizing risk and targeting readerships" (123).

"Conglomerization," Rosen notes, has resulted both in the pursuit of blockbusters and has also led to publishers catering to "a fragmented array of subcultures" (121). Minor-character elaborations can easily be targeted at minority constituencies, but also, through their affiliation with literary greatness (Shakespeare, Homer, and the Bible are frequent occasions for elaboration), to an educated audience that prides itself on its cultural sophistication. Indeed, minor-character elaborations frequently construct bookish protagonists, and this is transparently a "strategy to appeal to an audience that self-identifies as intellectual" (132). Authors and publishers alike have an obvious incentive to promote literary culture, and "selling books that feature booklovers to booklovers emerges as a reliable strategy for producers to reinforce the prestige of the literary and thus perpetuate a desire for their wares" (133).

I find this argument entirely convincing. It is also one of the arguments of Jim Collins's *Bring on the Books for Everybody*, of which Rosen is unnecessarily dismissive. But Rosen is right that his own three-pronged approach (not just formal features and material conditions, but also cultural history) leverages genre more successfully to revise the literary history of the last half century (and here it is unfortunate that Rosen seems to have missed Liedeke Plate's *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Rewriting*,

which tells much the same literary history through analyses of a genre that overlaps with Rosen's minor-character elaboration). The book's sustained focus on genre makes visible a culture-wide misreading of the cultural work that minor-character fiction does. When the genre took off in the 1960s (it has only been consolidated since the 1980s), it was received in the context of a multicultural politics of recognition and of a postmodern belief in the power of "unabashed cultural and intertextual appropriation" (24).

Yet celebrating these active rewritings of the canon as effective political achievements, Rosen shows, rests on a conflation of "literary representation with democratic self-representation" (88). It only works because writers, critics, and readers "understand the redistribution of narrative attention as a kind of justice" in its own right (88). Rosen singles out Alex Woloch's *The One vs. the Many* as a privileged place to witness that conflation; for Woloch, authors' decisions to use, for instance, flat characters are forms of violence against preexisting characters, and the failure to give minor characters a voice is somehow an assault on their liberal personhood. Convictions like these explain how the elaboration of once minor characters has been massively misread as a gesture of political restitution. This only makes sense, Rosen shows, against the background of the shared values of liberal pluralism—of "the rights of every individual to speak freely and of every group to contend on behalf of its interests" (40).

Not only is this liberal consensus not nearly as subversive as its proponents claimed, but Rosen also shows how it has perpetuated a misreading of several of the texts they invoke. For one thing, two of the early instances of the genre, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and John Gardner's *Grendel*, are overtly critical of the genre's formal reliance on an authentic narrative voice that the reader is invited to sympathize with. Rosen's patient readings show how metafictional devices undercut the suggestion of authenticity and how especially *Grendel* warns of the pitfalls of eliciting sympathy through voice. Rosen also shows how the pervasive investment in the politics of representation has resulted in a critical focus on a few works at the expense of the (by now far more numerous) titles that perpetuate rather than critique the cultural prestige of the classics. Rosen shows how the assumption that textual processes of characterization somehow count as political manipulations of real people (an assumption that the notion of "voice" naturalizes) makes critics and writers "misstate and overrate the kind of political work [the genre] might accomplish" (86). The critical elevation of the genre, in other words, serves the purposes of publishing conglomerates as well as the caste of literary scholars. Again, factoring in institutional dimensions proves crucial for a full account of recent literary history.

There is a name for the confluence of cultural and material developments in the last half century: neoliberalism. *Minor Characters* is somewhat reluctant to use this term as a label

for the situation it analyzes, yet the book is a key contribution to the literary history of neoliberalism. Rosen notes that the kind of identity reclaimed in minor-character elaboration “may be a matter of race, gender, or sexual orientation, but it is unlikely to be a lower-class one” (139). Describing Sena Jeter Naslund’s *Ahab’s Wife*, he observes that it invests in the rich imagining of a unique feminine subjectivity at the expense of a dramatization of “the effects of structural inequalities on women of the period” (144). The promotion of cultural identity at the expense of attention to class is crucial to what Walter Benn Michaels has influentially analyzed as the neoliberal novel—a kind of novel that is, in Rosen’s words, “wholly dedicated to the project of liberal self-making” (146), and that is not only compatible with but actively legitimates the material inequalities it leaves unaddressed. Mistaking literary attention for material change, the neoliberal novel is a key technology for promoting neoliberal subjectivity; the “egalitarian fantasy” that everyone deserves to have their voice heard, according to Rosen, shapes and animates both the genre of minor-character elaboration and *American Idol* (138). It is one of the main achievements of *Minor Characters* to ground this particular blend of cultural conservatism and social progressivism in literary history, even while revealing its dismal politics.