

Elizabeth King, *The Novelist in the Novel: Gender and Genius in Fictional Representations of Authorship, 1850–1949* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

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From the work of the eighteenth-century novelist Laurence Sterne to that of Charles Dickens, Herman Melville, and Henry James in the nineteenth century and James Joyce and Sylvia Plath in the twentieth, the figure of the novelist within the novel has long served as a narrative device to explore the complex interplay between reality and fiction. This metafictional technique has allowed authors to interrogate the creative process within a fictional frame, define the nature of art, critique the literary marketplace, and actively engage with cultural and gendered conceptions of authorship. Elizabeth King's *The Novelist in the Novel* approaches this phenomenon with a refreshing rigour, having identified a large corpus of some 886 texts, written or translated into English between 1713 and 2020, which feature fiction-writing characters. This surprisingly extensive corpus, a portion of which is supplied in the book's appendices, not only provides an invaluable archive for future research, but also reveals the prevalence and diversity of tales of the novelist in the novel, offering a comprehensive foundation for analysing how authors have continually critiqued and redefined the role of the writer across different literary periods.

King's own approach to the corpus, outlined in the book's introduction, is at once quantitative and qualitative. Taking inspiration from Franco Moretti's theory of "distant reading" to uncover some of the broader patterns and trends in the ways that authorship has been presented in fiction over time, King presents several graphs, which synthesise data on the number of publications in Britain and the number of author-characters produced within that total per decade, on the genders of author-characters, and on the genders of contributing authors. These materials are illuminating in their ability to represent the significance in scale and scope of the subject matter at hand, though there is a risk, as King herself acknowledges, that the richness of individual texts may be lost in the aggregate data. To that end, in King's own words, "the corpus illuminates the path, but close analysis navigates it," and each of the book's four chapters moves through a series of sustained close readings that interrogate more nuanced portrayals of authorship in individual

works.¹ There is further slippage, however, in the alignment King continually draws—at times a little too straightforwardly—between the values expressed by fictional creators and those of their creators.

Chapter One traverses some of the better-known narratives of the late Victorian period, featuring works by canonical white male writers who have significantly shaped the discourse around authorship and literary value. The chapter begins with an examination of Thomas Carlyle’s guidelines for judging literature which may or may not enter the canon in “The Hero as a Man of Letters” (1840) and outlines the period’s conflicted attitudes toward the literary marketplace, which saw an ongoing tension between the idealistic, struggling artist and the commercially successful writer. King then analyses Melville’s *Pierre, or The Ambiguities* (1852), George Gissing’s *New Grub Street* (1891), and several of James’s short stories in light of this dichotomy. Interestingly, this focus on some of the most established figures in literary history at the outset of King’s study serves to reinforce their dominance in the literary canon, while pointing to the kind of gate-keeping used to regulate and preserve a male dominated literary marketplace.

Moving from fictional male writers to fictional female writers, Chapter Two explores the two basic stereotypes with which women writers of the same period were forced to grapple: the “Silly Lady Novelist,” who was typically depicted as feminine and attractive, but naïve and unfit for the serious realist tradition, and the “New Woman Writer,” who, though more educated and independent, was criticized for being unfeminine, overly masculine, and unlovable. Drawing on works by Ella Hepworth Dixon, George Paston (Emily Morse Symonds), and Mary Cholmondeley, King presents a series of heroines navigating financial difficulties similar to their male counterparts, while facing additional obstacles: male relatives opposed to their literary pursuits, and publishers and editors who carefully control access to the literary world. Though the materials here, as in Chapter One, are readily familiar to scholars of the literary landscape of the *fin-de-siècle*, King offers a significant departure from previous work by demonstrating the ways in which women writers actively re-worked the categories available to them, in order to create space for more nuanced representations of

¹ Elizabeth King, *The Novelist in the Novel: Gender and Genius in Fictional Representations of Authorship, 1850–1949* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 13.

women writers. The characters in these novels, she argues, skilfully navigate and blend the supposedly redeeming qualities of each stereotype. They thereby forge successful literary careers within the male-dominated literary market while at the same time critiquing and challenging the cultural and societal forces that constrain them.

Chapter Three transitions from writers of the late Victorian era to those of the early twentieth century, registering a significant shift in the portrayal of authors in fiction across this divide. Unlike the Victorian emphasis on the financial and practical struggles of writers within the literary sphere, King claims, early twentieth-century narratives concentrate on the emotional, intellectual, and artistic development of a single, often autobiographical, author-character. Focusing on work by Thomas Mann, Joyce, and Thomas Wolfe, King argues that these modernist writers self-consciously draw on the earlier Romantic ideals of William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Charles Baudelaire in linking the time and space of childhood with the development of creative genius. By emphasizing the influence of Romantic ideals on modernist authors, the chapter perhaps overstates the continuity between these two literary movements. While Romanticism certainly impacted modernist thought, modernism also reacted against Romanticism in significant ways, incorporating influences from various other movements and philosophies. Nonetheless, King makes a compelling case for the Romantic influence upon the *Künstlerroman* genre, where youthful protagonists who demonstrate an early interest in poetry and art are shown to turn to writing prose in adulthood. This developmental trajectory not only infuses the resulting prose with poetic qualities, making it a rich subject for formalist critics, but also serves to elevate the novel's prestige by borrowing the high status traditionally associated with poetry.

Chapter Four again shifts in focus to female novelists and examines how they navigated and critiqued the early twentieth-century literary hierarchy. Taking its inspiration from Virginia Woolf's discussion of Shakespeare's sister buried at the crossroads, a symbol of the suppressed creative potential of women throughout history, King sets out to explore the extent to which the woman artist of the twentieth century might "finally be able to rise from her grave" and dedicate

herself to art.² Close analyses of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915–1967), Edith Wharton's *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) and *The Gods Arrive* (1932), and Dawn Powell's *Turn, Magic Wheel* (1936) are used to argue that these authors created hyper-masculine, celebrity male author-characters which resembled historical literary figures like H. G. Wells, Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway, in order to critique male dominance of the literary marketplace. The hyper-masculine characters in these novels typically view women only as muses, patrons, helpers, sexual conquests, or distractions, rarely acknowledging them as autonomous individuals or potential artists in their own right, while nonetheless frequently relying on their acknowledged labours.

A brief coda outlines more recent trends in the representation of authors in fiction, post-1950. These include a rise in popularity of so-called autofiction, as well as a new preponderance of fictional authors who work as academics and creative writing teachers, facing pressure to “publish or perish” within the neo-liberal university. King also gestures here towards the new anxieties of authors in the digital age, where the very existence of authors (and critics) is increasingly under threat by developments in artificial intelligence and the automation of labour. Ultimately, King argues, authors in fiction collectively serve as a kind of touchstone for the intellectual concerns of the moment, revealing cultural and structural shifts in the literary sphere even before their recognition in formal literary criticism.

In compiling a database of novels featuring novelists as the basis of this study, King's research has revealed fertile ground for examining the evolving definitions of literary genius, and the tensions between artistic integrity and commercial success across the Victorian and modernist eras. Further research might build on this, for example, by drawing in questions of intersectionality. Exploring how race, class, education, and other social factors intersect with gender in the depiction of author characters in fiction would continue to develop our understanding of literary genius and authorship across the corpus. Given the large number of texts King has categorised as author-stories, it is perhaps a little disappointing that the majority of these are left in the introduction, while the focus remains on such well-known writers as James, Gissing, Mann, Joyce, Wharton,

² King, *The Novelist in the Novel*, 187.

and Woolf. More engagement with those lesser-known works and authors with whom these canonical writers were in conversation would demonstrate more clearly the degree to which these writers are representative or exceptional, while dovetailing the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study more seamlessly. Nonetheless, this is a valuable and insightful study, which will be particularly useful to scholars of literary theory, gender studies, and those interested in the historical evolution of authorship.