

**Prosser, Jay, ed. *American Fiction of the 1990s: Reflections of History and Culture*. London: Routledge, 2008. 244 pp. ISBN: 0415435666 (hbk), 0415435673 (pbk), 0203091043 (ebk).**

In the concluding chapter of the 1992 edition of *The Modern American Novel*, Malcolm Bradbury observes that, although it has moved away from a recognizable aesthetic, American fiction of the nineties is nevertheless becoming characterized by “clear tendencies” that mostly arise “from the deep changes that have been reordering an American society which has been more conservative in its mood and less certain than before in its direction and future” (273). The contributors to Jay Prosser’s collection of essays allow us to recognize the prescience of Bradbury’s observations, exploring the ways in which many of the concerns that Bradbury picks out as embryonic tendencies in U.S. fiction at the beginning of the decade have evolved, been refashioned, and taken on a different character as the nineties progressed. These include an ongoing preoccupation with the Vietnam War, continued attempts to reconstruct African American pasts, a revisioning of the Civil Rights movement’s place in political history, the struggle to comprehend postmodernity, and—in terms of narrative strategies—an abiding dissatisfaction with realism. Inevitably, Prosser’s contributors offer a far more sustained engagement with the tendencies and concerns that *The Modern American Novel* points to, but they also introduce issues in 1990s U.S. fiction that are—at best—only touched on by Bradbury: Latino/a and Native American identities, globalization, multiculturalism, the imperial roots of the modern American nation-state, the Cold War, Queer cultures, masculinity, the mass media, and an escalating dissatisfaction with post-modernism. Indeed, as much as it examines many of the developments that Bradbury anticipates in 1992, it also reveals the roots of twenty-first century writing in the 1990s.

Divided into five sections—“Transnational Borders,” “Race Cathexes,” “Historical Narratives,” “Sex Images,” and “Postmodern Technologies”—and with an impressively panoramic introduction by Prosser, *American Fiction of the 1990s* manages the difficult task of balancing synoptic survey with detailed reading. Rightly refusing either to promote the sense of a core thematic that drives U.S. fiction of this decade or to adopt a simple linear account of the progression of U.S. writing towards the end of the century, this collection demonstrates how nineties fiction needs to be read across a number of issues and with an eye to the multiplicity of literary, social, and cultural contexts. A. Robert Lee’s opening chapter

samples, with dazzling virtuosity, the substantial body of writing which embraces and reflects “Hispano-*mestizo/a*” histories, picking out Rudolpho Anaya, Rolando Hinojosa, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, and Cristina Garcia (among others) for particular attention. The reshaping both of U.S. national identity and of race and ethnicity during this decade remains the focus of essays by Nahem Yousaf, Krishna Sen, Andrew Dix, Andrew Warnes and Suzanne W. Jones. Yousaf considers how E. Annie Proulx’s *Accordion Crimes* (1996), Junot Diaz’s *Drown* (1997), Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), and Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* (1997) provide transnational and global counternarratives to cultural nationalism and liberal multiculturalism, while Brian Jarvis’s “Skating on a Shit Field” discovers in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990) a “cautionary traumatology of topos” (134). In the third section, Zoe Trodd documents a shift away from the rhetoric and cultural politics of gay liberation groups in the U.S. and the emergence of the “Queer Nineties,” with an emphasis on sexual performativity, transgender identities, and political alliances; Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina* (1996) and Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* (1994) provide Trodd with literary instances of this new activism. If Trodd’s focus falls on the birth of Queer culture, then Kasia Boddy’s “Regular Lolitas” explores attempts to navigate the difficult subject of adolescent sexuality, charting the continued fascination with Nabokov’s eponymous character in 1990s novels (such as A.M. Homes’s *The End of Alice* [1997] and Emily Prager’s *Roger Fishbite* [1999]). In the closing section—Postmodern Technologies—Timothy Aubry argues that David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996) works against the narrative devices that it apparently embraces, instead provoking the readers’ dissociation from the “excesses” of postmodernity and calling for “an alternative set of values, centred around simplicity, empathy, and sincerity” (206). Closing the collection, Stephen J. Burn’s essay also picks up on Wallace’s disaffection for post-modernity. But Burns associates Wallace with other writers of the 1990s—Mark Leyner, Carole Maso, Lee Seigel, Richard Powers, and Jonathan Franzen—who are troubled by their debt to postmodernism even as they seek to develop alternative techniques. Around this impressive array of readings, other essays consider work in this decade by already established authors (including Don DeLillo, Bret Easton Ellis, Tim O’Brien, Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth), as well as writers who only started to gain recognition in the nineties, such as Sherman Alexie, Rosellen Brown, Bharati Mukherjee, Chuck Palahniuk, and Danzy Senna.

It is increasingly rare to find edited collections which manage to survey writing as rich as 1990s U.S. fiction while retaining a close attention to particular texts' nuancing of narrative and their specific modes of cultural engagement, if only because publishers now often favour student-friendly introductions to literary histories and geographies. It is to this collection's credit that it provides an extensive overview of 1990s U.S. fiction that is not only accessible to students, but one that will also be welcomed by those working at advanced levels in U.S. literary studies. Prosser's excellent collection provides a full and comprehensive sense of a decade that has only partially been explored, redefining the place of authors who continued to mature in the nineties, establishing the significance of writers who were emerging in this decade, and redrawing the cultural landscape of nineties America.

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### **Works Cited**

Bradbury, Malcolm. *The Modern American Novel*. 1984. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.