

**Timo Müller (ed.)**. *Handbook of the American Novel of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. Handbooks of English and American Studies 4. Berlin/Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2017, ix + 460 pp., 25 illustr., € 199.95/£ 180.99/\$ 229.99.

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2018-0027>

The fourth volume of the highly acclaimed Handbooks of English and American Studies series (2015–) is dedicated to the American novel of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Staying true to the series editors' stated aim of "combining theory with text analysis and contextual anchoring" (v), Timo Müller, the volume editor, has compiled an impressive collection of articles from twenty-nine contributors and framed them with an informative introduction of his own. The handbook is composed of two parts: Part I is entitled "Systematic Questions" and its seven chapters cover the broad theoretical and historical aspects of modernism, postmodernism, cultural diversity, intermediality, inter-American perspectives, the marketplace of the American novel and the futures of the American novel; Part II is devoted to exemplary "Close Readings" of twenty-two canonical American novels that range from Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903) to Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* (2012). Other authors discussed include Faulkner, Steinbeck, Wright, Ellison, Pynchon, Silko, Cisneros and Roth, to name just a few. Together, these thirty chapters merge into an excellent work of reference for everyone interested in American studies.

The *Handbook of the American Novel of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* starts with Timo Müller's introduction, in which he traces an "uneasy relationship between the nation and the novel in the United States" (1). Noting that the genre of the novel has been entangled with problematic conceptions of national and cultural identity, Müller also highlights its historical role in critiquing and defying these same notions – especially since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Other ubiquitous topics found in American novels are processes of industrialization and modernization, which gained momentum at the end of the nineteenth and especially at the beginning of the twentieth century. The resulting emergence of mass culture and new media problematized the relationship between highbrow and lowbrow, forcing the genre of the novel to reposition itself on this spectrum and, moreover, to subvert it. This became especially programmatic during the era of postmodernism, which Müller associates, for example, with the key idea of "the self as construct" as opposed to

modernism's guiding motif of "the self as object" (8–14). Together with the literary periods of modernism and postmodernism, the era of cultural diversity is used by the editor to structure the development of the American novel in the handbook. Indeed, these three key terms – modernism, postmodernism and cultural diversity – have been decisive for the selection of novels to be discussed in the close readings later on. In other words, great American novels that fall through the grid of these three concepts, such as J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) or Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), were not included here.

Nonetheless, as the chapters on "Modernism" and "Postmodernism" show, this grid is comprehensive and constantly being expanded by critics to include even more cultural products under these two headings. Matthew Stratton elaborates on why scholars have started to view the era of modernism as a transnational phenomenon from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Once Stratton has outlined these newer perspectives and modernism's characteristics, agendas and prominent actors, he proposes to replace this traditional approach with a much more relevant question: "How do we read and interpret literature differently when we view it through the dynamic conceptual lens called modernism?" (32). Hanjo Berressem's chapter on postmodernism opens up a wide field of cultural production and reception, taking into account the recent phenomena of "cyberpunk" (47), "hypertexts" (47) and "realism 2.0" (49). Berressem's chapter is, in fact, one of the true gems of this handbook, in that it manages to squeeze a vast array of complex theoretical aspects into a few pages while still supporting them with an abundance of literary examples. In comparison, other chapters seemed a bit crushed by the amount of material they cover. Carmen Birkle's informative chapter on "Cultural Diversity", for example, touches upon the following strands of American novelistic writing on only thirteen pages: the melting pot vs. cultural diversity, the Harlem Renaissance, black protest literature, (post)feminism, homosexuality, chick lit, Native American novels, Jewish American novels, Asian American novels, border studies, postcolonialism, Arab/Muslim American writing and disability narratives.

A more balanced picture is presented in the selection of close readings, which – despite the absence of outstanding female authors like Alice Walker, Harper Lee, Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood – offer an intriguing examination of twenty-two canonical novels. Each chapter consists of a short abstract and three subchapters on "Context", "Close Reading" and "Theoretical Perspectives", which are spread out over thirteen pages on average. While the reversal of the traditional order of research overview followed by an interpretation seems odd at first, it can be explained by this handbook's aim to serve as an introduction for BA and MA students who are approaching these canonical texts maybe for the first time. Thus, they are encouraged to dive into the primary source and an exemplary

reading first, before being confronted with the abundance of research directions which the work has invited. The helpful “Further Reading” section at the end of each chapter supports this impression as well.

Andrew S. Gross’s chapter on *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is a wonderful close reading chapter in that it links its object of study to one of the three overarching periods (in this case, modernism), shows the wider context and some common scholarly approaches to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s masterpiece, and all the while developing a new reading of *Gatsby*. By arguing that the male characters are representatives of and responses to modernism, Gross reveals a paradoxical pattern in the novel through which “the promise of America was destroyed by the materialism it enabled” (169). While this reading focuses on modernism’s socio-economic consequences at home, Hans-Peter Rodenberg’s chapter on *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) explores the ramifications of this era and especially the First World War on American expatriates in Europe. Ernest Hemingway’s novel has been praised as a “manifesto of modernism and ‘the lost generation’” (192) and, as Rodenberg’s chapter proves, its critical reception has undergone various stages, for example from being interpreted as misogynistic to being understood as a gender-bending work of art. The close reading of Hemingway’s book highlights these fissures, demonstrating how they can be interpreted differently depending on the historical stage of scholarly criticism itself.

Moving on from modernism to postmodernism, Susanne Rohr’s chapter on Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) indicates how some texts create these cracks and ambiguities on purpose to produce narratives that playfully elude a monolithic reading. Agreeing with researchers that the “true scandal” of Nabokov’s novel is not its perverse topic but its “irresistible beauty” threatening to seduce the reader (309), Rohr shows how *Lolita*’s aesthetics rest on a combination of romantic, modernist and postmodernist strategies. While this chapter would have profited from more space to expand its captivating ideas, it still is a wonderful example of how fruitful it is to work close to the primary source and to engage with a text’s detailed, linguistic intricacies. The same goes for Christopher Schliephake’s chapter on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), which supports the view that Morrison’s book is a postmodern “retelling of the slave experience from an African American viewpoint” while showing “how memory can haunt the present and disrupt community” (374). This chapter, similar to that on Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) by Markus Nehl, problematizes the African American experience in a white-dominated United States and its literary market.

The readings of the twenty-first century novels are just as illuminating as these examples from the twentieth century. The chapters on Jonathan Safran Foer, Cormack McCarthy and Louise Erdrich might be too small a number to represent a full picture of this century – hence also the relatively timid referencing

to post-postmodern theories throughout the handbook –, but they bring urgent new topics to the literary table. Alexander Starre investigates the intergenerational failures in communication due to trauma and highlights some intermedial functions in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005); Andrew Estes traces the same traumatic repercussions of 9/11 in *The Road* (2006) and brings ecocritical approaches into his close reading; Birgit Däwes, finally, shows how *The Round House* (2012) is interlinked with Erdrich's other novels and argues that Erdrich “combines the genres of the crime novel and the novel of adolescence in order to foreground issues of Native American sovereignty, American Indian law, and a history of political and social injustice” (427). All three readings are insightful and offer an easy entrance into the work of these writers and, moreover, into the world of twenty-first century American novels.

Thus, the *Handbook of the American Novel of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* is a worthwhile purchase for anyone working on or interested in American studies. It gives a rich synchronic and diachronic overview of the American novel's form, style, characteristics, topics and concerns over two centuries of production. The close readings of canonical texts, the helpful bibliographies, sections on further reading and the handy indices of subjects and names lend this volume particularly to teaching in BA and MA programs. Moreover, reading and working with this handbook furthers our understanding of how novels “have changed the American imagination, and [how] they have changed the way we imagine America” (16).