

Review of *Trilogies as Cultural Analysis: Literary Re-imaginings of Sea Crossings, Animals, and Fathering*, by Gregory Stephens (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018). 257 pages, \$72.

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In *Trilogies as Cultural Analysis*, Gregory Stevens has brilliantly constructed what he refers to as a “big canvas” view of cultural studies. The breadth of his study, in several directions, certainly backs his claim. The book is divided into three sections (four if you include the lengthy and important introduction). Section one comprises three chapters on “Sea Crossings,” one way that humans experiencing the human condition pass “between worlds and across cultures” on their way to their own experience of enlightenment, modes of self-knowledge that three works of literature here analyzed invite us to share. After a sectional introduction devoted to laying bare the boundaries of the institutional, personal and disciplinary in cultural studies generally, chapter one is an essay devoted to Yann Martel’s 2001 novel *Life of Pi*. Chapter two takes as its canvas Esmeralda Santiago’s 2006 novel *When I Was Puerto Rican*. Next, in chapter three, “Tied to the Mast: Connecting the Dots of Transfigurative Sea Crossings,” Stephens following a theme from the classical *Ulysses*, via Melville, Hemingway and Coetzee, all the way to contemporary music.

The next section of *Trilogies* investigates “human-animal relations.” After an introduction devoted to “rhetorical analysis and visual narrative,” the essay that is chapter four examines Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, while in chapter five Stephens looks further into the literary-cultural history of the theme of human-animal relations in “Living with Coyotes: Rethinking Human-Animal Relations, from Aesop to *Prodigal Summer* (Barbara Kingsolver’s 2001 novel). Finally in section two Stephens examines nature, rites of passage and meat in Nicolas Roeg’s 1971 film *Walkabout*.

The final section before the conclusion is “Late Fathering in Literature” and examines the theme of fatherhood as a “further” journey in several ways, somewhat from a biographical point of view, while also examining Coetzee’s late fiction and also Hemingway’s father-son relationships as reflected in his posthumous 1970 novel “Islands in the Stream,” particularly the “Bimini” section.

In each section of *Trilogies* Stephens does a good job of balancing theme with approach in order to get at what he calls “the normative human condition.” *Trilogies* literally involves, from a writing-structure point of view, three sets of three, if you will, or a “triptych” in each section, as a way of circling the applicable “target area” as a means of bringing about a deeper understanding and engagement with his themes.

All-in-all *Trilogies* is a good and informative read about the possibilities and possible outcomes of each of these cultural studies sections. Stephens is to be commended for his unique style bringing three different way of seeing three different but common types of human transformation together in such a transparent and analytical way. Through the study of several personally brave and adventurous authors, Stevens comes to the conclusion that “crossing borders” and boundaries, personal, institutional, disciplinary and above all cultural, is a defining characteristic

of the human condition or perhaps of a life fully lived. As Stephens himself says, “The stories I examine in *Trilogies* are all, in one way or another, about trying to ‘repair the broken vessels’ that occur when people break out of their bubble, their cocoon, and cross the waters to a new world...” Perhaps then the attraction of this literature is particularly to readers seeking a fuller life or a fuller experience of life across borders physical and psychological. Clearly on some level it is about it is about learning as transformation.

Stephens also contrasts “academic writing” and “literary writing” from the point of view of style, readability and the *impact* of reading: his is a cultural studies which is also a cultural critique of academic writing. Its weakness as well as perhaps its strength lies in the personal and idiosyncratic manner with which it becomes, as he says, “almost an anti-theory” and also an attempt by a cultural studies practitioner to work within the tradition but also “speak truth to power.” The result is a conversation about academic discourse which is well worth the read, being broad, surprisingly thought provoking, sensible and potentially liberating.

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