
BOOK REVIEWS

John Fowles. *Wormholes: Essays and Occasional Writings*. Ed. Jan Relf. NY: Henry Holt, 1998. 404p.

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Most readers will know John Fowles from his fiction, such as the early postmodernist *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or his previous novel, *The Magus*, recently re-published as a Modern Library classic (and placed by that series' editors on their controversial list of the 100 best English language novels of the twentieth century). Fowles' non-fiction will be less familiar, having typically appeared as magazine articles or as book prefaces. *Wormholes* collects most of these scattered essays into one volume, introduced by English scholar Jan Relf and arranged into four topic areas: writing, nature, culture, and literature. This last group, eleven essays in literary criticism, will be of particular interest to language professionals.

The earliest critical essay, "My Recollections of Kafka," almost perversely is about how little Fowles can recall of Kafka's works since having read them twenty years before. Fowles proceeds to use himself as a case study in reader-response criticism leading to speculation about why some works last and others do not. Two other essays are about Thomas Hardy, Fowles' predecessor in Dorset as novelist and local historian. In "Hardy and the Hag," Fowles draws on psychological theory about artists who are particularly sensitive to loss of intimacy with the mother and expend their adult literary efforts pursuing the recovery of that state; he speculates over how such a sense of loss may have energized Hardy, and how these possibilities apply to his own situation as a husband and as a writer.

The other essays on literature also focus on writers of some personal interest to Fowles. Although "Conan Doyle" examines formal techniques in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* to arrive at insights into the appeal — and limitations — of detective fiction, part of the story's attraction for Fowles is evidently its setting on Dartmoor, a stark landscape that Fowles knows intimately. In "John Aubrey and the Genesis of the *Monumenta Britannica*," as Fowles traces the work and mental habits of the seventeenth-century antiquarian, a reader may notice that Fowles and his subject both share a fascination with Stonehenge as well as a tendency to work unsystematically. "The Lost Domaine of Alain-Fournier" appeared originally as an afterword to an English translation of *Le Grand Meaulnes*, a novel whose

influence on him Fowles has long acknowledged. Reading this essay, one wonders if Fowles — like Alain-Fournier, or Hardy, or Dante — also wrote under the spell of an attraction he never quite got over. In “*The Man Who Died: A Commentary*” Fowles not only appraises D.H. Lawrence’s novel about the (secular) resurrection of Jesus but also defends Lawrence generally against his detractors, whose numbers seem to be growing. “He remains to me,” Fowles writes in 1992, “of the dimensions, in the context of both the Victorian and our own times, of a peak in the Everest range, or of the importance of rich old cities such as Rome or Paris, or of the value of some whole botanical genus, an oak or primrose family — much too lastingly significant to be forgotten.” Fowles’ admiration for Lawrence probably has something to do with the comparable seriousness at the heart of their novels.

Other fascinating pieces in *Wormholes* are outside the section of literary criticism. In the “Writing” group of essays, for example, Fowles describes various states of his mind as he was composing *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. The “Culture” group includes essays on the 1960s obsession with Hollywood “starlets,” on the 1982 war in the Falklands, and on the difference between being English and being British. The “Nature” group includes “The Nature of Nature,” an essay that culminates decades of Fowles’ thinking about his relationship to the physical environment, previously available only in a limited edition book for \$750.

My few reservations about *Wormholes* involve editorial decisions. A surprising omission from this collection is “The Tree,” usually excerpted when it has been anthologized elsewhere, and probably Fowles’ finest essay. With the essays that have been included, I felt a small disappointment over some changes made to the original versions. I have no objection to the way Fowles has occasionally updated their content, for example to insert an observation about the death of Princess Diana into an essay from 1982, but it was surely not necessary for the editor to update his style, throughout, so that it would conform to current preferences for non-sexist pronoun usage. One particularly awkward revision appears in the essay “Weeds, Bugs, Americans,” from 1970: “It seems bad enough that a man or woman can buy a gun across the counter without question, but just as bad that he or she can go straight out and immediately start firing it at any wildlife that crosses their path.” Another unwelcome change, in “Land,” replaces *bonne vauux*, an eighteenth-century French rural expression used by Nicolas Restif de la Bretonne, with a modernized equivalent phrase, *bon val*. The older phrase still appears in one of Fowles’ novels, however, and various critics have discussed — without seeming to feel confused — the importance of the *bonne vauux* in Fowles’ work. To my ear, these stylistic changes are not improvements.

Overall, however, *Wormholes* is a fine collection that will reward the intellectually curious reader, a book that students of language and literature in particular will admire — and enjoy. ✨