

Book Review

Gordon Hutner. *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920–1960*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 450 pp. \$32.00

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Martha Ostenso, Clement Wood, Anne Parish, Elias Tobenkin—twentieth-century writers who top the lists of important American novelists on course syllabi? Not hardly, and that is the issue that Gordon Hutner raises in *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel*. In his first lines Hutner poses the question: “Why are so few novels remembered while so many thousands are forgotten?” (1); he spends the next several hundred pages addressing that question, arguing convincingly that neglected middle-class, bourgeois novels must be explored in order for our literary history to be complete. Not only did novels of this ilk provide entertainment for many casual readers, Hutner posits that “these novels often meant to shape public awareness of cultural values as well as individual pursuits, and how they came together” (1). Like much of the literature that scholars elevate to the highest levels of critical praise, these works also present characters and situations from which readers could find parallels to their own selves, and, according to Hutner, there lies the value of refocusing on such forgotten works. Setting the stage for his analysis, he declares: “As much as any other tradition of U.S. writers over the last 125 years, these writers have pertinaciously defined America...since their fiction reveals the epic

story of a nation's self-invention as a modern society through the filter of middle-class experience" (36). Devoting a chapter each to the decades from 1920 to 1960, Hutner offers compelling arguments for including these novels in the literary and cultural history of the United States.

In a lengthy introduction, Hutner sets the stage for his chronological study, examining first the role of fiction in culture and then discussing the concept of "browism" as it relates to the critical reception of fiction and the canonization of some works. Upholding the middle class as the large majority of the reading public in his study years, he lambastes critics who labeled works "middlebrow," declaring that such a label supported critical approaches which relegate that literature to a lower status: "It promotes criticism as an Arnoldian quest for connoisseurship, with dictatorial critics dismissing anything insufficiently highbrow" (9). Additionally, he finds that "brow-ism disguises ignorance as superior taste to exempt critics and scholars from reading the stuff, as if to insulate them from the subterfuges of the mediocre and protect them from the danger of mistaking a phony as the real thing" (10). Despite these harsh remarks he does acknowledge that on a literary level the novels explored in this study may not require, or even support, the complex critical analyses that derive meaning from other literary works. Still, he proposes that the "deeper interest of these books [...] can be developed precisely out of their perceived weakness: how much they are like other books--fiction and nonfiction--how explicitly and reliably they register meanings and values abroad in the culture" (13). Here, indeed, lies the crux of Hutner's study: regardless of literary merit, these works reveal much about the American

populace that embraced them, and to ignore that fact is to risk leaving a large body of critical reflections out of the study of American culture.

Throughout the midsection of the book Hutner examines many texts to demonstrate that his ideas are well-founded. Referring to novels into which most literary scholars have never delved, he deftly points out the merits of employing these books to flesh out current American literary histories. His goal, he states, is not to establish a countercanon; rather his “hope is that these books will emerge in all their complementarity and supplementarity, wherein lies what may be their full power of distinction and contradistinction” (330). His view, then, is that these works of middle class realism are important supplements to the works currently upheld for literary studies: “I cannot make the point strongly enough that these are the novels the canon has been defined against, the literature of the not great but of the pretty good” (333). Throughout this book Hutner’s arguments are valid. The works which he examines will never be seen as “great” literature, but they do provide the background against which decades of scholars have weighed the novels that we do perceive as the best. An understanding of this “other” literature can only add to our knowledge of those novels we deem exceptional. Hutner’s study should begin a useful discussion about how we judge literature and just where the value of a novel lies.