



## Gill Plain. *Prosthetic Agency: Literature, Culture and Masculinity after World War II*

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When peace returned after World War II, Britain confronted the enormous task of rebuilding and rehabilitating a society that had been burnt out by almost six years of conflict. In her latest book, *Prosthetic Agency: Literature, Culture and Masculinity after World War II*, Gill Plain offers a compelling account of the ways in which British postwar fictions sought to repair and repurpose masculinities amid the social and cultural turbulence of the mid-century.

Between 1945 and 1960, an explosion of storytelling took place within British culture, with increasing opportunities for the public to access cheap paperback fiction and a range of movies at the cinema. Bringing together a rich array of these mid-century cultural texts including thrillers, adventure tales, male melodramas, biographies, memoirs, and films, *Prosthetic Agency* deftly illustrates how these stories functioned as props to aid the remaking of domestic masculine citizenship. As the British nation embarked on recovering from the conflict, themes of wartime demobilization, absence, and homecoming underpinned swirling social anxieties about male reintegration into everyday life. Plain showcases how storytelling through a variety of media offered a vital means of acknowledging these difficulties and safely exploring the pleasures and fears of residual wartime violence in British society. In uncovering new processes of what she calls “cultural demobilisation” (4) and masculine reconstruction in postwar storytelling, *Prosthetic Agency* proffers a welcome move past the so-called highbrow literature toward an in-depth focus on other stories that sought to engage wider popular audiences. It is delightful to see Plain’s use of fictions and authors that made significant contributions to Britain’s postwar popular “pleasure culture of war” but have thus far gained little scholarly acknowledgement. In particular, Plain offers rewarding analysis of Alistair MacLean’s *The Last Frontier* (1959), Hammond Innes’s *Air Bridge* (1950), and Nicholas Monsarrat’s *The Ship That Died of Shame and Other Stories* (1955), a marvellous book that is so often overshadowed by the author’s success with *The Cruel Sea* (1951).

Revealing dissonances of homecoming and fractured masculinities against the emerging backdrop of the early Cold War, *Prosthetic Agency* is organized into thematic chapters that establish and speak across intersections of technology, the male body, and postwar reconstruction in mid-century British fictions. The first two chapters explore the “man-making properties of technology” (49) in postwar popular fiction, noting how these stories revealed contemporary anxieties that technological modernity might strip away the humanity of men. In the third chapter, Plain interrogates how the shifting milieu of nuclear science and Cold-War tensions exacerbated these fears. Drawing on war memoirs such as William Simpson’s *I Burned My Fingers* (1955), the fourth chapter unpacks how masculine subjectivities were reconstituted when faced with life-altering injuries. Expanding and developing this theme, the final two chapters reveal how biographies and fiction sought to proffer therapeutic pathways to masculine recovery. The book’s fascinating coda outlines how *The Guinea Pig* journal, a hospital magazine designed for members of the Guinea Pig Club who received treatment at the East Grinstead burns and maxillofacial unit, operated as a form of collaborative autobiography that sought to mediate the social rehabilitation of seriously disabled and disfigured servicemen.

As Plain notes, in comparison with World War I, the area of disability studies and World War II remains considerably under-researched in modern British history, barring a couple of notable exceptions. In its exploration of cultural representations of masculine disability that were offered to audiences in British cinema and literature, *Prosthetic Agency* harmonizes particularly well with Martin Francis's *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939–1945* (2008) and Julie Anderson's *War, Disability and Rehabilitation in Britain: "Soul of a Nation"* (2011). Making a valuable contribution to the wider field of history of disability in modern Britain, Plain elegantly dissects representations of physical and mental disabilities, male violence, and dysfunction in sexual and romantic relationships in postwar storytelling to highlight acute contemporary anxieties about the long-term injurious effects of conflict upon individuals and society.

On the whole, *Prosthetic Agency* sits comfortably at the crossroads of modern social and cultural history and literature studies, although there are one or two slightly odd absences regarding its relationship with a flourishing generation of scholarship on Britain and World War II. Despite building effectively upon influential work within the historical field (namely Sonya Rose's *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939–1945* [2003]; Francis's *The Flyer*), *Prosthetic Agency* might have connected to a greater extent with more recent scholarship that advances new understandings of multiple aspects of construction, performance and legacies of wartime civilian and military masculinities in Britain, such as Linsey Robb's *Men at Work: The Working Man in British Culture, 1939–1945* (2015) and Linsey Robb and Juliette Pattinson's *Men, Masculinities and Male Culture in the Second World War* (2018). Similarly, Plain's analysis of autobiographical narratives produced by flyers such as Simpson and his famous counterpart Richard Hillary (*The Last Enemy* [1942]), which detailed traumatic experiences of combat, injury, and disability, might have engaged with extant work on World War II military life-writing (Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (1997); Frances Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale: British Military Memoirs of the Second World War* (2019)).

Despite these minor quibbles, *Prosthetic Agency* offers much of cross-disciplinary interest and value to mid-century researchers. Opening up fresh avenues of enquiry into gender, disability studies, and postwar British culture and society, Plain's new book will undoubtedly be widely read and enjoyed.

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## **Elain Price. Broadcasting for Wales: The Early Years of S4C**

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The creation of the television channel Sianel Pedwar Cymu (S4C) has an iconic status in Welsh folklore. After winning the 1979 general election, the new Conservative government went back on its commitment to create a Welsh-language television channel. This led Gwynfor Evans, then president of Plaid Cymru, to threaten a hunger strike unless the