

Web Roundup: Reading Literature as Medical Anthropologists

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By Cassandra Hartblay

This month's Web Round-up gathers reviews of recent works of fiction that engage medical anthropological themes. You'll also find some links to writings about anthropology and fiction from around the blogosphere. This slant toward literary subject matter is inspired by the recent addition of the [Top of the Heap](#) column to the Somatosphere family.

Fiction (or memoir) is often the place where we as writers and readers get to work through ideas and "what-ifs" in ways that journalism and ethnography don't allow. Science fiction (also called speculative fiction, or SF) offers a particular affinity with ethnographic thought, as an exercise in imagining other possible worlds. SF author Ursula K. LeGuin's anthropological roots especially underline this point (see [here](#) and [here](#)). And for many of us, while working in the field or writing ethnography, reading literature provides an important coda – a space to think outside of the immediate circumstance, to dwell in intuition and lyricism.

Fiction and/as Neuroanthropology

A coming book from the author of *Cloud Atlas* is an English-language translation of a personal memoir by a Japanese teenager with Autism. [The Reason I Jump](#) brings issues of neurodiversity and assisted communication out of the realm of behavioral science, and into personal prose. Along with Mark Haddon's fictional novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, the volume promises to add to a genre of Autism Spectrum writing, or, with of first person writing from authors with diagnosed cognitive differences. This not only offers an in-roads for scholars and students to approach an insider's perspective on neurodiversity, but opens the possibility for memoir or autoethnography of cognitive difference that, as G. Thomas Couser, Michael Angrosino, and Sanjay Gupta have all argued, can help to decolonize disability.

Cognitive difference as literary subject matter is not new. From Dostoevsky's protagonists in *Crime and Punishment* and *Diary of a Madman* to Jonathan Franzen's thematic focus on pharmaceutical use in contemporary American life in *The Corrections*, writers use the novel as a place to work out what kinds of thought drive human behavior. A recently

released novel titled [Umbrella](#), by Will Self, dwells in the world of British twentieth century psychiatry from post-WWI to early 2000s. *Umbrella* extrapolates on Oliver Sack's "Awakenings" story about the life course of people living with *encephalitis lethargica* (popularized in the film starring Robin Williams). Some reviews praise the formal disorder of the novel as an expression of the content – the disorder of the mind and so the disorder of the text. Others (e.g. on [NPR](#)) warn that the work, with its sprawling, modernist literary style, choppy narration, and refusal of chapters or other narrative breaks, can be intimidating to the reader. [The New Republic](#) suggests a middle ground, calling the novel's prose inaccessible at first, but ultimately catching and plot-bearing.

In the [New York Times Book Review](#), Judith Shulevitz highlights the way that *Umbrella* scrapes away at the medical roots of psychiatric diagnosis, hinting instead at social causation:

Looking back on his life, Busner [the protagonist], who never did stop believing that "mental illnesses were creations quite as much as inflictions," concludes that the post-encephalitic condition is indeed an existential phenomenology, that its symptoms express the pathologies of a disturbed world.

This suggestion, that socio-political structure is equally a root of mental illness as are neurological factors, is well-covered territory in anthropology and critical theory, from *Anti-Oedipus* to much of the contemporary ethnography reviewed on this blog. As R.D. Laing [writes](#), "We can see other people's behavior, but not their experience. This has led some people to insist that psychology has nothing to do with the other person's experience, but only with his behavior." According to the reviews around the web, *Umbrella* seems to offer an attempt to record inter-experience.

Finally, a recent book by Joshua Cohen, *Four New Messages*, takes on the challenge of sketching human meaning-making in the digital age. The book is reviewed in the [New York Times](#), discussed on the blog at [Harper's](#), and [Cohen is interviewed](#) on the KCRW radio program Bookworm. *Four New Messages* asserts that human brains "on the internet" are a subject for fiction as well as for scientific investigation.

Further Reading:

- For reading ideas at the anthropology/SF (Sci-Fi or Speculative Fiction) cusp, see the [open course page](#) put together by Erica James and Stephen Helmreich at MIT. They include both a statement on their philosophy of this intersection, and the syllabus,

with both novels and accompanying academic readings.

- Acclaimed British SF writer Gwyneth Jones has a collected volume of short stories, [The Universe of Things](#), as well as a book of collected critical essays on the genre, and her book, [Life](#), belongs squarely in the realm of feminist science & technology studies.
- Ryan at [Savage Minds](#) has a nice post from this past summer reflecting reading SF as a young person. He credits SF author Ray Bradbury as the person who “first sparked my interest in what we broadly call ‘the human condition.’”
- A curated collection at the website of the Journal of the Society for Cultural Anthropology offers a thoughtful essay by Shannon Dugan Iverson and Darren Byler about the points of convergence and divergence between [literary and ethnographic genres](#) – as traditionally distinguished by a concept of “truth” – over the course of the twentieth century. They also offer numerous reading suggestions, including fictional short stories, novels, ethnographic monographs, and critical articles.
- On her fieldwork blog, cultural anthropologist Cicilie Fagerlid observes that “no one does anthropology as well as novelists do.” For ethnographic fiction, she suggests: “[The White Tiger](#) on today’s booming India by Aravind Adiga, [What is the What](#), the life history of the Sudanese refugee, Deng, by Dave Eggers, or [The curious incident of the dog in the night](#) which shows, from the native’s point of view, so to speak, the life of a young boy with Asperger’s Syndrome, by Mark Haddon.”
- There is an engrossing [conversation](#) about the intersection of anthropology and fiction with author Laura Resau on anthropology-influenced young adult fiction [blog](#) Charlotte’s Library (maintained by Rhode Island archaeologist Charlotte Taylor). The thoughtful exchange addresses everything from the lack of lyricism in contemporary academic writing to the ethical problems of representing the other that ethnographers sometimes engage more directly than novelists. Resau herself describes her trajectory simply: “After I got my Masters, I decided that instead of continuing with my PhD, I wanted to dedicate myself to creative writing... with an anthropological twist.”
- The August 2012 edition of [Cultural Anthropology](#) included an interview with [Amitav Ghosh](#) (by [Damien Stankiewicz](#)) on Anthropology and Fiction. Ghosh holds a PhD in social anthropology from Oxford, and his historical fiction and journalistic

writing is widely published and has received numerous laudations. The journal has published several such fiction/ethnography articles over the years, and the links are collected [here](#).

- Lisa Wynn has a slightly older post on [Ethnographic Fiction](#) at Culture Matters.

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