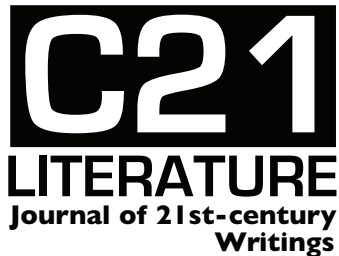




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Review

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REVIEW

Alice Bennett, *Contemporary Fictions of Attention: Reading and Distraction in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2018), ISBN: 9781474282628

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Why do we look to the books we read to teach us how to pay better attention? In her second monograph, *Contemporary Fictions of Attention: Reading and Distraction in the Twenty-First Century*, Alice Bennett identifies this tension; that there is a consensus of sorts that laments waning attention in the digital age, and seeks the salvific qualities of reading to get our attention spans back on track. Meanwhile, much of the contemporary literary fiction that is held up as models of attention does not subscribe to this crisis of distraction—and nor does Bennett, since after all, the novel ‘turns all its greatest threats into fodder for its survival’ (p. 4). In fact, many of these novels explore, even encourage, inattention and distraction. What Bennett sees in the literature is a tendency towards ‘an aesthetic of inward attention’, which she defines as ‘a variety of meta-attention that deflects part of the readers’ attention back from the book and onto the texture or fluctuation of reading attention itself’ (p. 8).

Throughout, Bennett alerts us to the extent of our attention economy, identifiable via the loaded notion of ‘paying’ attention, as well as in the mindfulness market, the currency of clickbait and retweets, and in surveillance and data interpretation. One of the many striking realisations borne of Bennett’s book is that once you attend to attention, you not only notice that the attention economy is everywhere, but also

how fruitful a lens of attention studies can be, in order to inspect our chosen texts and even the discipline itself. This is because the politics of attention is rife in academia, too. Most academics necessarily have to ferret out which sections of a book will be relevant to their work, often being highly selective of what is deserving of their attention; a process which is exacerbated by forms of precarity and overwork up and down departmental rosters. Even this book review is ultimately intended to help you work out if the book I'm reviewing is worth the time it takes to pay attention to it. Within literary studies, Bennett notes how close, deep, and surface reading practices relate to the significance of attention within the history of reading itself. Elements of narrative and form pertain to attention, too; red herrings, cliffhangers, and even footnotes, chapters, and paragraph breaks mediate, test, and encourage our attention.

The introduction to *Contemporary Fictions of Attention* deserves special attention (and, I would argue, repeat attention), acting as something of a standalone meditation on attention in contemporary culture. Taking 1996 as 'the starting point of this new era of distraction-crisis discourse' (p. 3), Bennett's introduction guides readers through this discourse and out the other side, into a way of thinking that does not berate readers for tangential thinking, breaks for people-watching, or texting. Novels by the authors discussed in the book (David Foster Wallace, Joshua Cohen, Ali Smith, Tom McCarthy, Zadie Smith, and Ben Lerner) aren't 'self-improving', whilst still being interested in the quality of attention; 'Not only has reading always been inattentive, but the play of attention and distraction is part of the structure of narrative itself' (p. 16). This introduction would sit comfortably within contemporary literature and culture modules, using attention as a thought-provoking, overarching way to conceive of set texts aside from the usual periodisation and generic classifications. Furthermore, it is encouraging, even freeing, for students and staff with specific learning difficulties or differences to read a piece of academic work featuring a subterranean message that pristine concentration is not a prerequisite for a degree or indeed a career in English literature. On a similar note, Bennett also calls out problematic usage of illness-as-metaphor that somehow persists in contemporary criticism and theory as well as in

attention studies, proving that it is possible to write about the natural rhythms of reading without comparing distraction to experiences of neurodiversity or disability.

The author-focussed chapters contribute to scholarship on each writer in their own right, with especial highlights being 'The Distraction of Both' on Ali Smith and 'Reading Absorption' on Ben Lerner, the latter of which acts as a conclusion. "Focus, People!" on David Foster Wallace centres around the idea that contemporary attention discourse is predicated on contradictions, and that Wallace enacts these contradictions, which Bennett inspects in relation to Wallace's 'Twenty-Four Word Notes' for the *Oxford American Writer's Thesaurus*, 'This is Water', 'E Unibus Pluram' and 'The Entertainment' in *Infinite Jest*. Bennett wonders if the trend of 'mega-novels' exists not just to teach us about attention but, less prescriptively, if they are seeing if we care enough about them to persist with reading them (p. 32). Narrative and temporality of different forms are the focus of the third chapter, 'Present-Mindedness', which discusses capitalist values of presenteeism and 'attention as presence' (p. 69). Using the story 'McDonald's', Bennett proposes a compelling way of reading Cohen's oeuvre alongside the notion of procrastination as a way to disrupt 'the temporal rhythm of present-mindedness' (p. 69).

'The Distraction of Both' is the most thorough reading of the two halves of Ali Smith's *How to be both* that I've found. It preserves the joy of reading the novel via Bennett's lucid style, whilst fully exploring Smith's games of split attention. It deserves a special mention for using referencing that accommodates whichever version of the novel that the reader might possess. This chapter also lays out a fundamental element of Bennett's argument, which is 'how a work of art can provoke and reward both attention and distraction', which speaks to the visual art central to Smith's novel as well as the novel itself, and beyond that to other contemporary works (p. 72). 'Amputated Attention' on Tom McCarthy uses two of his metaphors—the prosthesis and the blind spot; don't these subscribe to illness-as-metaphor?—to examine the idea that while 'something must be lost in order to gain access to technology' (p. 93), this loss is not unique. Bennett quotes McCarthy here: 'The hardware changes over time, but the base situation doesn't' ('How Technology Rewrites Literature').

Chapter six, 'Beginning to Mind', encircles a question proposed in Zadie Smith's *The Embassy of Cambodia*; should we draw 'a circle around our attention' as an act of self-care, so that we don't become consumed by responsibilities to others. This chapter develops the useful image of the circle in relation to 'fiction's formal imperative to exclude' (p. 24) and succeeds in demonstrating the scope and evolution of Smith's attention to an ethic of mindfulness. In the final chapter on Ben Lerner, Bennett shows how Lerner dramatises fluctuating states of absorption within his novels, placing absorption alongside a self-conscious awareness of 'a prevailing cultural norm which responds to art only through the discourse of critique' (p. 139). Bennett holds our attention for a little longer, showing us how attention paid to attention and inattention doesn't have to pierce our affective experience during reading. She leaves us with the suggestion that there is an affective capacity inherent in asking ourselves what we notice and why.

It feels reductive to simply affirm that paying attention to Bennett's *Contemporary Fictions of Attention* pays off, since the book shows us how disciplined focus is only one possible stance, amongst 'pleasurable flow, self-conscious mindfulness, split attention' (p. 137), distraction, and absorption. With this in mind, it is perhaps more fitting to say that paying attention to the texture and rhythm of your own reading alongside Bennett's arguments makes for a surprisingly refreshing and generative reading experience. A particular turn of phrase, or a piece of close reading sparks your own train of thought and, somehow, Bennett's observations have carried you into a moment of 'inward attention' of the kind laid out across the chapters. Bennett subtly and generously facilitates these quiet moments, which are a precious reminder of the value of letting our attention wander, whether it is directly productive for our work or not. It shouldn't feel radical to be reminded that it is okay to be distracted, but it does.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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