

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

**Laurie McRae Andrew (2022) *The Geographies of David Foster Wallace's Novels: Spatial History and Literary Practice*, 248 pp., £85.00 ISBN (Hardback): 978-1474497541**

In the period since #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, the work of American writer David Foster Wallace (1962-2008) has aged decidedly badly. Scholarship on the author of *Infinite Jest* (1996) and *The Pale King* (2011) expanded exponentially after his death, but recent times have seen Wallace Studies slow considerably. The publication of Laurie McRae Andrew's *The Geographies of David Foster Wallace's Novels: Spatial History and Literary Practice* (2023) situates Wallace's writing within an existing tradition of literary geography, as opposed to extant readings of Wallace as a writer primarily concerned with interiority. As well as this, McRae Andrew also attempts to address the problematic nature of much of Wallace's missteps concerning gender and race.

And the good news is that for the most part McRae Andrew succeeds quite spectacularly. Several of literature's finest scholars of space and place are engaged with here: Lefebvre and de Certeau being perhaps the most prominent examples. And it is obvious that the author is well versed in Wallace Studies, most notably the work of Herring and Lattanzi, the latter of which is perhaps the preeminent geographer of Wallace's fictional Boston in *Jest*. McRae Andrew's engagement with his sources is thoroughgoing and respectful, while at the same time, he never shies away from taking his own intellectual path, always a sign of good scholarship. This work draws the occasional long academic bow, as PhD research (which it was based upon) is sometimes wont to do, but far more significant is the book's contribution to Wallace studies in general, and the field of literary geography more specifically. And the merging of the two is without doubt an exciting development.

By concentrating only on Wallace's long form work, McRae Andrew is able to hone the thesis of this book to a cogent and thoroughly engaging argument, namely one that proves reasonably convincingly that Wallace was as interested in place as any author. Moreover, it is suggested, Wallace engaged with place as a direct means by which he could invigorate and extend his storytelling practice and the art of writing itself. This is where *The Geographies of David Foster Wallace's Novels: Spatial History and Literary Practice* really comes into its own: arguing for a continued reading of Wallace as an author deeply concerned with place and how its

presence in his writing is more than just perfunctory, and is – at least in some instances – the very engine that drives Wallace’s practice of writing. This is an interesting and rich new vein of enquiry in Wallace Studies, and as such, it must be stated that McRae Andrew’s work here has gone some way towards invigorating the field.

The book makes several cogent and convincing arguments to bear out its central thesis, notably in the chapters concerning *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*:

*Jest*’s approach to the metropolis had been underpinned by a faith in the novel as cure as well as diagnosis; the language and form of fiction itself had seemed to present a means through which literary practice might intervene in the social atomisation of urban America... in *Pale King*, Wallace’s practice of writing postindustrial landscapes had to find a way to negotiate its own imbrication within the sociospatial conditions it attempted to describe (177).

While much scholarly work exists concerning Wallace’s writing as a kind of cure, this is the first time, at least to my knowledge, and certainly in book form, that this analysis has been so closely linked in such a major way to the interrogation of place.

Wallace’s debut novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987) receives only one chapter: ‘This strange, occluded place’: regional geography, the Midwest and *The Broom of the System*. This is opposed to *Jest* and *King*’s two chapters each. Wallace himself derided *Broom* as akin to something that had been written by an extremely smart 14-year-old, and some will wonder why it even warrants a chapter in a text such as this. I tend to think Wallace was being overmodest, however, and the novel’s examination sets the tone well for an argument about the spatiality of Wallace’s oeuvre as a whole that might have been less convincing had it focused only on his more celebrated later works.

This represents an advancement of place-focused understanding of Wallace’s work right from the beginnings of his writing career. For example:

I am less interested than previous Wallace critics in testing the sincerity and authenticity of his regional affiliation to the Midwest. Instead, I want to shift attention towards what the category allows us to see of the novel’s intersections with material and imaginative processes of regionalisation (31).

The author shows superlative skill in being able to hone the research he undertook at the Harry Ransom Centre at the University of Texas, Austin (where Wallace’s papers are held). His research hardly ever fails to illuminate and expand the arguments he is making. He dives relentlessly into the minutia of Wallace’s notes and early drafts to elucidate several elements of Wallace’s practice, giving his conclusions the weight and benefit of rigorous research. A good example of this is the examination of various changes to Wallace’s many drafts of *The Pale King*, and how certain chapters moved to different locations throughout the drafting process.

The only serious issue with the book, for me, is that – while examining Wallace’s gendering and racializing of space – McRae Andrew is unable to provide the reader with any substantive suggestions as to how, in 2023, we might parse this. This may well be an impossible ask, and perhaps it’s enough to say – at least at this stage – that academic examination is an important first step. Then again, perhaps it is not.

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