

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 119

YEARBOOK 1998

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Volume 119

Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook 1998

The Year in Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and
World Literature and the Year's
New Authors, Prizewinners, Obituaries,
and Outstanding Literary Events

Jeffrey W. Hunter
Timothy J. White
EDITORS

Angela Y. Jones
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Deborah A. Schmitt
Polly A. Vedder
Kathleen Wilson
ASSOCIATE EDITORS



other recently deceased literary figures.

- **Topics in Literature**—This section focuses on a literary issue of considerable public interest: Literature and Millennial Lists.

Features

With the exception of the four essays in “The Year in Review” section, which were written specifically for this publication, the *Yearbook* consists of criticism drawn from literary reviews, general magazines, newspapers, books, and scholarly journals. *Yearbook* entries variously contain the following items:

- An **Author Heading** in the “New Authors” and “Prizewinners” sections cites the name under which the author publishes and the title of the work discussed in the entry; the “In Memoriam” section includes the author's name and birth and death dates. The author's full name, pseudonyms (if any) under which the author has published, nationality, and principal genres are listed on the first line of the author entry.
- The **Subject Heading** defines the theme of each entry in “The Year in Review” and “Topics in Literature” sections.
- A brief **Biographical and Critical Introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes criticism in the “New Authors,” “Prizewinners,” and “In Memoriam” sections; the subjects, authors, and works in the “Topics in Literature” section are introduced in a similar manner.
- A listing of **Principal Works** is included for all entries in the “Prizewinners” and “In Memoriam” sections.
- A **Portrait** of the author is included in the “New Authors,” “Prizewinners,” and “In Memoriam” sections, if available or applicable.
- The **Criticism**, included in all entries except those in the “Year in Review” section, represents essays selected by editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's writing in general. The criticism is typically arranged chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. In the “Year in Review,” “New Authors,” “Prizewinners,” and “In Memoriam” sections, all titles by the author being discussed are printed in boldface type, enabling the reader to more easily identify the author's work.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation**, designed to help the user find the original essay or book, precedes each selected piece of criticism.
- **Cross-references** have been included in the “New Authors,” “Prizewinners,” and “In Memoriam” sections to direct readers to other useful sources published by Gale. Previous volumes of *CLC* in which the author has been featured are also listed.

Other Features

The *Yearbook* also includes the following features:

Preface

A Comprehensive Information Source on Contemporary Literature

Scope of the *Yearbook*

Contemporary Literary Criticism *Yearbook* is a part of the ongoing *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC) series. CLC provides a comprehensive survey of modern literature by presenting criticism on the works of novelists, poets, playwrights, short story writers, scriptwriters, and other creative writers now living or who died after December 31, 1959. A strong emphasis is placed on including criticism of works by established authors who frequently appear on syllabuses of high school and college literature courses.

To complement this broad coverage, the *Yearbook* focuses more specifically on a given year's literary activities and features a larger number of currently noteworthy authors than is possible in standard CLC volumes. CLC *Yearbook* provides students, teachers, librarians, researchers, and general readers with information and commentary on the outstanding literary works and events of a given year.

Format of the Book

CLC, Volume 119: *Yearbook 1998*, which includes criticism on more than twenty authors and comprehensive coverage of a key issue in contemporary literature, is divided into five sections—"The Year in Review," "New Authors," "Prizewinners," "In Memoriam," and "Topics in Literature: 1998."

- **The Year in Review**—This section consists of specially commissioned essays by prominent writers who survey the year's works in their respective fields. Bruce Allen discusses "The Year in Fiction," Allen Hoey "The Year in Poetry," Julius Novick "The Year in Drama," and William Riggan "The Year in World Literature." For introductions to the essayists, please see the Notes on Contributors.
- **New Authors**—This section introduces twelve writers who received significant critical recognition for their first major work of fiction in 1998 or whose work was translated into English or published in the United States for the first time. Authors were selected for inclusion if their work was reviewed in several prominent literary periodicals.
- **Prizewinners**—This section begins with a list of literary prizes and honors announced in 1998, citing the award, award criteria, the recipient, and the title of the prizewinning work. Following the listing of prizewinners is a presentation of three entries on individual award winners, representing a mixture of genres and nationalities as well as established prizes and those more recently introduced.
- **In Memoriam**—This section consists of reminiscences, tributes, retrospective articles, and obituary notices on six authors who died in 1998. In addition, an Obituary section provides information on

- An **Acknowledgments** section lists the copyright holders who have granted permission to reprint material in this volume of *CLC*. It does not, however, list every book or periodical reprinted or consulted during the preparation of this volume.
- A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all the authors who have appeared in the Literary Criticism Series published by Gale, with cross-references to Gale's Biographical and Autobiographical Series. A full listing of series referenced in the index appears at the beginning of the index. Readers will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, is particularly valuable for locating references to those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, Ernest Hemingway is found in *CLC*, yet a writer often associated with him, F. Scott Fitzgerald, is found in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*.
- Beginning with *CLC*, Vol. 65, each *Yearbook* contains a **Cumulative Topic Index**, which lists all literary topics treated in *CLC* as well as the topic volumes of *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, and *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*.
- A **Cumulative Nationality Index** alphabetically lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by numbers corresponding to the volumes in which the authors appear.
- A **Title Index** alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the current volume of *CLC*. Listings are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, novellas, dramas, films, record albums, and poetry, short story, and essay collections are printed in italics, while all individual poems, short stories, essays, and songs are printed in roman type within quotation marks. When published separately, the titles of long poems (e.g., T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*) are printed in italics.

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¹Bonnie Costello, "Jorie Graham: Art and Erosion," *Contemporary Literature*, 33, No. 2, (Summer, 1992), 373-95, reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 118, eds. Jeffrey W. Hunter and Timothy J. White (Detroit: Gale, 1999), pp. 239-48.

²Ellen McCracken, "Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*: Community Oriented Introspection and the Demystification of Patriarchal Violence" in *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writings and Critical Readings* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 62-71; reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 118, eds. Jeffrey W. Hunter and Timothy J. White (Detroit: Gale, 1999), pp. 170-75.

Suggestions Are Welcome

The editors hope that readers will find *CLC Yearbook* a useful reference tool and welcome comments about the work. Send comments and suggestions to: Editors, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, The Gale Group, 27500 Drake Road, Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535.

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The Year in Review

The Year in Fiction

by Bruce Allen

Some of the most interesting American fiction of 1998 came to us from writers who haven't been heard from in some time, or belong to an earlier time. The *classic*—quite literally, classic—example was Eudora Welty, now in her ninety-first year, and long since acknowledged as one of the irreplaceable masters of the American short story.

Welty's well-loved *oeuvre* has now been enshrined in the invaluable Library of America, which published in matching volumes her *Complete Novels and Stories, Essays, and Memoir*. The first of this pair restores to print Welty's five limpid long fictions, including her high-spirited homage to both Mark Twain and the Southern regionalist storytellers *The Robber Bridegroom*, her deft comic monologue *The Ponder Heart*, and that still unsurpassed modest epic of byzantine family relations *Losing Battles*—as well as Welty's virtually unclassifiable *The Golden Apples*, an incredibly rich collection of linked stories that blends folk comedy with classical mythology in a manner perhaps matched only by Faulkner's unconventionable masterpiece *The Hamlet*.

The Stories volume of course contains the famous tales initially gathered in her breakthrough collections *Curtain of Green* and *The Wide Net*, along with a number of later stories which at their best vividly dramatize the tension that animates all of Welty's work: the individual's conflicting desires to blend safely into the shelter of a nurturing family or community versus the wish to light out independently in search of more varied experience and knowledge. The whole arc of Welty's long career (which in effect ended, it seems, a quarter-century ago) displays her remarkably consistent imaginative power and stylistic mastery—nowhere more evident than in such early triumphs as "Why I Live at the P. O.," "Petrified Man," "The Wide Net," and "A Worn Path." These, and many of their companion stories, are the work of a great American writer.

The late Henry Roth's serial autobiographical novel *Mercy of a Rude Stream* continued in (its fourth installment) *Requiem for Harlem*, in which Ira Stigman (Roth's obvious doppelganger) recounts his student years at New York's City College, frustrating relationships with both his teacher and mistress Edith Welles (a fascinating fictional simulacrum of feminist intellectual Eda Lou Walton) and the sister and cousin whom he has incestuously loved, and increasing alienation from the family he credits only with stifling him. In old age, Henry Roth scrutinized with unflinching intensity the patchwork character of his early self—distinguished as much by egocentricity and hypocrisy as by artistic diligence

and courage—and the uneven though irresistibly compelling result is a portrait of the artist unlike any other in our literature.

Hubert Selby Jr.'s place in contemporary fiction is assured by his blistering anatomy of inner-city despair *Last Exit to Brooklyn*—fortunately so, in view of Selby's latest novel (and first in twelve years) *The Willow Tree*, a fulsome recounting of a vengeful black teenager saved from his own rage by an improbably saintly concentration-camp survivor. It's a bathetic, totally unconvincing amalgam of "West Side Story" and Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker*. Only for Selby's most fervent admirers.

James Purdy was in rather better form with *Gertrude of Stony Island Avenue*, another of this uniquely subversive writer's deceptively simple stories about unprepossessing "ordinary" people discovering the unsounded depths in their human connections and experiences and in themselves. Moving echoes of Purdy's fine early novel *The Nephew* surface frequently throughout the story of Midwesterner Carrie Kinsella's search to understand why her daughter Gertrude, a talented artist, took her own life. In so doing, the formerly submissive Carrie achieves a transformative independence which is subtly heightened by a tissue of suggestive allusions linking Carrie's quest with the classical myth of Demeter and Persephone. Purdy's first book in a decade is one of his best.

Veteran novelist (and Presbyterian minister) Frederick Buechner made a dazzling return to fiction with *The Storm*: a witty romance which relocates Shakespeare's *The Tempest* at an upper-class resort, Plantation Island, just off the Florida coast. This novel's (all quite likable) characters include an aging writer, Kenzie Maxwell, "exiled" to this demi-paradise in the wake of a sexual scandal (he's Buechner's Prospero); Kenzie's virginal daughter "Bree" (a very Miranda); wealthy spinster Violet Sickert (the witch Sycorax); an Ariel, a Caliban, and any number of visiting characters—all invited to Kenzie's seventieth birthday party, and disturbed by the storm that climaxes the story—each of them "endlessly trying, . . . like . . . [Kenzie], to find where they really belonged." Their efforts and cross-purposes cohere in a dazzling entertainment that was one of the year's least noticed and most accomplished novels.

Another unexpected pleasure came to us from Oakley Hall, the highly praised author of such near-classic Western novels as *Warlock* and *The Bad Lands*. Hall's *Ambrose Bierce and the Queen of Spades* is a deliciously convoluted caper

involving the choleric satirist and magazine editor (and self-appointed to “sworn enemy of piffle”) and his stalwart apprentice Tom Redmond in a murder investigation complicated by stock fraud, endangered (and dangerous) women, closets positively bulging with skeletons, and a cast of slippery villains that Stephen King and even Sax Rohmer might envy. Great fun, manipulated for maximum comic-melodramatic effect by a very skillful old pro.

James Wilcox’s agreeable fictional world of Tula Springs, Louisiana (which hamlet has spawned such splendid comic novels as *Modern Baptists* and *Sort of Rich*) was once again heard from, in *Plain and Normal*. This is the enjoyably sprawling story of transplanted Southerner Lloyd Norris’s ongoing midlife crisis in New York City, where the stresses of being an attractive unattached male who’s gay are exacerbated by people who keep insisting Lloyd *must* be straight, and others (including his ex-wife) resolved to find him a boyfriend. One of the droll Mr. Wilcox’s funniest and finest books.

The millennium, and all the expectations attending it, provide rich comic matter for Maureen Howard’s ironical and hopeful *A Lover’s Almanac*. It’s a portrayal of the relationship between two well-meaning people—artist Louise Moffett and computer graphics-meister Artie Freeman—as the unruly passage of time (that is, the new century approaching) pressures them to think about commitment and stability. This is a daunting hodgepodge of a book, juxtaposing (sometimes stentorian) authorial commentary with really rather sweet romantic folderol, and snippets of its characters’ and the century’s pasts arranged in a collage structure similar to the one Howard employed so successfully in her brilliant historical novel *Natural History*. *A Lover’s Almanac* is a lesser book, but it’s still a hearty, stylish, and entertaining rebuff to the cynics and doomsayers.

Readers who appreciate Maureen Howard’s urbanity won’t want to miss *The Smithsonian Institution*, professional curmudgeon Gore Vidal’s savvy amalgamation of political satire and time-travel romance. It’s the story of “T.” (not otherwise identified), a charismatic adolescent mathematical whiz who’s whisked away from his Washington prep school and into the title institution (in 1939), and thence into both America’s past and its potentially catastrophic future (which the sapient T., contriving “to enter time at the right point and alter history,” ingeniously averts). Delightfully humane and funny—and, for this author, quite surprisingly avuncular. The year’s most sophisticated entertainment.

Joyce Carol Oates’s *My Heart Laid Bare*, her twenty-eighth novel and the latest installment in her ongoing “Gothic Quintet” (begun with *Bellefleur*) devoted to mischievous reinvention of American history, tells the defiantly tall tale of turn-of-the-century confidence man Abraham Licht and his

variously blighted children and descendants. The Lichts’ mastery of criminal impersonation, fraud (which takes several very amusing forms), and murder blandly skewers the self-righteous getting and spending that underlie American enterprise and ingenuity. And Oates manages the difficult trick of dexterously mingling broad satiric comedy with far more serious material in the novel’s bleak climactic pages, in which Abraham’s black adopted son Elisha strikes out on his own, with dramatic unforeseen consequences.

This is probably the most skillfully plotted of all Oates’s novels, and its resonant mockery of the tireless acquisitive energies of both Abraham Licht and his cohorts and victims makes it both a partial departure from and an interesting counterpart of her more overtly “serious” contemporary fiction.

Another of our most prolific and esteemed writers, John Updike likewise returned to familiar material with a third (and, it seems likely, the last) collection of related stories *Bech at Bay* (following *Bech: A Book* and *Bech is Back*) featuring his (distantly related) fictional alter ego: “semi-obscure” American Jewish novelist Henry Bech. This ineffably wry guided tour of the resilient egoist’s supposedly declining years shows us Henry Bech on a disastrous European cultural tour (“Bech in Czech”), confronting his literary peers (“Bech Presides”), and—having fortuitously mastered computer skills—dispatching obnoxious critics (“Bech Noir”). Finally, in his seventies, the aging reprobate gratefully accepts both the blessings of fatherhood and the ultimate literary accolade (“Bech and the Bounty of Sweden”). Witty and ingratiating, if ever so slightly sentimental, this is one of the most winning of Updike’s recent books.

Philip Roth, whose recent novels *Sabbath’s Theater* and *American Pastoral* rank among the best of the decades came back to earth with *I Married a Communist*. This awkwardly mixed bag of a book offers a scathing indictment of the McCarthy years in its core story about the rise and fall of conflicted leftist intellectual (and radio celebrity) Ira Ringold—as observed and in retrospect recorded by recurring (Roth-like) Roth character, novelist Nathan Zuckerman. The novel is filled with bracingly articulate and driven personalities (Ira’s older brother Murray, a valiant lifelong radical, is a particularly wonderful one), but submerged by its frequent recourse to partisan rant, and further marred by a subplot detailing Ira’s bitter estrangement from his actress ex-wife (a relationship that bears uncomfortable resemblances to Roth’s own notoriously unhappy one with actress Claire Bloom). The novel bristles with energy, but its declarative fervor overpowers its comedy and drama alike, making this one of its author’s least convincing books.

I was also surprised, if not precisely disappointed, by *Cities of the Plain*, the concluding volume of Cormac