

David Bolt, *The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-Reading of Twentieth-Century Anglophone Writing* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2014), 167 pp.

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“My idea of blindness came from the movies,” says the narrator in Raymond Carver’s story “Cathedral.” “In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed....A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to.” The narrator’s words remind us how powerfully film and the arts can affect beliefs about those different from ourselves. In *The Metanarrative of Blindness*, David Bolt perceptively explores how Carver’s story and a range of other twentieth-century novels, stories, and plays in English represent blindness, both reflecting and shaping widespread attitudes toward visually impaired people.

In so doing, Bolt advances critical investigation of disability in literature, which is part of the rich interdisciplinary field of disability studies that has emerged in the last several decades. Building on work on race, gender, and other identities, scholars have investigated the multifarious, complex ways that disability shows up in literature and the cultural work that such depictions do. Seminal studies in the 1990s by scholars like Lennard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have led to some more specialized monographs on topics such as deafness, madness, or blindness in literature. Bolt extends our understanding of the latter, adding to work like Rod Michalko’s *The Mystery of the Eye and the Shadow of Blindness* (1998) and Georgina Kleege’s *Sight Unseen* (1999). Underpinning all of this academic inquiry is a spirit of advocacy and commitment to disabled people, who are often stigmatized and denied full dignity and rights.

This is no disengaged intellectual enterprise. Bolt brings valuable background to his project. First, as he states, he has been “registered as blind since my teens” and has used guide dogs for more than 20 years (2). Drawing on this experience, he brings in revealing first-person anecdotes and makes the topic personal throughout as he reveals common stereotypes and images of blindness (he adeptly uses autobiographical testimony from Michalko, Kleege, and Stephen Kuusisto too). Furthermore, Bolt is the founder and editor of *The Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, which over the past decade has become a vital publication and put him at the heart of the field (full disclosure: I have an article forthcoming in this journal). All of this experience readies him to explore the topic.

By “the metanarrative of blindness,” Bolt means the cultural understanding of blind people, an “overriding narrative that seems to displace agency” and that is apparently

largely unconscious (10). Turning to a broad range of both canonical and non-canonical Western literary works, Bolt traces recurring tropes that he avers are part of this cultural narrative. For example, he notes how many authors objectify visually impaired people by not referring to blind characters by name. Thus in "They," Rudyard Kipling's narrator speaks of "the blind woman," while the title of one of D. H. Lawrence's stories is "The Blind Man." Such terminology persistently has a distancing effect. Bolt goes on to probe how blind characters are repeatedly associated with animals, such as when the blind citizens in H. G. Wells's "The Country of the Blind" "sniff the air" like dogs. Blind characters, he shows, are alternatively perceived as asexual (because they do not participate in erotic eye symbolism) and hypersexual (because of their groping sense of touch). Such hypersexuality especially turns up in the American science fiction writer John Varley's "The Persistence of Vision," which describes a separate deaf-blind community where people frequently go naked and engage in casual sex. Bolt suggestively connects such representations to negative eugenics, the cultural desire to remove people deemed unfit from the population. He argues that fear underwrites the metanarrative of blindness: fear of blind people, of contagion, and of becoming blind oneself. We see such terror in José Saramago's *Blindness*, where an epidemic of blindness and chaos breaks out, and in the suicide wishes of newly blinded characters like Joseph Conrad's Captain Whalley in *The End of the Tether*. The effect is a potent, and mostly negative, cultural narrative that Bolt astutely says affects all people, visually impaired and non-visually impaired alike.

Although the ethos that Bolt uncovers is largely dehumanizing, we do see positive examples, and he could perhaps do more with these. In Carver's "Cathedral," for instance, the blind man, Robert, disrupts many of the bigoted narrator's expectations: he laughs, smokes, and, in the story's memorable ending, teaches the narrator about human connection. Bolt acknowledges this breaking of stereotype in an endnote, but could make this confounding of expectations more prominent. Similarly, he sometimes examines works that problematize the idea of curing blind people. In northern Irish playwright Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney*, the protagonist has her vision restored after forty years of blindness, but becomes institutionalized and seriously ill as a result. Later, in another chapter, he discusses John Millington Synge's play *The Well of the Saints*, which features a blind couple who reject the possibility of a cure. By keeping these examples discrete instead of considering them together, Bolt misses a chance to show even more forcefully how they complicate the metanarrative of blindness and the privileging of sight as supreme.

Some readers might also point to the thriving, self-sufficient communities of blind people in Wells's "The Country of the Blind" and John Varley's "The Persistence of Vision" as positive, a position that Bolt acknowledges but with which he disagrees: he

rejects any binary division between visually impaired and sighted people. In this way the book may be somewhat controversial. While Kleege, for instance, claims the word “blind” as a mark of pride, Bolt renounces it, preferring “person who has a visual impairment” instead. As he points out, most “blind” people have some sight. This attitude is especially interesting to me because of my background in the deaf community. Deaf people who use sign language proudly call themselves “deaf”—even though only about fifteen percent of “deaf” people hear nothing at all—and abjure “hearing impaired,” which is the opposite what Bolt supports.

This question of boundaries has animated disability studies over the last two decades. Some concept of borders, Tobin Siebers once opined, is necessary for identity and political empowerment. However, Bolt, perhaps conscious of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s claim that oppositional categories always exist in a dominant-subordinate relationship, and influenced by Lennard J. Davis’ idea of dismodernism, resists any such division. All humans exist on a spectrum of visual ability, he asserts, and an “entrenched binary system” leads to “terrible logic” that positions visually impaired people as subhuman (125). His goal, he states at the end of book, is no less than “the dismantling of the metanarrative of blindness” and the binary on which it rests (131). His position raises questions about the best way that visually impaired and disabled people generally can advocate for themselves. Should we insist on the dissolution of binaries, or, as Simi Linton has argued, retain at least some of them as long as discrimination and prejudice persist? I am inclined toward the latter view, but Bolt makes a provocative case.

The book fruitfully opens up new areas for study, including for those interested in American literature. Although Bolt includes American authors like Carver, Varley, Thomas Wolfe, Susan Sontag, Stephen King, and Charles Wheeler, he mostly deals with writers from the United Kingdom, which makes sense, given that he is British. One could do more to chart the metanarrative of blindness in American cultural history. Some fictional examples Bolt does not discuss seem to reinforce his theory of a negative metanarrative. The blindness of Mrs. Dalton in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* seems to work on a metaphorical as well as literal level, suggesting how she does not perceive her own racism, while in Tennessee Williams’s play *A Streetcar Named Desire* a visually impaired Mexican woman selling flowers on the street seems to herald death. However, representations based on actual historical figures appear more complex. Willa Cather evidently based the African American pianist Blind D’Arnault, in *My Antonia*, on Blind Tom, a musician who was a sensation in the late nineteenth century. William Gibson’s play *The Miracle Worker* is of course based on the early life of Helen Keller. When we add in the work of American blind poets like Lynn Manning and Stephen Kuusisto, the US metanarrative seems intricate and doubtless could use more exploration.

Bolt's study raises other potential areas of inquiry. Despite the titular weight he gives "Anglophone," we do not encounter postcolonial authors writing in English, like J. M. Coetzee (who wrote about a blind indigenous girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*) or Chinua Achebe (who made the Chief Priest's father blind in *Arrow of God*). How do non-Western authors extend or alter the cultural understanding of blindness? Finally, Bolt leaves room for others to explore the larger function of blindness of these texts. For example, why does James Joyce—who was visually impaired himself—choose to include a blind stripling in *Ulysses*? By calling attention to the metanarrative of blindness and its implications, Bolt has produced a worthwhile and fascinating study.