

account of jazz, though it does not really cover any other topics – there is a cursory reference to Martha Graham, but dance does not receive the emphasis which it deserves. These, however, are minor criticisms: in such a concise volume, it would be impossible to cover everything in detail, and Currell really does pack a lot in, without ever sacrificing clarity.

The book includes a detailed timeline – reading down the column entitled “Criticism” produces an instant potted history of intellectual developments in the 1920s, while the other columns list key events and canonical titles in literature, film, music and so on. Another attractive pedagogical feature of this series is the inclusion of boxed case studies. In Currell’s volume, these are effectively integrated into the main text, and among the well-chosen topics are events such as the Scopes Trial and Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight, key books and films including *Cane*, *Nanook of the North*, *Manhatta* and (rather inevitably) *The Great Gatsby*, and important artists and performers – Bessie Smith, Eugene O’Neill, Clara Bow, Georgja O’Keefe and others. This book would be ideal for use on an interdisciplinary cultural-history course, but it also provides exactly the kind of contextual knowledge required by students focussing purely on literature, or film, or visual art, or music.

In general, the book is lucidly written, although I did notice a few passages which were either hastily composed or carelessly edited. There are occasional small errors (*The Beautiful and the Damned ...*), but in general this is a most reliable and carefully researched book. I shall certainly add it to the reading list for my own course on America in the 1920s; indeed, I think it belongs right at the top of the list.

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Peter Conn, *The American 1930s: A Literary History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, £15.99/\$27.99). Pp. 280. ISBN 978 0 5217 3431 8.

David Eldridge, *American Culture in the 1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008, £17.99). Pp. 287. ISBN 9780748622597.

By confining the focus of his literary survey of 1930s America to fiction and non-fiction, Peter Conn risks presenting a frustratingly incomplete portrait – especially ironic given his assertion in the introduction that the majority of scholars take such a reductive view of the 1930s as “to reduce a complex palette to a monotone” (6). Yet considering the inclusion of some comment on the decade’s drama and history painting, and notwithstanding the absence of any real discussion of the era’s rich poetical output, the analysis is impressively broad. Arguing against the common critical assumption that the 1930s may be characterized in cultural terms largely by leftist aesthetics and politics, Conn emphasizes the enormous ideological and imaginative diversity of the United States in the 1930s. However, Conn’s focus is specific, and his literary history is driven by the sustained force of the past on the American imagination. As the debate grew during the 1930s over the meaning of

America, the urge to create a “usable past” gained new significance, and Conn demonstrates how history was ever-present in the literary expression of the Depression decade.

Accordingly, chapters are arranged in order to illuminate what Conn calls the decade’s “thick texture of ‘pastness’” (8). The first chapter ends with a note of positivism that infuses the entire book: Conn argues that whereas the 1920s were broadly characterized in terms of social criticism by “embittered estimates of the American scene” (32), the 1930s were met by the majority of American writers with optimism and resolve. Following chapters outline the ways in which the ensuing search for America allowed writers of various disciplines and calibres to engage with their country’s past via biography, historical fiction and painting. The strength of Conn’s achievement lies in his deft management of a wealth of material, and in his convincing and balanced examination of the works of writers from a broad spectrum of political and cultural backgrounds. In chapter 4, for example, discussion of the motives behind the numerous presidential biographies of the era leads to the consideration that the two biographies of Noah Webster added to the “intense reflection on the origins and meanings of the nation’s identity” in that Webster “was the linguistic nationalist of the early Republic” (117). In chapter 5, analysis of the racial frameworks supporting explorations of the southern past brings to light parallels between the treatment of slaves during Reconstruction and black sharecroppers during the Depression, as well as the far-reaching effect of the oscillations in the debate between supporters and denigrators of black freedmen on the educative systems of America.

The focus of Conn’s survey precludes any analysis of literature that did not in some way appeal to the past. As a result, his discussions of leftist and documentary responses constitute the weakest points of the book, sidestepping the aesthetic (and modernist) sophistication of those poets, documentarians, novelists and playwrights who sought to present contemporary social perspectives. That said, Conn demonstrates via sustained and lively analysis that the historical turn of the 1930s was a key and complex response to national economic collapse. *The American 1930s* seeks to recover the heterogeneous complexity of intellectual life at a time when present economic circumstances prompt us to reappraise our own literary lineage. As such, it serves as a valuable reference book for current and future generations of scholars in American studies.

Eldridge’s *American Culture in the 1930s* provides a more comprehensive survey of the cultural output of the decade, adhering to the format of the established EUP series on Twentieth Century American Culture. Thus chapters offering an intelligently structured overview of 1930s literature and drama, film and photography, music and radio, art and design, and “New Deal culture” are interspersed three apiece with closer readings of influential texts, events and people in the form of “case studies.” Whilst less specific than Conn’s review, Eldridge’s survey nevertheless presents a detailed panorama of the period, drawing on extant scholarship by the likes of Michael Denning and David Kennedy to provide an insightful and fresh look at the major cultural forms of the era. Indeed, Eldridge’s “Introduction: The Intellectual Context” serves as a more informative initiation into the cultural framework of the era than Conn’s corresponding skim through the 1920s. Additionally, the development of American studies as a discipline during the 1930s – with its origins in a

backward-looking reclamation of cultural heritage – is given due attention in Eldridge, but is noticeably absent in Conn.

The strongest parts of the book are the discussions of radio and Hollywood film (in fact, the book leans toward a treatment more of popular culture than of intellectual endeavours – a first indication of this being the cover: a film still of Henry Fonda from John Ford’s adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*). Eldridge offers a perceptive and convincing account of the diversity within each mode of entertainment at the time, noting throughout that such variation should “caution against accepting any reductive readings of 1930s culture” (65). This is not to say that politically informed or reactive works are not discussed with dexterity; each chapter handles a different form of 1930s expression with a sure and light touch, and Eldridge’s synchronic approach matches the multifarious ethos of the era very well.

There are necessarily many areas where the two books overlap; however, Conn’s historical focus and Eldridge’s wider cultural lens complement each other to provide a clear and vivid picture of the era’s aesthetics. For example, where Conn explores the inherent and damaging racism in textual rehearsals of the white South’s grievances during Reconstruction, such as Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, Eldridge stresses Mitchell’s questioning of the “cultural hold awarded to fictive, legendary pasts” in her portrait of a heroine who draws “her courage from the future” (56). Likewise, Conn’s treatment of Grant Wood highlights the way he “comically enacts the nation’s decline” (71) in paintings such as *Daughters of the Revolution*, whilst Eldridge gives more space to the dichotomy in Wood’s art between the expression of rooted experience and local knowledge, and his distaste for narrow regionalist interpretations of national culture. “Wood’s Regionalism,” argues Eldridge, “was a notably pluralist vision” (139).

Although the book uncovers nothing new in terms of ideological and aesthetic perspectives on the decade’s cultural output, it is the juxtapositions that Eldridge offers that incite interesting comparisons, and should serve to generate more research. *American Culture in the 1930s* therefore provides a challenging reference point for students and scholars alike.

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James T. Fisher, *On the Irish Waterfront: The Crusader, the Movie, and the Soul of the Port of New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009, \$29.95). Pp. 392. ISBN 978 0 8014 4804 1.

In *On the Irish Waterfront*, James T. Fisher provides a fascinating exploration of the Port of New York’s Irish American communities during the first half of the twentieth century; of the campaign by a Jesuit “labor priest,” Father John M. “Pete” Corridan, to break the code of silence that enabled dockside racketeering to flourish; and of the process by which screenwriter Budd Schulberg and director Elia Kazan came to represent Corridan’s struggle against corruption in their 1954 cinema classic *On the Waterfront*. Fisher weaves together portraits of the