

Hayes, Kevin J. 2012: *A Journey Through American Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP. 220 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-986206-1.

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Unless you are a hobo and hop a freight train to wherever it takes you, a ‘journey’ means an itinerary, which means a series of choices of destinations and an organization of possibilities: how long to linger, what to report, what photos to keep and to share with your friends, what souvenirs to buy. Inevitably your choices would not necessarily be mine, but nor do personal preferences (and a somewhat idiosyncratic selection) mean that the journey is less interesting. Kevin J. Hayes’ decision to organize his journey through American Literature not by the traditional chronology or different movements but by genre and by theme is full of pitfalls, yet even these challenges give us a new way to approach and a different sense of understanding of the ‘journey’.

In a more straightforward chronology one can examine the specific socio-historical moment within which to explore each literary text as a response to that era, as a cultural production of its time. Choosing a ‘thematic’ approach is tenuous: what themes are consistent? How do different authors develop them? What happens if themes are mixed within one text? Even considering all these possible limitations, Hayes’ personal *Journey* is often interesting and a lot of fun. In spite of, or perhaps even because of, the problematics of his selection, there is a wealth of information here, particularly for an instructor of American Literature who wants to teach a course on, say, ‘travel literature’, or for the graduate student reading widely in order to decide on focus and familiarize him/herself with the multitude of possibilities. For the less well-versed, however, the selections and focus are not always useful as an overview. Sometimes trying to make a general statement about a variety of very different works leads the author into difficulties. Each of the eight different chapters are subdivided into various sections and, although what is included in each section is sometimes arbitrary, a fairly inclusive index makes it somewhat easier to read for content and specific writers or their works.

Chapter 1, ‘Beginnings’, piques the reader’s interest by citing the ‘Opening Lines’ of many of our major writers. And we may confidently agree with the author when he asserts that “American literature is about identity . . . [and] there may be no general theme more prevalent in it or more pertinent to it” (3). Yet Hayes is on more slippery ground when he asserts on page six that “[i]n the United States, the expression of individuality is

an expression of nationality". This can be effectively argued, as Hayes indeed does, when reviewing Poe, Melville, Whitman or Twain, but not particularly if you are black... and 'invisible', which the author acknowledges by including Ralph Ellison's unforgettable opening, and then, in his own short discussion, stating: "He exists in a society that does not acknowledge his existence" (11). Included here are the most obvious choices — John Smith, Franklin, Jefferson and Crèvecoeur (though not Payne). Although Hayes rightly points out that the term 'American Dream,' so prevalent in American mythology, is scarcely one hundred years old, he centers this rather (too) short discussion on Horatio Alger with a nod to Franklin, Henry James, and even Ralph Ellison. In this section, however, one cannot help but expect to see included such established texts as Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, or F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, to name only two. For these we must wait until later chapters (6 and 7, respectively). And herein lies one of the problems with trying to organize a thematic journey, which the author then abandons in favor of specific chapters on genres rather than themes: travel literature, autobiography, the short story, poetry, theater, the novel, yet finally returning to a mix of all of the above in 'Endings'.

Hayes is at his best in Chapter 2 on 'Travels' (26-48), an erudite *tour de force* of a rather neglected area of the literature. Within this chapter he in fact organizes his discussion chronologically: 'Eighteenth Century Travels,' 'Classics of the West' (roughly coinciding with the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), 'The World' (again covering the nineteenth century) which begins with Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) and in which Melville, James and Twain are all represented. This chapter winds up with 'Twentieth Century Travels,' and then relies on a very brief review of John Steinbeck's novels (to represent the first half of the century) and a more detailed examination of Paul Theroux's work (for the second half of the century). My guess is that this particular genre is both Hayes' specialty and his passion. The chapter is lively and invites further reading, concluding with a vigorous defense by the author to consider excellence in writing as good literature "regardless of genre" (48). Hayes is obviously not only very well read and informed, but also revels in sharing that knowledge. A rollicking good read.

Obviously a chapter on 'Autobiography' (Chapter 3, 49-69) will begin with the ubiquitous Benjamin Franklin. Though acknowledging that not all autobiographies are "the whole truth and nothing but the truth," Hayes nevertheless affirms that "[f]or most autobiographers, the writing process is a matter of selection, not imagination" (51), though perhaps enhancement is a first cousin to imagination. However, the statement that "the slave narrative is another genre of American autobiography" (53) is misleading. Frederick Douglass wrote his life story three times during his life, but the specific characteristics of his slave narrative make its uncritical inclusion as 'autobiography' rather problematic. This ex-slave mastered not only the skills of reading and writing, but also of effective rhetoric, and was quick to adopt the literary techniques and conventions that would be most effective in achieving his objectives. The specifics of the Slave Narrative as genre will spill over into Hayes' section on 'Jazz Autobiography,' the personal stories of jazz

musicians, where he cites both their documentary value as well as their aesthetic qualities. Perhaps he should have more creatively followed his own nomenclature, as 'jazz' music is traditionally thought to be improvisational and much more about process than product, less about 'truth' than performance. Hayes leaves us in this chapter within post-modern reader response theory: Forcing "readers to make sense of the material, . . . [Theresa Hak Kyung] Cha's literary gem beautifully demonstrates how readers construct the identities of the autobiographers they read" (69). The author has thus ultimately compromised his own initial description of 'autobiography'.

In Chapter 4, 'Narrative Voice and the Short Story' (70-93), the author returns to look specifically at genre more or less within a chronological framework. Beginning with Washington Irving, Hayes describes *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon* (1819) as "essentially a book of travels" (70), which ostensibly takes us back to 'travel', while Hawthorne's short fiction explores "the depths of the soul and the intricacies of the past" (73), so aren't we back to 'identity'? I actually do not agree with Hayes in 'Naturalism and the Short Story' (82) because making Crane's 'The Open Boat' emblematic of the naturalist short story is also problematic: This particular story in many ways constitutes a challenge to naturalism and can be analyzed as both impressionistic and symbolist. Jack London's short stories are more to the point here, but unfortunately there is no referencing in this chapter of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's seminal story, 'The Yellow Wallpaper'.

Ernest Hemingway in 'Modern Voices' emphasizes the "moral vacuity of modern existence" (85) and forces readers to fill in the gaps and make sense of what is there as well as what is not. In 'Postmodern Voices' Hayes points out the ironic, more allusive, "discordant mix" of humor with seriousness, genre and styles as well as self-conscious playfulness (89), although the reader must content him/herself with good discussions of only Thomas Pynchon and Raymond Carver. It is unclear, however, if the author includes Sandra Cisneros as a postmodern short story writer, nor why he would do so. While the discussion of 'Woman Hollering Creek' is an interesting representation of her work, including it at the very end of this chapter only points to the painful omission of a slew of very successful short story writers, representatives of the post 1960s' loosening of the canon. Why not a section on the 'multi-cultural' short story, including some if not all of the pioneers of the 'new frontier' of American fiction?

Chapter 5, 'Poetry' (94-116), begins in the nineteenth century with the obligatory Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. Whitman, of course, writes as an extension of his 'self', the 'I' that democratically represents the whole of the American nation (Whitman being the Transcendental Poet Emerson was waiting for). "The contrast between Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, between private and public . . . [is] absolutely vital to American poetry" (98), writes Hayes, but then he fails to give other examples that might have been useful in backing up this claim. This review of poetry then jumps backwards in time to 'Colonial American Verse' with not only the obligatory references to Anne Bradstreet and the Rev. Edward Taylor, but also an interesting analysis of the Virginian Robert Bolling and Ebenezer Cook's mock-epic, 'The Sot-weed Factor' (1708).

A look at the ‘Other Major Nineteenth-Century Poets’, including Poe, Melville and Crane, suggests “growing complexities in the relationship between poet and public” (103). ‘Modernist Verse’ makes mention of Ezra Pound, W.C. Williams and H.D., T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, and though I was pleased to see Langston Hughes included among the Modernist poets, he is dispatched in only three sentences. It would, of course, be absolutely impossible to deal with the plethora of American poets of contemporary times, but in ‘The Private Poet’, Hayes’ selection of Richard Hugo is a good one, particularly because as a vet he speaks for the many who have sought homecoming from multiple wars through their art. This journey becomes infinitely more interesting when the author actually takes time to delve a little more deeply into the authors/poets he chooses to include.

I find it rather curious that the first section of Chapter 6 is entitled ‘Representative American Plays’ and not ‘Playwrights’, because after citing ‘adaptations’ from the nineteenth century, the chapter does indeed turn to the ‘golden age’ of American theater to discuss the three ‘greats’: Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams. As with the section on O’Neill, the pages given to Arthur Miller pique my interest yet again. But while Tennessee Williams is described as writing about what it means to be a Southerner (*à la* Faulkner), the ‘ideas central to American literature’ fully expressed in *The Night of the Iguana* are not cited, much less discussed. The reader is left hanging: which ideas is Hayes referring to? Hayes obviously knows a lot, but at times he needs to be a little more explicit so as to enable us to more fully follow his arguments.

Hayes makes his way into ‘Writing for Cinema and Television’ by noting that many contemporary screenwriters, specifically Sam Peckinpah, cut their teeth on Williams’ dramatic productions, and then by delving into the successful work of Paddy Chayefsky’s writing for television drama (though according to Christopher Bigsby, Chayefsky despaired and felt demeaned because he did not receive much credit for his work). While only commenting that playwrights like Edward Albee had a distaste for writing for TV, Hayes also totally ignores a long list of contemporary dramatists. Although celebrating writers Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld for their sitcom *Seinfeld*, Hayes rather despairs of writing ‘the literary history of television’, given that so many contemporary programs are written by committee. But while the author certainly latches on to a critical move from live theater to the TV series, even more innovative is Christopher Bigsby’s take on ‘everyday drama’ in the first dozen years of the new millennium. In his latest book, *Viewing America: A Critical Introduction to 21st Century American Television Drama* (2013), Bigsby argues convincingly that writing for TV has gained a new respectability and that what used to be the domain of live theater, in depicting an edgy, critical response to socio-political concerns, has migrated to the smaller screen and is reaching an ever-widening audience. A new generation of ‘playwrights’ has been drawn in this new century to the radical critique of a ‘culture in crisis’ now possible on television, in which this new writer of the ‘drama of the everyday’ becomes absolutely central, not the committee writers that Hayes signals. Though drama might not be the American strong suit (we can, perhaps, leave that accolade for the novel), still it seems unfair of Hayes to eliminate so many strong

playwrights in favor of two or three screenwriters and the ‘committee writing’ of many popular TV series.

Some of Hayes’ strongest writing is in Chapter 7 (136-57), ‘The Great American Novel’, and not because I agree with his choices, but because his discussion of just how this was/is to be evaluated over the centuries (in ‘The Birth of a Literary Ideal’) is both illuminating and a fascinating read. Hayes uses this ‘review’ of its evolving definitions and implications to consider the contributions of both critics and authors throughout the later nineteenth and the twentieth century. Included in this section (finally) is Fitzgerald’s masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*, as is William Faulkner, though the latter’s prestige is alleged to rest not on one particular novel but on the cycle of novels written about Yoknapatawpha county.

In Hayes’ definition, ‘The Postmodern Novel’ moves from the 1950s (Kerouac, Heller, Kesey) through Barthelme’s *Snow White*, “which effectively sounded the death knell of the American novel as an evolving and coherent form” (151). Hayes argues that in the late sixties “many of the best writers turned toward nonfiction” (152), leading into ‘The New Journalism and the Death of the Novel’, and on to talking about Tom Wolfe and briefly mention Truman Capote. Be that as it may, ‘The Genre That Wouldn’t Die’ touches on Philip Roth, returns to Tom Wolf, and then moves forward (or to the side) to include Maxine Hong Kingston, who proposed an alternative to the Great American Novel, ‘the Global novel’ (155). At least Jonathan Franzen receives a page and a half with descriptions of *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2012), “another saga of a Midwestern family in tatters”, for which “the new book’s inadequacies have not shaken the mantle of great American novelist from Franzen’s shoulders” (156). But in Hayes’s view,

[a] truly great novel, American or not, requires more daring. . . . The author must not only tell a story that encapsulates the nation but also tell it in a new way, inventing a mode and method of storytelling different from what other novelists have done before. Novelists with the ambition, talent, and daring to accept this challenge come along only once or twice a century. (157)

Such a sweeping evaluation makes it even harder for me to understand why, of all the authors included in this book, not one mention is made of Toni Morrison’s oeuvre. *Beloved*, winner of the Pulitzer in 1989 and selected by the *New York Times* informal survey in 2006 as the best novel of the previous 25 years, is not even mentioned, not even included in the ‘Timeline’, which for 1987 only lists Tom Wolf’s *The Bonfire of Vanities*. Yes, I am a Morrison devotee, and yes, I believe she is the best writer in contemporary USA, but even beyond my very personal (and very defensible) personal biases, Toni Morrison is the only living recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature from the United States. Surely that would warrant an acknowledgment of some kind in a book of this nature, even admitting that Hayes’ preferences are hardly mine. I would argue that *Beloved*, by focusing on the very contradiction of the American experiment (Life? Liberty? Pursuit of happiness?) certainly ‘encapsulates the nation’ and the national experience with daring and ambitious,

new modes and methods of storytelling, and that Toni Morrison has demonstrated the requisite talent to *at the very least* be a contender for the GAN, even if you have other preferences.

So after that little diatribe, let me end with Hayes' 'Endings' (Chapter 8, 158-71), which begins by returning to Henry James and his denouement for *The American*, which closes "with ambiguity and uncertainty" (159). Christopher Newman "remakes himself into someone different . . . a sadder and a wiser man, perhaps, but a new man nonetheless" (159). But in this view, "[w]hoever assumes a new identity, after all, forgets the former self and erases the past" (160). Yet In Hayes' own words, "a mix of experience and emotion, memory need not destroy us; it can enhance and enrich our identities" (171).

As teachers and scholars we have often erred on the side of specialization, teaching what we like best, what we think works well with the students in the classroom, and what is somehow representative of our own journey or narrative viewpoint or our own particular, albeit not quite so comprehensive, overview. But still the question lingers: who is the ideal reader for such an exploration of American literature? Hayes' *Journey* is often entertaining as well as erudite, and for the more experienced reader in the field, provides a chance to sharpen wits and mount a challenge to his more 'controversial' readings. For the lay person who just wants a general overview with an eye to selecting one or another text, more or less at random according to what strikes his or her fancy, the book might also be useful as an inspiration to delve more deeply into the literature. But for teachers and their students, it is hard to see how this type of overview can compete with the more traditionally organized *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* by Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury (1991) or with the more recent *A History of American Literature* by Richard Gray (2004). Nevertheless, it's a good read, and accompanying Hayes on his journey is always interesting and sometimes even refreshingly illuminating; but almost inevitably, my journey has been and probably will always be a different one.

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Received 23 January 2013

Accepted 15 May 2013

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