

BOOK REVIEW

A History of the *Bildungsroman*

Sarah Graham, (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 352

Anyone who reads fiction will eventually encounter a *Bildungsroman*—a novel about a young person facing the challenges of growing up—because it is one of the most popular and enduring genres in literary history.

(Graham 2019: 1)

A History of the Bildungsroman, edited by Sarah Graham and published in 2019, stands as the first comprehensive study of the genre. It offers a historically and geographically expansive survey that meticulously explores its emergence, evolution, and rich literary landscape over more than two centuries. Unlike earlier foundational studies that focused predominantly on the genre's German origins, the volume distinguishes itself as the first comprehensive study to move beyond existing Eurocentric frameworks. This is the volume's most significant contribution, as it fundamentally redefines the *Bildungsroman* within a global context and demonstrates its broad adaptability across the world literary scholarship.

Graham and the volume's contributors criticize the rigid, tree-like structure of the genre's development. They instead propose a rhizomatic model (Graham 2019: 4), a term borrowed from philosophy, suggesting that the genre developed not from a single root but from multiple, interconnected, and non-hierarchical roots across various cultures and time periods. This framework allows for a more flexible understanding of the genre, emphasizing its ongoing evolution. The collection shifts the focus from a fixed set of formal requirements (e.g., apprenticeship, wandering, finding one's place in society) to the underlying thematic concern: the process of self-formation and the negotiation between individual desire and social expectation. These culturally diverse interwoven roots evolve in distinct yet overlapping ways, roughly from the eighteenth century through modernity. This rhizome is “without origin or end” (Graham 2019: 4), neither clearly emerging from one text or nation nor completely dying off at any one cultural moment.

Intriguingly, the volume's essays do not uniformly embrace the rhizomatic logic, a fact that proves to be a strength. Chapters discussing the German, Russian, and English *Bildungsroman* (by Todd Kontje, Lina Steiner, and Richard Salmon) often reinforce a more linear model, tracing the genre's descent from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-96). In contrast, other chapters offer crucial counter-narratives, as scholars like Alison Finch, Maroula Joannou, and Meredith Miller instead locate the genre's roots in heterogeneous pre-Goethean forms, such as eighteenth-century romance or Gothic fiction. This latter approach underscores the genre's inherent capacity to articulate dissident gender and sexual identities from its earliest, non-Germanic sources. This internal disagreement among the contributors' genealogical models is not a structural fault, but rather a defining intellectual strength of the volume. It strategically allows the collection to simultaneously present the established, traditionally linear narrative of German-initiated growth alongside fresher, more heterogeneous, and expansive alternatives regarding the genre's enduring development.

A further strength of *A History of the Bildungsroman* (2019) lies in its challenge to the narrow, often restrictive definition of the genre. This volume offers an in-depth analysis of the

evolution of this narrative form and its establishment of significant traditions in various national contexts, particularly Germany (the term's origin), France, Britain, Russia, and the USA, while extending beyond this conventional framework to foreground narratives that have historically been marginalized. The book argues for a much wider and more expansive view of the *Bildungsroman*, challenging the customary, narrow association of the genre with the journey and social integration of the young, white, middle-class male protagonist. Crucially, a key contribution of the volume demonstrates the genre's diversity by exploring previously overlooked areas and articulating the formative experiences of marginalized subjects such as women, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and postcolonial communities.

Taken together, the volume positions the *Bildungsroman* as a genre with a deep historical lineage and a dynamic future. Its eleven chapters, written by leading scholars, illuminate the genre's emergence, development, and contemporary relevance. By emphasising the genre's ability to depict resistance and marginality even in the postmillennial period, the collection uncovers its potential for subversive critiques of sexism, racism, imperialism, and homophobia.

A History of the Bildungsroman edited by Sarah Graham is an essential contribution to contemporary literary scholarship. This book has already become and will continue to be perceived as a key reference point in future discussions of the literary genre, compelling scholars to radically expand their understanding of the *Bildungsroman*'s temporal origins, geographical reach, and the diversity of its protagonists.

Katarína Rendošová

Katarína Rendošová

Department of British and American Studies
Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice
Moyzesova 9, 04001 Košice
e-mail: katarina.rendosova@student.upjs.sk

In *SKASE Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies* [online]. 2025, vol. 7, no. 2 [cit. 2025-12-30]. Available on web page <http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JLCS15/04.pdf>. ISSN 2644-5506