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Lorraine Kerslake, *The Voice of Nature in Ted Hughes's Writing for Children: Correcting Culture's Error* (Routledge, 2018), 192 pp.

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Surprising as it may sound, this is the first book entirely dedicated to Ted Hughes as a children's writer. Over the past few decades, limited scholarly attention has been paid to Hughes's work for young people in both areas of children's literature and ecocritical studies. Now is the right time to revisit Hughes's children's writing; the context of a world that has lost its balance is ever so relevant today as environmental degradation intersects with the rapid digitalisation of human interactions. There is the common concern about the decline of children's outdoor activity in urban areas and the consequent alienation from the natural world. Such "extinction of experience," to use Robert Pyle's term, has a devastating impact on children's wellbeing as well as their attitudes towards the environment. Lorraine Kerslake's *The Voice of Nature in Ted Hughes's Writing for Children* can therefore be read as a response to the urgent call for reconnecting children (and adults) with nature, based on Hughes's conviction that "Every new child is nature's chance to correct culture's error" (*Winter Pollen* 149). It is a timely study that raises questions about the role of children's literature in relation to the environmental crisis, crediting Hughes's legacy with the power to revive what Rachel Carson calls a "sense of wonder" towards the environment.

Kerslake's in-depth discussion of a representative selection of Hughes's writing for children unravels the healing agenda that runs through his whole body of work. In the introduction, Kerslake puts forward a two-fold notion of Hughes's healing quest: one related to his own fractured self and the other to the wider ecological crisis. This frame clarifies her choice of dividing the book into two parts that appear to be of complementary importance. The parts titled "Speaking through the Voice of Nature" and "Correcting Culture's Error" directly refer to Hughes's vision of his poetry. It takes root in the natural world and aims "to direct readers (listeners) towards certain faculties – inner concentration, inner listening and dependence on the spontaneous mind rather than on the calculating and remembering mind" as Hughes writes in a letter to Lissa Paul (*Letters* 483).

With the aid of such letters and other archival material, Kerslake elaborately elucidates how Hughes's personal healing quest informed his ecopoetics. It seems difficult for Kerslake to separate Hughes's biography from his creative work, especially in the light of Timothy Clark's definition of ecopoetry which she quotes: "a space of subjective

redefinition and rediscovery through encounters with the non-human" (Clark 139). Many scholars have attempted to study Hughes's work through the lens of his personal experiences, most notably Neil Roberts's *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (2006) and recently Yvonne Reddick's *Ted Hughes: Environmentalist and Ecopoet* (2017). Kerslake's book, however, sheds light on Hughes's 'inner self that was often masked in his writing for adults' but revealed and embodied in his children's writing (1). Accordingly, she reads "Orpheus" (1971) and *Ffangs* (1986) as the most "redemptive" of all his children's plays and stories in dealing with his own traumatic experience.

Kerslake sets out to trace Hughes's sense of ecological healing through his children's writing and work, bringing to the fore Hughes as an eco-educator. The transition from Hughes's biographical background to the detailed readings of children's works goes through "Hughes's cauldron of ideas" about childhood and education. The close examination of his handbook *Poetry in the Making* (1967) and the "Myth and Education" essays (1970, 1976) highlights the therapeutic power of the creative process. Kerslake makes invaluable links between his critical and imaginative writings, clearly articulating Hughes's philosophy of holistic education which emphasizes the role of imagination in reuniting our inner and outer worlds.

How could the rift between the two worlds be healed in the realm of children's literature? To answer this question, Kerslake follows the strands of the healing quest as manifested in the development of Hughes's own environmental consciousness across the different genres of drama, poetry and prose. Within the parameters of "ecodrama," Kerslake shows how environmental ethics is developed alongside his play characters through which he criticises the dualities of science/education and culture/nature. Yet it is in his packed poetic oeuvre that Hughes takes the healing quest a step further by reconnecting those binaries set up in his plays. Kerslake argues that Hughes's children's poetry is "where the connection between the human/animal is perhaps clearest and where the adult/child reader can also be reconnected" (131). The tracing of animal representations along the course of his children's collections suggests the role of the ecopoet in redefining the human-animal relationship, recovering the reader's "sense of wonder," and raising ecological awareness. As change becomes urgently needed, narratives like *The Iron Man* (1968) and *The Iron Woman* (1993) voice an active sense of environmental responsibility related to pollution. In her ecocritical reading, Kerslake makes a compelling point about the complex connection between the psychological, the social and the ecological in Hughes's healing quest.

This broad exploration of Hughes's children's writing suggests an accessible route to recover our lost sense of wonder through the appreciation of nature and imagination. It opens up new areas of enquiry for scholars interested in Hughes studies, children's literary criticism, environmental humanities and education alike. While the therapeutic effect for Hughes has been magnified, the developmental impact of Hughes's work on children is yet to be examined in sufficient depth and detail. To find out how young readers engage with and interpret Hughes's voice, it might be useful to ground discussions about his children's literature in some kind of empirical research. Hughes's educational/environmental projects also present an important area for further research;

they provide blueprints for reforms in education as discussed by Kerslake in a subsequent paper (2020) that is worth adding to the book. Kerslake's *The Voice of Nature* is a reference to which one will return again and again for its insights into Hughes's children's work and environmental education.

Works Cited

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