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Review of *Out of Place: The Writings of Robert Kroetsch* By Simona Bertacco

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BOOK REVIEWS

Out of Place: The Writings of Robert Kroetsch. By Simona Bertacco. Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002. 280 pp. Bibliography, index. \$56.95 paper.

The 1965 Johnny Cash rendition of E.T. Rouse's "Orange Blossom Special" includes the line, "I don't care if I do die do die do die do die do die." Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue* (1986) echoes the line. In *Out of Place: The Writings of Robert Kroetsch*, Simona Bertacco says the pas-

sage shows how Kroetsch pushes “‘words out of meaning’” and “‘makes language abandon . . . its conventional function to become intransitive and intensive.” Kroetsch, however, increases the number of repetitions and ends on the wrong word in the sequence, throwing the allusion into doubly new territory as it moves from a song about an American train into a Canadian poem, tricking Bertacco into thinking he invented what he borrowed.

Readers who keep in mind that Kroetsch the trickster presents ironic allusions and intentional misquotes, borrows his most original moments, and undercuts unifying tendencies can learn much from *Out of Place*. Bertacco sometimes fits things together too neatly (a sign of being tricked), yet I admire her for daring to confront the riotous excess of Kroetsch’s texts armed only with contemporary literary theories and an unstated conviction that she can make sense of this material. Bertacco’s “basic argument is that Kroetsch’s work reveals the ultimate dismissal of the thematic quest for identity.”

Bertacco begins with a discussion of Kroetsch’s early engagement with literary theory, noting that “postmodernism identified . . . a global revolutionary movement set to debunk any form of dominant institution.” Part 2 studies unusual pairings of Kroetsch’s poetry and fiction: *The Ledger* and *Gone Indian*, *The Studhorse Man* and *Completed Field Notes*. Part 3 covers *Seed Catalogue*, *What the Crow Said*, *Badlands*, and *Fieldnotes*. The book ends with Bertacco’s August 2000 interview with Kroetsch. The mixture of poetry, fiction, and critical essays discussed suggests the complexity of Kroetsch’s career; the interview adds to the lore of Kroetsch on Kroetsch. The book does not discuss recent works in depth, or—oddly, in a book titled *Out of Place*—Kroetsch’s travel book about his native province, *Alberta*.

Bertacco asserts that Kroetsch evokes the prairies as “a mythical place,” “re-perceiving the prairie experience through techniques and narrative modes . . . similar to those employed by magic realism in painting.” “Kroetsch reads the prairie as the metonymy of Canada.” Given Kroetsch’s postmodern program of debunking received ideas, however, perhaps his presen-

tation of the Great Plains challenges traditional archetypes. As Kroetsch writes in *Completed Field Notes*, “believe you me I have a few tricks up my sleeve myself.”

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