

Lisa Zunshine, *Strange Concepts and the Stories They Make Possible: Cognition, Culture, Narrative*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008; pp.214; RRP \$US25.00 paperback; ISBN: 978-0-8018-8707-9

Lisa Zunshine, literary theorist and lecturer on Restoration and eighteenth-century English literature, uses an analytical framework shaped by key concepts from cognitive psychology and evolutionary anthropology to critically engage a wide variety of literary texts, poems, films and artworks in her latest monograph, *Strange Concepts and the Stories They Make Possible*. The author repeatedly signals the restricted application of the framework, justifies its use in particular circumstances, and in so doing, provides the kind of caveats necessary to disarm objections to this ambitious coupling of evolutionary principles and literary criticism. What follows is an incredibly rich, truly illuminating, highly enjoyable and original critique of sci-fi texts and films, nonsense poetry, drama, and surrealist art.

So what are the *strange concepts* with which the author is concerned? Invariably, the quality of *strangeness* is attached to those entities we find it conceptually difficult to categorise as inherently one thing or the other. This invariably occurs where our ability to designate function to an artifact, or some essence to a living entity, becomes blurred. Is a cyborg, for example – an artefact built for a particular purpose, but possessed with real human organs and capable of feeling pain – more human than someone in a coma or on life support? If so, what are the ethical implications for terminating life or deactivating the machine? Intuitively we feel like we know the answers to these questions: there is something essentially human about humans that robots can't possess. Zunshine does a fantastic job in showing how frequently these essential differences are stripped away, problematised, or blurred in a host of literary works, and in illuminating how this cognitive frustration impedes our capacity to relate to these texts on clear moral or ethical grounds.

Exploring the relationship between essence and function is Zunshine's main objective, and the author does a fantastic job in blending the scientific and the literary, offering those uninitiated with evolutionary psychology or evolutionary anthropology a very well-structured and clear explication of a host of unfamiliar themes and terminology. For this reason, *Strange Concepts* is one of those books that gives you a heightened sense of your intellectual faculties, the kind of book that makes you feel more intelligent with each page turned, and the kind of book that makes you feel like a peanut when you try and explain to someone else a set of ideas, so ably wielded by the author, that suddenly spin out of control in the author's absence. All of which is to say that the clarity and coherence Zunshine brings to introducing 'the Science' in her text is exemplary. Repetitive statements of this position leave the reader in no doubt about the premises and parameters of the argument, although the repetition occurs with sufficient regularity to make it tedious by the time you hit the third and final section of the text. Nevertheless, a brilliant book outlining an original approach to literary interpretation that will no doubt be profitably adopted by scholars in the future.

Philip Kierle
University of Western Australia