



CHRISTOPHER MACGOWAN

THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY
**AMERICAN
FICTION**

H A N D B O O K



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The Twentieth-Century American Fiction Handbook

Christopher MacGowan



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How to Use This Book

This book is one of a series of Blackwell Literature Handbooks and consistent with the design of the series is intended as a guide both for the independent reader who wishes for an introduction to the major writers, texts, and issues of twentieth-century American fiction, and also for graduate students and upper-level undergraduates taking courses that focus upon this subject area. The book should also be helpful to students studying twentieth-century American literature more generally, as well as students of modern or contemporary fiction written in English.

After reading this book the reader will be aware of the major figures in twentieth-century American fiction and some of its central texts and themes. The book discusses some of the characteristics that distinguish the fiction of the century's early decades from the writing impacted by the rise of international modernism. There are also essays outlining the fiction of the Depression years, the fiction that emerged after World War II, and more recent fiction that explores the complexities of ethnic and national identity. Separate essays discuss the central importance of race in twentieth-century American fiction, the cultural assumptions that often limited the possibilities afforded women writers, the influence of Hollywood on the careers and subject matter of a number of major authors, and the notable achievements of American writers in the short story form.

As the reader will see from the Contents page, the information within the book is organized in a number of ways. A Chronology sets out some of the major social, technological, political, and literary events of the century as they provide a broad context for the fiction. In the Introduction I set out the thinking behind the choice of writers and texts for individual treatment, and discuss the scope of the more general historical and thematic essays. The reader who has little familiarity with the subject would do best starting with the general Introduction and the chronological essays. The four thematically focused essays are designed for a reader more familiar with the general subject

of the volume, but may be read as individual, self-contained introductions to their topics.

The individual essays on writers and texts offer two perspectives upon the same story. The reader might choose to switch between individual writers and texts, to juxtapose larger groupings based upon chronology or shared formal or thematic concerns, or to read each section as a separate narrative. Not all writers who are the subject of an individual essay are represented by an essay in the section on texts. Note that where quotations are given, the page references are always from the edition listed first in the Bibliography at the end of the chapter.

Finally, the Guide to Further Reading is designed to point the way to further discussion of a century of writing which this one volume cannot hope to fully represent, but about which – if this book has achieved one of its primary aims – the reader will wish to know more.

Chronology: Significant Dates and Events, 1900–2000

1900	US population around 75 million, 14 times greater than in 1800; death of Stephen Crane
1901	First transatlantic radio transmissions; President McKinley assassinated, Theodore Roosevelt at 42 becomes the youngest President in the nation's history; first Nobel Prize for Literature Awarded (to French poet Sully Prudhomme)
1903	Wright Brothers make the first successful airplane flight; Leo and Gertrude Stein settle in Paris and begin to collect modern art; W. E. B. Du Bois publishes <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i>
1904	Pacific cable completed
1909	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) founded; Henry Ford begins production of Model "T" automobile
1910	Death of Mark Twain
1911	The Nestor Company opens the first film studio in Hollywood
1914	Panama Canal opens
1916	Death of Henry James
1917	US enters World War I

1918	First Pulitzer Prize for the Novel awarded, to <i>His Family</i> by Ernest Poole
1919	Alcock and Brown make the first non-stop flight in an aircraft across the Atlantic; O. Henry Awards begin for best short story: winners include William Faulkner (1939, 1949), Eudora Welty (1942, 1943, 1968), John Cheever (1956, 1964), Flannery O'Connor (1959, 1963, 1965), John Updike (1966), Joyce Carol Oates (1967, 1973), Saul Bellow (1978), Raymond Carver (1983, 1988), Alice Walker (1986)
1920	18th Amendment to the US Constitution prohibits the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages ("Prohibition"); 19th Amendment grants the vote to women
1925	<i>The New Negro</i> , edited by Alain Locke, published
1926	Sinclair Lewis declines a Pulitzer Prize for <i>Arrowsmith</i> on the grounds that with the award's criterion that a winning novel "present the wholesome atmosphere of American life" . . . every compulsion is put upon writers to become safe, polite, obedient, and sterile"
1927	Transatlantic telephone service begins; Warner Brothers releases <i>The Jazz Singer</i> , the first successful sound film
1929	Stock market crash, beginning of the Great Depression; New York's Museum of Modern Art opens
1930	Sinclair Lewis becomes the first American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature; over four million unemployed
1933	"Prohibition" repealed; James Joyce's <i>Ulysses</i> allowed to be published in the United States; Screen Writers Guild formed in Hollywood; Franklin Roosevelt's first "New Deal" legislation; worst year for jobless rate in the Depression, 24.9%, 13 million unemployed
1935	Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks start the <i>Southern Review</i> ; Federal Writers Project established as part of the Works Progress Administration
1936	Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) begins

1938	Pearl S. Buck becomes the first American women writer awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature
1939	John Crowe Ransom founds <i>The Kenyon Review</i> , a major literary journal of the 1940s and 1950s; regular transatlantic air service begins; mass-market paperbacks introduced in United States
1940	Richard Wright's <i>Native Son</i> is the first book by an African American writer to become a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. The novel sold 315 000 copies in the first three months of publication; Scott Fitzgerald dies owing Scribners \$5456.92, his 1939 royalties total \$33
1941	US enters World War II following Japanese attack upon Pearl Harbor
1944	US Supreme Court rules that no citizen may be denied the vote on grounds of color
1947	House Un-American Activities Committee begins investigation of alleged communist influence in Hollywood studios: nine screenwriters and one director who refuse to answer questions receive jail terms; Richard Wright leaves the United States and settles in France
1948	Invention of the transistor; <i>Literary History of the United States</i> published, 54 male editors listed, one female
1949	Network television starts in the United States
1950	US population 150 million; Korean War (1950–1953) begins; the first National Book Award for Fiction awarded to Nelson Algren's <i>The Man With the Golden Arm</i>
1954	US Supreme Court rules that racial segregation in schools is unconstitutional
1956	Martin Luther King Jr. leads bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama
1958	Chester Carlson invents the photocopier for Xerox

1960	Beginning of the Civil Rights movement with a sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter, Greensboro, North Carolina; Zora Neale Hurston dies in a welfare nursing home, buried in an unmarked grave
1961	Suicide of Ernest Hemingway
1963	Civil Rights March on Washington; assassination of President Kennedy
1964	Race riots in Harlem and Philadelphia
1965	Vietnam War (1965–1973); Malcolm X assassinated; Congress establishes the National Endowment for the Arts
1966	National Organization for Women founded; Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court declares William Burrough's <i>Naked Lunch</i> not obscene, ending the last major literary censorship battle in the United States
1967	Protest against Vietnam War grows; March on the Pentagon, October 21, Norman Mailer arrested; race riots in major cities continue
1968	Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy assassinated
1969	Stonewall riots in New York City lead to beginning of Gay Liberation Movement; Apollo moon landing; Native American writer N. Scott Momaday's <i>House Made of Dawn</i> wins Pulitzer Prize for Fiction
1970	Native American Rights Fund established, non-profit law firm dedicated to asserting and defending the rights of Indian tribes, organizations, and individuals nationwide; first important black feminist anthology, <i>The Black Woman: An Anthology</i> , edited by Toni Cade Bambara
1972	Watergate break-in, President Nixon resigns in 1974
1976	US Bicentennial
1982	First Library of America volumes published, Jack London is the first twentieth-century writer included

1985	First year the National Award of Arts presented, Ralph Ellison among the recipients
1989	US invades Panama, first use of American military force since 1945 unrelated to the Cold War; fall of the Berlin Wall, collapse of the Soviet Union
1990	Oscar Hijuelos is the first Hispanic writer to receive a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, for <i>The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love</i>
1991	Iraq invades Kuwait, leading to Gulf War; World Wide Web introduced; Sandra Cisneros is the first Chicana writer to receive a contract from a major publishing house
1992	End of the Cold War (1945–1992); US intervention in Somalia
1993	Toni Morrison becomes the first African American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature
1994	US intervention in Haiti
1998	Eudora Welty is the first living author included in the Library of America series
1999	US part of NATO-backed military intervention in former Yugoslavia
2000	2000 census shows US population 281 million: 69.1% white, 12.5% Hispanic, 12.1% Black, 3.7% Asian and Pacific Islander, 0.7% American Indian; Hispanic population the fastest-growing group

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Introduction

The block of five essays in this book that precede those treating individual writers and texts is broadly chronological in its arrangement. While the calendar provides neat boundaries to decades and centuries, history, of course, including the history of a century's literature, is never so tidy. Many of the prevailing ideas of the nineteenth century spill over into the twentieth in the history of American fiction, just as a few of the earlier century's major writers lived on into the new century. Both the writers and the prevailing ideas can be seen influencing the early history of the American Institute of Arts and Letters. The Institute was created in 1898, originally limited to 150 members (250 after 1907). In 1904 the members of the Institute elected the first seven members of an eventual fifty to the more elite American Academy of Arts and Letters (this two-tier system was eventually dropped in 1993). Of the four who represented literature in the 1904 election, John Hay was best known for his political and diplomatic career and for his biography of Lincoln, whom he had served as private secretary. Edmund Clarence Stedman was a respected poet and anthologist. The other two members elected are central to any history of American literature: William Dean Howells and Mark Twain. When the Academy expanded its membership the following year Henry James and Henry Adams were elected.

Howells, Twain, James, and Adams are major figures, yet arguably all but Adams had his best work behind him by 1905, and at least three of them, including Adams, had misgivings about what the new century would bring. Twain's work had become darker in his last years, and when he died in 1910 he left an unfinished novel, *The Mysterious Stranger*, which, while it is a celebration of imagination and the power of print, is deeply nostalgic about a lost innocence somewhat ambivalently associated with the antebellum South

of his youth, an innocence that is both national and personal. James, elected to the Academy a year after beginning his first visit to the United States for 22 years, was deeply disturbed by many of the changes he witnessed, as he records in *The American Scene* (1907). Henry Adams, in *The Education of Henry Adams* (published in 1918 but written a dozen years earlier), saw himself as ill prepared for the twentieth century by his nineteenth-century education and experience. For Adams there seemed little place for the literary or the literary imagination in a new century dominated by the powerful and ever-growing world of science. Howells, elected the first President of the Academy in 1904, and outliving Twain, James, and Adams, had a forum for his views on literature – the “Editor’s Easy Chair” column in *Harper’s Monthly* – right up to his death in 1920. While Howells’s views remained relatively conservative, he supported the writing of a number of emerging poets and novelists, recognizing the talents of Robert Frost and Edwin Arlington Robinson, but silent on Ezra Pound; including in his edition of *Great Modern American Short Stories* (1920) work by James, Twain, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sarah Orne Jewett, Theodore Dreiser, and Edith Wharton, but not Sherwood Anderson.

Although Julia Ward Howe was not a particularly adventurous choice as the first woman to be elected to the Academy in 1908 (she wrote the lyric to “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” in 1861 and was in her late eighties), more significant in literary terms was the election of Edith Wharton to the Institute in 1926 and to the Academy in 1930 (she had originally been nominated in 1908 along with Howe). The first black writer, however, W. E. B. Du Bois, was not elected to the Institute until 1944.

In the 1920s Ford Madox Ford, writing from Paris in the *transatlantic review*, where Hemingway was his assistant editor, more than once insisted that the most interesting work coming into the journal came from Americans. But a more prominent sign that American literature had received international recognition 110 years after Washington Irving had become its first internationally known author was the award to Sinclair Lewis in 1930 of the Nobel Prize in Literature. In his speech to the Swedish Academy Lewis surveyed the field of contemporary American literature, and in the process took to task the American Academy of Arts and Letters for still harboring the genteel ideas of late nineteenth-century Boston, and he particularly singled out its deceased first president.

Lewis regretted Howells’s continuing influence “down even to 1914,” and what Lewis saw as the timid gentility of Howells’s realism. For Lewis, “Mr. Howells was one of the gentlest, sweetest, and most honest of men, but he had the code of a pious old maid whose greatest delight was to have tea at the vicarage,” and he sought “to guide America into becoming a pale edition of an

English cathedral town.” Howells had, for Lewis, presided over an Academy which even 10 years after his death could not find a place in its ranks for Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, Eugene O’Neill, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, or Thomas Wolfe. Ironically, as Lewis half-recognized in his speech, he was naming some of the figures who would succeed him in the decade to become America’s most important writers. By 1935 Lewis was willing to have his name on the ballot for the Institute, feeling that it had become a “much more vital” body since 1930, and most members were willing to forgive him. He was duly elected to the Institute, and admitted to the Academy in 1937. Of those on Lewis’s Nobel list, Dreiser and Hemingway declined to be nominated, and were apparently not sufficiently moved by the changes that impressed Lewis to regret their exclusion.

The early history of the Institute of Arts and Letters is a useful touchstone to academic ideas of the canon in the first decades of the century, and a reminder of the marginalization of women’s and minority voices in the circles of official culture at the time. Dreiser himself, in 1900, had encountered such conservative forces when he published *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser’s novel refused to reward its heroine’s immoral actions with ruin, pictured the streets of Chicago and New York as little more than urban jungles, and saw biological determinism as much more a force in human behavior than any kind of innate goodness. Dreiser had to revise his manuscript to make it even remotely publishable. And then, when Doubleday, Page accepted the novel – after further toning down – they tried to renege on the contract and refused to market the book, which eventually sold only 456 copies. Dreiser took matters into his own hands in 1907 and arranged for a reprint, and the novel was eventually picked up by Harper in 1912, even though they had originally rejected the novel in 1900 on the grounds that it would bring “offense to the reader.” Dreiser’s experience made him a hero for writers whose ideas of realism clashed with those of the more genteel tradition, and who demanded that serious writing be free from censorship. Sherwood Anderson dedicated his short story collection *Horses and Men* (1923) to Dreiser, adding “Because of him, those who follow will never have to face the road through the wilderness of Puritan denial, the road that Dreiser faced alone;” while for Lewis, in his Nobel Speech, *Sister Carrie* “came to housebound and airless America like a great free Western wind, and to our stuffy domesticity gave us the first fresh air since Mark Twain and Whitman.”

The censorship of serious literature was not finally settled in the United States, however, until the mid-1960s, and the courts and government agencies were the opposition rather than the publishers. There were landmark cases along the way involving such high-profile texts as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and