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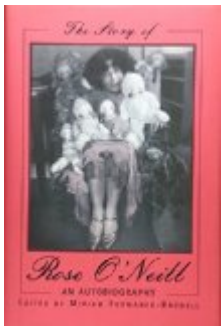

Rose O'Neill. *The Story of Rose O'Neill: An Autobiography.* Columbia, Mo. and London, England: University of Missouri Press, 1997. xi + 15r pp. $24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8262-1106-4.

Reviewed by Dorothy Browne

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Students of women's history and cultural studies should find this volume entertaining as well as educational. In her introduction, Miriam Formanek-Brunell provides a thought-provoking analysis of a transitional figure in twentieth-century American culture. Rose O'Neill (1874-1994) is best known as the inventor of the Kewpie doll, but Formanek-Brunell brings to light O'Neill's many other achievements. O'Neill had several fascinating careers--as a writer of poetry, novels, and short stories, as a commercial illustrator and cartoonist, and as an art patron--in addition to her work as a doll designer and businesswoman. Raised in the nineteenth century and coming of age in the twentieth, O'Neill's life and how others perceive her tells us much about changes in American culture. Formanek-Brunell points out that the various accounts of O'Neill thus far vary widely in their assessment of her, and that this reflects cultural changes as well as her multi-faceted personality. For example, she has been described in biographies both as dilettantish and as a "great artist" (p. 6).

The primary lens Formanek-Brunell uses to view her subject is gender. She argues persuasively that O'Neill defied conventional gender stereotyping in her art and lifestyle: "[p]referring art, activism, and adventure to motherhood and marriage, O'Neill pushed at the boundaries of her generation's definitions of gender in an effort to create new liberating forms that transcended rigid gender roles" (p. 8). Indeed, O'Neill never had children, and although she married twice, she also divorced twice. Much of her adult life was spent living and working with her sister Callista at her homes in Greenwhich Village, Connecticut and in the Ozarks. Furthermore, her activism encompassed a wide array of ideas, from anarchism and free love to woman suffrage. Finally, there are the Kewpies, the characters that made her famous. Formanek-Brunell notes that the Kewpies were androgynous figures in many ways. O'Neill stated that they were boys, but they had feminine features and characteristics and often wore clothing associated with females, such as aprons. O'Neill created them as a mixture of elves, Cupids, and angels.

The editor portrays O'Neill as a resourceful, witty, creative, independent, original and playful artist and businesswoman. Formanek-Brunell's characterization of O'Neill seems on target in reading the second portion of the book, the autobiography. O'Neill's prose is lively and engaging, although it is more literary than linear. Written in 1940 in her "deep retirement," this autobiography begins with her childhood and ends in her sixties. In her final pages, she reflects on women and aging, and on the difficulties in meeting our society's standards of beauty in old age. In her characteristic fashion, she plays with images of beauty and her ambivalence about her own. In her account, we meet a fascinating and enigmatic person who successfully challenged gender and other conventions in her life, activism, art, and business.

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