

**Book Review: Kate Rigby. Dancing with Disaster.
Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for
Perilous Times. Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia
Press, 2015, 225 pp.**

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Kate Rigby. *Dancing with Disaster. Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times*. Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2015, 225 pp.

Disasters of all kinds have featured prominently in human history and culture. In her latest monograph, *Dancing with Disaster. Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times*, Kate Rigby masterfully deals with the onto-epistemological and ethical issues involved in disaster discourse and invites her readers to a dance on the literal (and very real) volcanoes of our current ecological crisis. Rigby presents us with a staggering historical account and traces the long philosophical and scientific traditions in which we stand when narrating and interpreting catastrophic events. In five chapters that deal with different disasters – from floods through fire storms to plagues – she manages to illustrate the entanglement of human and nonhuman agency in the complex histories of catastrophe and to illuminate their ethical reflections in imaginative literature in a number of close readings that range from the German Romantics to contemporary Australian children's writers.

Her readings are instructive in so far as they supplement the vast social and natural scientific literature on disaster discourse with a crucial humanist and cultural perspective and because they manage to include recent moves toward material agency, ecofeminism, and material ecocritical theory. This framework allows Rigby to account for the unaccountable, namely those natural and more-than-human processes that determine our living conditions on this planet and that influence our respective ways of dwelling and co-existing with the land. The “uncertainty”

involved in disaster discourse can be seen in the onto-epistemological and ethical problem of how catastrophes can be adequately categorized and labeled in an age of anthropogenic global warming – as Rigby reminds us from the outset, no disaster is ever only “natural.” Rather, the term has to be seen as a “hybrid phenomenon” (p. 13) itself, which fuses non-anthropogenic as well as social categories (cf. p. 14). While the social and technological aspects are now widely discussed and recognized in disaster studies, the cultural level is still developing as one of the most interesting strands of environmental discourse, and Rigby's text could well become a key text in this vibrant field as it uncovers the ethical dimensions of imaginative literature with regard to how it narratively frames disasters. This entails one of the principal arguments of the book, also encoded in the metaphorical title *Dancing with Disaster*, namely that new strategies and ways of thinking are called for in our “perilous times” – ways that do not only rationally account for an anthropocentric mastery over nature, but which take seriously “the unforeseeable” (p. 20), the “nonhuman agency” (p. 21) involved in our co-dwelling on this planet. “Dancing” highlights movement over stasis, improvisation, playfulness, and spontaneity over scientific doctrines, exclusionary mindsets, and hegemonic ideologies. It is an apt way of categorizing Rigby's ecological thinking and the readings of her exemplary texts (including Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, Theodor Storm's *Der Schimmelreiter*, Colin Thiele's *February Dragon*, and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*).

The five chapters of the book deal with different kinds of disaster, covering a vast historical time-span as well as geographical space, moving from Antiquity through the Enlightenment and Romanticism to our contemporary age of anthropogenic

climate change and stretching from Europe to Australia. This gives Rigby a welcome diachronic and transnational scope, including a deep historical perspective that brings the traditions of Western reasoning and postcolonial issues swiftly into focus. The first chapter, "Moving earth," deals with the harrowing social and cultural consequences of the Great Lisbon Earthquake (1755), which sent shockwaves all over Europe and whose lingering effects could still be felt years later. Rigby unfurls the historic discourses with great expertise and clarity and thus succeeds in uncovering the major ways of interpreting disaster still prevalent today (moral-religious, techno-scientific, and socio-political). Her close reading of Kleist's *The Earthquake in Chile* is exemplary for the way in which imaginative literature as a de-pragmatized discourse succeeds in bridging the gap between these interpretative schemata and shows how catastrophes unfold by and amidst an entanglement of human and nonhuman agents. It is in this context, in the face of the breakdown of ecological and social stability and dear-held notions of (divine or human) control, that literature assumes the role of a self-reflective cultural instrument that can point to limits and blind spots of knowledge and create new knowledge at the same time.

The ensuing chapters all follow a similar pattern that interweaves philosophical and non-fictional texts with imaginative literary explorations of the perilous co-presence of humans and other-than-human nature on this planet. "Spreading pestilence" looks at disease and epidemics as disasters marked by a hybridity that involves both human and nonhuman beings and that unfolds

through the body of an organism rather than the metaphorical body of the earth. The subsequent chapter, "Breaking waves," elaborates further on this posthuman perspective by incorporating elemental philosophy and material ecocriticism in a discussion of water's role in the formation of the biosphere and its complex entanglement with the evolution of humankind's settlements since Antiquity. The call for a more sensible interaction and co-dwelling with the more-than-human environment is further developed in the last two chapters, "Proliferating fire" and "Driving winds." In these, the author takes us to her homeland, Australia, and presents us with the instable island ecology of a continent prone to a risky fire ecology and heavy thunderstorms. Building on recent trends in postcolonial ecocriticism that focus on the systemic violence involved in land appropriation by government initiatives and corporate undertakings, Rigby underlines the need for the acknowledgment of "patterns of connectivity" (p. 173) that help challenge dominant mindsets and invite a reimagination of how nonhuman forces are entangled with (and can trump) human endeavors and enterprises. All in all, Rigby's book manages to offer a timely and much needed humanist take on disaster discourse. Its deep historical perspective, its focus on the narrative framing of human-nature relations, and the call for their ethical re-evaluation make *Dancing with Disaster* an essential read for scholars interested in the "environmental humanities."

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