

Carme Manuel Cuenca. *La literatura de Estados Unidos desde sus orígenes hasta la Primera Guerra Mundial.* Madrid: Editorial Síntesis, 2007. 394 p. ISBN: 84-9756-413-8. Paperback. 23.5 euros.

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During the last Conference of the Spanish Association of American Studies (SAAS), so brilliantly held at the University of Barcelona in April 2009, there was a crowded act in which the Javier Coy Series on U. S. Studies proudly presented its 60th volume, written by former SAAS President Constante González Groba. Any Spanish scholar working in the field of U. S. Studies nowadays should be fully aware of the worth of the Javier Coy Series, whose director is Professor Carme Manuel Cuenca, from the University of Valencia. Over the last decade or so, she has emerged as one of the most respected experts in the field not only nationally, but also internationally. Apart from running the Javier Coy Series, this tireless scholar has also found time to write a new history of U. S. literature from Puritan times to the beginning of the First World War.

It was a much-needed publication since, for decades, Spain lacked a solid volume of this kind, given that similar efforts in the past never seemed to achieve their goal. Luckily, in recent years the situation has greatly improved, as the field of U. S. Studies vastly expanded and consolidated in Spanish academia. In 1991, one of the most respected publishing houses in the country, Editorial Cátedra, put forth *Historia de la literatura norteamericana*, a translation of the massive *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*, which the late Emory Elliott edited in 1988 in an attempt both to update and to contest Robert E. Spiller's canonical *Literary History of the United States*, first published four decades earlier after the Second World War. Similarly, the Spanish branch of Cambridge University Press put out in 1998 *Literatura norteamericana*, a translation of Peter Conn's *Literature in America. An Illustrated History*, a rather general overview originally published in 1989. In 2001 Ediciones Almar published *Historia crítica de la novela norteamericana*, a collective work edited by José Antonio Gurpegui Palacios, a major effort which only dealt with one literary genre, as the title clearly indicates. More recently, in 2003, a pioneering figure in the study of U. S.

literature in Spain, Félix Martín, published in another major national publishing firm, Alianza Editorial, a brief but clarifying chronological overview with the title *Literatura de los Estados Unidos. Una lectura crítica*.

Now, in the 'Historia de la literatura universal' Series, in which Editorial Síntesis is publishing in Spanish histories of French, German, or Italian literature, among others, Carme Manuel Cuenca offers a rewriting of the early literary history of the United States which compares with the best available internationally. The work, which reveals a solid command of such a wide subject, is written in an elegant and precise style that makes it suitable not only for both students and professors, but also for a general readership. Moreover, the clarity and precision of ideas is equally manifest in the structure of the book, which is divided into four chapters in chronological order. Chapter 1, "La literatura colonial (1607-1700): los orígenes" is the shortest one (pages 7-45), and offers a brief but sound approach to literary life in the different English colonies, as well as an explanation of Puritan dogma which should be specially helpful for students. Chapter 2, entitled "La literatura colonial (1700-1810): la Revolución Americana y los inicios de una literatura nacional" (pages 47-115), deals with the different literary manifestations of the eighteenth century, before and after the thirteen colonies declared their independence from Great Britain. Chapter 3, "La literatura del siglo XIX anterior a la Guerra Civil", is the longest of the four (pages 117-247), and explores in depth the brilliance of antebellum letters, paying due attention not only to canonical authors of 'the American Renaissance', but also to many other writers of those years. Lastly, chapter 4, "La literatura estadounidense en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX" (pages 249-353), focuses on the innumerable paths that opened for literature in the decades after the Civil War, with Realism and Naturalism as the two leading trends, alongside with alternative ones like distinctive regional writing, or rich ethnic traditions.

Throughout the book, Manuel Cuenca proves that she is perfectly acquainted with all the 'dead white males' who, for decades, defined the canon of U. S. literature. Her critical readings of Hawthorne, Whitman, Twain, James, or Poe can be considered exemplary for their critical insight and their conciseness. While the author of "The Raven" receives what is arguably the most detailed scrutiny, probably many readers will want to know more about the deep philosophical enigmas of *Moby Dick*. But this literary history goes well beyond the canon, since it expands the notion of what is U. S. literature by paying great attention to many voices which are practically unknown to most Spanish readers. As she has amply demonstrated over the years in her many publications, Carme Manuel Cuenca is very much attuned to the new paradigms in the field proposed by critics like Elizabeth Ammons or Paul Lauter and, as a result, she has written a truly multicultural literary history of the United States. Consequently, in this scholarly work for the new millenium many women and ethnic minorities are generously represented--invisible and silenced no more after a prolonged critical

neglect. Specially brilliant in this regard are sections like the one on the socio-cultural phenomenon of 'the New Woman', or the one on the Chinese-American author Sui Sin Far. In addition, the rich and diverse Native American literary traditions are also scrutinized in depth in several chapters of the book, tracing their evolution over the years; as a result, they are rightfully incorporated into the U. S. literary canon, something unimaginable not so long ago, as Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury's *From Puritanism to Postmodernism. A History of American Literature* clearly demonstrates.

Since she has published widely on African-American literature, the author offers many critical insights when dealing with this area of study, and her analyses on the slave narrative or on abolitionist writing attest to it. As an expert who has also done much research on Southern literature, her approaches to forgotten figures like Thomas Nelson Page and, especially, George Washington Cable stand out as well. Without a doubt, one of the many rewarding aspects of this revisionary literary history is how it recovers a long tradition of dramatic activity which should finally convince readers that drama in the United States did not start at the beginning of the twentieth century with Eugene O'Neill; the pages devoted to highlight the cultural significance of a peculiar historical figure like P. T. Barnum are quite revealing and close to the field of Cultural Studies.

Although the book always shows a great degree of critical balance and objectivity, the author does incorporate a few thought-provoking subjective comments, as when she vindicates the literary value of Upton Sinclair and his novel *The Jungle*, or when she questions the ideological subtext of Rebecca Harding Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills*. Three general features of *La literatura de Estados Unidos desde sus orígenes hasta la Primera Guerra Mundial* deserve special praise as well. First, the frequent and revealing interdisciplinary references to cultural manifestations like film, painting, or photography; second, the connections established both with British literature of the period and—more abundantly—with twentieth-century U. S. literature, all of which suggest insightful intertextual links; third, the adequate use of critical sources, which never get in the way, but always clarify or expand a major point: along with founding fathers like Parrington, Matthiessen, Fielder, Chase, Lewis, or Ziff, there are also references to most of the critics and theorists who have reshaped the understanding of U. S. literature over the last thirty years—Ammons, Baker, Elliott, Fishkin, Gates, Krupat, Lott, Pease, or Tompkins, among others. There is even room for the original views of an erudite like Jorge Luis Borges in order to enrich this critical dialogue.

As it is still the norm in most Spanish publishing, the book lacks a final name index which might have proved specially useful in such a detailed and comprehensive work. Perhaps, a brief introduction and conclusion would have provided readers with a few more pages of critical insight. However, the book

does include at the end a brief but lucid glossary of terms, an excellent chronology from 1607 to 1914 which places texts in their historical, social and cultural context, and a highly selected and updated bibliography.

In conclusion, with a landmark publication like *La literatura de Estados Unidos desde sus orígenes hasta la Primera Guerra Mundial*, Carme Manuel Cuenca not only consolidates her status as a leading scholar of U. S. literature, but she also provides readers with the standard academic work for years to come. Given that, unfortunately, those who cannot read Spanish will not have a chance to enjoy this work, perhaps thinking about a possible translation might be in order. To conclude, one can only hope that the second volume of this new literary history of the United States is published in the near future, and that its author somehow manages to reach the high mark set here so brilliantly.

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