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Katie Ritson, *The Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands. Literary and Historical Imaginaries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 170 pp.



Katie Ritson's *The Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands* presents a timely contribution to a growing body of scholarship focusing on water and floods—a body of work that gains in urgency as climate crisis worsens. In *The Shifting Sands* Ritson convincingly demonstrates how a range of texts from the mid-nineteenth century onwards are not only case studies for human-nature relations in the past, but provide ways of thinking about the present and future. She discusses literary works from Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and England from a truly interdisciplinary perspective. Bringing together both environmental history and ecocriticism, *The Shifting Sands* is an example of the best kind of environmental humanities scholarship, steeped in both disciplines and traditions.

The interdisciplinarity of Ritson's book shows not only in the combination of theoretical perspectives, but also in her discussion of literary texts. Instead of exploring the novels, short stories and the occasional poem—from Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and England—separately the chapters in the book are organized around themes. In four out of the six chapters, the discussion of texts from different countries is interwoven. The exceptions to this approach are the third and fourth chapters in the book, both focusing on the literature of East Anglia.

The book's first chapter—"Against the Tide. Living with the North Sea"—explores the crises of living with the North Sea. The central texts in this chapter are Hans Christian Andersen's *De to Baronesser* (*The Two Baronesses*) from 1848 and Arthur van Schendel's *De Waterman* (*The Waterman*), a Dutch novel published in 1933. Both works are not only environmental in nature, but also, as Ritson shows, engage with politics and national identity. The chapter concludes on a discussion of Dutch literary responses to the 1953 North Sea Flood. The book's explicit commitment to showing the relevance of the (historical) literary imagination of the North Sea is reinforced in chapter two. This chapter—"Conquest and Control. Engineering the Anthropocene on the North Sea"—approaches Theodor Storm's 1888 *Der Schimmelreiter* (*The Rider on the White Horse*) and the short story "The Netherlands Lives with Water" (Jim Shepard, 2010) exemplify cultures of disaster on the North Sea shore. Cultures of disaster, a term frequently used by historians, refer to "the cultural processes of learning from and trying to prevent recurring crises arising from the hazardous settlement in littoral areas" (49). Indeed, the concept might be used for life in the Anthropocene as a whole, as Ritson shows in this chapter.

Chapters three and four have a less comparative and interdisciplinary character than the earlier and later chapters in the book. In chapter three—"A Sense of Place in the Anthropocene. W.G. Sebald and East Anglia"—Ritson brings a fresh approach to a text familiar to many critics in the environmental humanities, W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995). Ritson suggests that *The Rings of Saturn* can be read as a literary account of the Anthropocene, through its ecocentric embedding of Enlightenment history in a planetary context; its treatment of anthropogenic damage; and finally, through the way in which it places humanity as a species in a historical context. Moreover, she makes the case for Suffolk as an especially significant place in the Anthropocene. The Suffolk coast, Ritson notes, "is the fastest eroding coastline in Europe and its visible instability and vulnerability to storms and tides have been a constant feature of the landscape" (83). Sebald's literary engagement with this coast, then, is also an engagement with a landscape that lends itself particularly well to imagining life in the Anthropocene. Chapter four approaches the previous chapter's focus on East Anglia from the perspective of new British nature writing, especially the work of Robert Macfarlane. Focusing on two short pieces by Macfarlane—"Ghost Species" (2008) and "Silt" (2012)—Ritson shows how the instable, shifting landscape of East Anglia also functions as a literary palimpsest, in which past, present and future are written.

Chapter five and six again show the comparative approach of the first two chapters. Time is central to chapter five—"Causeways to the past. Anthropocene and Memory in Contemporary Novels"—which explores *What I Was* (2007) by the American novelist Meg Rosoff and the Norwegian novel *Mandø* (2009) by Kjersti Vik. Both novels, Ritson argues, are exemplary texts of the Anthropocene as "both novels use their lowlands setting to move between the past and future of the environment, engaging with questions of time, human agency, and environmental change that are so central to understandings of the Anthropocene" (115). In chapter six, Ritson turns towards two speculative texts that ground petro-fiction (a term denoting fictions concerned with hybrid human-petroleum actions that Ritson takes from Heather Sullivan) in the special context of the North Sea coast. China Miéville's "Covetithe" and the long poem "Solaris korrigeret" ("Solaris Corrected") by the Norwegian poet Øyvind Rimbereid place the North Sea in a larger global risk culture dependent on fuel.

As Ritson emphasizes in the book's brief conclusion, her readings are informed particularly by Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay "The Climate of History: Four Theses" from 2009. Translating this work by a historian into a literary context, Ritson uses literary texts as means of engaging with and responding to Chakrabarty's theses. The success of this approach demonstrates how Ritson consistently frames works of literature not only in wider literary traditions, but also in terms of scholarship on the Anthropocene, both literary and historical. Showing that the North Sea lowlands are real places *and* places of the human imagination, *The Shifting Sands* provides depth and insight even for scholars not working on one of the national literatures that Ritson explores. Moreover, the book shows an impressive range and familiarity with not only a variety of different texts, but also with a range of theoretical perspectives.