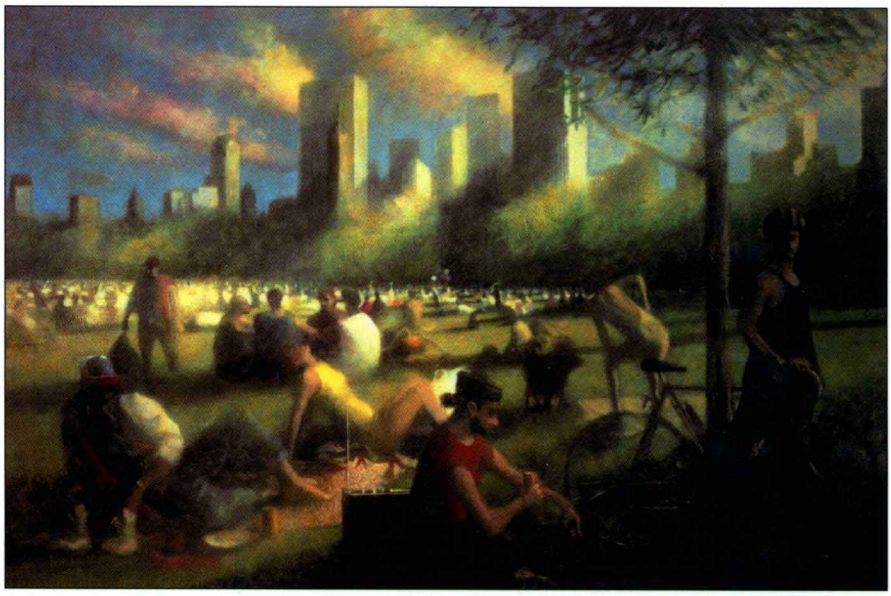

A COMPANION TO

TWENTIETH-CENTURY UNITED STATES FICTION

EDITED BY **DAVID SEED**

WILEY-BLACKWELL

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Contents

Introduction

David Seed

Since the 1990s, the New Americanist critics have been warning us against an uncritical use of the epithet "American." As if following the Monroe Doctrine, it has taken on a hegemonic dimension and come to privilege the U.S.A at the expense of other countries and cultures on that continent. In this *Companion*, "American" is used to signify the United States, in implied scare quotes because the term has been constantly problematic and contested throughout the twentieth century Though coined a century earlier, its apparent opposite, "un-American," achieved institutional notoriety through the House Committee on Un-American Activities (H.U.A.C.), which served from 1934 through to the 1970s. The very existence of this committee was premised on a set of identifiable national characteristics and practices; in other words, the very notion that these novelists question.

Whenever the term "American" appears in the titles of modern U.S. novels, as often as not its meaning is ambiguous and ironic. Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* (1965) undermines the singularity of a cultural catchphrase and gives a surreal account of power networks. Jerome Charyn's *American Scrapbook* (1969) describes the internment of thousands of Japanese Americans in World War II, punning in its title on the human "scrap" ignored by the authorities. The title story of Max Apple's *The Oranging of America* (1976) echoes Charles Reich's account of the counterculture in *The Greening of America* (1970), but opens with facetious reflections on Howard Johnson, founder of the U.S. restaurant and hotel chain. Scott Bradfield's *What's Wrong with America* (1994) is unusually direct in its criticism and couches its narrative in the form of a journal bequeathed to her progeny by a grandmother disenchanted with the contemporary U.S.A. And so the list could continue.

But there is an even more fundamental problem with the national epithet. Toni Morrison has asserted that "American means white" and that therefore the Africanist presence can only be registered in the interstices of texts: "the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation" (Morrison: 46–7). Gerald Vizenor, in a spirit similar to Morrison's, uses the term "postindian" to identify a new generation

of Native American writers working in the period after the "literature of domination," when they were confined within the picturesque Other (see chapter 49 of this volume). In both these cases, cultural production has emerged from oral storytelling and the vernacular continues to invigorate American fiction from a variety of different sources.

"American" sometimes functions as a hegemonic term concealing different cultural groups, and one of the most important historical developments in U.S. fiction throughout the twentieth century was the progressive pluralization of American identities so that new voices could be heard and different presences registered. In *My Ántonia* (1918), Willa Cather describes the patchwork of social groups settled in the prairies. According to the ideal of the melting pot, all these groups would merge into a new, homogeneous society, but Cather addresses the constant resistance by emigrants to what many see as a loss of identity. Cather dramatizes a tension common to immigrant fiction: the rival pulls of the old and new countries. Her eponymous protagonist is American *and* Bohemian, living between identities. In that sense, she embodies the double consciousness attributed to African Americans in W. E. B. Du Bois' 1903 classic *The Souls of Black Folk*. Contemporary commentators such as Winfried Siemerling (*The New North American Studies*, 2005) have argued that this notion of doubleness is central to all American fiction, not simply those novels representing a particular ethnic group.

It is ironic that "American" can carry such severe exclusions as those described above given that many novelists subscribe to an aesthetic of openness. The critics Richard Poirier and Tony Tanner have both mounted cogent arguments that U.S. writers have tried to articulate ways of being outside that society. Tanner particularly expresses this notion as a tension between the dream of an unpatterned life offset by the "dread that someone else is patterning your life" (Tanner: 15). As James Giles shows in chapter 2 of this volume, this tension also informs perceptions of the city as both a place of opportunity and one of betrayal and failure. Tanner's title, *City of Words*, suggests that novelists are, to an important extent, constructing stylistic environments for their characters, as much verbal constructs as topographical descriptions. Similarly, Neil Campbell (chapter 3) demonstrates that the Western offers not portraits of places but rather stylized versions of power struggles revolving around identity.

Although its roots lie in the 1890s and therefore outside the scope of the present volume, the tradition of naturalism, Donald Pizer argues, continued into the twentieth century and flourished particularly in the 1930s, late 1940s, and 1950s. For Pizer, "naturalistic fiction usually unites detailed documentation of the more sensationalistic aspects of experience" with a demonstration that Americans are "more circumscribed than ordinarily assumed" (p. xi). Pizer's argument is empirical and could be extended into the second half of the twentieth century to include the massively documented narratives of William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, and David Foster Wallace. Indeed, if the loss of freedom is central to naturalism, this tradition could even include noir thrillers and spy fiction.