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At the close of the 1890s, some 30 years into the 70-year span covered by this volume, Henry James considered eagerly the unprecedented conditions for the production and consumption of what was coming to be called ‘American literature’. He observed ‘the huge American public’ of the ‘great common-schooled and newspapered democracy’ notable for ‘the variety of races and idioms’ contained within its vastness; the situation, he wrote, presented to the writer and the critic an array of new ‘opportunities’. James delighted in the radical uncertainty about how exactly these opportunities would play out: ‘what forms, what colors, what sounds may the language take on or throw off in accommodating itself to such a growth of experience; what life may it…reflect and embody?’ This book may be taken as a response to these questions. It answers them specifically with regard to the genre James himself did so much to define, and yet, it emphasizes that so soon as we cordon the novel off from the rest of cultural production as a discrete artefact, we distort our understanding of it. There is a necessary cordonning of some sort going on here, however, in that this volume is one in a series, and its special purview within that series is delimited not just by dates but by the label ‘American’. The volume’s fully realized commitment to literary history affirms that what makes an ‘American’ novel distinctive is the American past. But—especially given the present scholarly preoccupation with the ‘transnational’ and the ‘global’ or the ‘planetary’—American history itself hardly keeps within neat boundaries. With a happy irreverence towards its title, the volume works relentlessly to problematize every single word in the phrase ‘the American novel’.

The ‘American novel’, as portrayed here, is a splendidly contingent thing in time and space: it is entangled, embedded, and never really self-contained; it constitutes itself, often just ephemerally, from multiple subgenres and source texts, only to explode promiscuously across pirated pages again and again; its readership is legion, polyglot, internally fractured, and occasionally illiterate. Its author is not always a person; it is not always written or read on American ground; it is not always written or read in the English language. It feeds upon and then seeds itself back into visual and auditory media forms as well as textual ones. It is modern, experimental, and new; it is never more than a reformulation of earlier tropes and narrative tactics. It consolidates social hierarchies; it incites the revolt of the oppressed. The great achievement of this volume is to make this unstable and various object of study richly available for our analytical attention: here, ‘the American novel’ seems to be a (rapidly) moving target, but we feel our eyes are on it. We also feel that we had better stay alert.

The volume delivers a generous measure of what is usually called ‘context.’ There is a notable paucity of theoretical reference; the gathered essays give careful attention to issues of composition, publishing, and reading, as well as the political, legal, economic, and social conditions within which those processes played out. Contributors write in lucid prose, and chapters and sections are clearly and logically organized: though suited to readers who dip in and out, the book also holds up remarkably well as a sustained cover-to-cover read. The citation apparatus is minimal: there is one conglomerate bibliography of cited works at the end, and there are no notes at all. This streamlined format may disappoint researchers
seeking a quick brush-up or a set of references on a particular topic, but those same researchers, when they turn to their work as teachers, are likely to value precisely this streamlining: this volume will make an approachable and stimulating resource for students.

Certain ideas, arguments, and questions recur across multiple contributions, together providing a useful sense of what scholars in this field believe we should be thinking about right now. The emphasis on the transnational is salient; especially effective in this vein is Orm Øverland on ‘The American Novel beyond English’. The volume also returns repeatedly to the problem of genre in a number of fine essays, including Claudia Stokes on ‘The Religious Novel’ and David Kazanjian on ‘The Dime Novel’. Multiple contributors argue against a literary–historical narrative that describes a sentimental, romantic, religious, and feminine mode of antebellum fiction ceding to a new masculine realism after the Civil War; they urge us to attend to the important continuities across that alleged divide. A similar move to disrupt clean delineations of genre manifests itself in the volume’s repeated emphasis on the way that ‘low’ genres and ‘high’ genres mix and mutually inform each other, as well as the way that journalism, radio, film, and visual art—particularly in their technology-enabled modern forms—should be understood both as part of the stuff of which novels are made and as media realms into which novels’ influences extend. Michael Moon’s discussion of Faulkner’s abiding interest in Mickey Mouse drives home this point convincingly, as does Jonathan Freedman’s account of James and the modern multimedia landscape, which concludes by picturing the Master as a Jenny Lind of the novel, his late prose ‘a kind of lied to typewriter accompaniment’. But along with neatly delineated genres, the neatly delineated author also dissolves under the pressure of the evidence presented here: against that striking image of the singular diva James, we might contrast the urban collective that makes dime novels out of crime news clippings; or the dual-identity writers who publish highbrow prose under one name while also selling anonymous lowbrow prose; or the essentially collaborative work of writers and readers who push a narrative forward together over time, the former responding to the demands of the latter as each installment of a serialized fiction generates its response.

The volume also repeatedly glances forward to now, observing the antecedents of today’s cultural production in the texts it treats, and pondering the fresh meanings those texts might bear in the present. Jonathan Arac observes that ‘since the early twentieth century, literature has become less important within culture as a whole, even in its elite sectors, as new media, including film, radio, television, and the e-world have rapidly risen to dominance’. Even as other contributors energetically expose the interpenetration of the novel and these modern media forms, there is a salutary self-awareness in Arac’s declaration that the novel is ‘culturally residual’ in our own time. This declaration contributes to the important self-reflexive work of situating the volume itself in historical context, as does Elizabeth Renker’s excellent essay on the origins of the study of American literature within the professionalized academy. Whether we consider the novel culturally residual or continually evolving, this volume’s account of a particular epoch in its American history offers a useful response to James’s questions about ‘opportunities’, and it achieves a very Jamesian aim in leaving us full of pleasurably unsatisfied curiosity.

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