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Sacred Land: Sherwood Anderson, Midwestern Modernism, and the Sacramental Vision of Nature by Mark Buechsel (review)

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does help propel the book along and create suspense, but it can be confusing if the reader is not sure of where the story left off. Fortunately, the book is a quick read, so it will not take the reader long to catch up.

It should be noted that this is not the first time the tale of some of these ships has been told. In truth, there have been several books published about the individual ships lost in the storm over the past several decades. However, no book places these tragedies in the context of the storm as well as Schumaker's, which discusses not only the nature of the storm but also how so many vessels could be caught unawares. In an age before satellite weather data, Doppler radar, and GPS systems, vessel captains had to use barometers and their instincts to determine whether it was safe to sail.

In addition, he situates the 1913 "hurricane" in the context of other storms and the history of shipwrecks on the Great Lakes. He reminds us that the very first sailing vessel on the Upper Great Lakes, the Griffon, disappeared with its entire crew in Lake Michigan on her maiden voyage in 1679. It was the first of countless shipwrecks and disappearances on the Great Lakes that have become the stuff of legend. Schumaker paints this picture before he spins the tale of the "hurricane" of 1913 as a way to give us a perspective on just how savage and devastating it was to not only the sailors, but to their families and communities as well.

In the end, he reminds us that although these ships meant the loss of millions of dollars of cargo and vessels for the companies that owned them, the greatest toll was in human life. These human stories are the core of this book and remind us that even man's greatest creations cannot always withstand the wrath of mother nature.

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Mark Buechsel, *Sacred Land: Sherwood Anderson, Midwestern Modernism, and the Sacramental Vision of Nature*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2014. 268 pp. \$65.00.

Mark Buechsel begins his analysis of midwestern writers by establishing what he feels is an unexplored niche: "Many aspects of this discussion, such as the themes of Puritanism, sacramentalism, and nature vs. culture, have been touched upon in one way or another by various critics of Mid-

western authors. However, none have discussed in depth a Midwestern modernist tradition centered on the sacramentality of Midwestern nature.” Buechsel incorporates analyses of not only Sherwood Anderson, but also Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ruth Suckow, and Jane Smiley. Unfortunately, despite the book’s admirable intentions, it falls short of definitively adding to a larger discussion of midwestern modernism, midwestern spirituality, or midwestern literature, more broadly.

The strengths of this book are in its commitment to distinguishing the Midwest as a place of importance and spotlighting the region’s diverse cross-section of writers. Buechsel describes his own midwestern connections in the introduction to the book, noting his German roots but midwestern ancestry, an ancestry that he began exploring at the age of seventeen when he moved to the Midwest to live with family friends. His search for understanding is personal: “I discovered that many Midwestern writers had loved their region quite passionately and had felt a deep sense of loss at how the region had developed, that they had searched for reasons and answers as I had.” It is clear in reading this book that Buechsel admires these voices and their literary complexity, including his professed admiration for neglected writers like Ruth Suckow.

However, this is not a book for the average reader. Buechsel’s engagement with pastoralism, sacramentalism, theology, and other areas will not necessarily be clear to a lay reader. While he also quotes from several of the texts he references throughout, he does not always provide clear context for the novels, short stories, and poems, so a reader unfamiliar with the texts may have a difficult time following along.

For those who are more well versed in midwestern literary studies, there are other problems. Despite the reference to “Midwestern modernism” in the book’s title and numerous references to “Midwestern modernist writers” throughout, Buechsel never defines what he means by the term. Modernism is a fairly well established literary style and era, and yet Buechsel generalizes the ways that midwestern writers may incorporate modernist stylistic elements and still maintain a midwestern identity. Because scholars have long struggled to define modernism, it is curious that Buechsel provides little explication of the term’s meanings. Moreover, a lack of comprehensive bibliographic references occludes readers from further exploring the concept of modernism.

It is clear that Buechsel has a strong understanding of the work of Sherwood Anderson. Four of the book’s eight literature-focused chap-

ters center on various works by Anderson, and Buechsel's theories and observations hold up best in those sections. (His clearest, most well written chapter is on Anderson's novel *Dark Laughter*.) The other literary chapters vary in strength and often feel as if they were tangentially added to the premises established by Anderson's works. The secondary scholarship is not nearly as strong in these additional chapters, leaving notable gaps. For example, in a few places in the Cather chapter, Buechsel mentions sexuality and sexual imagery in connection with the author or her texts without mentioning the scholarly discourse surrounding Cather's own sexuality, an element that could have shaped her fictional portrayals of the issue.

While the importance of the midwestern land clearly comes through in *Sacred Land*, Buechsel's desire to stitch the authors in his collection together—emphasizing their similar uses of land and commitments to a sacramental vision—is ultimately the major weakness of this book. In his final chapter, Buechsel notes, "The object [of the book] is not necessarily to attain maximum historical accuracy but to gain a deeper understanding of what this region's history has meant to some of its spiritually sensitive daughters and sons, what lessons they may have drawn from that history, and how they have reconfigured the meaning of the Midwestern land in an effort to inspire the future historical course of the region." That lack of "maximum historical accuracy" shows, however, as he fails numerous times to establish the spirituality of these authors in any way other than the spiritual images that could be interpreted from their work. While an author's intentions or biographical details are not always the definitive element in understanding a literary text, they can often be revealing in understanding why a description was phrased a certain way. Buechsel wants to see deep meaning in every literary reference that can be interpreted biblically or spiritually, and at times, those examples often could be arbitrary as much as meaningful. For example, a footnote in the Fitzgerald chapter explaining the author's use of the name Henry Clay Marston in "The Swimmers," reads: "The middle name 'Clay' indicates the character's ability to perceive spiritual significance and vitality of the American soil, of American nature," with no seeming consideration that Henry Clay was one of the most prominent politicians of the nineteenth century and could have easily influenced Fitzgerald's choice of name.

Midwestern writers of the 1920s and 1930s are near and dear to my own heart and a focus of my own literary study. I was excited by the premise of Buechsel's book and sincerely wanted him to our understanding of the

1920s and 1930s Midwest. While his enthusiasm for and commitment to midwestern literature should be commended, his study generalizes too much and fails to truly articulate valuable differences and nuance that can illustrate the complexity of emotions and ideas that these writers bring to the region.

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J. L. Anderson, ed., *The Rural Midwest since World War II*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014. 335 pp. \$28.95, paper.

This outstanding collection of essays provides a comprehensive survey of an area that is often overlooked by scholars. The rural Midwest is a region of idealized innocence, where the sentimental notions of American culture have created a society that produces Superman and Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon. The mythology of the modern Midwest—that of a peaceful rural place where community values remain in the face of a materialistic and selfish world—stands in stark contrast to the images of excess that often define places such as Southern California and New York City. This bucolic world is mostly gone, if it ever existed at all, and the forces of globalization, deindustrialization, agricultural consolidation, and demographic change have transformed the most American of all regions.

This book, edited by J. L. Anderson, provides a much needed historical correction to the stereotypes of an agricultural utopia populated by white Americans driving pickup trucks. Today's rural Midwest is a highly diverse place, rapidly evolving due to immigration and economic modernization and increasingly dependent on the federal government. Most of the Midwest's population is urban, and less than ten percent of rural people live on farms. Most farm income does not even come from agriculture, but from off-farm employment.

The Rural Midwest since World War II contains a rich variety of essays exploring how this region has changed in the past seven decades. Useful chapters on ecology and environmental history open the book, followed by essays on manufacturing, government policy, women, children and ethnic and religious minorities. A brief introduction and a concluding overview put the region in its historical and sociological context. There is not a weak chapter in