

BOOK REVIEW

THE ETHICS OF (IN-) ATTENTION IN CONTEMPORARY ANGLOPHONE NARRATIVE

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Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega (Eds.). *The Ethics of (In-)Attention in Contemporary Anglophone Narrative*. Routledge, 2024. xvi+264 pp. ISBN: 978-1003463610

Abstract: This review examines *The Ethics of (In-)Attention in Contemporary Anglophone Narrative*, edited by Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega, a timely anthology that interrogates how contemporary fiction engages with the ethics of attention and inattention in an era dominated by distraction. The volume's contributors analyze Anglophone narratives across diverse contexts—historical, ecological, political, and cultural—highlighting how literature brings neglected, silenced, or marginalized realities into focus. Divided into four parts, the collection explores theoretical frameworks, overlooked histories, the dynamics of attentional economies, and ecological ethics. While the book is ambitious in scope, its greatest strength lies in showing how fiction not only represents but also performs ethical attention, urging readers to cultivate a more responsible and responsive mode of perception. This review outlines the major contributions of the volume while assessing its significance and limitations.

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The omnipresence of digital distractions raises a pressing question: how can individuals cultivate attentiveness toward communal issues in a world where perception is fragmented? *The Ethics of (In-)Attention in Contemporary Anglophone Narrative*, edited by Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega, offers a compelling literary response. The volume situates itself within the ethics of attention, emphasizing that perception is not merely an individual act but a moral practice that requires governance, direction, and engagement. The editors argue that attention in literature is incarnated: it moves beyond acknowledgment of reality to active engagement, enabling fiction not just to represent but to perform ethical acts of attentiveness. This notion guides the contributions, which collectively illustrate how Anglophone fiction opens ethical spaces for marginalized voices, neglected histories, and overlooked ecologies. The anthology is divided into four parts: *Frames and Readers*, *Historical Invisibilities*, *The Forces of Inattention*, and *The Natural World*. Each part focuses on how attention operates within and beyond literary texts, ranging from political invisibility to ecological consciousness.

The first section situates attention within interpretive frameworks. Susana Onega engages with John McGregor’s *So Many Ways to Begin* (2006), invoking Walter Benjamin’s notions of the ragpicker and *Eingedenken* (remembrance) to highlight how literature recuperates marginalized experiences, such as the invisibility of working-class women in postwar England. Her analysis demonstrates how fiction transforms consciousness into perception, making attention performative. Miriam Fernández-Santiago turns to Dave Eggers’ *The Parade* (2017), situating it within the politics of attentional economies. Katia Marcellin then examines Harry Parker’s *Anatomy of a Soldier* (2016), showing how “interstitial ethics” can reframe attention through fragmented narrative forms. Collectively, these essays underscore how literary texts disrupt habitual inattentiveness and reframe neglected realities.

The second part foregrounds literature’s capacity to expose obscured histories. Merve Sarıkaya-Şen’s reading of Claire Keegan’s *Small Things Like These* (2021) brings attention to Ireland’s Magdalene laundries, spaces of institutionalized abuse where thousands of women and children were subjected to systemic violence. Sarıkaya-Şen emphasizes how Keegan’s novel challenges societal and ecclesiastical neglect by foregrounding caregiving and vulnerability as ethical imperatives. Subsequent chapters extend this concern to Romani women’s writing and minor literatures, drawing attention to historical and linguistic marginalities often dismissed by dominant cultural narratives. These contributions broaden the ecology of attention by reminding readers that literature can reframe silenced histories.

The Third section examines how inattention itself can function ethically. Ángela Rivera-Izquierdo analyzes Jenni Fagan’s *The Panopticon* (2012), which critiques surveillance culture and its impact on young women in institutional care. Paula Romo-Mayor addresses Jan Carson’s *The Last Resort* (2021), emphasizing the ethical imperative of attending to others across social and narrative levels. Alice Bennett’s essay on Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005) is particularly striking. She complicates the assumption that attention is always virtuous, suggesting instead that forms of carelessness or distraction can resist coercive demands for attention. Her analysis of Ishiguro’s carer-patient dynamic demonstrates how inattention may serve as a mode of liberation and ethical refusal, especially within feminist care ethics. This provocative stance broadens the scope of the volume by showing that ethical engagement sometimes requires disengagement.

The final section addresses ecological ethics. Bárbara Arizti reads Inga Simpson’s *Where the Trees Were* (2016) as a novel that foregrounds attentiveness to nature, linking human responsibility with environmental care. She emphasizes that recognizing interdependence between humans and ecosystems is foundational to ecological ethics. Ángelo Monaco’s discussion of Sarah Moss’s *Summerwater* (2020) highlights the relational dimensions of ecological attention in contemporary British

literature. Finally, Jean-Michel Ganteau’s reading of *At Hawthorn Time* (2015) highlights fiction’s power to foster grounded, routine attentiveness through ordinary experiences of nature and community, cultivating modest yet transformative ethical sensibilities. This anthology undoubtedly demonstrates that Anglophone literature not only represents marginalized experiences but also activates attentional practices in readers. The examined texts—from McGregor to Harrison—reveal politics of attention across surveillance, feminist care and ecological crises.

A key strength of the volume lies in its theoretical innovation: it insists that attention is not merely cognitive but incarnated, linking perception with ethical action. Particularly striking is its exploration of inattentiveness as potentially ethical, a position that complicates the moral binary often attached to attention. Nonetheless, the breadth of the anthology can at times overwhelm. The wide scope—from historical invisibilities to ecological attentiveness—risks diffusing its central arguments. Certain chapters, while insightful, might have benefited from clearer articulation of how their case studies directly advance the volume’s overarching framework. Moreover, the absence of discussion on Indigenous Australian narratives—such as Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1990), Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006), or Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance* (2010)—highlights a missed opportunity to address other marginalized traditions of attention and inattention. Despite these limitations, *The Ethics of (In-)Attention in Contemporary Anglophone Narrative* stands as a valuable resource for scholars of literary ethics, narrative studies, and cultural criticism. It offers nuanced insights into how fiction mediates attentional practices in relation to marginalized histories, social care, and ecological responsibility. The collection challenges readers to rethink not only what we attend to but how we attend, demonstrating that the ethics of attention remains a crucial concern in contemporary literature and society.

REFERENCE

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