

**The Journal of  
Modern Craft**

Volume 7—Issue 3  
November 2014  
pp. 341–344

DOI:  
10.2752/174967714X14111311183162

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2014

## Book Review

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# **The Textile Reader** *Jessica Hemmings* (ed.)

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London and New York: Berg, 2012. 512pp., 40 b/w illus.  
GBP24.99. ISBN: 9781847886347

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## **Reviewed by Eleanor Flegg**

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Craft publications, like long-awaited buses, tend to appear in convoy. *The Textile Reader*, for example, follows in the recent footsteps of Berg's successful *The Craft Reader* (2010), edited by Glenn Adamson, and *The Design History Reader* (also 2010) edited by Grace Lees-Maffei and Rebecca Houze. These three publications work well collectively; a useful resource for students and a valuable teaching tool. It is less easy to understand why a publisher would elect to commission two anthologies on textiles in the same year. *The Textile Reader* and *Textiles: Primary and Critical Sources*, a multi-volume set edited by Catherine Harper, were both published by Berg in 2012. Although the logic of this is elusive, it is likely that the latter is intended mainly for libraries and to be used as a scholarly resource rather than a desktop companion. The publication of such an exhaustive anthology, which includes many seminal texts, may, however, have created the opportunity for *The Textile Reader* to become something other than a source book. The discipline sorely needed a comprehensive collection of academic writing; it did not need two of them. Possibly for this reason, Hemmings's anthology extends beyond the academy in several interesting directions.

In its selection, *The Textile Reader* raises questions of how the academy is defined. Like all areas of craft scholarship, the discourse around textiles is in a formative phase. Since the canon is not fixed, the notion of what texts are, and

are not, legitimate canon fodder remains relatively fluid. Hemmings raises a gentle but interesting challenge to the conventions of legitimacy in her inclusion of some decidedly non-conventional texts. *The Textile Reader* is a book, she writes in the introduction, “as concerned with *how* we write about textiles as it is interested in *what* we write about textiles.”

*The Textile Reader* contains 45 pieces marshaled under the themes of touch, memory, structure, politics, production, and use. While the line-up includes some of the usual suspects—the introduction to the new edition of Rozsika Parker’s *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, for example; or Sarat Maharaj’s “Arachne’s Genre: Towards Intercultural Studies in Textiles”—there are also many that have been sourced outwith the canon of academic writing. Some pieces are extracts from novels: Italo Calvino’s “Thin Cities” and “Trading Cities” come from his novel *Invisible Cities* (1972). Others, like “The Blank Page” by Isak Dinesen and Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” were written as short stories. The inclusion of unconventional approaches to writing about textiles within the anthology is masked by clever editing: the pieces are thematically integrated with much elegant academic writing. This is a sleight of hand that makes the selection seem less radical than it actually is.

In this, *The Textile Reader* highlights some of the anomalies within wider art and design scholarship: its vast dependence, for example, on non-fiction. Despite its status as the dominant genre of academic publishing, non-fiction is not really a weight-bearing concept (all writing, surely, is fabrication). Academia tends, nevertheless, to heavily privilege one

type of writing—the sort that claims to describe rather than create realities—over others. The difference between the two genres comes down the intention of the author: most non-fiction texts on textiles have the subject matter as their primary concern. It is in the nature of non-fiction to be “about” something in a way that is clear and defined. Fiction, however, has different parameters. Stories or poems that are of interest regarding textiles do not usually have the elucidation of textiles as their goal. Walker’s story, for example, is a muscular piece of fiction that creates a fictional reality. Writing “about” textiles is not its reason for being; it describes a wider and deeper context in which textiles play their part. Walker, in this instance, does not set out to consider the location of textile practice nor to understand its perceived inferiority. These ends are achieved in the piece without ever having been its purpose. It is only by situating the story in the context of other writing about textiles that we see that the story, as Hemmings writes: “highlights two conflicting value systems that textile is often torn between” (p. 436).

Only a few of the pieces in *The Textile Reader* are fictional; Hemmings also draws from other non-dominant genres. Peter Stallybrass’s “Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things,” was written for the spoken voice and retains that character. Judith Clark’s “Statement VI” is written in note form and organized as numbered observations. Suzanne Lee’s “Bioculture of how to grow a frock” is a compilation of extracts from a blog and written in the friendly colloquial tone that the genre demands. Sadie Plant’s experimental writing connects the history of

computing with that of the Jacquard loom, via the diaries of Ada Lovelace and the science fiction of William Gibson. There, disappointingly, is only one poem: "100% Cotton" by Pamela Johnson.

The reason that such an eclectic selection works as an anthology is two-fold. First, the pieces are well chosen: they read as though they were selected because someone likes them and finds them interesting, and this gives the selection

personality and integrity. Second, their logical and coherent positioning into relation to each other creates a sense of flow that is helpful to the reader, even in an anthology that is probably not intended to be read from cover to cover. Its greatest value is, however, in its general sense of opening out the genres and the way in which it creates a space for different types of writing on textiles to be considered on an equal footing.