

The 2012 ASN Book Prize

Presentation by Professor Philip John Davies, President, European Association for American Studies, Izmir, March 29, 2012

Twenty-six entries were submitted for the American Studies Network Prize, demonstrating an extraordinary depth of talent across EAAS member associations. With great difficulty the judges established a long list of 9, then a short list of four.

Focusing on American literature, social history, and politics in the transnational context, Peter Swirski's *American Utopia And Social Engineering In Literature, Social Thought, And Political History* (Routledge, NY-London, 2011) analyses, in a witty, provocative, and accessible style, post-WW2 American socio-political history in relation to fiction of the period. Drawing on a rich blend of literary analysis, socio-political critique, and evolutionary biology, Swirski examines the hopes, horrors, and illusions of utopian social engineering through the lens of twentieth-century American fiction. In this remarkable example of interdisciplinary research, chapters include analyses of aspects of evolution and behavioural psychology, medicine and pharmacology, voting systems, parliamentary and referenda procedures, altruism, multi-level selection, chip-implant technology, and mirror neurons, yet are balanced by archival research that enriches the literary and historical context of the study. The book constitutes a surprisingly original contribution to American Studies.

In *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (Princeton UP, Princeton-Oxford, 2011) Paul Giles provides a new and original account of American literary history

from the colonial period to the present. He considers literary history as an institution established at a particular historical moment which strove to subject the entire American literary production to a nationalist-exceptionalist agenda. Giles engages in revisionary work on two planes. Firstly, he pinpoints the moments when this nationalist institution was put on the map (in the time after the Civil War) and when it started to erode (in the early days of the Reagan Presidency). Secondly, he shows that the literary practitioners in the periods before and after the nationalist phase situated themselves in trans-national contexts. To remap the ground for American literary history, Giles brings insights from cultural geography, political history, and the history of technology and the media. But what is most impressive is what he culls out of the writers themselves. From Cotton Mather to William Gibson via Emerson, Longfellow, Howells, Stein, Stevens, and Foster Wallace, he succeeds in bringing to light aspects of these writers which one had never seen before. Elegantly written and exemplifying a very high standard in contemporary literary criticism, Giles' book is a major contribution to the ongoing theoretical debates concerning cultural space.

Stephen Tuck also sweeps through time and space in a masterly way in *We Ain't What We Ought To Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama* (Belknap/Harvard UP, Cambridge, MA-London, 2010). The civil war is underway as the book opens. Ellen, a Georgia slave, has taken to using her mistress's toiletries, and continues in spite of the beatings meted out by her owner. Robert Smalls, a slave assistant to captain of a cotton steamer, rose early one May morning, donned the captain's clothes, and sailed the ship through the Confederate checkpoints in Charleston Harbour to join the Union navy. 'I don't know exactly what you are now,' said the Northern captain, 'but you're certainly not slaves...'. Smalls went on to meet

President Lincoln, to win a congressional seat, to be betrayed by Reconstruction and to be in the minority opposing a disenfranchising constitution at the 1895 South Carolina constitutional convention. Questions remain as the book ends. Obama warns that 'It's important that stories like mine aren't used to say everything is OK for blacks.' Tuck covers magnificently one hundred and fifty years of American history, building the landscape of critical political and social history on a densely structured foundation of evidence from the lives of many individuals in a volume that will reward richly its every reader.

But the prize this year goes to *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the 9/11 Novel* (Winter, Heidelberg, 2011), in which Birgit Däwes investigates how novelists over the past decade have tried to come to terms with an event that has impacted the public consciousness of the West in an unprecedented way. She welcomes the fact that her material has become superabundant and very diverse, and that our attention may have become dulled by overexposure, because they have induced novelists to become more reflective, nuanced, and creative in their treatments. In her book, Birgit Däwes analyses dozens of novels employing a variety of critical approaches and develops a comprehensive typology of this new subgenre of fiction – a typology which is oriented at the different intellectual, epistemological, and aesthetic functions performed by these works. We are bound to admire the fresh, lively, inquiring spirit with which she conducts her investigation. Not driven by a particular agenda, she rather desires to give the different fictional and critical approaches their full sway, probably in the understanding that the culture at large – in its effort to grapple with 9/11 – will profit from such plenitude and diversity. The book gives the reader a sense of participating in a comprehensive intellectual

and cultural debate. In mapping the field of Ground Zero Fiction, Birgit Däwes has conducted pioneer scholarly work that will help to guide scholars and readers for years to come. But she has also written an engaging and intellectually generous book that draws our attention to the powerful resources provided by literature and criticism encouraging us to gain a more balanced view of how our culture comes to terms with such a momentous event as 9/11.

Also submitted were:

Sonia Baelo-Allue, *Brett Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing between high and low culture* (Continuum)

Josep M. Armengol, *Richard Ford and the Fiction of Masculinities* (Peter Lang)

Clive Bush, *The Century's Midnight: Dissenting European and American writers in the era of the Second World War* (Peter Lang)

Madeleine Danova, *The Jamesiad: The postmodern lives of Henry James* (Polis)

Emma Dominguez-Rue, *Of Lovely Tyrants and Invisible Women: Invalidism as metaphor in the fiction of Ellen Glasgow* (Logos)

Dominika Ferens, *Ways of Knowing Small Places: Intersections of American literature and ethnography since the 1960s* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wroclawskiego)

Craig Fox, *Everyday Klansfolk: White protestant life and the KKK in 1920s Michigan* (Michigan State UP)

Jeffrey Geiger, *American Documentary Film: Projecting the nation* (Edinburgh UP)

Jeffrey Herlihy, *In Paris or Paname: Hemingway's expatriate nationalism* (Rodopi)

Karin Hoepker, *No Maps for These Territories: Cities, spaces and archaeologies of the future in William Gibson* (Rodolpi)

Mischa Honeck, *We Are the Revolutionists: German-speaking immigrants and American abolitionists after 1848* (University of Georgia Press)

Ulla Kriebenberg, *The Transatlantic Dialogue on Higher Educations: An analysis of cultural narratives* (Logos)

Corina Maria Marculescu, *The American Cinematic Culture: Consumerism, social control, and individual freedoms* (editura universitatii din bucuresti)

Mariusz Marsalski, *Metaphysical Perspective in the Drama of Sam Shepard, David Rabe and David Mamet* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wroclawskiego)

Robert Mason, *The Republican Party and American Politics from Hoover to Reagan* (Cambridge UP)

Andrea Mehrlander, *The Germans of Charleston, Richmond and New Orleans During the Civil War Period, 1850-1870: A study and research compendium* (De Gruyter)

Michael O'Brien, *Mrs Adams Winter: A journey in the last days of Napoleon* (Picador)

Alan Rice, *Creating Memorials, Building Identities: The politics of memory in the Black Atlantic* (Liverpool UP)

Justine Tally, *Toni Morrison's Beloved* (Routledge)

Clive Webb, *Rabble Rousers: The American far right in the Civil Rights era* (University of Georgia Press)

Johannes Voelz, *Transcendental Resistance: The new Americanists and Emerson's challenge* (Dartmouth College Press)

Nicole Waller, *American Encounters with Islam in the Atlantic World* (Winter)