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Writer in Motion: The Major Fiction of Stephen Crane:
Collected Critical Essays by Donald Pizer (review)

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REVIEWS

Writer in Motion: The Major Fiction of Stephen Crane: Collected Critical Essays, by Donald Pizer. New York: AMS Press, 2013. xiv + 153 pp.
Cloth, \$76.50.

Over the years a number of scholars have attempted to find a common theme or stylistic approach running throughout Crane's work. He has variously been called, for example, a realist, a naturalist, an impressionist, and a pre-modernist. A number of these categorizations have led to excellent readings of Crane's fiction because he employed all of these perspectives, sometimes using several of them in the same work. Rather than using a single interpretative lens through which to view the fiction, however, Donald Pizer argues for its "fundamental instability." As a result, Crane is "a writer in motion," a depiction that captures the sense that Crane's understanding of the human condition grew as he matured as an artist. No single work, Pizer argues persuasively, captures Crane's worldview. In response to the conventional opinion that Crane replaced the environmental determinism of *Maggie* and *George's Mother* with other themes in his work as he matured, Pizer argues that "Crane from the beginning to the end of his career had grave doubts about the presence in human experience of either an overarching guiding spirit or individual volition. What differs in his work from its early to late phases is not his acceptance or rejection of this basic naturalistic premise but the sophistication and richness of his exploration of it. Put another way, I am claiming that naturalism in his hands is not a sledge hammer but a scalpel."

The book consists of thirteen essays, written between 1965 and 2009, which chart the illustrious career of one of the most important scholars in American literature. Lucidly written and cogently argued, they focus primarily on *Maggie*, *George's Mother*, and *The Red Badge of Courage*. For example, Pizer re-examines the evidence for Maggie's death (murder or suicide?) and on a broader level explores the contrast between the sprawl-

ing length of naturalistic novels in general (e.g., *An American Tragedy*) and the brevity of *Maggie* as a means of analyzing a distinctive feature of Crane's style, his penchant for compressing themes and literary devices as though he were writing a prose poem. In *George's Mother* Pizer explores the problem of survival in the journey from George Kelcey's home to the world (an issue shared with *Maggie* and *The Red Badge*). The discussion of *The Red Badge* deals with its text, theme, form, characterization, and historical background. Here one will find Pizer's response to the controversial 1982 publication of a version of *The Red Badge* based on an early draft of the novel.

As the titles of several of the essays make clear—e.g., “Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism: An Essay in Definition” and “Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism: An Approach through Form”—the book deals with larger scholarly issues as well. The longest essay, “Self-Censorship and the Editing of Naturalist Texts,” should be required reading for textual editors grappling with an author's intentions as they construct modern critical editions. (See especially the penultimate paragraph of the essay.) Besides *The Red Badge of Courage*, Pizer examines Frank Norris's *McTeague* and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* in his discussion of the question of authorial self-censorship. All three novels, as Pizer points out, have a similar context. They were radical for their time in terms of theme and content, and their authors, unknown at the time of publication, were more vulnerable than established, successful authors to editorial and economic pressures on any revisions. Because Pizer has edited all three novels, he is thoroughly aware of their textual history. Elsewhere in the book, there is insightful commentary on other writers and topics, e.g., James T. Farrell, John Dos Passos, Norman Mailer, and the role of Ripley Hitchcock as a literary editor.

Writer in Motion contains groundbreaking, seminal essays that have become standard readings of Crane's fiction. Clearly written and meticulously argued, this remarkable collection charts a legacy of five decades of incisive commentary that will continue to shape the way scholars view Crane and, more broadly, American naturalism.

—Paul Sorrentino, *Virginia Tech*