

Mark Storey (2013) *Rural Fictions, Urban Realities: A Geography of Gilded Age America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 208pp., £47.99 (hardback), ISBN 9780199893188.

‘Oh! What a seen! What a seen! Back and forth, passin’ and repassin’, to and fro, parasols, and dogs, and wimmen, and men, and babies, and parasols, to and fro, to and fro. Why, is I stood there long so crazed would I have become at the seen that I should have felt that Josiah was a To and I wuz a Fro, or I wuz a parasol and he wuz a dog.’

Honest rustics bamboozled by bustle: Marietta Holley’s *Samantha at Saratoga* (1887), a bestseller not featured in Mark Storey’s ‘archaeological’ investigation into the traces of urban modernity to be found in countryside-set American fiction of the Gilded Age, exemplifies the rigid, opposition-seeking tendency of the geographical imagination that *Rural Fictions, Urban Realities* wants to challenge. Samantha and her husband Josiah, corn-fed natives of Jonesville, NY, react antithetically to the perceptual and ethical challenges posed by a trip to Saratoga Springs, the United States’s best-known spa and a byword for fashionable (that is, urbane) sociability: Samantha sticks to her guns (and her countrified vernacular); Josiah loses his head, going in for flirting and proprietary miracle cures. But Holley, projecting what Raymond Williams famously described as a ‘Romantic structure of feeling’, never loses sight of which spatial mood is which, structuring her narrative through a time-honoured clash between the intimacy and simple good nature fostered by the village and the discombobulating busy-ness, performative compulsion and hard-nosed *Zweckerationalität* of city living.

Storey is out to mulch such binaries. Building on the Lefebvrian insight that urban subjectivity is not spatially but socially, politically and economically determined, *Rural Fictions, Urban Realities* describes how rural-set fiction registers the countryside’s piecemeal, ambivalent and reversible reconfiguration by and in capitalist modernity. The thesis is persuasive and well sustained, and if it is a shame that attention to what fiction can tell us about historical change occasionally overpowers formal concerns, it is only because the book’s ideas in the latter area are strong too - and appealingly paradoxical. Storey wants to recover rural literature as a distinct category of enquiry, fleshing out its relationship to more customary generic banners like regionalism, realism and naturalism, while at the same time picking at some of the assumptions of traditional genre theory. ‘Rural fiction’ – the monograph takes in work by canonical figures (Bret Harte, William Dean Howells), critically fashionable novelists (Sarah Orne Jewett and Paul Laurence Dunbar) and virtually unread writers (Maurice Thompson, Alice Brown) – describes an impossibly broad and syncretic range of texts and concerns, and this is rather Storey’s point. Genres speak eloquently in narratives, but too polyphonically – too interestingly – for the texts that result to be coherently parceled. As Storey puts it: ‘If anything as circumscribed as a genre of rural fiction does emerge in this book, it is to illustrate that it serves as an exemplary site for the dismantling of genres themselves’.

The monograph is structured thematically. Each of the first four chapters focusses on a different ‘synechdochal counterpart’ to a key process or discourse of modernization in Gilded Age America, with Storey ever alert to how narratives about the countryside’s absorption of technological, spectacular, scientific and legal novelty undermine tendentious and unilinear ideas of progress or despoliation. The first chapter, on the train journeys that regularly bookend American fictions of the late nineteenth century, covers familiar theoretical ground, drawing on seminal work by Wolfgang Schivelbusch and Michel de Certeau about how transport technologies alter both

landscapes and perceiving subjects' apprehension of those landscapes. Through readings of train-travel passages from Howells' first novel *Their Wedding Journey* (1871) and 'Up the Cooly', a story from Harlan Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), Storey considers the train as a primary metaphor for urban-rural capital flows. He also shows how, viewed at speed and through the pictorializing medium of the carriage window, the countryside takes on new appearances, with the conversion of both known and novel sights into 'scenes' (or 'seens', as Holley's Samantha would have it) variously facilitating and threatening to scupper realistic and romantic modes of narration. Finally, attention to Jewett's 'Going to Shrewsbury' (1889), about an old woman taking the train for the first time, prompts (again not strikingly new) reflections on 'railway time' and its part in the standardization of temporal experience and the development of an American national consciousness.

Subsequent chapters on the travelling circus, the country doctor and lynching bring Storey's careful analysis to bear on less well-trodden territory. Readings of stories in which the circus irrupts upon the rhythms of country life (texts discussed include Booth Tarkington's first novel *The Gentleman from Indiana* (1899)) highlight how mass entertainment employed distinctly modern rational-commercial techniques to tap into ideals of 'romantic freedom and carnivalesque excess'. In a fascinating, Foucauldian discussion of medical science in the sticks, country doctors – the bearers of an 'urban-centered, and therefore urban-legitimated' professional discourse – are posited as disturbers of the generic peace in rural fictions. Most original of all, perhaps, is Storey's chapter on lynch mobs, in which he juxtaposes fictional accounts of popular justice with legal literature to 'illuminate the fractious development, centralization, and implementation' of modern American criminal law.

A coda on utopian fictions of the 1880s and 1890s brings the book to a close – and us back to Samantha and Josiah at the spa. Storey observes that many Gilded Age writers themselves sought a way round the rural-urban binary, with the title of Henry Olerich's *A Cityless and Countryless World* (1893) encapsulating the impulse. He invokes Ebenezer Howard's garden city movement and the architectural visions of Frank Lloyd Wright as objective correlatives of such utopian trends in fiction. But both Howard and Wright feel a little out of place in a conversation about Gilded Age America, even if their work can usefully be conceived of as a reaction to the era's urbanizing excesses. Research into resort culture, developed precisely to cater to elite demand for the kind of heterogeneous spatial forms Storey has in mind, might conceivably have been a better bet. Holley's Samantha fails to appreciate the compromise, but the watering place, written about compulsively in the postbellum United States, is perhaps the best example the nineteenth century has to offer of a real-life *urbs in rure*.

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