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Sandra Mayer and Ruth Scobie (eds), *Authorship, Activism, and Celebrity: Art and Action in Global Literature*, London, Bloomsbury, 2023, pp. 264, ISBN 9781501392337

This dazzling collection of essays explores the intersection between the themes suggested by its title. Featuring a vast array of contributors, from industry stakeholders to scholars and writer-activists, it seeks to investigate the historically situated and often uneasy relationship between authorship and wordliness. In their variety, all contributions illuminate the role of the author as “a powerful agent in the public sphere” (p. 11), and pause to consider, though in different geo-temporal coordinates, the manifold ways in which individual authors and the social arena interact.

A foreword by author Meena Kandasamy opens the collection, while a concluding piece by novelist Kristy Gunn brings it to its close – both very apt choices to highlight the continued relevancy of the collection’s central concerns. Their contributions invite us to reflect on how the integrity of the author must be constantly negotiated and fought for in the neoliberal editorial market; to situate this struggle, to voice the way in which it unfolds in different directions, and to emphasise its urgency through its multifaceted appearances are the arduous yet noble ambitions of this volume as a whole. In their introduction, editors Sandra Mayer and Ruth Scobie convincingly argue that the tensions extant between issues of literary celebrity and activism can be retraced to the ideas which originated them, namely “a capitalist literary marketplace and a post-Romantic conception of literary authorship” (p. 3). Their suggestion not to see literary fame and genuine political action as mutually exclusive is also an encouragement to challenge preconceived notions of what an author is, and, most importantly, to view literature “as a social and cultural practice” (p. 16), one which spans across different fields and which necessarily engenders a very complex, difficult-to-define relationship between the object of the book and the outside world.

Meeting the need to deepen the analysis, the essays that follow the introduction consider authors and contexts ranging from eighteenth-century England to the twenty-first century. Yet, rather than showcasing academic essays quite homogenous in style, this collection presents a wonderfully varied exploration of the topics at hand, as it also includes email exchanges, public panel discussions, and conversations between scholars, poets, novelists, and publishers. A similar configuration is only too fitting in connection with the historically and culturally contingent nature of the themes discussed, and also allows for a smoother, more engaging reading practice.

The editors’ introduction is followed by the transcription of a conversation between British poet Benjamin Zephaniah and writer and academic Malachi McIntosh, which

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was live-streamed from the Story Museum in Oxford in 2021. This exchange opens the door to a call for hopeful action that sets the tone for the subsequent four parts of the collection, characterised by such a proliferation of voices and investigative efforts that a simple summary, or even a list of the topics, may not be provided in just a few pages. Yet, in spite of the many arguments and ideas raised in the book, the way the contributions are strung together gestures towards a coherent overview.

The first section, titled “Art as Activism”, investigates the entanglement between the authors’ agency and the political potential of their creations. Here, renowned scholars and writer-activists such as Peter D. McDonald, Margie Orford, Rachel Potter, Carles Corner, Laetitia Zecchini, and Ellen Wiles bring to the fore the important influence exercised by networks like PEN International, or London-based LGBTQ+ literary salon Polari, which help to expatiate on the notions of freedom of expression, belonging, diversity, and community. A passionate yet hopeful inquiry into how social change can be fostered – and how this change depends on the deeply political interplay between language, literature, medium, location, and audience – constitutes the central theme of the email exchange between Professor Peter D. McDonald and South African poet, translator and academic Antjie Krog. The three contributions to the first section testify to the broad scope of the investigation, which seeks to situate the advocacy for justice of the writer-activist in different contexts around the globe.

The following section, titled “Activism and the Literary Industry”, suitably brings to the table how literary activism intermingles with the publishing industry. Reading the three contributions to this part – a conversation, a panel discussion, and an academic essay – reveals that an awareness of the market is paramount not only to exploit its resources, but also to be mindful of how to make one’s voice heard. This section, too, showcases a remarkable variety of tones, arguments and interpretative approaches. It starts with film conversations between novelist Kristy Gunn and publisher David Graham, moving on to a panel discussion between writers, scholars, literary critics, editors and literary authorities of the calibre of Ellen Bohemer, Alice Guthrie, Daniel Media, Charlotte Ryland and Alan Taylor, and closes with an essay by Eva Sage Gordon on nineteenth-century female authors Fanny Fern and Nellie Bly. “Activism and the Literary Industry” persuasively demonstrates how literary activism intercepts with the literary market in ways that, while at times constraining, are also susceptible to radical transformation from within. This ongoing renegotiation, though constantly evolving, generates struggles that are deeply connected even if they are set centuries apart.

What constitutes a ‘public intellectual’, how this notion developed in the context of growing specialisation and professionalisation, and how pivotal the role of the author can be in the literary grounding of democratic ideals, are the main concerns of the third section of the volume, which is aptly titled “The Invention of the Public Intellectual”. Here, Odile Heynders focuses on the power of fiction to nurture activist readership, as it trains to navigate “the fluid edges between truth and reality, or truthfulness and lie” (p. 123). An attentive reading, such as Divya A.’s, may also help to uncover narrative strategies which seek to maintain existing hierarchies by confining the concept of literary authority to upper-caste men, as her analysis of B. Jeyamohan’s short story “Aram” (2011) readily demonstrates. The contributions by Anna Paluchoska-Messing

and Kieren Hazzard examine the evolution of the public writer-intellectual by choosing as their subjects the cases of Frances Burney and James Silk Buckingham, respectively. When read consecutively, their analyses, aptly positioned one after the other, point to how being a literary celebrity and an activist in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also depended on the era's restrictive gender norms. Indeed, Burney, constrained by these norms, chose to employ more tentative strategies than the flamboyant Buckingham. This section, too, manages to display a wide purview of the themes discussed, and successfully conveys their extensive breadth.

Similarly, the final part of the collection, "Writing Europe", endeavours to examine the complex and expansive notion of the textual construction of Europe by encompassing different periods. Benedict Schofield opens the section by observing how authors, after the Brexit referendum, have come together in networks to construct a politically engaged authorship able to draw attention to European issues and "rehearse, perform and enact their visions of Europe" (p. 181). The two following essays by Elisa Bizzotto and Tore Rem concentrate instead on the figures of Vernon Lee and Knut Hamsun. These contributions do not merely illustrate the way these authors leveraged their reputation as writers by shaping and expanding their ideas across European boundaries, but also invite us to pause and reflect on how the position of the writer-activist is inextricably complex and requires careful consideration. Both Lee's self-appointment as a civiliser of Italian society and Hamsun's espousal of fascism exemplify the necessity of engaging with texts on a conscious as well as political level. This spirit is also captured in the aforementioned volume's conclusion by Kristy Gunn, which revisits the age-old question of how political and influential a work of fiction can be by tracing the issue back to the single reader's approach. Through this perspective, Gunn suggests that the true impact of a text is shaped by the reader's own political awareness and interpretative engagement.

This may well be the chief insight of *Authorship, Activism, and Celebrity*, a collection which resists strict categorisation, both stylistically and thematically. Nonetheless, one could still claim that the volume's impressive range of case studies is simultaneously its greatest strength and its weakness. No easily identifiable issue is covered extensively, definitively, or irrevocably. And yet, why should there be one? Indeed, the book manages to persuade us that the intersection between authorship, activism, and celebrity assumes various forms, that it pervades different layers of culture and depends on the specific social-historical contexts in which it is located. For this reason, the editors have rightly selected contributions which belong and refer to different disciplines, thus employing multiple interpretative tools. Rather than providing a full-scale analysis, the volume's multifaceted approach to the themes discussed signals how pervasive they are, and seems to imply that further research would be welcome.

All in all, the wide variety of themes and forms makes this book more appealing to a broad readership than the strength of its academic arguments might initially suggest. Whether confronted with an essay, a panel discussion, an email exchange or the transcript of a conversation, readers find thought-provoking, nuanced examinations of how the figure of the writer operates, and are thus spurred to reconsider their own position as interpreters, too. By investigating the profound and complex link between

the written word and the eyes which receive it, *Authorship, Activism, and Celebrity* offers reflections and observations which linger in the reader's mind well after the final page has been turned, and which continue to exert their influence just as convincingly when a new book is picked up.