

Introduction

Bryan M. Santin

For students and scholars of American literature, this volume is a broad resource for clear, concise, and insightful essays on the inextricable relationship between the American novel and politics in the twentieth century. In much of the existing literary scholarship, critics regularly invoke political movements, ideas, and events to illuminate their core arguments. To facilitate and enhance these kinds of critical engagement in the future, *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century American Novel and Politics* analyzes political phenomena that have not only shaped the American novel, but have been shaped in turn by long-form prose fiction.

Essentially, this volume seeks to shed more light on a perennial question in American literary studies: What is the relationship between the twentieth-century American novel and politics? The question occurs so frequently not only because of its intrinsic complexity and thematic significance, but also because the very term “politics” is historically contingent, a protean category whose normative valences and assumed linkages to literary texts change over time. This explains why previous scholarship on the relationship between literature and politics must be understood within the sociopolitical context of its production. To take just one prominent example, Walter Rideout published his classic survey *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900–1954* (1956) at the height of New Criticism, a formalist movement whose acolytes tended to see political literature as an impure element of aesthetic contamination. Consequently, Rideout anticipated this kind of critique by acknowledging that “the formalist critic will surely be unhappy over the very large amount of what he would call ‘extrinsic’ [i.e., political] material.”¹ Although the hegemonic containment culture of the Cold War “did not prevent Rideout from completing and publishing his study,” John Whalen-Bridge has observed,

¹ Walter Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900–1954* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), vii.

he did have to “work against the anti-political prejudice constantly to fashion his book,” a defensive position that shaped how Rideout defined politics and framed its role in American fiction.² The point of this example is neither to celebrate nor to condemn Rideout’s important book. It is merely to point out that no scholarly attempt to investigate the relationship between politics and literature will be neutral. The chapters that follow, then, intend to provoke productive debates about the politics of the twentieth-century American novel that go beyond shallow partisan categorization (e.g., progressive vs. conservative, Democrat vs. Republican, etc.) by contributing to ongoing discussions that we can see anew with two decades’ worth of historical distance from the previous century. But while historical distance may usher in fresh perspectives, it does not usher in objective perspectives that hover omnisciently outside of history, granting access to some pure metaphysical definition of “politics.”

That raises the obvious, fundamental question: What does this volume mean by the historically contingent term “politics,” especially in relation to the twentieth-century American novel. Defined narrowly, “politics” in the twentieth-century United States is an umbrella term for a set of civic discourses and practices, referring primarily to the formal distribution of power through society at various interlocking national, state, and local levels. From this restricted perspective, statements and actions are recognizable “political” if they partake in ritualistic public acts including, but not limited to, voting, protesting, legislating, adjudicating legal disputes, campaigning for elected office, or advocating for social change. While this Cambridge Companion does not ignore the practices associated with that formal definition of politics usually associated with the specialized sub-genre of the “political novel,” it presupposes a more expansive vision of American political history, theory, and praxis. Defined broadly, “politics” in the present volume signifies dynamic sites of social struggle that were framed, for better or worse, by distinctly American permutations of post-Enlightenment liberalism in the twentieth century. Following Richard Hofstadter and Louis Hartz, this volume assumes that liberalism is the dominant philosophical strand in American political history. As Hofstadter famously claimed, “It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one.”³ However, acknowledging that Hofstadter and Hartz were prone to oversimplification, this volume also stresses that American

² John Whalen-Bridge, *Political Fiction and the American Self* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 25.

³ Quoted in Michael Kazin, “The Right’s Unsung Prophet,” *Nation* 248 (February 20, 1989), 242.

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liberalism was never monolithic, as various “liberalisms” challenged one another over the course of the so-called American Century, from minimal-state liberalism to active-state liberalism.⁴ In this sense, liberalism is fundamental to the politics of the American novel since specific novels can be read as affirmations of, or dissents from, the American liberal tradition. While this volume does not mean to downplay the social justice dimension of, for instance, famous feminist or antiracist activist campaigns by framing them as liberal movements, it does seek to emphasize that the forms of social justice for which American novelists have advocated are inseparable from the rhetoric (i.e., free, autonomous human agents), theoretical assumptions, and material institutions of American liberalism. From this perspective, many kinds of novels – not just classic “political novels” in which traditional political characters or settings dominate the plot – investigate and thematize the changing hopes and anxieties of free independent subjects in the United States. To put it succinctly, “politics” in this Cambridge Companion means the theoretical intersection of power, freedom, and justice – the perennial, difficult, necessary task of linking “might” to “right,” or of empowering justice in a nation of putatively free citizens – within evolving historical forms of twentieth-century American liberalism.

From this dual theoretical-historical perspective, the novel form is a unique aperture from which to view political conflict and change because official power relations often intersect with personal power relations in ways that are deep, enduring, and ideologically mystifying. In the words of the political theorist Corey Robin, this “is why our political arguments – not only about the family but also the welfare state, civil rights, and much else – can be so explosive: they touch upon the most personal relations of power. It is also why it has so often fallen to our novelists to explain to us our politics.”⁵ So, while some of the novels featured here engage directly with unmistakable political topics and themes, many of them conceptualize American democracy as a “way of life,” in the words of the political scientists Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner, a key insight that they attribute especially to twentieth-century African American novelists such

⁴ For an excellent critical analysis of Hartz’s theory of American liberalism, see Marc Stears, “The Liberal Tradition and the Politics of Exclusion,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007): 85–101.

⁵ Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 [2011]), 10.

as Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison.⁶ The upshot of this literary interrogation of American politics is a greater awareness that, “while the formal practices of democracy such as voting matter, it is a mistake to treat democracy merely as a [theoretical] form rather than a way of life that extends well beyond the voting booths.”⁷ If rights within America’s constitutional regime are not “self-executing,” Rogers and Turner conclude, then their embodied reality “depends on a set of supports – human, economic, and political – to help sustain them.”⁸ At its best, the novel interrogates precisely these kinds of sociopolitical supports. The novels in this volume, then, have been chosen for their propensity, as Irving Howe puts it in *Politics and the Novel* (1957), to dramatize “the literary problem of what happens to the novel when it is subjected to the pressures of politics and political ideology,” particularly over the course of the twentieth century in the United States.⁹

Acknowledging that a wide swath of American novelists, working in a variety of twentieth-century literary genres, astutely dramatize American politics as a way of life, this volume assumes that it would be unhelpful to restrict its focus to the typical “political novel.” In his landmark monograph *The Modern American Political Novel* (1966), Joseph Blotner defines the genre in narrow, functionalist terms as a category of novels that “deal primarily with political processes and actions,” which causes him to exclude novels that focus “on the conditions out of which political action may eventually arise,” such as Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) and John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).¹⁰ At the same time, this volume does not assume that all twentieth-century American novels are worthy of the same kind of political analysis and attention. “We may argue that literature is inherently social,” in the words of Whalen-Bridge, “but not all literature is equally political.”¹¹ Even if one agrees with Frederic Jameson’s well-known claim that, since “everything is ‘in the last analysis’ political,” the genre of political fiction is nothing more than “a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life,” scholars interested in the robust linkages between literature and politics are still confronted with the task of distinguishing novels that are worth their

⁶ Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner, “Political Theorizing in Black: An Introduction,” in *African American Political Thought: A Collected History*, ed. Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21. ⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), 11.

¹⁰ Joseph Blotner, *The Modern American Political Novel* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 8.

¹¹ Whalen-Bridge, 4.

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time – i.e., novels that they deem more politically insightful and revealing than other novels.¹² That task of discernment is neither objective nor incontestable. It does not occur from an apolitical, bird’s-eye view of the literary field outside of history. A novel that may have seemed political only in a vague, cryptic sense may, in the light of history, appear more politically significant than critics would have ever guessed – e.g., Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991), in which a New York City investment banker who secretly tortures and mutilates women idolizes none other than Donald J. Trump. Any collection that purports to survey the relationship between the American novel and politics must justify its principles of selection within an ever-evolving political landscape, a task toward which this introduction now turns.

For this volume, the first question of methodological selection was historical periodization. Why delimit the volume’s timeline to the twentieth century, especially since American novels have investigated both formal politics and political ideologies throughout the country’s history? The first reason is practical. To attend adequately to the richness, depth, and sheer breadth of the various political movements, ideas, and events featured in the American novel, it was prudent to restrict the field of analysis to novels published between roughly 1900 and 2000. The second, more fundamental reason is theoretical. Unlike earlier moments in American history when republicanism dominated the public debate, a robust framework of liberalism undergirded twentieth-century American politics, different strands of which are visible in everything from the early-century Progressive movements to the midcentury “rights revolution” to late-century neoliberalism. At the dawn of the century, Progressivism was already sweeping the country, as Hofstadter has noted, in an effort to redefine liberalism and “to restore a type of economic individualism and political democracy that was widely believed to have existed earlier in America and to have been destroyed by the great corporation and the corrupt political machine.”¹³ But by the end of the century, in Michael Sandel’s words, “the civic or formative aspect of politics [had] largely given way to the liberalism that conceives of persons as free and independent selves, unencumbered by moral or civic ties they [had] not chosen.”¹⁴ In their various explanatory accounts of how and why twentieth-century

¹² Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 20.

¹³ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 5.

¹⁴ Michael Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontents: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 6.

American liberalism evolved, scholars have often privileged the American novel as a cultural medium not only because it occasionally influenced key ideological shifts, but also because it uniquely indexed those shifts. Thus, while any act of periodization will be arbitrary to some degree, a basic premise of this volume is that the “twentieth century” signifies a timeframe with a recognizable political-literary arc that reveals more than it obscures.

To take one of the most well-known, and still frequently cited, examples of a major intellectual utilizing the American novel to theorize the evolution of twentieth-century liberalism, let us briefly consider Richard Rorty’s *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (1998). For Rorty, prominent American novels function like apertures through which one can understand the cultural and institutional decline of American liberalism’s most progressive strands. Whereas early novels such as Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925) are potent social protest novels characterized by national hope and pride, later novels such as Thomas Pynchon’s *Vineland* (1990), Norman Mailer’s *Harlot’s Ghost* (1991), and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) are impotent and despairing political novels characterized by “national self-mockery and self-disgust.”¹⁵ In this declension narrative, the Vietnam War is the inflection point of the century since its domestic impact produced “a generation of Americans who suspected that our country was unachievable – that that war not only could never be forgiven, but had shown us to be conceived in sin, and irredeemable.”¹⁶ If the pre-1960s American novel was stimulated by pragmatic hope, then the post-1960s American novel was haunted by Gothic despair, a symptomatic dichotomy that maps (too) neatly onto an early-century, can-do reformist left and a late-century, hopeless cultural left. While Rorty’s story about the relationship between the twentieth-century American novel and politics is polemically generative and, at times, illuminating, the present volume exists because Rorty’s book unfortunately exemplifies the reductive interpretative tendencies that still persist in the literature. Specifically, narratives like Rorty’s fail to account for the following phenomena: the complex dialectic of hope and pessimism that existed within and between political movements, which American novels, especially ones written by women and minorities, both catalyzed and registered; the undertheorized political contributions of

¹⁵ Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

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popular literary genres beyond just canonical realist fiction and acclaimed postmodern novels; and the unique, politically astute examinations of American culture that certain novels, with the benefit of hindsight, have been recognized as providing.

To remedy these lacunae, the volume groups its twenty-four chapters into three parts: “Ideologies and Movements,” “The Politics of Genre and Form,” and “Case Studies.” Part I considers philosophical ideologies and broad political movements that were both politically and literarily significant in the twentieth-century United States, including progressive liberalism, conservatism, neoliberalism, overlapping manifestations of socialism and communism, several waves of feminism, various sexual liberation movements, and a cluster of Black liberation movements. These political discourses were chosen for two interrelated reasons: their sustained importance in American politics over prolonged periods and the degree to which they manifested in twentieth-century American novels. This rationale throws into relief why no standalone chapter on “fascism” exists in this section, since it was largely a European movement that made inroads into both American political discourse and fictional texts in the 1930s and 1940s, but which faded from American politics as a live option later in the century, although its usage as a rhetorical pejorative persisted. These seven chapters show how novels refracted big ideas and movements, as political abstractions were bent through the prism of the novel as an embodied narrative form. Part II analyzes the evolving political valences of specific genres and forms in the twentieth-century American novel, focusing on crime fiction, science fiction, Western fiction, literary realist fiction, immigrant fiction, horror fiction, and postmodern metafiction. While a great deal of scholarship exists on the political nuances of these genres, there is no recent source that brings them together in one place and subjects them to political analysis. As perhaps the most innovative section in this volume, these seven chapters illuminate the range of genres in which political discourse manifests itself in different American novels.

Part III examines ten individual novels as exemplary case studies. Tracing the arc of the entire century, this grouping of texts features a diverse assortment of politically minded novels, from paradigmatic political fiction such as Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men* (1946) to watershed genre novels such as Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). This distinctive section assumes that readers will benefit not only from a deeper engagement with a thematically rich novel, but also from novels that dramatize political discourses that do not have their own standalone chapters – e.g., Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935)

and the speculative counter-history subgenre of American fascism; Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), a post-*Silent Spring* iteration of the environmental movement; and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and the literary politics of Indigenous representation in the wake of the 1960s American Indian Movement. For some readers, a few conspicuous absences here may elicit confusion. Where are the famous white male "usual suspects," such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, E. L. Doctorow, John Updike, Philip Roth, and Robert Coover? First, these important authors are by no means excluded from the volume, as their novels are treated, to varying degrees, in previous chapters. Second, this volume recognizes that a great deal of excellent political literary criticism on these novelists already exists. For any given novel, inclusion in Part III signifies not an implicit award of timeless canonical status, but rather a recognition of political insight in an ongoing disciplinary attempt to make sense of fiction and politics in the previous century. In the interest of originality and innovation, then, this section substitutes novels by those usual suspects with ones such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's once-forgotten feminist utopian novel *Herland* (1915), James Baldwin's jeremiad against Nixonian "law and order" politics *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and Octavia E. Butler's prescient critique of neoliberalism and climate change in the *Parable* series (1993, 1998).

The four opening chapters investigate the literary politics of several major political ideologies: progressive liberalism, conservatism, neoliberalism, and socialism and communism. Johannes Voelz's "Progressive Liberalism" provides a literary genealogy of twentieth-century American liberalism, showing how an early progressive form took shape that retained the utopian end of liberating individuals from arbitrary constraints but re-envisioned the state as the principle means to achieve that end. The terms "progressive" and "liberal," Voelz argues, were often tested and developed in the cultural laboratory of the literary imagination. In "Conservatism," Stephen Schryer focuses on the undertheorized relationship between the novel and American conservatism, documenting how the modern conservative movement's cultural wing adopted contradictory positions, elitism and populism, which caused them to develop a mode of counter-expertise that increasingly estranged them from mainstream literary institutions. In the next chapter, "Neoliberalism," which acts as a kind of sequel to the previous one on conservatism, Mitchum Huehls traces the story of neoliberalism from the early post-1945 fear of socialism to four overlapping historical phases: the economic (1970s), the political (1980s), the socio-cultural (late 1980s and 1990s), and the ontological (2000s). Instead of

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developing a strict definition of the neoliberal novel, Huehls uses this heuristic framework to model ways of grasping how different iterations of the neoliberal economy constitute contemporary American culture, particularly via the novel form. In “Socialism and Communism,” Mark W. Van Wienen surveys not only the realist and naturalist literary modes typically associated with socialism and communism, but also modernist and speculative novels by authors committed to radical human liberation. Exploring the relationship between literature and socialism and communism throughout the century, Van Wienen pays special attention to Black communism in novels by Claude McKay and Richard Wright and to utopian anarcho-socialism in novels by Ursula K. Le Guin.

Part I’s final three chapters examine broad political movements that existed throughout the century but peaked during the “rights revolution” of the 1960s: feminism, sexual liberation, and Black liberation. In her chapter “Feminisms,” Jean Lutes documents the ways in which political feminism affected the American novel, reshaping the content, and sometimes even the form, of virtually every US novel genre by century’s end. Lutes also interrogates the usefulness of the “waves” metaphor in feminist historiography, arguing that a literary perspective puts the lie to this reductive metaphor that misleadingly privileges white women at the expense of all other women. In “Sexual Liberation Movements,” Guy Davidson outlines the cultural politics of sexual freedom in America, from the early legal battles over literary censorship involving Henry Miller to post-Stonewall novelistic engagements with queer liberation. On the one hand, Davidson argues, these movements were all committed to certain intersecting aims, particularly the use of literary expression to expand rights, benefits, and legal protections associated with newly legible kinds of sexual behavior. On the other hand, serious tensions existed between these movements, the most salient being the theme of radical individualism at the heart of heteronormative novels and the theme of collectivity and community at the heart of queer novels. In their co-written chapter, “Black Liberation Movements,” Sheena Michele Mason and Dana A. Williams examine the African American novel as a deeply political aesthetic form that shaped an array of twentieth-century political campaigns dedicated to eliminating various forms of oppression faced by Black people because of their racialization. Like Lutes’s critique of feminist “waves” in Chapter 5, Mason and Williams also question the political utility of typical frameworks of periodization in twentieth-century Black fiction, arguing that they can elide the degree to which African American novelists grappled with racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia across

the century. Ultimately, they document how the African American novel, broadly conceived across many genres, did cultural work within and outside the boundaries of what scholars usually recognize as Black political movements.

In Part II, “The Politics of Genre and Form,” the first three chapters take up popular genres – crime fiction, science fiction, and Western fiction – that were once associated with rigid conventions and predictable politics and deconstructs those associations by resurveying their respective genre histories. In “Crime Fiction,” Andrew Pepper argues that the politics of twentieth-century crime fiction have never been straightforward or easily predictable. Even when crime novels end by reestablishing the dominant social order, they often reveal the corruption within and across the institutional domains of capital, policing, and politics. Noting that classic crime fiction was often focalized through alienated white male outsiders, Pepper also considers the politics of racial and gendered noir novels, noting how Black and female crime novelists appropriated the genre for explicitly political ends. In “Science Fiction,” Jason Haslam asserts that the twentieth-century science fiction novel, with its legendary depictions of dystopias and utopias, has a rich history of engaging political questions. In the first half of the century, Haslam writes, as scientific advancements led to both spectacular progress and profound destruction, science fiction writers imaginatively interrogated the hopes and fears bound up with new forms of collective technological action, especially in relation to the postwar threat of nuclear annihilation. Toward the end of the century, as both the internet and global capitalism swept over the country, American science fiction writers shifted their focus to cyberpunk themes of postmodern decentralization and to racialized and minoritized groups within the speculative subgenres of Afrofuturism, Indigenous Futurism, and Afro-Latinx Futurism. According to Stephen J. Mexal, in the chapter “Western Fiction,” the twentieth-century Western novel frequently engaged with Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” regarding the link between the frontier and individualism, for it allegorized several of the fundamental myths of American politics, such as the cultural memory of the US Civil War and the anxieties surrounding masculine individualism during the rise of industrial – and, later, post-industrial – society. Arguing that the genre is fundamentally about the politics of individual freedom, Mexal examines Western novels stretching across the century, from Zane Grey’s pulps to Cormac McCarthy’s neo-Westerns, and concludes that they are meditations on the fraught history of liberalism in America.