

Sigmund Ro, *Literary America. An Introduction to the Literature of the United States*
Oslo: Universitets forlaget, 1997. x + 310 pp. ISBN: 82-00-21954-2; paper.

In his foreword, Sigmund Ro clearly states the audience his book is intended for:
'beginning and intermediate-level EFL-students in colleges and universities in their first

and second years of study.' He goes on to say that the book's *raison d'être* is that 'students often lack the necessary historical knowledge for an adequate understanding of American literary texts.' To fill the void Ro has taken an approach which places the literature in its social, historical, and cultural contexts.

He is certainly right about the lack of knowledge our students have. Academics in the old Anglo-Saxon world groan about the quality of their students, the decline in the knowledge they are expected to have. In non-native-speaker institutions this is compounded. The amount of literature high school students are expected to read in Finland is minimal in Finnish, to say nothing of what is offered in their English classes. Pre-university-level English is still primarily oriented towards the language rather than the culture. The extent that literature is read today is totally dependent on the individual; as a result our first-year students are a very uneven lot.

About ten years ago, a colleague in the Comparative Literature department asked me to suggest a literary history that his students (non-English specialists) could use. All I could come up with was the massive *Literary History of the United States* and Marcus Cunliffe's shorter work. This was before Emory Elliott's *Columbia Literary History of the United States* and Ruland and Bradbury's *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*. All this makes the need for an introductory text clear. A major consideration involves the level and depth of the text, the language and terminology, and the length. Long works, like the Spiller *LHUS* and the Elliott, are far too extensive for the beginning student of American literature. The information is there, but do these particular students need it? Will it in the long run be counterproductive? What about Ruland and Bradbury? It is only about 70 pages longer than *Literary America*, but far more detailed. Since many of our students only do American Studies and Literature courses because they are required, I agree with Ro against prescribing such longer works.

Literary America is traditional in the way it looks at its subject. It is divided into seven chapters, which grow in length as the literature of the United States becomes more established and significant. As expected, the accepted divisions into Colonial, New Republic, Transcendental, Realist/Naturalist, and Modernist periods are followed. An entire chapter, I am pleased to say, is devoted to the problematic decade of the 1930s. The long final section is given over to writing in the Post-War period. Ro chooses to highlight certain writers in each period in the form of short 'Author Portraits' (which unfortunately are uneven in content and scope; some are to the point, others are more anecdotal: does the student need to know that Katherine Anne Porter collected 'silver and china as well as jewelry, furs, and furniture?'), writers he feels to be representative, in essence creating his own canon. He is, however, conscious of this fact. Ro notes the 'debatability' of his choices but, considering the anticipated readership, these choices have to be made. They are for the most part the usual 'dead white males,' but women, immigrants and writers of color are more in evidence starting with the late nineteenth century, when society begins to allow them a greater voice.

Particularly in the early chapters (through the end of World War I), Ro provides excellent analyses of the social and cultural contexts. The importance of money and the power of capitalism as themes run through the text, as does the mythology of America: the Jeffersonian/Crèvecoeurian notion of the American as yeoman farmer; Emersonian self-reliance and the self-made man who replaced the yeoman; both are staples of Manifest Destiny. Ro's portraits of regional writers like Bret Harte and Owen Wister examine the Western myth so familiar to students from the Hollywood product. The author questions the traditional American history that students have been fed in high school classes. Ro takes pains in noting the social problems associated with race, class and definitely gender, and the importance this has had on the literature; this is to be expected from a late twentieth century Americanist. The chapter 'Winds of Change: The Rise of Realism and Naturalism, 1860-1912' is particularly strong in this respect, explaining the literary importance of the rise of the city along with the attitudes of the Protestant Church, the 'Gospel of Wealth' and its underpinnings in Franklin, Emerson and Darwin. Ro points out the gender division of skyscraper and colonial home and the segregation of urban neighborhoods. The significance of the Genteel Tradition and its passing in the works of the realists and naturalists is made clear to the reader.

The range of writers that Ro includes is not exhaustive, but sufficient to give the reader a sense of the diversity of the literature. Again, this is strongest in the Post-Civil War era. The largest number of 'author portraits' is included here, under four classifications: Regionalism, Social and Psychological Realism, Naturalism and the Revolt of the 1890s, Women Writers and the 'New Woman.' A coda to the chapter 'Immigrants and Minorities at the Literary Gate' briefly describes the emergence of Native American, African American and Jewish American writing. Ro, however, errs in omitting any reference to Mary Antin's 1912 autobiography *The Promised Land*, which is emblematic of the quest for total assimilation/Americanization championed in many immigrant circles at the time and in contrast to the problems of assimilation described by Abraham Cahan and later Jewish writers.

Literary America has its problems, both in analysis and practical features. Deciding what to include in respect to the last eighty years naturally poses a dilemma to all literary historians, but the problem is magnified by the limitations of space and depth. A certain 'glossing over' is particularly evident in the section on the thirties. Ro introduces the WPA Art Projects, but does not go into greater detail, especially why it was so important to writers. When he does, he should check his facts: Philip Roth, born in 1933, could not possibly have been employed by the Federal Writers Project! Ro's section on 'Hard-boiled Crime Fiction,' while indicating that the settings are often San Francisco or Los Angeles, does not bring up the failure of the California Dream, especially in works by Horace McCoy, James M. Cain (who are unmentioned) and Nathanael West (who is), and the significance of Hollywood in the American mentality (cf. David Fine's *Los Angeles in Fiction* (1984)). Jewish American writing after Cahan is seemingly reduced to two themes, the immigrant story of Henry Roth's 'undisputed masterpiece' *Call It Sleep* and Daniel Fuchs's *Williamsburg Trilogy* and the problems of full assimilation. What makes Roth a

masterpiece, indisputably above the bulk of the sentimental ethnic writing Ro notes? Fuchs's trilogy may be set among Jews in the Williamsburg ghetto, but could just as easily represent just about any immigrant group in the United States at the time.

A significant problem concerning the Post-war period which the student faces involves unclear references requiring clarification. For instance, César Chavez's strike in California in 1965: what was he striking against? Or 'drop-outs from Berkeley' in the Ginsberg portrait: what was Berkeley? Similar references appear in earlier sections: Sarah Orne Jewett's 'crippling accident,' the last name of a critic – Brooks, a writer – Freeman. How is the reader to recognize these names? A similar problem arises in regard to Ro's citations of critical sources. He introduces a long quote by Susan Stanford Friedman on the modernist intellectual crisis, but does not cite the work. If we are seeking to awaken an interest in our students, hoping that they will go further on their own, why impede them by providing a 'Select Bibliography for Reference and Supplementary Reading' which is organized by 'author profile,' including primary and secondary works? Since *Literary America* is concerned with social, historical and cultural contexts, why not include a general bibliography by period? An index is necessary, for pedagogical reasons alone. One way of providing valuable space for analysis and interpretation would be the elimination of the 'Overviews' following each chapter. Serious students surely would not need these short summaries, especially of the short early chapters.

Despite these faults, *Literary America* succeeds on the level it is meant for, as a background reference for beginning and intermediate students. The basic understanding of the subject matter the book provides should allow the instructor to delve more deeply into the literature itself as well as supplement much of the material omitted due to considerations of space.