

Vnuk, Rebecca. *Women's Fiction Authors: A Research Guide*. Author Research Series. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO-Libraries Unlimited, 2009. 163 pp. ISBN 9781591586425. \$40.00

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When I was doing my time in a graduate level research methods class, I had a professor who was fond of using monikers as evaluative yardsticks, springboards that could launch further evaluative commentary. For example, he was fond of terminology like “admirable attempt,” “comprehensive coverage,” and “starting point.” One of his odder phrases was “suspiciously thin,” a descriptor which was reserved for those texts which one could pick up, hold up to the light, peer closely, and realize—without even opening the front cover—that there was no way justice could have been done to the subject being covered. I have been waiting 15 years for the chance to use that evaluative phrase, and thanks to the Libraries Unlimited (now a subsidiary of ABC-CLIO) decision to veer away from the Genreflecting model for readers’ advisory texts towards the Author Research series model (a selective bibliography), I now have the opportunity to say, with all seriousness and no sense of exaggeration, that *Women's Fiction Authors*, by Rebecca Vnuk, is suspiciously thin. And unfortunately, once I examined the text, I found that my suspicions were not unfounded.

Let me begin by once more invoking the ghost of research methods past. The first steps in evaluating any reference source are always to determine what are called limitations and weaknesses. Limitations are loosely synonymous with the statement of scope which every good reference work should include. Here, an author cues readers in by letting them know what was purposefully left out of the book; with this information, an astute reviewer can determine what

was unintentionally left out, the ultimate failure of any good reference work. Having co-authored a few readers' advisory guides for the Genreflecting series, I am more than well aware of the complexities which by their very nature accompany the creation of any good guide, the first of these being a sense of comprehensiveness, or completion. Vnuk's text comes across as a bibliographic guide to a predetermined set of texts, rather than an expansive readers' advisory guide that compares texts. Granted, she states clearly that well-covered authors are outside of her scope of coverage, and that she limits herself to more modern women writers, but her choices seem arbitrary at best. For example, she includes Amy Tan, who is well-covered in most literary texts about women, but not Barbara Kingsolver, and both women write what is undeniably women's fiction.

Making matters worse, Vnuk's prefatory material is confusing at best in its cursoriness. In fact, in one of the few thorough reviews of Vnuk's text, Elzbieta Beck writes that "The introduction does relatively little to clear up this confusion, especially in its attempt to explain its scattered, broad idea of the women's fiction genre.... But perhaps the most bewildering element of Vnuk's definition is her sidestepping of the tricky question of why all fiction written by women doesn't fit into her idea of 'women's fiction,' and what, exactly, makes up a work of fiction aimed at an exclusively female audience."¹ What seems to bother Beck in her review, I find problematic as well: simply stating at the beginning of a reference text that you choose not to cover an author, as Vnuk does, should not be license to do so. All authors of both readers' advisory guides and bibliographies should know that—by definition—the scope of those texts dictates itself. There can be no arbitrary authorial decision.

Despite this, for which the publisher as well as the writer should be held accountable, Vnuk's text could have served well as a complimentary text, one that is an admirable attempt to

fill a hole in scholarship. Careful researchers, however, will very quickly realize that this is not a possibility with the text as soon as they read the prefatory section “How to Use This Book.” If the full use of a reference book can be explained in three sentences, there is something seriously wrong with that book, and that is the case here. A quick look at just a few entries makes clear exactly what those serious problems happen to be: Each entry begins with a “Biographical Sketch,” and sketch here is the operative word. What readers get is not even a mini-encyclopedia entry, but a collection of factoids. This is followed by a quote about the writing process (perhaps the best part of each entry), then a chronicle of major works in the form of a short list which gives only title and year of publication, and a very sketchy list of “Research Sources and Web Sites.” Again, the author attempts to explain the cursory treatment of these in her introductory materials (and why she chooses to not include reviews in the bibliographic section of a readers’ advisory text is beyond this reviewer), but Vnuk’s stating that her decision to cite predominantly websites over published articles and reviews is due to the contemporariness of the female authors covered is questionable.

All of this could be overlooked if the text were a decent readers’ advisory guide, but Vnuk commits the unpardonable sin of readers’ advisory librarianship—not listing “read alike” or similar authors for every entry. She excuses this in her prefatory material with a cursory “some entries include a ‘Read Alike’ section.” This statement left this reviewer scratching his head, asking only *some* entries, in a book that contains only 75 authors and because of its organization would have to match read alike status only at the authorial level? Let’s just say this left me at a loss for words. Having worked on the Genreflecting series, remembering how much work and consideration had to go into every entry, still reeling from the task of matching every entry with read alikes at the title level.... Again, I am at a loss for words. I can only wonder what

LU was thinking when it not only commissioned but then published this text in its current state, and I can only hope that the editorial boards at ABC-CLIO and LU soon realize that publishing such cursory treatments like this is a terrible mistake, one that will eventually cost them a solid reputation. In fact, if Vnuk's text is indicative of the series, LU is in grave danger of dumbing down its readers' advisory texts to the point of making them irrelevant.

But I digress (albeit out of sheer frustration). The bottom line is there is little in this book that isn't found readily and easily on the Internet. The organization of the entries, especially considering the limited and all-too-brief information available in each entry, assures that this is the case. The sheer lack of the author's making a serious attempt to match every author, or better yet, every text (hello? this is after all supposed to be a readers' advisory guide) makes the work read as haphazard at best, lazy at worst. Having worked with LU previously, I place the blame not entirely on Vnuk's shoulders, for authors often write exactly what they are asked to write; rather blame must be shared by the series editor, Jen Stevens; by the editorial board decision which choose the design for the series; and by book review sources like *Booklist* that allow cursory book reviews which do little more than parrot introductory material provided by the author,² thus giving license to publishers to create substandard texts. It does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that *Women's Fiction Authors: A Research Guide* in no way accomplishes what it sets out to do—and that should be the ultimate yardstick of success for a reference book. In good conscience, I cannot recommend this pseudo readers' advisory guide, and in good faith, I appeal to the editors at ABC-CLIO and LU to return to the model of readers' advisory texts that may have been rigorous and difficult to produce, yet were rewarding and useful for readers.

NOTES

1 Elzbieta Beck, *Feminist Collections: A Quarterly of Women's Studies Resources*, 30, no. 4,

(Fall 2009): p. 21.

2 See Jennifer Dawson, *Booklist*, 106, no. 4, (October 15, 2009): p. 80.