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Journal of American Studies / Volume 45 / Issue 01 / February 2011 / E7

DOI: 10.1017/S0021875810002288, Published online: 03 March 2011

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0021875810002288

How to cite this article:

CHRIS WITTER (2011). Journal of American Studies, 45, E7 doi:10.1017/S0021875810002288

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Kasia Boddy, *The American Short Story since 1950* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, £19.99). Pp. 184. ISBN 978 0 7486 2766 0.

The scope of Kasia Boddy's *The American Short Story since 1950* is certainly ambitious, particularly when we note its slightness. The result is a brevity that often troubles an otherwise clear and compelling account of the literary cultures of the twentieth century, and the correlative mutations of the short-story form.

The introductory chapter takes us back to the late nineteenth century, where Boddy identifies what become key themes of the twentieth-century (and twenty-first-century) short story. These are then carefully developed in six roughly chronological chapters that take us through from Flannery O'Connor to Cynthia Ozick, with an emphasis on the interaction between literary form and literary institutions. Boddy spends a substantial portion of the book analysing the developments of the "Romantic-through-modernist tradition of the short story – from Poe to Anderson to Carver" (133), relating this to the canonizing anthologies of Edward J. O'Brien and, later, of creative-writing courses (most notably, Cleanth Brooks's and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Fiction*). There is also a convincing description of the relation between the form, theory and reception of the short story and creative writing pedagogy.

Other themes relating production and reception to short-story form are also delineated. In the course of the book, we note, for example, the homology between the reception of early twentieth-century "local colour fiction" and that of "dirty realism" in the 1980s, and diasporic fiction in the 1990s. There is also discussion of short-story writers' attempts to escape various forms of "entrapment" (78) – a theme which recalls Boddy's PhD supervisor Tony Tanner's chapter on "interior spaciousness" in *City of Words* (1971).

It is in relation to previous criticism that Boddy's book becomes most interesting. Although the book has, in some ways, been anticipated by recent work – most notably Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* (2009) – it is still a decisive turn away from the (often overly exuberant) claims made about the postmodern in much existing criticism of postwar American literature. The fact that the word "postmodern" only appears (by my count) on two occasions in the entire book – and even then held at a distance: "the have-your-cake-and-eat-it attitude we have come to call postmodern" (150) – can only be read as a (near-)silent polemic. This does lead to some odd moments, though. For example, when Donald Barthelme is introduced we are told, "today Donald Barthelme is known as an exemplary *New Yorker* comic writer" (69). However, despite recent attempts by David Gates, Louis Menand and Tracy Daugherty to "save" him from the label, Barthelme is still best known as an exemplary postmodernist. This sort of deliberate nescience cannot overcome by itself the established interpretive and critical tendencies. Worse, Boddy's approach avoids the necessity of an actual critique of that which the author describes as postmodern.

This last point relates us to the book's biggest failing. Despite occasional thrusts at "organicism" (13) and new criticism, Boddy's book does not take us much beyond the internal developments of "literary cultures", presented all too often as

“enclosed and complete” (105). This results only in the formalism of a now slightly expanded field. A constant frustration is the failure to substantially relate this “internal” history to a broader historicization. Moreover, Boddy seems consistently to refuse to take a position, remaining always hidden behind a veil of quotations. As a result, we are given a rather neutral narrative that only reproduces the depoliticization observable in the vast majority of previous structuralist–formalist critical studies. Despite the many successes of this book, it is precisely in failing to address existing critical analyses and, indeed, its own critical position, that the book avoids the risks of taking us beyond existing research.

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