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Wolves and the Wolf Myth in American Literature

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Recommended Citation

Erdheim, Cara, "Wolves and the Wolf Myth in American Literature" (2010). *English Faculty Publications*. Paper 11.
http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/eng_fac/11

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Gerhardt and *The Titan* (1928)—the novels sold well. Nazism suppressed Dreiser and others, but a revival of his works occurred during the 1950s and 60s when movie versions of *An American Tragedy* and *Sister Carrie* contributed to the author's popularity. In "Same or Other," Bardeleben explores in depth both the selection of Anna Nussbaum as the translator of *Sister Carrie* and the problems she had translating the novel.

The final three essays in Part IV focus on the single work that marks Bardeleben's greatest contribution to Dreiser studies, her research into, her analysis of, and her editing of *A Traveler at Forty*. In "From Travel Guide to Autobiography" (2000), Bardeleben develops her argument that *A Traveler at Forty*, as originally intended, served as an autobiographical travel narrative, not merely as a travel guide. And the final two essays of the collection, the textual and historical commentaries, from the Dreiser Edition of *A Traveler at Forty*, reveal the 1913 book to be a mere selection from the full manuscript, a selection that avoided personal reflections, sociological analysis, and real names of people and places. In her restoration of this autobiographical travel chronicle, Bardeleben brings together an expertise that she developed over a forty-year engagement with Dreiser. A valuable collection, *Engaging Dreiser* represents Dreiser as an innovative travel writer, assessing not only how he experienced Europe but also how Europeans have encountered him.

—Roark Mulligan, *Christopher Newport University*

Wolves and the Wolf Myth in American Literature, by S. K. Robisch.
Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 2009. 494 pp.
Cloth, \$49.95.

S. K. Robisch maps out an American literary landscape that both informs and is informed by various myths surrounding wolves in western culture. Throughout the book, Robisch sets out to demythologize the wolf figure, which he claims American authors and cultural critics have sought either to romanticize or to demonize. *Wolves and the Wolf Myth in American Literature* does a fine job of identifying its ecocritical methodology from the start: careful to set himself apart from those who view nature with a capital N through a privileged pastoral lens, Robisch claims that environmental critics should evaluate literature based upon how it confronts, rather than escapes from, difficult issues. Indeed, this book doesn't run away from the wolf, but rather confronts as a species through which we can deepen our understanding of American literature and culture. At a time

when many ecocritics challenge the reality of wilderness by viewing it instead as a social construct, I find Robisch's emphasis on the materiality of nature and nonhuman life rather refreshing.

This book's ecocritical contribution to literary naturalism interests me because of my own efforts to provide green readings of American naturalist writings by Dreiser, Norris, Sinclair, and others. In multiple places, Robisch rightly notes that scholars of London's wolf stories have focused on the politics of race, gender, and class at the expense of biological and ecological realities surrounding wolves as a species. At the same time, Robisch cautions us against the potential pitfall of resorting to nature/culture dualisms (that is, failing to recognize how the two are deeply intertwined) when he says, "the term *culture* has been invested with almost as many meanings as its frequent antonym, *nature*." Through carefully crafted close readings of *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, Robisch shows that readers and critics can locate culture not only in the realm of human language and power struggles, but also within the nonhuman world of non-verbal communication between wolves. In this way, the book provides its most persuasive ecocritical perspective on London's literary works.

Robisch's reading of Jack London's wolf stories doesn't reach its full potential, however, because he fails to consider the complexities of American naturalism, nor does he account for its full historiography. Traditional critics like Charles C. Walcutt have read naturalist novels as socially deterministic, for sure, but more recent scholars such as Jennifer L. Fleissner have illustrated the strong feminist sensibilities present within Wharton's writings, for instance, or throughout Petry's prose. By situating London's wolf stories within a larger context of naturalist narratives that glorify "the rough-and-tumble man of aptitude and strength in the face of a cruel environment," Robisch resorts to old readings of London rather than contributing to a growing field of invigorating scholarship on American literary naturalism.

The book's strongest sections, I think, come through its contributions to ecofeminism. Though he acknowledges the risks of associating women with nature or the land and men with culture or civilization, Robisch convincingly claims that ecofeminists such as Carolyn Merchant can help readers to reevaluate animal narratives or female-authored wolf stories. By giving thorough attention to Lois Crisler's *Arctic Wild* and Renée Askins's *Shadow Mountain*, two memoirs written by women about wolves and wilderness, Robisch affirms that "the wolf book is not merely the province of adventurous and atavistic men." Moreover, I find ecofeminist parallels between "wolf-eradication programs," which Robisch's book contextualizes

clearly in relation to United States history, and “sexism” or “hypermasculinism” incredibly compelling. S. K. Robisch’s work wonderfully confronts wolves in American literature and culture as an ecological reality from which human readers, scholars, and critics simply cannot escape.

—Cara Elana Erdheim, *Sacred Heart University*

Fateful Beauty: Aesthetic Environments, Juvenile Development, and Literature, 1860–1960, by Douglas Mao. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008. 319pp. Paper, \$27.95.

As Douglas Mao points out in his fascinating study, *Fateful Beauty*, aesthetics and literary naturalism are not concepts scholars ordinarily link together. In fact, naturalism would seem to focus most often on places notable for the absence of aesthetic beauty. Positing his book as a significant departure from this perception, Mao establishes a persuasive argument that proponents of these two distinct ideas have a common ground in their shared interest in the role of environment as a force responsible for shaping individuals. In focusing his attention on the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, he is able to show how anxiety about childhood development led to an increased consideration of the concept of environment and how even the smallest experience could “exert incalculable influence” on a developing individual. This confluence of environment and experience allowed a wide array of critics, theorists, and other authors to consider the potential role of beauty as a source of concern for children in their formative years and beyond.

In his opening chapter, Mao underscores the nineteenth-century belief that children were in need of constant protection to highlight the development of environment as an all-inclusive notion. From its earliest usage, environment entailed “a totality of influences” that shaped each individual. As such, “environment” moves beyond mere notions of a physical space: it stands as something that “migrated freely” and included the domestic space as much as it did the natural world outside of one’s door. Through this broad definition, prominent theorists began to examine the aesthetics of a child’s surroundings as one of the few aspects of life that remained static in an otherwise chaotic world. Amidst the anxious observation of even the minutest aspect of childhood development, these authors believed it was the “formative power of beautiful environments” that played a crucial, if “unperceived,” role in a child’s life.

While the book contains detailed examinations of a number of liter-

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