region of the country attempting to navigate the complex relationship of industry and environment for enduring benefit.

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The New Midwest: A Guide to Contemporary Fiction of the Great Lakes, Great Plains, and Rust Belt

By Mark Athitakis


Midwesterners always live, it seems, in an age of lead, the con even meaner than Hesiod’s own contemporary “Iron” age, all misery and decay, casting nostalgic glances back on the cast of cast-off ages, the more precious alloys and ores—Bronze, Silver, Gold. The gist of the old metallurgy haunts the subtitle of Mark Athitakis’s fine guidebook, The New Midwest: A Guide to Contemporary Fiction of the Great Lakes, Great Plains, and Rust Belt: the oxidation of wistfulness, the boketto sigh of the looking back on looking back, that green breast of a new world always obviously out there, always out of reach. “You should have seen the lake in my day, now that was a great Great Lake!” But to his great credit, Athitakis in this archeological dig of the heartland’s literary bottomland neither stratifies the mildewy cultural milieu nor selects works and authors steeped in the crick-necked, over-the-shoulder gape into the golden-grassed past. I wish I could recreate here the graphic crag captured on the book’s lead-colored cover—the NEW careted in between the THE and the MIDWEST—that illustrates the illustrious work this book does, wedging apart the tattoo of charred cartography, the midden of might-have-beens, the runes of ruined ruin.

I like the heft of the book, handy and handsome, with fancy French flaps. The elegant introduction addresses, as it must, the issue of timeliness and timefulness (the components of “place” that are often overlooked) but more importantly succinctly defines the great brooding midwestern mystery of location, location. Just where is the where of the Midwest? Perhaps unique to the region is always the discussion of its regionalness. I once taught in a literature department that had eliminated the model of historical and
national coverage and enshrined a model of textual studies identifying race, class, gender, and sexual orientation as “sites of contestation.” One semester would be Shakespeareless while the next term would have four or five courses on Shakespeare each taught through one of those theoretical lenses. I half-jokingly suggested “region” as another bust on this Mount Rushmore of identity and was ignored. But I, as a writer, do think of myself as a Hoosier as well as a straight, middle-class white man. Athitakis argues, ingeniously, that the “place” of the Midwest resides in the shifting categories of race, gender, and class as well as the topographic, meteorological, architectural accoutrements of plains, prairies, tornadoes, floods, barns, factories, and skyscrapers. With midwestern understatement (“Glad to have you with us. Even though we may not ever mention it again”), he posits his own ism, his aesthetic of a postmodern regionalism that could actually also be thought of as a kind of post-colonial theory, deconstructing the heck out of the “Midwestern” and its place in “American” literature.

Having dispatched the formalities of the formless form of the Midwest, the rest of the book takes the form of brief dispatches from the cornucopiaic smorgasbord of the region’s fiction writers. As a SHORT fiction writer, I am always sensitive to the bias in the field as it tilts toward the LONG novel, but that is my lookout and my only beef with the herd in this well-stocked stockyard. Athitakis’s writing is lively, stylish, informed, and engagingly idiosyncratic. It’s nice and I mean that in a nice way. The selection of the line-up, its ordering, and its connective tissue bolster those understated but important theoretical articulations of the enabling introduction. It is very important that we escape the ancient blinders and binders of base and precious metals. The New Midwest does important work re-imagining that brittle impulse of the critic from the hierarchically vertical to the descriptive limitless horizontal where, lord knows, all of us Midwesterners feel most at home.

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