

of data and information about each school is impressive and certainly represents many hours of research and data collection. This book adds to the list of books that tell the story of rural schools in Iowa.

*Old-Fashioned Modernism: Rural Masculinity and Midwestern Literature*, by Andy Oler. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019. xi, 234 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

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In *Old-Fashioned Modernism*, Andy Oler makes an argument considerably broader than his subtitle suggests. While the subject of his book is the depiction of masculinity in a range of (mostly) twentieth-century novels from the official twelve-state census district of the Middle West, his conclusions range beyond fiction into matters of contemporary and historical regional identity. At its heart this is a consideration of how midwestern literature “counters the simple binary of progressive urbanity and retrograde rurality . . . [by] imagining the Midwest as a comparatively inclusive middle ground that joins past and future” (6). Oler shows the reader how this was done by examining a series of twentieth-century novels “from the Great Lakes to the Great Plains” (6).

His study begins at the historical moment when American masculinity itself was in transition. The nineteenth century had traditionally measured manhood in terms of character and self-control. By the early twentieth century, however, this model was decidedly old-fashioned. In fiction and in fact, it was being displaced by a newer, personality-based male ideal that defined success in terms of wealth and corporate expansion (47). At this “disorderly modern moment” (14), Oler suggests, midwestern writers forthrightly depicted the challenges faced by both men and women responding to a changing society.

The works he analyzes foreground the experiences of men. *Old-Fashioned Modernism* begins with Sherwood Anderson's 1920 *Poor White*, then moves to Dawn Powell's *The Story of a Country Boy* and Lorine Nie-decker's multimedia poem *Next Year or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous* (both 1935). The Great Plains are represented by William Cunningham's *The Green Corn Rebellion* (1935) and *The Home Place* by Wright Morris (1948). *Not Without Laughter* (1930), Langston Hughes's semi-autobiographical novel, extends the argument beyond the rural and small town Midwest to include urban Chicago. That novel offers a view of black

masculinity that “challenges the assumed spaces and narratives of African American modernity” (163). In a concluding chapter Oler extends his discussion to the post-industrial Midwest, in brief explorations of J. Ryan Stradal’s *Kitchens of the Great Midwest* (2015) and Bonnie Jo Campbell’s short story, “Boar Taint” (2009).

These works, Oler claims, are simultaneously old-fashioned and modernist. Stylistically the texts are realistic or naturalistic (with the exception of Niedecker’s collage-poem), but they are also replete with modernist indeterminacy and anxiety. The writers deploy techniques like fragmentation to convey the “inchoate lack of order [that] is a key feature of modern life” (24). Collectively, he concludes, they try to address that lack of order by strategies of “coping, managing, negotiating” (30) rather than radical reconfiguration. The works do not offer resolution of the difficulties they describe. The authors and their protagonists seek—and sometimes occupy—an uncertain middle ground between nostalgic ruralism and dismissive urbanism. Oler sees this trait as regionally characteristic. “Much Midwestern cultural production,” he observes, “is preoccupied with questions of middleness” (30).

Although a study of six novels and a poem is not sufficient to demonstrate this important point, *Old-Fashioned Modernism* does offer some promising examples. A segment on the production of “race records” in small midwestern towns, inserted somewhat randomly into the chapter on *Not Without Laughter*, discusses the disparity between the literary portrayal of jazz as an exclusively urban phenomenon and the reality of relentless band travel to small-town venues and recording studios throughout the region. Actual historical complexity belies the superficial division between rural and urban that condemned the Midwest to increasing national irrelevance in the late twentieth century. Consideration of a 1938 post office mural, *Cooperative Planning and Development of Wauseon* (Ohio) alongside Anderson’s *Poor White* is another method Oler employs to extend his evidence beyond literary works. These instances of interdisciplinary analysis suggest the potential richness of a more sustained demonstration of his concluding claim: “Despite a national push for centralization, profit and efficiency, people and communities in the Midwest promote local and regional outcomes—allowing for growth and modernization, but moderating those through experience, tradition, and local needs” (168). Even readers unintrigued by Oler’s topic of early-twentieth-century masculinity in literature will find much worth pondering in his suggestive connections to expansive themes of middle western regional identity.

*America Ascendant: The Rise of American Exceptionalism*, by Dennis M. Spragg. Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2019. xxi, 409 pp. Notes, images, bibliography, index. \$34.95, hardcover.

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According to this book's back cover, broadcasting professional and media researcher Dennis Spragg aims to show how the Second World War's media-government alliance established the case for American exceptionalism. It would be easy to imagine this book as a contribution to the field by focusing on that alliance, in line with Wendy Wall's excellent *Inventing the "American Way": The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (2008).

That was not the book that was written. Spragg does not engage Wall or other historians who have worked on state-media relations at all. Instead, the book traces the background and success of FDR's supposed goal of doing away with "expansionism as a national imperative and replacing it with interventionism" as proof of American exceptionalism (xiii). It would be fine to write a book trying to argue for American exceptionalism. The author of such a book would have to be clear-eyed when addressing idealists' arguments detailing failings to live up to U.S. rhetoric and realists' points on how the U.S. behaves like other great powers. A book on exceptionalism ought therefore to have an international perspective. Calling one nation exceptional is inherently a relativistic claim, as it speaks to some unexceptional average that defines most nations.

Spragg did none of those things. The text's normative objective led to an unfocused, rambling book. There is a chapter centered on Alexander Hamilton. The Second World War makes up only a minority of the book. The book ends with points on the problems that the U.S. faced in the 2010s, tied to the "largely liberal news media [being] aligned with one political party and, increasingly, the leftist wing of that party" (334). Spragg is more interested in telling the reader America is exceptional rather than providing evidence of something, in fact, exceptional.

Spragg sets up strawmen to knock down. Much of the United States's difficulty with Latin America is because Latin Americans "resented" America's "cultural, economic, and political" achievements (33). He brushes aside one of the most famous U.S. imperial adventures abroad, arguing that "the United States did more in fifty years to aid Philippine development than Spain did in five hundred years" (37).