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Kathryn Robson, *I Suffer, Therefore I Am: Engaging with Empathy in Contemporary French Women's Writing*. Cambridge, U.K.: Legenda, Modern Humanities Research Association, 2019. ix + 140 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-78188-675-5.

Review by Gill Rye, Institute of Modern Languages Research, University of London.

In this concise, fascinating book, Kathryn Robson explores text/reader relationships in a range of contemporary French women's writing, including memoirs, fictional, and autofictional texts that relate to narratives of suffering—in particular, anorexia (chapter one), the death of a child (chapter two), and maternal filicide (chapter three), with chapter four focusing on autofictional narratives. Such texts raise questions about how readers respond to and indeed may be positioned by them, by means of the authors' stylistic choices. Robson asks whether and how these positionings can be resisted and disrupted. The study has grown out of the row between two women authors in France—Camille Laurens and Marie Darrieussecq—when the former accused the latter of plagiarism and, moreover, argued that she should not write about the loss of a child when she had not herself experienced it. [1] Laurens's text *Philippe* told of the death of her baby son immediately after birth. [2] Darrieussecq's novel, *Tom est mort* is the fictional narrative of a bereaved mother whose young son fell to his death from a window. [3] Their mutual publisher supported Darrieussecq over the affair, and dropped Laurens from their roster. Darrieussecq subsequently responded to Laurens's accusations by writing a book on plagiarism, and defending the right of the fiction author to write about any topic. [4] Robson finds the key question to her study from this scenario, namely “what is at stake in reading narratives of other people's pain?” (p. 1).

While Darrieussecq's novel displays authorial empathy for a bereaved mother, Robson interrogates the notion of empathy in reading. In her substantial introduction, she explores theories and critiques of empathy, and painstakingly unpicks empathy from sympathy, pity, and compassion. She also makes reference to Judith Butler's notion of framing in relation to the cultural coding of subjects of suffering in order to think about reading, ethics, and empathy. Robson highlights the pitfalls of all too hastily assuming empathy and risking depoliticization of the suffering subject, consumption of their suffering, and voyeurism on the part of the reader. Her ethics of reading include bearing witness and self-reflexive interrogation for the reader, and she develops a new kind of unsettling, destabilizing, uncomfortable empathy.

Following the introduction, the four chapters each study a range of texts along thematic lines, exploring how the texts make an appeal to the reader and, in turn, how the reader can approach the texts and narrative subjects without simply consuming or all too easily identifying with their

pain. In chapter one, Robson shows how narratives of eating disorders, including texts by Delphine de Vigan and Amélie Nothomb, are rooted in their subjects' dissolution, and so they cannot be fixed as objects of empathy for the reader. She argues that they do not invite empathy or identification and thus leave the reader disoriented and distanced. Chapter two, on autobiographical narratives of bereaved mothers following the death of a child, including texts by Laurens, Sophie Daull, and Laure Adler, also shows how readerly empathy is rejected. The narrators categorically refuse to allow the reader to empathize, writing rather about the impossibility of others understanding or imagining how they feel. Here, Robson argues that we thus have to renegotiate our encounter with the text through what is not known or understood. She carries out a complex, inspiring analysis in order to extend conceptions of empathy in literature beyond what we can understand or share.

Chapter three tackles the difficult issue of maternal filicide, of which there have been many real-life cases in France over the last two decades. Here, Robson refers to an article by Marguerite Duras about the power of the media to invent constructions and how assumptions of empathy are bound up in these fictional representations. With reference to this article, and to the real-life cases on maternal filicide in France, including the famous cases of pregnancy and birth denial in which the babies' bodies were put in a freezer, Robson goes on to analyze the fictional representations and narratives of maternal filicide by Sophie Marinopoulos, Mazarine Pingeot, Véronique Olmi, and Laurence Tardieu, which were inspired by such tragedies. She finds that empathy is problematized and foreclosed, as the narrative subjects are blurred, incoherent, or bound up in violent relationships, from which the reader needs to take distance. Arguing for empathy, then, as a renegotiation of the text/reader relationship, Robson suggests that this can be done through opening up alternative narratives rather than response to a closed account. We need to interrogate our responses and positions in relation to these texts and not to assume that the gap between us and them can be bridged without registering the discomfort it generates.

Autofiction has become a form *par excellence* for women writers and especially in relation to narratives of suffering.<sup>[5]</sup> However, as Robson shows in chapter four, it calls for complex reading relations. The challenge is for the reader to negotiate empathy towards texts "that self-consciously question the truth of their own accounts, even as they narrate experiences of suffering that require acknowledgement" (p. 99). Drawing on Judith Butler's notion of narrative and ethical accounting for oneself, Robson explores text/reader relations in texts by Chloé Delaume and Vigan. These include gaps, uncertainty, and self-conscious unrepresentability, and as such the reader has to make room for these gaps, create distance, and interrogate the impact of the empathy they may bring to the text, which can itself do violence. Ultimately, Robson calls for a recognition of the responsibility of reading, of reading ethically, and of conceiving of a different concept of empathy--the recognition of the impossibility of understanding other people's pain while attempting to approach it with critical awareness.

This book engages with and responds to the difficult issue of how readers approach and respond to narratives of suffering. Such texts receive wildly differing responses, from trite labels, such as "misery memoirs" or "navel-gazing"; through simple, if problematical identification; to more positive, if challenging responses of self-reflection and self-interrogation. Robson shows that it is all too easy to assume empathy, and that empathy can itself do damage to the other. Her study is important because it deals with why readers may feel uncomfortable towards narratives of suffering and, in interrogating empathy, offers some pointers towards newly negotiated ethical empathetic responses. We should read these narratives and try to approach others' suffering, but

we need to interrogate our responses to them and take responsibility for our readings. This is a wonderful, sensitive book, beautifully and thoughtfully written, and I whole-heartedly recommend it to anyone who wants to think more about how we (might) read.

## NOTES

[1] Camille Laurens, "Marie Darrieussecq ou le syndrome du coucou," *La Revue Littéraire* 32 (Autumn 2007): 1-14.

[2] Camille Laurens, *Philippe* (Paris: P.O.L., 1995).

[3] Marie Darrieussecq, *Tom est mort* (Paris: P.O.L., 2007).

[4] Marie Darrieussecq, *Rapport de police: accusations de plagiat et autres modes de surveillance de la fiction* (Paris: P.O.L., 2010).

[5] See Shirley Jordan, "Autofiction in the Feminine," *French Studies* 67/1(2013): 76-84.

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