

Book Reviews

Susan Merrill Squier. *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004. 350 pp. Hardcover, \$84.95, Paperback, \$23.95.

In a time that we may describe as increasingly biocultural, Susan Merrill Squier's new book, *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine*, is a welcome guide. The book takes as its central subject the now very controversial notion of liminal lives. By this, Squier means those lives that are created and put into the cultural imaginary by actual and figural developments in biotechnology. The now primitive notion of test-tube babies, as they used to be called and about which Squier has written in her book *Babies in Bottles: Twentieth-Century Visions of Reproductive Technology* (1995), has birthed itself into the many-headed monster of the new reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization, prenatally engineered fetuses, and xenogenic reproduction, as well as the currently famous or infamous embryonic stem cells.

In this sense, Squier is elaborating the borderlands between life and death, between subject and object, between person and thing. Squier's interest in this liminal world, the world between concepts, between boundaries, is something that must interest us all. If nothing else, we are living in an era that demands attention to this new redefinition of the human in which all is projected and nothing is certain. What is important is that this liminal world is no longer a subject only for scientists but for politicians and the general public as well. The Terri Schiavo case is the tip of the iceberg. Stem-cell research, abortion, end-of-life technologies, genetic engineering, cloning, and so on are in the public view almost daily. Squier raises many interesting and provocative questions about these subjects, and she does this by examining not only bioethical and biotechnical dimensions; she informs the discussion by also bringing fiction into the mix.

For Squier, fiction, particularly science fiction, is not simply a marginalized, often cheaply popular genre, but it is the testing ground for many of the biocultural ideas that will come to the fore. One of the pleasures of reading this book is accompanying Squier on her rambles through the archive of sci-fi literature. Many of the texts mentioned are

works that one has read, but many more are ones that most of us will never read, and which Squier culled from the pulp weeklies and monthlies of the 1920s and '30s. These stories were devoured by devoted readers whose imaginations were in many ways the forerunners, according to Squier, of the scientific research that would later take place in the areas of replacement medicine and regenerative medicine, reproductive and genetic technologies, and antiaging research and practice.

But Squier is not only a literary critic, she is also an historian of science and its culture. She takes us to research laboratories, professional conferences, and various medical practices that parallel these fictional works. In effect, the book analyzes the communications of science and medicine as well as the collective fantasies of a public who reads science fiction and journalism that touted the imaginary—in the sense of future—accomplishments to be attained by researchers who project the applicability of their experiments into a brave new world of practice that includes eternal youth, children created purely by science, cross-species chimeras, prosthetic naturalism, and so on. Indeed, when one writes about this study, one tends to make lists; and when Squier writes, she often gives us catalogs of possibilities.

It is the open-ended nature of the liminal that sets this book off on what becomes a Cooke's Tour of our biocultural age. The reader must be as educated as the author to keep up with Squier's catalog of erudition and amazing examples of both science and science fiction. Pleasing to this reader was a stop in 1926 to observe Dr. Serge Voronoff, who astounded a convention of physiologists in Stockholm with the news that he had grafted the sex organs of a human female into a chimpanzee named Nora and artificially impregnated her with human sperm. Squier as tour guide duly notes the Ibsenian reference and takes her readers along to Louise Brown, the first IVF baby conceived in 1978. There are additional stops to read pulp fiction with titles like "The Talking Brain," in which a scientist isolates a human brain in a laboratory and talks with it by Morse code, and "Advanced Chemistry," in which a professor discovers how to reanimate people after their death by drilling a hole in their heads and injecting chemicals that activate electrical cortical activity. While doing so, the doctor himself dies, but the newly reanimated patient drills a hole in the doctor's head and perfuses his brain with the electrically charged liquid, bringing the doctor back to life. When they shake each other's hands in congratulations, they are both electrocuted and die. And more!!!

If you have a taste for human bodies preserved in plastic or embryos freeze-dried and made into earrings, you will begin to ap-

precipitate the range of liminal lives in this book, which is its own cabinet of curiosities. But of course Squier's point is more than simply showing us the freak show that can be the borderland between the normal and the abnormal or between the body and science or the body and art. Her larger aim is a propadeutic one, to encourage us to think liminally—to bridge the gap between science and art. Her main point is that by living in either of the two cultures that Charles Percy Snow (and who knew that he wrote sci-fi pseudonymously?) famously described—science and the arts—we are living abbreviated lives and having only peripheral visions. The true vision involves a synthesis of the scientific and the humanistic. Of course, this revelation would be bland if it were only that. Science studies is filled with people calling for the interdisciplinary leaven of the humanities to the stolid confection of science. But Squier's point is more nuanced. She claims that "throughout the twentieth century, science fiction writing was as crucial in the cultural realm as immunology was in the realm of medicine in bringing about public acceptance of organ transplant technology. Indeed, we might think of science fiction as functioning as a kind of ideological cyclosporine" (183). So science fiction negotiates (to use a word Squier likes a lot) the space between the realms of research, medical practice, and public acceptance. This is a qualitatively different claim than the usual one that literature simply adds to our knowledge and sensibilities. It is a cultural-studies notion of the value of the media and the deep interconnectivity between kinds and genres of knowledge.

Squier's strength as a writer is her ability to present a range of works and points of view. What one can say of her approach is best said by Squier herself in a comment about Tod Chambers's book, *The Fiction of Bioethics* (1999), which she notes presents "a range of different aesthetic and critical perspectives, not attempting to achieve a unitary and exhaustive analysis but rather mingling" many approaches (264). In this mode, Squier uses the ideas of many other scholars, seamlessly weaving them together into a set of observations that do not attempt an overriding argument beyond the points I have mentioned. Readers will thus find many local insights but no strong thesis. Part of the reason for this is that Squier is uniquely tuned to postmodern analysis, which critiques metatheories. Thus the strength of the work resides in observations about networks, intersections, parallels and asymmetries, overdetermined (and underdetermined) representations. One of Squier's favorite words is "both" as in "the novel is both descriptive and extrapolative" or "the science fiction conversation about growth both set the agenda for, and diverged in important ways from, the

approaches of biomedicine" (116). Or, "The *Food of the Gods* portrays both a scientific success . . . and a scientific and social failure" (117). These examples, taken from two facing pages in the book, are characteristic of a willingness on Squier's part to allow a *thick description* of her material. However, the same strength could be seen as a weakness. Some might find Squier's lack of a strong thesis frustrating. Indeed, there are many places in the book where local knowledges and narratives need an anthropologist of the old school to pull together the argument and the meaning. And here is where the idea of liminality becomes a liability. Squier is heiress to an increasingly loose use of the term and a consequent loss of its utility. While it is often helpful to include for consideration any metaphoric borderland, in-between space, or existence, this broad interpretation can become an inflated concept. Squier never met a liminal space she did not like and she almost never finds a space that is not a closet liminal one.

To her credit, Squier is usually quite careful about the dangers of this expanding universe of liminality. She is, after all, a scholar first and foremost, and the pleasures of reading this book are the pleasures of watching an inquiring mind going after the fruits of research, delectating them, turning them around in the mind's eye, and creating displays of connections that educate and enlighten. In the end, this book will be a revelation for many and a guide for those who already know. It is a work that the emerging field of biocultures needs to consider and the world of politics needs to absorb.

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Janis McLarren Caldwell. *Literature and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Britain: From Mary Shelley to George Eliot.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 201 pp. Hardcover, \$75.

Janis McLarren Caldwell's book, along with several other recent works on literature and medicine in the nineteenth century, dissents from Michel Foucault's idea of the "clinical gaze" as a normative, quasi-authoritarian discourse. Foucault asserted, in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), that doctoring in this era was about power, not about caring.¹ But Foucault tended to use only French examples to exemplify his basic contentions, which his readers then applied to all of modern Europe. As Caldwell points out, previous writers on literature and medicine in