

the most critical eras in America's history and culture. The final paragraph before the epilogue confirms the value of Bryson's achievement: little survives even as memory; it is the many major events of 1927, both admirable and tragic, that make the summer of 1927 'one hell of a summer'. Europe was no longer the center of action – why, and with what consequences for America are Bryson's major concerns. Readers on both sides of the Atlantic will appreciate his knowledge, humor and wit.

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Lilijana Burcar, *American Literature and its Social Political Context*. Ljubljana: Ljubljana University Press, 2014. 132 pp. ISBN: 978-961-237-640-6.

American Literature and its Socio-Political Context is based on the premise that all literature is intimately connected with everyday reality, and more specifically, with its social and historical context, to which it owes both its content and form. Literary works, Burcar argues, not only shed light on American reality but also on the constructs of race, gender and class that continue to shape American society. Because works of fiction are embedded in very specific social relations as well as social, historical and political contexts, they constitute a way of communicating with the reality to which they owe their very existence. Indeed, works of fiction “do not just reflect but actively shape and produce our perception and understanding of the world” (13). Reality sheds light on the literary work; the literary work sheds light on reality.

The double process of illumination is based on a particular ideology, Burcar argues. Drawing on Terry Eagleton's definition of ideology as a system of manipulation and deceit that is based on distortion and misrepresentation, Burcar points to the tendency in literature to conceal injustice and validate inequalities based on artificial ideas of difference and inequality. Race, sexism and social inequality are examples of this tendency, the consequences of which are discrimination, exploitation and the implementation of what Burcar terms “false consciousness”.

At the same time, instead of upholding existing relations of social injustice, literature also has the potential and power to expose and even challenge the reproduction of social inequalities, promoting critical awareness and providing a new vision of the world that carries with it the ability to

stimulate transformation. Such works are emancipating. This idea is not new, of course (Burcar refers not only to Philip Rice and Patrician Waugh but also to Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle); however, Burcar does challenge the fundamental assumption of formalist literary studies, namely that literature is timeless, universal and self-contained. Literature is always contextualized, and its form and content are always intimately connected. As we deal with literature we deal with humanity. Literature is seen to be both a social practice and social discourse.

Divided into seven chapters, *American Literature and its Socio-Political Context* analyses seven major works, one work per chapter. Chapter one focuses on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), chapter two on Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), chapter three on Russell Banks's *Rule of the Bone* (1995), chapter four on Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), chapter five on John Dos Passos's *The Big Money* (1937), chapter six on John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and chapter seven on Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughter-House Five* (1969).

Chapter six, the longest chapter in the book, is particularly interesting. Containing a thorough introduction to land privatization, tenant farming and the capitalist restructuring of agriculture in Oklahoma as well as the effects of fascism and corporate agricultural capitalism in California, Burcar demonstrates how *The Grapes of Wrath* provides an in-depth analysis of the system of exploitation facing farm workers; at the same time, the novel also suggests possible social action. Its solutions, however, are only ameliorative and pacifying, Burcar notes: while they may provide comfort, they do not address the root problems. Burcar challenges the reader to go beyond the novel's limitations, see it as a whole and establish the way its conservative and subversive elements mesh with one another in the individual chapters. She does not, however, suggest how the reader should go about this. While that is beyond the scope of her study, a couple of examples would nonetheless have assisted the reader.

The most recently published novel to be discussed in Burcar's study is Russell Banks's *Rule of the Bone* (1995). It is perhaps a shame that there is no chapter on more recent novels, including, for example, Richard Russo's *Empire Falls* (2001), Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) to show how American works of fiction continue to engage with American reality.

One of the strengths of *American Literature and its Socio-Political Context* is the "further reading" sections at the end of each chapter, which con-

tain a range of older and newer sources. Useful quotations from the seven novels are set out in separate boxes, with page references. These are carefully selected to demonstrate the importance of the social context of each work. *American Literature and its Socio-Political Context* also contains pertinent quotations from historical sources both in the chapters themselves and in separate boxes at the end of the chapter. The bibliography is solid and contains works up to 2013.

American Literature and its Socio-Political Context is an excellent starting point for students of American literature interested in exploring the relations between American reality and American fiction. It draws attention to the need for a critical reading of the works as well as for a committed engagement on the part of the reader in order to understand the work in its context. It is not Burcar's intention to offer a detailed critical appraisal of the works but to open up a fresh way of looking at how they not only reflect but also subvert the reality of which they are a part and a product. It is to be hoped that Burcar will continue her project, include more works of fiction and extend the range of historical sources consulted.

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Alisa Solomon. *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2013. 432 pp. ISBN 978-0-8050-9260-8.

A recent conference on border studies and cultures of migration, taking place in Southwest Germany. The conference banquet is preceded by a bus ride that carries participants over the international border into Northeastern France. Once there, a Finnish professor and a German-Danish doctoral candidate engage in a cheerful conversation. Both are working on Jewish American literature. After just a couple of viewpoints have been exchanged, the subject matter is set for the night. It is *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Could there be a better anecdote to illustrate the border-crossing, time-transcending quality of the famed Tevye tale – that family saga about the patriarchal yet lovable protagonist from the fictional village of Boiberik (or is it Anatevka, as the Hollywood movie suggests?), and his convention-shattering daughters? Without a doubt, Tevye the dairyman is an iconic figure in popular discourse, a Jewish cultural archetype and master of the pro-