

**James F. English and Heather Love (eds.), 2023,  
*Literary Studies and Human Flourishing*  
 (New York: Oxford University Press)**

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Departing from the oft-quoted function of literature and literary criticism, of manufacturing discomfort, of acting as “an axe to break the frozen sea within readers,” writer Leah Price argues that the function of literature of/for human flourishing is to act as an “icepack.” The ameliorative aspect of literature and its curative power form the basic framework of the edited volume, as it takes into account the multiple lines of thought emerging from within literary studies that appear to converge towards a plane of negotiated existence with the “positive” science of well-being. The otherwise antagonistic position that literary studies has taken to positive psychology is subordinated in the interest of finding ways in which the two can conjoin in productive ways to break new theoretical ground for reconciling the “philosophical and methodological differences that separate” literary scholars from becoming a part of an “interdisciplinary conversation about human flourishing” (English and Love 2). The edited volume is organised into ten chapters across five sections and is preceded by an Introduction.

The editors, James F. English and Heather Love, establish a truism at the very outset of the Introduction, declaring “literature provides an imaginative access to the inner lives of others, widening our capacity for empathy and mutual understanding,” which is invoked time and again in the sections that follow, to draw on the connections between literary studies and human flourishing, and how the seemingly irreconcilable twain shall meet (2). The grounds of engagement for the two nonetheless remain vague, with chapter authors treading two lines simultaneously, one of literary studies’ theoretical engagement with human flourishing. The other is dealt with in Sections IV and V, of how the intersection of literary studies and human flourishing can contribute to all kinds of health benefits (assist with ageing), and repair trauma and generally be a great source of well-being. Admittedly, the volume pays much more attention to the former, with only Beth Blum’s chapter on “therapeutic redescription” attempting to

engage with the latter. She discusses *Meditations* at length, to underscore how the Stoics, in Foucault's words, used "reductive description" and "description that aims to discredit" to generate an alternate view of things. Therapeutic redescription has been particularly fruitful in the field of cognitive-behavioural therapy and Gestalt psychology, which emphasise "modifying language for therapeutic benefits" (Blum 186). Blum's project here then extends to incorporating the use of re-descriptive language into analytical thinking, to bring out the dormant therapeutic elements coiled within literary studies.

In the section titled "Happy Reading: Literature without the academy," Leah Price's chapter "Bibliotherapy and Human Flourishing" opens with the different ways, often not so flattering, in which books have been blamed for "tired eyes, hunched backs or fevered minds," before proceeding to its more contemporary understanding of tools that help "mitigate anxiety and depression" (25). The section also details *science's* enquiry into the correlation between literature and theory of mind, particularly, the act of fiction reading and the sophistication of mind, insofar as subjects' ability to "identify the emotions expressed on faces or understand others' false beliefs is concerned. It further builds on Steven Pinker's correlation between the "decline in violence with an increase in fiction reading" (25). Post-globalisation, in the era of the internet, *Goodreads*, the online book rating platform, has emerged as a rich source of data for researchers working on mapping out the reading habits of readers online, and the possibility

or otherwise, of eclecticism that the internet, with its democratisation of access, provides. Common sense dictates that, with so much information and access, the reading habits of the readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century might be more eclectic, and the readers themselves more omnivorous. But the chapter titled "Bad Habits on Goodreads" utilises readers' data from Goodreads to analyse how the digital platform, besides being an e-library catalogue, also affects reader preferences, consequently advancing "entire schemes of values, preferences" (English et al. 36).

Christopher Castiglia's chapter opens with a rather bizarre sentence, which on cursory glance might seem antithetical to the project the volume puts forward. He writes, "Flourishing is a possibility that haunts me" (65). "Flourishing spirits" speaks of séances and of spirits, particularly of the spiritualist doctrine of the mid-1800s. His argument hinges on the power of belief, which is foundational to the world of death and beyond, and its invocations in séances and the implications it had on the wider socio-political happenings of the mid- and late 19th-century American society. Riddled with problems of sexism, discrimination,

and slavery, these séances often served as platforms for conversations about reformation. Using excerpts from spiritualist newspapers like *The Banner of Light* and fiction, *The Gates Ajar* (1868), Castiglia offers a perspective on performing a balancing act between reason and “the willing suspension of disbelief,” to show how relying on the latter can be ameliorative and even reformist. While critics of séances have often been dismissive of the performance as nothing more than “private theatricals,” Castiglia’s writing shows how the belief induced by these practices enabled the “real fight” to make the world otherwise than it was (73). The caveat, however, that is re-emphasised, is that belief should not encumber morality, but the cost of morality and reasoning should also not be an abandonment of belief and imagination. The evolving nature of imagination and hope is what holds the key to human flourishing.

The editors call for a reconfiguration of the Aristotelian eudaimonic view, which regards well-being as the telos and primary motivation for human action, to better account for the “concomitant realities of poverty, violence, and mortality” (12). The reconfiguration is meant to blunt the overwhelming force of language and ideas infused with superfluous buoyancy. This sits at odds with David James’s chapter on the Literature of Uplift that makes a case for the necessity of literature that is “upliftingly ‘redemptive’ in its confrontation with mental illness” and a well-spring of hope (James 108). While “uplift” is geared specifically towards charting buoyant experiences, Janet Lyon’s chapter on disability studies’ place within the eudaimonic turn yanks our attention to representations of disability in literature and to the various ways the condition of being disabled and its lived realities are described. Lyon maintains that disability is value-neutral and neither “de facto tragic, nor inherently pathological” (144). This position allows the writer to gaze beyond the binary logic of either/or. However, positive psychology’s preoccupation with “productivity” rather than well-being often hinders meaningful engagements with non-normativity and the field of Disability Studies. This chapter’s project extends to making disability visible within studies on/of human flourishing and to finding ways in which the concept of well-being can engage with non-normative models of health and embodiment.

While it’s easy for literary scholars to launch into a diatribe against positive psychology, the volume proposes ways in which the two can coexist in an interim symbiosis. It also stands to reason that literary scholars should remain wary of studies on human flourishing, since they are riddled with stigma, exclusion, and various forms of inequality. However, as the contributors who come from

varied disciplines, seem to be suggesting, it can be mitigated, provided the right methodological frameworks are worked out. There is much that the intersection of the two disciplines has to offer. The contributors make an outstanding effort to collate and make sense of the otherwise the subject matter that always seems to be slipping into inaccessible nooks and crannies as it grows rhizomatically. The volume sets out on the arduous task of asking thoughtful questions, gathering novel perspectives and breaking new theoretical ground in studies on human flourishing. This is executed with perfect structural harmony, dialectical disagreements and rigorous editing, resulting in a fine collection of essays.

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