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The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing (review)

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Weber, Ronald. *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing.* Midwestern History and Culture series. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992. 288 pp. Cloth: $35.00.

The starting point for Ronald Weber's history of Midwestern literature is the notion that dominance in American literature has moved from one region to the other—from New England in the nineteenth century, to the Midwest in the early years of the twentieth century, to the South after about 1925. Weber's topic is the Midwestern "ascendancy," its beginning pushed back to the publication of Edward Eggleston's *Hoosier School-Master* in 1871 and the end forward to the suspension of publication of the journal *The Midland* in 1933.

Weber's initial list of significant authors in the ascendancy runs to nineteen writers: "Edward Eggleston, Hamlin Garland, James Whitcomb Riley, Booth Tarkington, Theodore Dreiser, Henry B. Fuller, Floyd Dell, Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, Zona Gale, Sherwood Anderson, Ring Lardner, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, Ruth Suckow, O. E. Rolvaag, Carl Van Vechten, Glenway Wescott" (p. 3). Weber departs slightly from this list in the succeeding chapters. He drops Zona Gale (one of only three women) and adds a few other writers, including Joseph Kirkland, E. W. Howe, and the young Fitzgerald and Hemingway. But for the most part, the list represents Weber's Midwestern canon.

Weber is as precise about the recurring themes of Midwestern literature as he is about its authors—"the loss of a natural pastoral life, village mediocrity, escape to the city in search of the fullness of life, rural returns touched with feelings of nostalgia, guilt, and superiority" (p. 3). As for the contribution of the "ascendancy" to American literature: "It formed the leading edge in the freeing of American writing from the grip of the genteel, bringing us for the first time face to face with contemporary life. It provided fresh visions of style and form on the route to modernism's preoccupation with literary manner" (p. 4).

Given this view of what Midwestern literature is—its important writers, its themes, and its contribution to American literature in general—*The Midwestern Ascendancy* is very well done. Weber writes smoothly and lucidly and with an obvious empathy with and affection for the writers he includes. The book is especially strong on secondary material contemporary with the main texts. Weber uses critics and reviewers of the teens and twenties very well and, especially, the writers' comments on each other's work —Sinclair Lewis's comments on Willa Cather, for example.

These considerable virtues, though, cannot conceal a distinctly dated quality in Weber's historiography. The starting point of the book, he says, was in an undergraduate course at Notre Dame taught by John T. Frederick, whose "dark suits, wire-rimmed glasses, and courtly manner brought to mind another age" (p. ix). Weber's book has a similarly nostalgic quality. His all

white, almost all male canon; his pat list of themes; his Whiggish comments on the contribution of Midwest writing to the "progress" of American literature—all bespeak another age of literary study.

One form of the blinkers that Weber dons when looking at Midwestern literature is his unnecessarily narrow definition of "literature." Early in the book, he says of Hamlin Garland's early stories that they were "work that, for the first time in Midwestern writing, retains some interest for literary as well as social and cultural reasons" (p. 38), thereby dismissing a century of Midwestern writing. Perhaps the best argument here is not theoretical but pragmatic. Do we gain anything by including in our textual repertoire, along with the stories of Hamlin Garland, such works as Eliza Farnham's *Life in Prairie Land*, Abraham Lincoln's speeches, and William Herndon's biography of Lincoln? Or, to move nearer to Weber's time limits, Frederic Thrasher's *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* (1927) as well as James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan*? Surely we lose nothing and gain a great deal by being more inclusive in our consideration of texts.

One would never know, from Weber's account, that a lively and successful group of women novelists were representing turn-of-the-century Chicago very differently from the male novelists he considers, as Sidney H. Bremer has documented (*Urban Intersections*, 1992). Or that a rich tradition of non-fiction writing lay behind the fictions of Edward Eggleston and Hamlin Garland, as Robert C. Bray has shown (*Rediscoveries*, 1982). Or that there was a close interchange between Chicago fiction of the 1920s and the new urban sociology at the University of Chicago (see Carla Cappetti, *Writing Chicago*, 1993).

The most frequently cited secondary source in *The Midwestern Ascendancy* is T. K. Whipple's *Spokesmen*, which is cited in a 1963 reprint but which was actually published in 1928. *Spokesmen* is a lively, insightful account of the careers of ten writers, including six of Weber's, while those careers were in progress. It is a wonderful book, but it presents a 1928 view of the "Midwestern ascendancy." Weber's challenge was to produce a 1992 view; his book falls somewhat short of that. We might turn the book's epigraph, from Glenway Wescott, back upon itself: "It had not kept its promise, so it was still the promised land."

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Garner, Stanton. *The Civil War World of Herman Melville*. Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas Press, 1993. 544 pp. Cloth: $29.95.

After reading Joyce Sparer Adler's *War in Melville's Imagination* (1981), I was convinced that she had achieved genuine depths and insights that had been lacking in previous studies of Melville and that conflict. Not that her