

Mario Klarer. *A Short Literary History of the United States.* New York: Routledge, 2014. Pb. xiii, 196 pp. 17 Fig. \$ 25.95. ISBN 978-0415742177.

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In his 2014 book (published in the German original by C.H. Beck in 2013, and translated by the author himself the next year), Mario Klarer offers what he modestly titles “A Short Literary History of the United States” which is in fact quite extensive and covers a lot of ground. The book starts off with the “older literary production in the North American territories and colonies before the formation of the United States” (xi) and moves up all the way to the present, thus setting a broad frame. The author presents a clearly structured and highly readable text (which is not necessarily a given with other works written in German originally) that throughout keeps its promise to serve as an introduction for beginner students of American Literature. The book is designed appealingly; numerous illustrations (such as an image of the map of Walden Pond as Thoreau provided it in *Walden*; 39) and the decision to set the names of authors treated in the text in bold type make it easy for the reader to find one’s bearings. An extensive glossary, further reading list, bibliography, and index round out the package that comes at a user-friendly price of just over twenty Euros.

The book is divided into 10 comparatively short chapters covering – in chronological order – discovery narratives, colonial literature, literature of the Early Republic, Transcendentalism, the American Renaissance, the Gilded Age and Realism, Modernism, and Postmodernism. Klarer adds an elaborate chapter on literary theory (apparently dear to his heart) which he obviously wants readers to use as a tool kit in terms of methodology when tackling the history of American literature, and a – rather short – chapter on “Ethnic Voices.” The latter category is introduced as another tradition of American literature that “runs mostly parallel to postmodernism but is relatively untouched by its often playful narrative techniques” (106). The author makes it clear that for him, grouping texts by African-Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans and others as separate literary traditions represents “a development of ‘ghettoizing’ literature that is not unproblematic” (*ibid.*); however, he acknowledges that it may still make sense “to trace some of these ethnic traditions individually,” and goes on to illustrate why (*ibid.*). This evaluation serves as an example as to how Klarer offers room for debate, engaging the reader by seemingly deliberately taking a stance, as when in the Transcendentalism chapter, he calls Thoreau’s measurement of the lake “rather strange” (40), or when in the Gilded Age chapter, he refers to Henry James’s “narrative peculiarity” (65) and the fact that “[f]or the uninitiated, not much seems to

happen in James's fiction, which at times leads unprepared readers to find his work boring or tedious" (66). In the same vein, Klarer is not afraid to admit that when looking e.g. at American colonial history, "unsolved mysteries" remain when it comes to comparing events such as described in the Pocahontas myth with historical facts (13).

As early as in the first two chapters of the book, when dealing with discovery narratives and colonial literature, the author draws a bigger picture, offering historical background and biographical information on the early explorers, and introducing the main strands of perception and interpretation with regard to America both as a concept and as a place of literary production. Klarer persuasively describes the reciprocal effects of cultural, literary, and political creativity as well as their implications. Thus he calls the 1620 Mayflower Compact "a kind of miniature constitution" and "the starting point of the American democratic self-image" (14), and – another example of offering context – John Winthrop's *A Model for Christian Charity* a representation of the "sermon-like homiletic prose that will dominate the literary output of Colonial America over the next century" (18). At a later point in the book, Klarer mentions the terrorist scare of 9/11 which, according to him, "conjured up analogies" to the Puritan witch hunt culminating in the Salem witchcraft trials (20).

In the ensuing chapters, the author sticks to the principle of putting things into perspective, not least by introducing various genres and subgenres through concrete examples such as Franklin's autobiography, sentimental novels by William Hill Brown and Hannah Foster, picaresque novels by Tabitha Tenney, and founding texts of the US like the Declaration of Independence. Klarer succeeds in deciphering American Transcendentalism in a mere six pages, a remarkable achievement in itself, and he manages to set Transcendentalist writers apart from the writers of the American Renaissance, without denying connections and mutual influences, all of which in comprehensible terms. Klarer's statement at the beginning of his American Renaissance chapter that the writers "whose work constituted this movement were busy writing a national narrative" seems debatable when put in such absolute terms (44); while this could be said for Melville, others would argue that James Fenimore Cooper meets this categorization best while this is not necessarily the case with Poe whose work Klarer discusses in detail in this chapter.

A Short Literary History of the United States is always at its best when Klarer offers background information that would otherwise not be immediately available for the inexperienced reader, such as when he explains the underlying structure of Melville's *Moby Dick* (45–46), e.g. its "unconventional narrative technique" (46), and thus helps readers to grasp another dimension of this classic. Or when Klarer shows how Poe in his short stories "anticipates the contemporary film genre of so-called 'mind-tricking narratives' [...] which reveal at the end of the

movie that, up to this point, we as viewers have been severely misinterpreting crucial aspects of the plot” (48). In order to make his point, the author includes quotes and short excerpts from texts he discusses, such as Emerson’s famous “transparent eyeball” passage from *Nature* (38), Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” or the opening verses of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” (95–96). In the Gilded Age/Realism chapter, Klarer makes a point of how a growing number of female authors enter the scene around the turn of the century, introducing the life and works of Louisa May Alcott, Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Edith Wharton, and thus emphasizing the importance of these developments often overlooked in the past by a strong focus on Mark Twain, Jack London, and other male protagonists of the time.

In the chapters on Modernism and Postmodernism, starting the second half of the book, once again the author’s fascination with overlappings of writing and other art forms such as photography, film, and avant-garde art becomes apparent, and the reader is presented with a portrait of Gertrude Stein by Pablo Picasso. Klarer goes on to introduce major drama authors, such as Eugene O’Neill, Susan Glaspell, and Elmer Rice, but also innovative minds and originators of other important works of the time, such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington and their theoretical reflections on race relations. Again, the author comes up with a great example when he ventures to define the elusive concept of Postmodernism on a dozen pages, choosing to portray Thomas Pynchon, whose novels and short stories constitute “prime examples of postmodernist narratives” (101), via his appearance as a cartoon character in *The Simpsons*. Playfully yet precisely, Klarer outlines Pynchon’s self-perception and public role, his playful and self-conscious secretiveness.

The book’s final chapter on Literary Theory in the US clearly shows how important the author considers a solid theoretical background also for beginner students. And Klarer makes a convincing case by describing how American authors as early as during the 17th century (Anne Bradstreet, Phillis Wheatley, and later Charles Brockden Brown, William Dean Howells and others) engaged in “authorial self-reflection” (112) – thus providing a role model as ‘text producers’ for those ‘consuming’ their texts centuries later. Again, Klarer provides a helpful map for what can prove a complex endeavor for beginners, namely finding one’s bearings in the vast and multilayered field of literary theory. He divides the chapter into different sections, differentiating between ‘Author-oriented,’ ‘Reader-oriented,’ ‘Text-oriented,’ and ‘Context-oriented’ approaches: Another striking example of just how well the author manages to provide readers with little or no background in the matter with access to the discipline, while never losing sight of the sociocultural context and references these (presumably mostly young) readers bring to the table. *A Short Literary History of the United States* is an impressive feat, both for its wide-ranging approach and accessibility.