

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-

verbial “migrant experience.” His faring has come to epitomize the Jews’ continual adaptation strategies in a variety of social surroundings. And his story simultaneously universalizes the process of cultural adaptation, converting it into a trans-historic allegory of any person’s or community’s self-reinvention in the face of a changing world. In her extensively researched and richly contextualized *Wonder of Wonders*, Alisa Solomon traces the vexed paths this allegory has taken over the last one hundred and twenty years, and the global impact it has been exerting.

The story of Tevye entered the public imaginary against the socio-political backdrop of turn-of-the-century czarist Russia. Later, when opening as an opulent Broadway show in 1964, it became an immediate blockbuster hit, introducing a new cultural narrative – that of Eastern European *shtetl* life and the expulsion of the Jews – to a North American mainstream audience. Two of the historical epochs that *Wonder of Wonders* explores in depth are thereby indicated. Solomon account starts in the 1880s, when the trilingual Ukrainian author Sholem Rabinowitz decided to add some spice to the Russian and Hebrew literary elitism of his day: writing in the vernacular Yiddish, he refashioned himself as the *folkshrayber* Sholem-Aleichem and would stage an original set of characters that tragicomically displayed human vice and virtue – the follies of everyday Jewish existence in the Pale of Settlement, the rustic cordiality of the “common people.” Within the *folkshrayber*’s narrative cosmos, *Tevye der milkhiker* moved center stage for the first time in a short story of 1894. In Part I of her study (“When America Commands”), Solomon expounds how this episode led to Sholem-Aleichem’s well-known cycle of Tevye tales as well as a number of early dramatic adaptations over the following decades, before in Part II (“Tevye Strikes It Rich”) she outlines in exciting detail how that groundwork gradually became *Fiddler on the Roof*, the record-smashing Broadway production of the 1960s.

All the while, as Solomon provides careful readings of the different versions of the narrative, a vast historical panorama unfolds to the reader. For, to be sure, she is not only a leading theater critic and drama scholar, but also a first-rate cultural historian. Thus the third part of *Wonder of Wonders* (“Tevye’s Travels”) takes us far beyond the realms of turn-of-the-century Russia and mid-century America. In four case studies, Solomon here presents how *Fiddler* was enacted and received in 1960s Israel, as read in the larger context of postwar Zionism; as a fiercely contested Brooklyn school play – indeed a “battleground” (257) – starring a cast of African American

students in the midst of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville controversy; as “one of the last big successful Hollywood musicals” (288) in Norman Jewison’s 1971 filmic adaptation; and as a communal open-air ritual in the Polish town of Dynów, where *Fiddler* was staged in 2006/07 by two young artists to perform a regenerative form of memory work, engaging the community’s silenced history of the Second World War. All of these sub-chapters – and in particular the last one, in which Solomon explains how *Fiddler* has been used to “[recall] Dynów’s multicultural past [...] as a way of looking toward Poland’s European future” (319) – constitute pieces of performance scholarship in their own right; the relative outsider to the field benefits tremendously from the author’s outstanding experience in the theater world.

To present her material and her analyses, Solomon combines loads of interesting production notes with sympathetic portrayals of many of the persons involved in bringing the examined texts to life; and she integrates informed guesses on the respective artists’ aesthetic and commercial interests with comments on the broader cultural discourses of reception. In the process, her own intellectual position as well as her reservations toward particular schools of thought become manifest. Her basic argument is that *Fiddler*’s extraordinary narrative power stems from its inherently flexible, even “contradictory” (2) nature, so that it has persistently been claimed by both progressive and conservative forces. On the one hand, throughout her investigation Solomon points to, and criticizes, a certain “standard grumble” (252) expressed by the “[railing] guardians of Yiddish literature” (42): all-too puristic defenders of a supposedly “true” or “authentic” Jewish Tevye interpretation. On the other hand, implied in that critique is her own, anti-essentialist concept of Jewishness (or any identity, for that matter). As she puts it, any “generation of artists gleefully adds to, and takes from,” the “raw materials” that are available in the socio-discursive arena, while “keep[ing] the identifying tags on the items that they own” (347). It is consistent that Solomon concludes her book with a brief celebration of most recent and “playful” (*ibid.*) revampings of the *Fiddler* trope – experimental music, cartoon caricatures, or self-parodic dances that have emerged with the “Heebster” and “New Jew” generation of culture makers.

“As a drama about cultural adaptation that itself has been adapted repeatedly for shifting cultural circumstances, *Tevye* has grappled with the anxieties and the promises of constancy and change in form as well as content” (44), Solomon writes. It is hardly a coincidence that her own work stays true to this dialectical principle: “it locks backward and forward” at the same

time (3), deals with both the particular and the universal, by presenting micro- and macro-history – the succession of primary texts and their cultural contexts – in a constant dynamic interplay. This integrative approach, and the sheer abundance of new inquiries into a prime example of the drama canon, make *Wonder of Wonders* an adorable piece of scholarship.

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**Birgit M. Bauridl, *Betwixt, Between, or Beyond? Negotiating Transformations from the Liminal Sphere of Contemporary Black Performance Poetry*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013. xi + 326pp. ISBN 978-3-8253-5900-3.**

Performance poetry has received conspicuously little scholarly attention considering its popularity. Birgit M. Bauridl's recent book *Betwixt, Between, or Beyond?: Negotiating Transformations from the Liminal Sphere of Contemporary Black Performance Poetry* (2013) seeks to redress this state of affairs by offering an account of contemporary black performance poetry from the "vista point of transnational American studies" (251). As the author points out, the field of performance poetry has so far lacked "a profound theoretical conceptualization and contextualization and a scholarly location not only within literary history, but moreover within cultural history and an investigation against the foil of synchronic culture(s)" (36). This point of departure is a challenging one both in a positive and a negative sense. The gap in the body of research in black studies provides an intriguing opportunity to break new ground by mapping a hitherto scarcely explored territory. On the other hand, the task of delineating the scope of the research is bound to be a demanding one, given the ambiguity of the object of research and the relative shortage of critical studies to build on. The book at hand provides a competent and insightful negotiation of its object of study and manages to avoid the potential pitfalls of such an ambitious endeavor.

The overall structure of the book is logical and proceeds patiently from profoundly executed initial conceptualizations and definitions and their critical assessment through a thorough overview of previous research and