

Cecilia MACHESKI (ed.), *Quilt Stories*, (Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1994, pp. ix+289, ISBN 0-8131-0821-7)

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[See table of contents](#)

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The stories that have often been absent from published documents about quilts are of special interest to me, so it was with anticipation that I agreed to review this book. The dust jacket describes a collection of "short stories, poems and plays by Bobbie Ann Mason, Joyce Carol Oates, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Dorothy Cranfield and many others." Anyone familiar with American literature will recognize most of these names as those of published and acclaimed authors (one Canadian and one British author are included; all but one writer are women). The table of contents, however, reveals again as many works by "unknown" writers, some identified only by a pseudonym or "anonymous." In her introduction, Cecilia Macheski explains the source of many of these works in popular genres and magazines where women, "often rejected by the mainstream literary world" (p. 1), began to publish. The collection spans the latter half of the nineteenth century up to the present, although it is not organized chronologically but thematically (five sections which take as their titles traditional quilt patterns: Memory Blocks, Double Wedding Ring, Radical Rose, Wheel of Mystery, and Old Maid's Ramble). This assemblage is described by the editor as "twenty-five literary 'blocks' [that] form a quilt of words...a sort of literary album quilt" (p. 1).

The quilt, as image or metaphor, provides the link between each of the literary works. In the pieces that work most successfully within this frame, "quilt" functions as more than a passing referent, and gives the story or poem its resonant centre, as when Canadian author Paulette Jiles has spirit voices say to the young child-quiltmaker, Lula, in the first section, "thou shalt make quilts, and these will tell their stories time without end, and protect thee with stories, even though the earth shall burn..." (p. 53). The metaphoric connection between quilts and stories works best where we might expect it to: in the sections on memory (subtitled "remembrance and meaning") and age and wisdom (the subtitle of "Old Maid's Ramble"). In the three thematic sections that form the middle of the book, quilts are more often present as descriptive domestic details around which related action (a quilting bee in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing*; a murder in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*) takes place. While a number of these in the second section, "Double Wedding Ring: Stories of Community and Courtship," portray the quilting bee as a site for women's conversation, the traditional feminine and literary conventions at work in these entries load the dialogue with stereotypes and clichés making it difficult to see, without greater editorial analysis, the "intricate, deliberate and often subversive networks women created as they told

one another stories" (p. 1). Sometimes equally opaque is the "struggle and change" identified as the subtext of the third section, "Radical Rose." The inclusion in the fourth section of one excerpt, *The Body in the Kelp*, a murder story with only passing reference to a quilt, seems to undercut the editor's claim that "in the imagery of the quilt women writers found the literary model they needed" (p. 2).

In her thematic, achronological juxtaposition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, popular and literary works, Macheski is hoping that what might on its own appear to be "a mere 'scrap'" will, when read against the others, "Create part of a pattern" (p. 4). The diverse forms, but similar themes, are intended to make "an argument for women's literary history as a continuous strand" (p. 1). Yet discontinuity was more apparent as I read the entries, introduced only by title and author without even a date of publication. Popular nineteenth-century works replete with stereotypes about both women and quilting are juxtaposed with contemporary works which dare to describe quilting as "colourless, exacting work" and quilters, metaphorically, with "bleached heads blindly seeking the sun" (Jane Wilson Joyce, pp. 118-119). Eliza Calvert Hall's "Aunt Jane" of 1898 (the date can be found at the back of the book under "Sources and Permissions") "wrought a transformation in the homely mass of calico and silk and worsted [into] Patchwork? Ah, no! It was memory, imagination, history, biography, joy, sorrow, philosophy, religion, romance, realism, life, love, and death" (p. 256). Against this all-inclusive list that romanticizes "folk culture" as do many of the earlier stories included here, it is something of a relief to hear Bobbie Lee Mason's contemporary and less reverent "Aunt Opal" ask her niece who adores her quilts, "Do you know what these quilts mean to me?...A lot of desperate old women ruining their eyes" (pp. 273-274).

It is with the "deconstructive" Aunt Opal that Macheski, a professor of English, chooses to end her collection, revealing perhaps her own bias and that of her preferred feminist reader. Such a reader might seek between the lines and in the briefly sketched author, and source notes at the end of the book for the historical contexts that inform the writers collected here. The importance of many of these stories, as the editor admits in her introduction, is less for their literary quality than for their record of domestic details and women's history. To assert the importance of these stories as documents of women's history, Macheski's contextualizing comments, as well as dates and details about each author would have been more usefully included before each entry. The historical and thematic range of women's history covered in these quilt stories, both popular and literary, makes it an intriguing and useful collection for those interested in quilts as well as women's literature and history. Yet "displayed" as they are, with the contextualizing "stories" that frame the stories themselves almost hidden from view, they risk becoming like quilts on a museum wall, meaningless "wall

hangings," divorced, as Alice Walker's narrator decries in the section on struggle and change, from "everyday use" (p. 181).

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