

Institution: Sheffield Hallam University
Unit of Assessment: 29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: The Testament of Jessie Lamb
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>This case study is based on the impact from the research constituted by the writing of this novel and on the wide discussions of science and genre arising from its reception. The impact consisted of enhancement of cultural life and public critical discussion, especially by:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) raising questions in narrative about the politics and ethics of scientific research in relation to identity, power, gender and reproduction 2) enriching debate about possible differences and similarities between 'literary' and 'science' fiction and how these are valued.
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The research begun as an Arts Council Fellowship project at Banff Writing Centre, Canada in 2006, and was completed during 2006-10. The research was carried out by Jane Rogers through the drafting and completion of the novel itself and in the exploration through writing of how a novel drawing on both mainstream fiction traditions, combined with more popular science-fiction genres could bring together areas of knowledge (contemporary scientific issues, literary craft, narration) in an original manner which would be widely-accessible, while also having literary merit. The basic concept of the novel was that a teenage girl should volunteer her life to help save the human race. This is based on the plot of <i>Iphigenia in Aulis</i> and also has parallels with the story of Christ. Research into first-person voice involved systematically examining a range of voices (especially first-person teenage voices) in recent literature, in search of a model which would allow the protagonist to speak in a way which is convincingly teenage and yet able to be articulate about complex ideas; a voice which is accessible and yet at a slight remove from today's idiom. The most helpful model turned out to be <i>The Diary of Ann Frank</i> (as discussed in Guardian interview http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/21/paperback-qanda-jane-rogers-testament-jessie-lamb).</p> <p>The concept of the novel also necessitated gathering information on two areas. First, exploring scientific evidence into viruses which might be engineered to suppress or destroy female fertility, and also an examination of alternative options for bringing a baby to term. And, second, ideas and projections about the future in general, looking at topics like climate change and the exhaustion of fossil fuels. The process of gaining insight into the necessary scientific background began with exploratory reading on the subject of IVF developments and procedures, artificial wombs, and other options for ectogenesis, such as the use of sheep. Advice and suggestions on reading came from Peter Rogers, Professor of Women's Health Research (Dept of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Melbourne University). In discussion he helped develop the idea of a biologically plausible virus which could be released by bio-terrorists and would lie dormant in the entire population but which would kick in (like pre-eclampsia) during pregnancy. Research included visiting an IVF clinic, where part of the novel is set. Wendy Rogers, Professor of Clinical Ethics (Macquarie University, NSW) gave valuable medical advice. Gathering ideas about possible near-futures consisted of reading popular science on ecology, subsistence farming, genetic research, animals in science, and reproductive technology, plus a visit to the Centre for Alternative Technology at Machynlleth.</p> <p>This background information continued to be drawn on in the process of drafting and redrafting the novel, helping to inform its plot, and to make events and characters more convincing. The transforming of the scientific ideas and background into a novel which explores form, content and genre, and focuses these through an idealistic, uncompromisingly self-centred teenage voice constitutes the originality of the project.</p> <p>The key researcher (Jane Rogers) was Professor of Creative Writing (0.3 fte) at SHU during 2008-2013, having been first appointed in 1994.</p>
<p>3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jane Rogers, <i>The Testament of Jessie Lamb</i>, 2012, Canongate, (Authored book) ISBN

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9780857864185. Entered as output in RA2. The novel itself is the main research output of the project; it was first published by Sandstone Press (2011), then by Canongate Press (UK), and Harper Collins in the US and Canada (2012).

Evidence of quality of the research

- Winner - Arthur C Clarke Award 2012; Long-list - The Man Booker Prize 2011
- It has sold 10,000 English-language copies. Translations have been published during 2013 in German (Heyne / Random House), Hungarian (Nebali Kft) and Swedish (Ordfront). Completed translations into French (Presses de la Cite), Japanese (Hayakawa), Korean (Viche / Gimm-Young) and Turkish (Cakiltasi) will appear in 2014.

2. Five part serialisation for BBC Radio 4 broadcast June 24-28, 2013 as part of the major *Dangerous Visions* season of Dystopias by seven contemporary writers.

Grants

1. Jane Rogers, Arts Council International Artists Fellowship 2006; award to work on this book for a 3 month period at the Banff Centre in Canada.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Beneficiaries were 'literary' and 'science-fiction' novel-readers, radio-listeners, and blog contributors. *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* was long-listed for the 2011 Mann Booker and 2012 Portico Prize, and awarded the 2012 Arthur C. Clarke Science Fiction Prize. The BBC Radio dramatisation extended the reach of the novel, as did a BBC blog about the adaption by the author and her discussion of scientific and ethical issues in the narrative on 'Start The Week' (17/6/13) (for both see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b02zc0160>). Rogers appeared at numerous literary events where she read from and discussed the novel. Events in 2011 included those at Newcastle University, Ilkley Literature Festival (reading with Tessa Hadley), Calderdale Writers' Roadshow, Fiction Writing Day (Halifax Central Library), Halifax Readers Groups (Northowram Library, Halifax). Events in 2012 included 'Time to Read' events at Wigan and Trafford Libraries (for National Libraries Day), Edinburgh Festival, public reading at Octagon Theatre, Bolton (with Gwen Riley), and Manchester Children's Book Festival, Museum of Science and Industry, Manchester, which included a reading and discussion with 100 teenagers from Manchester schools. She discussed the novel as a panel speaker at the *Write the Future* conference on the relation of science and science-fiction organised by the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Royal Society, London (1/5/13) for an audience from 'the creative industries, publishers... and science communication' (<http://writethefuture.eventbrite.com/>), and in her keynote at the *Contemporary Women's Writing And Literary Prize Culture* conference (Leeds Metropolitan 24/6/13) which addressed an academic and public audience (<http://www.the-cwwa.org/>). Press reviews and individual readers' responses in blogs show the novel's national and international impact (for example, 212 reviews and 791 ratings, as of 31/6/2013, on the *GoodReads* site (http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/10287791-the-testament-of-jessie-lamb#other_reviews)).

Examples of discussion (referenced in section 5) are given below, focussing on the two impact topics identified in the **Summary** above. Items a, b, c, h and j are reviews in newspapers or periodicals, items d, e, f, g are individual reader's blogs.

1) Raising questions in narrative about the politics and ethics of scientific research in relation to identity, power, gender and reproduction

a) 'Rogers raised eyebrows in the sci-fi community... with her first shot at speculative fiction. But it's based on a premise so terrifyingly plausible you're half-afraid the book might fall into the hands of some ruthless bio-terrorists with the keys to an IVF lab. Set in what feels uncomfortably like the day after tomorrow, the human race faces being wiped out within a generation by a deadly virus that kills women in pregnancy. Sixteen-year-old Jessie is determined to do something about it, volunteering for the sinister Sleeping Beauties programme in which women give birth in an artificially induced coma ... Rogers brilliantly characterises the self-centred logic of an obstreperous teenager' (A. Hickling, the *Guardian* 3/7/2012).

b) 'Rogers has captured Jessie's voice brilliantly, alternating a teenager's solipsism with a growing awareness of the wider world. Jessie's self-conviction is both admirable and infuriating, and the

reader is torn between her clear, unequivocal conclusions and the intricate, heartfelt compromises of her parents. *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* opens with a quotation from Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and although we are left to draw our own conclusions, the hint would seem to be that a society ready to sacrifice young girls, willingly or not, does not end well (L. Dallas, *TLS*, 6/ 5/ 2011)

c) 'The scary thing about this novel is that the questions it raises are so close to home. Must women always be the victims and the fall guys? Are Sleeping Beauties really so different from young men volunteering for war? What happens, as Jessie's Mum asks, once we accept that individuals can be sacrificed?' (K. Guest, *Independent*, 20/2/201).

d) 'This book was thoroughly thought provoking. The premise is unsettling and was well presented by Jane Rogers. Jessie Lamb is a normal girl growing up in a world that is changing. Women can get pregnant, but they die. The babies too. Scientists are trying to figure out what is going on and how to stop it, but at what cost? Girls. Girls are either volunteering or being coerced into becoming "sleeping beauties" and thus basically killing themselves for the good of human kind' (*goodreads*)

e) 'The book is supposed to be about the ... struggle of a teenage girl trying to find her own voice and make her own choices separate from her parents in a post-bio-warfare world and yet the choice she ultimately makes and her reasoning for it remain firmly adolescent ... This would make a very good book to study with a group of young women with regard to the way that women are viewed, making choices and their dreams (*goodreads*).

2) Enrichment of debate about possible differences and similarities between 'literary' and 'science' fiction and how these are valued

f) 'Jane Rogers is best known for her mainstream novel *Mr. Wroe's Virgins*, but I get the impression that her work has often teetered on the edge of the genre, and *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* is certainly sf. I was really impressed with it; it felt in some way to be a response to the Wyndham-esque cosy catastrophe, in that it is a story of an ordinary middle-class girl in Manchester and what happens to her when catastrophe strikes. In this case the catastrophe is that the entire of humanity becomes infected with a condition where pregnant women die; Jessie Lamb volunteers to be part of a scheme for ensuring that the human race survives despite the appalling consequences for herself' (*goodreads*).

g) 'An interesting book that raises a lot of ideas without pretending to come up with answers. Could prompt an entertaining discussion on any number of topics, not least on whether it actually counts as science fiction' (*goodreads*).

h) 'Anyone who came of age amid the AIDS crisis of the 1980s should have a direct line into the existential funk of the title character in Rogers's futuristic novel: a 16-year-old whose sexual maturation is muddled by the emergence of a virus fatal to pregnant women. While scientists (including her father) recruit teenage guinea pigs for deadly antiviral research, a competing circus of protesting social extremists and religious fundamentalists vie for center ring. The brouhaha becomes a catalyzing agent for Jessie as she transitions from adolescent self-absorption into the idealism and self-empowerment of young adulthood. "People will change the way they live if they can see there's hope," she insists. Second-guessing the motives of the bioterrorists who engineered the virus, she tries to get at "what it was about now, about us that made it able to happen?" ... The answer that drives Rogers's fleet but intermittently enigmatic tale is that everyone is too constricted by the tunnel vision of faddish ideologies to catch the warning signals. Echoes of Kazuo Ishiguro's stealthy novel "Never Let Me Go" abound, but Rogers works with a more populist tool kit'. (J. Stuart, *New York Times*, 22/8/2012).

i) 'In part, this is a coming of age novel, wittily observed but heartbreaking, enchantingly garrulous but deeply unsettling. It deals with notions of identity and belonging with the conviction, passion and flair of Iain Banks' *The Crow Road*, David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* and J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. Jessie could rival Holden Caulfield as a caustic observer of the inauthentic and insincere. But sadly for her, and everyone else in her world, there's more to this story than teenage angst and alienation...The existence of the Sleeping Beauties highlights not only clashes

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of value and ideology, but also our tendency to adopt hypocritical positions in relation to notions of sacrifice and the collective interest. Jessie's emotional journey also encompasses reflections on consumerism, global warming, male violence against women, commercially driven genetic research and, of course, eco-terrorism. These are issues of tremendous urgency, not just for politicians, scientists and campaigners but for all of us. Rogers' key concern, however, is the way women and men relate to each other: the wedges our consumer-driven society drives between 'us' and 'them' and the way power is allocated on the basis of sex and sexual identity. It is no exaggeration to suggest the way the sexes interact impacts on the way we organise ourselves, the work we do, the things we buy and the morality we adopt. For me, in addition to focussing our thinking on the abuses of science, MDS provides a metaphor for the objectification of women and the commodification of sexuality brought about, at least in part, by the cultural and aesthetic hegemony of the porn industry.

Few contemporary writers could tackle these issues with the forensic clarity of Jane Rogers. And, I would argue, a key factor in her ability to illuminate the themes other writers of serious literary fiction fail to explore lies in her willingness to use the tools and tropes of genre to augment her rigorous observation of the nuances of character and behaviour.

Which brings us to two key questions. Where should this book should be shelved? And who should be reading it? Rogers uses an sf premise to explore urgent issues with a collective impact. There's a self-limiting tendency in mainstream literary fiction which makes it comparatively poor at reflecting the rapidly changing nature of modern life. For example, it tends to ignore the increasingly fragmented nature of our social networks and the increasingly diverse and significant threats to our survival. These are issues novelists can no longer afford to ignore, and the extrapolatory and speculative nature of sf makes it ideally suited to tackling them. Some critics will assert that Rogers' book is literature, not sf, because of its focus on character development and the psychological make-up of an individual. But, in this respect, it fits firmly into a tradition established in the 1950s by books such as James Blish's hard sf novel *A Case of Conscience*, and reinforced in the 1970s by dystopian classics such as Thomas Disch's *334*.

The quality of writing and subtle observation in *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* means it deserves to be treated as serious literary fiction. The apocalyptic central premise and the sheer inventiveness of the author's investigation of science, society, ideology and morality should earn it a place on every sf bookshelf. This is a book that explores important ideas without sacrificing psychological depth and characterisation. Profoundly enjoyable and deeply unsettling, it opens minds and stomps on genre boundaries: Jane Rogers deserves the widest possible audience.' (A. Hedgecock, *Interzone*, 236, 2011).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

For audit / corroboration purposes of impact claims we can supply details of 5 discussions in newspapers / periodicals and 5 individual users/beneficiaries as follows:

- a) A. Hickling, the *Guardian* 3/7/2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/03/testament-jessie-lamb-rogers-review>
- b) L. Dallas, *TLS*, 6/5/11: SHU can provide a copy on request
- c) K. Guest, *Independent*, 20/2/2011 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-testament-of-jessie-lamb-by-jane-rogers-2219823.html>
- d) M. Caldwell, 22/4/2012, <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/317012048>
- e) Jessica 1/2/13 <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/523577445>
- f) N. Whyte, 6/6/2012, <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/349670812>
- g) Jacinta 4/9/2012; <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/406965079>
- h) J. Stuart, *New York Times*, 22/8/2012: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/12/books/review/new-books-by-sadie-jones-simon-mawer-and-more.html?_r=2&
- i) A. Hedgecock, *Interzone*, 236, 2011 <http://ttapress.com/1127/interzone-236/>