

might trailblaze an inevitable re-negotiation of traditional parameters of the nation-state. All in all, Kindinger's *Homebound* is a useful book to keep handy both as reference, if one is interested in non-Jewish diaspora studies, and as a set of case studies in Greek/American and return nonfiction.

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**Andrew Warnes, *American Tantalus. Horizons, Happiness and the Impossible Pursuit of US Literature and Culture*. London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2014. 198 pp. ISBN: 978-1-6235-6107-9.**

*American Tantalus. Horizons, Happiness and the Impossible Pursuit of US Literature and Culture* presents the American canon in the context of Homer's Tantalus, who was tormented by eternal hunger and thirst while surrounded by food and water beyond his reach. Literature, argues Warnes, has a tantalizing effect: it is something we try to reach but which withdraws from us, creating a frustrated desire that permeates American writing and culture. The effect is particularly visible in the works of great writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Henry James and in cultural symbols such as the cars, guns, hotel rooms and swimming pools portrayed by, among others, Robert Penn Warren, Hunter S. Thompson, Raymond Carver, John Cheever and Stanley Elkin.

Warnes compares literature to a beautiful but empty swimming pool whose shining and untouched surface lures us to enter; as we do so, however, the surface is shattered and the illusion is gone. The pool, explains Warnes, "tries to instill in us a desire we can never act out. The yearning it would inspire repulses, necessarily, its object of attraction" (5). He states in his introduction that he focuses on US literature because "it broods so obsessively, and foregrounds so persistently, such a rich panoply of tantalizing effects" (5). Because the experience of tantalization is so universal, its prominence in US literature, and more particularly in the novel, is all the more striking, argues Warnes. *American Tantalus* is a study in desire for the things that desire itself destroys. Desirable objects like a beautiful woman or a well-made toy must remain untouched if they are to retain their beauty.

American literature is moving away from classic and resonant national

myths such as the western horizon or the virgin wilderness, shifting its focus to what Warnes calls an “alienated newness of pristine commodities” (18) and exposing these as objects that withdraw from the very curiosity that they encourage. The primary purpose of *American Tantalus* is to show how the American literary tradition mirrors tantalizing situations and predicaments in American everyday life.

Divided into four chapters, *American Tantalus* demonstrates that the pursuit of the untouchable continues regardless of the consequences. Chapter one, “Perpetual Pursuits: Happiness, Horizons and Other Elusive Objects in Modern US Culture”, focuses on works by, for example, Sanford Robinson Gifford, John Ford and John Cheever; chapter two, “The Becoming Blank: Fantasies of Invisibility after the Frontier”, focuses on Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Henry James; chapter three, “Play Things: Toys at the Edge of Whiteness”, discusses new technologies and industrial design, and how these are portrayed in literary works by, for example, William Faulkner (*Wild Palms*), F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*) and Richard Wright (*Native Son*); and chapter four, “Necessary Torments: Temptations, Falls and Bodily Compensations in Modern US Culture”, considers the influence of scholars and critics such as Roland Barthes on American culture and African-American literature. Focusing on “tantalization’s apparent capacity to resurge and withstand the exposure of the hidden processes of its creation” (114), Warnes considers sealable spaces such as hotel rooms which are locked tight between the public and the private, and which have an untouchable aura. He refers specifically to Stanley Elkin’s *The Franchiser* and the works of Raymond Carver, Hunter S. Thompson, and Robert Penn Warren.

*American Tantalus* offers a series of what Warnes describes as “close or surface readings” (135) in which the texts themselves are the centre and from which he excludes the external context of the works. Each of the works discussed serves to show that there is a long tradition in American literature of reaching for untouchable horizons, a tradition that precedes the postmodernist concern for elusive desire. It is Warnes’s primary hope that *American Tantalus* will aid our understanding of some of America’s most important texts.

Warnes’s comprehensive notes and bibliography bear witness to the breadth and depth of his scholarly and yet surprisingly compact study. *American Tantalus* does, however, have one important weakness: as one critic (Rona Cran; *Times Literary Supplement* 3 April 2015) has already

noted, it fails to take into account the reasons for Tantalus's punishment, which causes tantalization to be presented as arbitrary and without cause. *American Tantalus* does nonetheless provide convincing evidence for the idea that meaning is immanent in the surface of a literary work; digging below the surface is not necessary. While not all readers would agree with this standpoint, *American Tantalus* does provide fruitful grounds for debate and re-consideration of a number of America's seminal works. This is indeed Warnes's most important achievement in *American Tantalus* and one likely to be appreciated by a wide range of scholars of American literature.

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**Winfried Fluck, Erik Redling, Sabine Sielke, and Hubert Zapf, eds., *American Studies Today: New Research Agendas*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014. 475 pages. ISBN 987-3-8253-6094-8.**

*American Studies Today: New Research Agendas* is an ambitious title. Not only does it suggest an overview of American Studies as it is practiced today, but it also proposes to contribute new agendas to a field known to continuously problematize its identity, methodologies, and intellectual agendas. Given the volume's title, I would imagine its most likely target group to comprise graduate students and scholars in the field. Although my own graduate student days are long gone (I completed my Ph.D. at the University of Texas at Austin in 2004), I still remember vividly all the seminar discussions, oral exam preparations, and job market rehearsals, where we were instructed to give definitions of both what American Studies is and how we position ourselves within the field. All of us had to do this; you could not enter doctoral candidacy without a firm grasp of your own conceptualization of the field. The rationale for this was that few people outside of American Studies had much understanding of what it is that we actually "do," while few of those well-versed within the field's various paradigms seemed to agree about them. Once I left the United States to work in Europe, I was introduced to an entirely different can of worms in trying to decipher the ways in which the field was conceptualized and practiced in the various European nations.