

BOOK REVIEWS

A Historical Guide to James Fenimore Cooper, edited by Leland S. Person.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 249 p. ISBN 978-0-19-517313-0.

So James Fenimore Cooper has finally been admitted to the Oxford club. *Oxford Historical Guides* is a series that offers an alternative to the famous Cambridge Companions to individual writers, with the ambition to be “an interdisciplinary, historically sensitive series” with a special focus on authors “with a strong sense of time, place, and history,” as we read on the back cover. After Hemingway, Whitman, Emerson, Hawthorne, Poe, Thoreau, Twain, Wharton, Hughes, Dickinson, Ellison, Fitzgerald, and Melville comes Cooper’s turn. This is a fair deal, as his cultural influence reaches further than even many readers familiar with Cooper are ready to imagine.

Leland S. Person, an author of several essays on Cooper (though his main field seems to be Hawthorne, Melville, and James) wrote the introduction. Wayne Franklin, one of the renowned Cooper scholars, contributed a biography. The body of the volume consists of essays by John McWilliams, J. Gerald Kennedy, Dana D. Nelson, Barbara Alice Mann, and the final, bibliographical essay is the work of Jeffrey Walker. Out of those, only McWilliams and Walker could be regarded as unquestionably Cooper scholars. Kennedy is mainly a Poe scholar, Mann a Native American history specialist, and Nelson is an expert in the field of race studies. All in all, Cooper scholars are a minority here. Let us see if it works for the better.

It is to be understood that the book is aimed at a wider audience than Cooper scholars and readers. This is also evident from the reduced number of citations and notes. In addition, books like this one serve to promote writers rather than to compromise them, even though the publishing house requires a balanced view. Person’s introduction does not do a disservice to Cooper, as it courageously addresses the progressive features of Cooper’s very prolific literary career, although at the same time he does not hide the off-putting, conservative facets of Cooper’s thought, which are hard to reconcile with the current discourse on democratic plurality, equality, gender, and race. In his opinion, it is sad that Cooper continues to disappear from academic syllabi, falling victim to “laudable efforts to expand the nineteenth-century American literary canon” (4). Let us hope that Cooper will at least survive in Europe, because Europe has always been responsive to the myth-making ability of America and its spirit of adventure, its ability to explore the extremes. Since the aim of the book is to bring Fenimore Cooper to wider audiences, we should examine the strategies the critics use to make Cooper modern and attractive—through gender, race, postcolonialist, and even transnationalist discourse.

Cooper is reread as a postcolonial writer, which may be surprising for those who labeled him as a critical exponent of American expansionism and of the march of civilization. Even more interesting is Person’s very poignant

argument that Cooper's work played an important role in the history of American criticism, in its efforts to overcome the British cultural hegemony. Person points out that at least "Leatherstocking Tales" certainly became a hallmark for American myth criticism, which was so prominent in the post-World War II decades and so instrumental in liberating American literature and American studies from their colonization by English literature" (7).

It is clear, however, that this merit can hardly save Cooper for 21st-century readers, something which Person apologetically admits, because the myth that Cooper embodied is now considered as "male-centered, racist, and imperialistic" (8), even though it does not mean that Cooper's writing is really of such a kind. Person praises especially the strong visual aspect of Cooper's writing, which is a good move because our culture has become increasingly image-oriented. Person argues that "Cooper had a brilliant, scenic imagination," and points to the criticism of the period that did not fail to notice and appreciate this quality as early as 1822. There can be no doubt that Cooper was able to create unforgettable scenes, which both have magic and are charged with symbolism.

Another important argument that can save Cooper for modern readers is his acute sense of place, which Person links with the concept of "situated identity" (9). Cooper's sense of place is also connected to another very topical theme of the day, the environment and ecology. Cooper, as it is correctly pointed out, was, especially in his early works, concerned with the devastating impact of man upon his environment, and he did not mean only nature but also the city habitat.

Several pages of the essay are devoted to addressing some of the controversial issues, and it is necessary to applaud the efforts to do justice to Cooper's complex critical reflection of the social and political fallacies of both America and Europe. Person tackles Cooper's very complicated concept of democracy and its limits, his fears and anxieties about populism and other abuses of democracy, his relatively stiff gender and class perspective, and his very complicated views on slavery and race. For an uninitiated reader, this part may be rather too confusing because the complexity and paradoxes of Cooper's attitudes are difficult to resolve without a context.

Fortunately, the brief biography by Wayne Franklin is not, as is the custom of this series, so brief. Franklin, the author of a remarkable Cooper monograph *The New World of James Fenimore Cooper* and a recent monumental Cooper biography (as well as the editor of *New Essays on The Last of the Mohicans*), packs more than thirty pages with various aspects of Cooper's life and his writing and publishing career. How does he try to make Cooper come alive for contemporary readers?

Unlike many previous authors, Franklin emphasizes Cooper's first-hand experience with his materials—while many authors argue that Cooper's Indians are mythic creations, a discursive construct of savagism, Franklin points out that Cooper knew "some of the 'last' of New York's native inhabitants" personally. When Franklin writes that Cooper viewed

“the frontier from both sides, and therefore imagining possession and dispossession as linked truths” (28), he implies his sense of fair play and concern for justice.

Like Person, Franklin brings forward Cooper’s theme of the consequences of the inevitable march of civilization and articulates it in a green environmental mantle. I think that this view is somewhat too green to be fully true—as it is obvious from many examples, Cooper could appreciate a sensitive blend of the natural and artificial. True to the anti-intellectual tradition in American society and literature, Franklin does not neglect to mention that Cooper, though the son of a congressman, was a university dropout (expelled for his pranks with gunpowder) who began his first job as an ordinary seaman at the age of sixteen.

In Franklin’s biography Cooper appears as the first successful American literary entrepreneur who introduced new marketing methods to the book industry—he was the first fully professional American writer, he made his living by writing and selling his own books, and he also devised a new strategy for combating pirate editions of his books in Europe and thus minimized his losses.

What I find important is Franklin’s reconceptualization of Cooper’s employment of nature as the environment. While Person raised the ecological aspect of the treatment of nature, Franklin uses the environment in the phenomenological sense as “a complex, ever-changing milieu capable of shaping and coloring human experience” (45), and it is evident that the sense of place affects not only the characters but also Cooper’s plots and themes. Franklin also showed Cooper as a writer who did not end up replaying worn formulas but kept on trying new techniques and new forms; for instance, he introduced first-person narrative in two of his novel series of the 1840s, and he also experimented with the genres of dystopia, the Antarctic tale, and the court drama.

The second essay in the main section is by John McWilliams, the author of several Cooper-related monographs and of an invaluable study of *The Last of the Mohicans*, which at many universities throughout the world is worn thin by the students who every term choose to write a class essay on *The Last of the Mohicans* for a 19th-century American literature course.

His article is revisionist because its aim is to rehabilitate Cooper’s young heroines, whom Cooper’s contemporaries admired but frequently criticized for being stock, lifeless characters. McWilliams picks as a motto a quotation from a famous satirical poem by James Russell Lowell, who laughed at Cooper that his women are “all sappy as maples and flat as a prairie” (61). Recently, several critics have stood up in defense of Cooper’s ladies, for example Signe O. Wegener in her monograph *James Fenimore Cooper versus the Cult of Domesticity* (2005). McWilliams adroitly focuses on active young female Shakespearean patriots, who do not avoid political discussion and become very vocal in formulating political principles or pronouncing criticism of the abuse of political principles or laws in the new republic. McWilliams

argues Cooper filled a certain vacuum: the less authoritative voices of women were employed to express “subversive political ideas more safely” than their male counterparts (62). McWilliams provides a very penetrating and balanced analysis and reveals a fascinating discrepancy between the role of women in his fiction and his essays, where he sounds much more in accord with the present-day discourse on the role and place of women (62). McWilliams also elaborates on the influence of Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814) on Cooper’s young female characters, arguing that Cooper, contrary to the solution in *The Last of the Mohicans*, later reversed the cultural hierarchy in favor of the active dark-haired outspoken heroine. I especially appreciate McWilliams’s analysis of a witty exchange between the three Wharton siblings from *The Spy*, revealing amazing underlying complexities of politics and gender (72–73).

Perhaps the most interesting point McWilliams makes is that the origin of women’s faith in freedom is not explained and seems to have no particular source, which serves both as “the commendable mark and the eventual limitation of woman’s political power” (88). The women characters do not seem to have read John Locke, or the history of Rome, nor do they have oppressive fathers. While one can hardly disagree with McWilliams in these respects, he nevertheless displaces the major ethical frame that shapes women’s decisions, the New Testament Christian ethics; since women in Cooper’s world are not pressed by practical considerations to establish a social order and economic prosperity they can idealistically insist on principles, regardless of the costs.

McWilliams’s chapter pairs nicely with one section of another essay on Cooper’s women characters by Dana D. Nelson. Although her cultural and social conclusions are somewhat weakened, as she narrows her focus on “Leatherstocking Tales” only, her chapter compensates for this lack by a very solid grounding of the discussion of gender and male friendship in the historical context of the period, as well as in contemporary criticism. She makes very clear one issue that is often treated as a paradox, even by McWilliams in his chapter: how to reconcile the ideal of active, clever, educated women with the gender norms of what I would call domestic sleeping beauties. Nelson demonstrates with references to historical studies that in the first decades of the 19th century, because of a number of economic and social factors, there was a gradual shift of the paradigm from the republican ideal of politically and socially engaged women to passive homemakers, and Cooper’s fiction was caught somewhere in the middle.

The section titled “The Weakness of the Female” grounds the debate of gender in a historical context. In her discussion of Cora, the woman of color from *The Last of the Mohicans*, Nelson brings forward one important point that is usually left out in criticism. In her opinion, in her indiscriminate judgment of the Huron villain Magua Cora is “flatly wrong” (130). On the other hand, Cora’s purely white sister Alice is treated by Nelson as a flat type and a model of the new submissive, weak womanhood, defined here, in reference to Linda Kerber’s *Women of the Republic* (1980), in terms of spiritual

piety, moral purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (127). Such a reduction tends to disregard Alice's moments of courage, as well as other little details through which Cooper strives to give greater complexity to his characters. Nelson suggests an interesting conceptualization of the gender issue: "Cooper seems to counter, if not repudiate, True Womanhood with an alternative feminine ideal, Real Womanhood, which insisted that women should cultivate intelligence, physical fitness, and economic self-sufficiency, and certainly *not* passivity and submission" (132).

I especially appreciate that Nelson opens one of the fascinating questions of Cooper criticism. Most critics take it for granted that resolutions of the plot have serious thematic implications and spell out solutions to cultural dilemmas. It is generally argued that the marriage of the purely white Alice and the Virginian gentleman planter Duncan Heyward represent the future white Anglo-Saxon America. Nelson does not openly challenge this possibility but succinctly proves that later novels do not repeat the same formula and, as regards gender, offer other types of American heroes and heroines than an upper-class gentleman and golden-haired submissive Alice. A similar approach is used to resolve the issue of race. The deaths of Uncas, Cora, and Magua are generally believed to spell out the doom of people of color. To counter the effects of the tragic climax Nelson correctly stresses the power of cross-cultural and inter-racial sympathy, embodied in the friendship of Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, the last Mohican.

The chapter by J. Gerald Kennedy, primarily a Poe scholar, provides a close reading of Cooper's travel books from the 1830s. Kennedy's way of "modernizing" Cooper is to present his travel books as an early example of comparative transnational studies. Kennedy's sensitive reading reveals the reason for the relatively low popularity of these books—Cooper managed, somewhat insensitively, to offend everybody with his critical comments, and nor did he spare his American readers. One cannot but admire Cooper for the courage with which he carried out his plan to educate the American public, running the risk of losing his readership as a result of his cutting remarks. The concise summary of Cooper's political views can be of interest to any serious readers of Cooper who need some background on his political thought. Kennedy argues, and I agree with him, that Cooper's social and political analysis of American society is still pertinent.

The last essay in the central part of the book is a passionate defense of Cooper by Barbara Alice Mann, titled "Race Traitor: Cooper, His Critics, and Nineteenth-Century Literary Politics." Mann, a Native American scholar of the Seneca tribe, makes Cooper a victim of "a large-scale, organized political assault" on those who dared to challenge the myth of racial supremacy (157). Mann has a simple, original point with a wonderful cutting edge: she has remade Natty from an Indian by heart into an Indian by blood. She argues that Natty is a cross-breed and his obsessive exclamations "I am a man of no cross" are nothing but a performative gesture of "a mixed-blood man desperately passing for white" (157). Even though we may not be completely

convinced by this argument and may not find her evidence conclusive, we will be more inclined to accept her argument that this was the way in which race-sensitive readers of the 19th century perceived Natty. In my opinion, Mann's main contribution rests in her exploration of the political, social and economic motivation of Cooper's critical enemies. In order to understand the literary wars among the critics, it is important to know their affiliations and social connections.

Coming from the country of origin of the Moravian Church (Moravia, the eastern part of the Czech Republic), I also welcome the vindication of John Gottlieb Heckewelder, Cooper's most important source on Native Americans.

As an appendix there is a useful illustrated chronology providing a selective comparative context for Cooper's life and work. The volume is rounded off by a brief bibliographical essay by Jeffrey Walker, which also contains comments on some of the important monographs.

I found just two mistakes in the volume, both in one chapter. Old Natty does not adopt Mahtoree, the vile chief of the Sioux Indians, and the reference to the year 1842 on page 142 is confusing; if it refers to the year of publication of *The Deerslayer*, it should be 1841.

This guide offers a good insight into the thematic richness of Cooper's writing, makes readers more intimately acquainted with the historical context, and, what is most important, manages to make Cooper look more up-to-date.

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Edgar G. Ulmer: Essays on the King of the B's, edited by Bernd Herzogenrath.
Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009. 287 p. ISBN 978-0-7864-3700-9.

One of the many nicknames that have been given to director Edgar Georg Ulmer is the "Ulysses of the cinema." Just like Ulysses, he was almost forgotten by his motherland, the world of film. In one of his last conversations with his daughter he expressed a fear that his entire life's work would disappear from the face of the earth. Fortunately for us, he was rediscovered by film enthusiasts and became an inspiration for several generations of filmmakers; his admirers include François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdanovich and Wim Wenders, among others. Four of his films became classics of Yiddish cinema, *The Black Cat*, bringing together Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff, holds a special place in the dark hearts of horror fans, and *Detour* belongs among the cult gems of *film noir*.

The essays included in *Edgar G. Ulmer: Essays on the King of the B's* explore all aspects of the Ulmer persona. They range from analyses of particular movies to studies of the peculiarities of Ulmer's *oeuvre*. Bernd Herzogenrath, the editor, has managed to bring together a unique and comprehensive group of authors—film scholars, literary scholars, film critics, and filmmakers. Important contributions to this mixture are from Stefan Grisseman, the author of Edgar G. Ulmer's biography, entitled *Mann im Schatten* (2003), and, most importantly, Ulmer's daughter Arianné, who wrote the foreword and became the godmother of the book. Herzogenrath himself provides an introduction to this volume, in which he creates a portrait of Ulmer the man. He talks about the director's beginnings as a filmmaker and gives us the biographical information needed to fully understand Ulmer's complicated character.

We learn about Ulmer's ambiguous relationship to his real birthplace; even though in Hollywood the director claimed he was born in Vienna, the Mecca of culture, Herzogenrath made a discovery that is gratifying for all proud Czech patriots. He located the house where Ulmer was really born—in Olomouc, then in Czechoslovakia. He further mentions his dream of bringing Ulmer back home by means of an "Ulmerfest," which was eventually held in Olomouc in 2006. The topics discussed during the conference became a basis for the present volume and a commemorative plaque honoring the director was unveiled on the building where he was born in 1904.

Ulmer's voyage into the heart of Hollywood began in the 1920s in Germany, where he started working with the legendary Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau and, according to the Ulmerian legend, contributed to the birth of such classics of German expressionist cinema as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* or Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Murnau brought Ulmer to Hollywood, where the young director became an employee of Universal Studios. He was later forced to leave after falling in love with Shirley Alexander, who was then married to the nephew of Carl Laemmle, the founder of Universal. Ulmer married Alexander and became a director with PRC, a small B-picture studio, where some of his best movies first saw the light of day. He soon earned a reputation as a director who could make movies for a negligible amount of money in little time. They were not the best pictures ever to come out of Hollywood, but one has to admire Ulmer's creative ideas and incredible ability to make art out of virtually nothing.

This skill helped him gain cult status in the eyes of film fans and scholars alike. In the first essay in the collection, Bernd Herzogenrath explores the connection between cult and culture, so important for Ulmer's work. Ulmer had always been proud of his knowledge of European culture and even though he found a new home in the United States, he stayed deeply anchored in the European cultural heritage. For a large portion of his life he commuted between the continents and he never gave up his cultural roots. Herzogenrath argues that it is the planting of European high culture into American trash cinema that makes his movies unique. According to the author, Ulmer revives

culture by “linking it with cult, with the unorthodox, the trashy—and thus graces the unorthodox, the trashy.” In other words, culture cannot survive without cult; cult becomes its vital drive.

Stefan Grisseman’s essay concentrates on the so-called “moments of broken economy” in Edgar G. Ulmer’s movies, i.e., on his efforts to make the most out of limited resources, to turn deficiency into art, to make his visions work. Grisseman points out three aspects of Ulmer’s cinema: the potential for surprising visual and narrative solutions, the strange documentary value in many of his films, and the sometimes breathtaking minimalism of his *mise-en-scène*. Grisseman’s essay captures the true substance of Edgar G. Ulmer’s cult status. Even though his movies can be tiresome and sometimes even—Ulmer buffs will, it is hoped, forgive this blasphemy—bad, they always have an unexpected surprise up their sleeve, a breathless moment which wins the viewer’s heart with its economy and minimalism. One of the best examples is probably the frequently quoted scene from *Detour* where one of the main characters, Vera, is accidentally strangled with a telephone cord. This talent of Ulmer’s is arguably the main reason why he has become such a great inspiration for independent filmmakers—he was the master of improvisation, the magician who could pull a perfectly alive rabbit out of an empty (and worn-out) hat.

A similar topic is explored in the essay by Ekkehard Knörer. He introduces a new term for Ulmer’s movies—“the not-quite movie.” He talks about the strange pleasure we get from watching movies that are not quite perfect, not quite whole, and, in fact, are more falling apart than holding together. “The not-quite movie” is not a complete disaster, which, in Knörer’s opinion, is the difference between Ulmer’s movies and those of Ed Wood, the American cult filmmaker labeled by some as “the world’s worst director”; it is not trash cinema in the true sense of the term. It is a cinema of great visions and ideas but unfortunately no money. Knörer’s essay is an interesting contribution in this age of film buffs who have sold their souls to the B devil.

Stephanie Diekmann’s essay focusses on three issues that are problematic in the context of Ulmer’s work: authorship, signature, and the body of work. Ulmer’s authorship is often questionable—the director was a great mythmaker and there is no proof that he was really involved, for example, in the production of the German expressionist classics mentioned at the beginning of this review. His movies are mostly products of circumstances; he did not have the proper background to be called an *auteur* in the new wave sense of the word. The Ulmer signature is therefore not only the signature he himself wanted to imprint on his movies but more the signature of circumstances, which are the burden of every talented but poor artist. In the section dedicated to Ulmer’s body of work, Diekmann points out that the early research into Ulmer’s films had to consist primarily of the recovery and restoration of the individual movies—a process in which Arianné Ulmer Cipes played a vital part. Diekmann further argues that Ulmer’s movies also have a fragmented nature. She is of the same opinion as

Grisseman and Knörer, saying they are mostly second-rate cinematography with occasional breathtaking scenes. She agrees with Knörer who proposes that a “best of Ulmer” DVD would, amusingly enough, create the impression of an outstanding director.

Herzogenrath’s book also includes analyses of the most famous Ulmer movies—*The Black Cat* by the famous horror movie scholar Gregory William Mank and *Detour* by the New York University cinema studies professor Dana Polan—as well as films that are more on the obscure side—e.g., *Ruthless*, *The Strange Woman*, *The Naked Dawn*, and the rather depressing *The Man from Planet X*. Ulmer’s ethnic movies are also present—Sharon Pucker Rivo, the director of the National Center for Jewish Film, writes about his Yiddish films, whereas Frank Mehring analyzes the first all-black cast movie in history, Ulmer’s *Moon over Harlem*. Marcel Arbeit’s essay explores the director’s educational movies, namely his anti-syphilis *Damaged Lives* and its history. Herbert Schwaab chose *Babes in Bagdad* as a stepping stone for a discussion of the relations between camp, art film, and classic Hollywood cinema. Michal Peprník’s essay on *Daughter of Dr. Jekyll* and the effects of the displacement of home gives us a new perspective on Ulmer’s denial of his place of birth.

All in all, Bernd Herzogenrath’s effort to compile a representative volume which would be a dignified homage to “the King of the B’s” was not in vain. Despite the fragmented character of Ulmer’s work, the book holds together very well (is this not against the Ulmerian spirit, I dare ask?). The authors represented constitute a pleasantly diversified group from both Europe and America, just like Ulmer himself. The range of topics discussed is exhaustive. Moreover, the book is not only about movies; the reader is also given a unique insight into Ulmer’s life and his character and Arianné Ulmer’s consecration helps make it an essential handbook for every fan of this exceptional filmmaker, whose work still has the power to fascinate and inspire. However, the greatest asset of this book is its overall tone. From Herzogenrath’s honest and warm-hearted introduction we get the impression that this is not a work of obligation but a work of love. The volume tastefully combines the personal and the academic and therefore it can be enjoyed not only by scholars but also by film lovers, to whom Ulmer belongs in the first place. It is gratifying that this book was conceived in Olomouc, of all places; with it, Ulmer-Ulysses has come home and is finally given the recognition he deserves, Bernd Herzogenrath being the Penelope who never gave up on him. Let us hope that this book is the first “light ahead” and that more books and/or DVD editions of restored movies will follow.

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The Return of Král Majáles: Prague's International Literary Renaissance 1990–2010; An Anthology, edited by Louis Armand. Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2010. 938 p. ISBN 978-80-7308-302-1.

The Return of Král Majáles was recently published to coincide with Majáles (student May Day) celebrations in Prague and the 20th anniversary of Allen Ginsberg's return to Prague; the book's title is taken from the poem Ginsberg wrote to commemorate both his own return and the return of free speech to Czech society.

While Ginsberg's influence on Czech writers and intellectuals is discussed in the introduction, and some of the foreign writers in the anthology were influenced by Ginsberg personally, the book is not about Allen Ginsberg, despite its title and cover. Nor are the works collected in this anthology particularly *Ginsbergian* in the sense of satori or manifesto. Instead the anthology attempts to map the territory of what the English-language literary scene in Prague between 1990 and 2010 entailed. A number of writers writing in Czech are also included in English translation.

The anthology weighs in at nearly 1000 pages, which reflects current anthology philosophy on being "inclusive"—representing the work of ninety four (count 'em!) writers in the twenty years of its scope. It follows on the tradition of Milan Kozelka's Czech anthologies of the literary and artistic scenes of Olomouc, Ostrava, and Northern Bohemia in the 1990s. The editor, Louis Armand—an Australian poet and teacher at Charles University who came to Prague in 1994—set out to document the myriad poetry and fiction readings, theatrical performances, and the broadsides, chapbooks, novels and translations published in one of Europe's great cities in the period right after the opening of the Iron Curtain.

Armand himself was part of this literary scene, hosting a regular reading performance series called "Beef Stew"—and his anthology reflects the same kind of throw-it-all-into-the-pot, "open mic" approach. "I became a little alarmed," said Armand in a recent interview in *The Prague Post* (April 28, 2010) to mark the book's publication, "you start to look for a record of these things, and it is not there." In his book's lengthy introduction, he does a solid names-and-dates job of telling the history of not only the literary scene, but also the story of a community within a community, where Czech culture (mostly counter-culture) met foreign cultures, and how they were mutually influenced.

Allen Ginsberg's return to Prague in 1990 was a symbolic revisiting of one of the key moments in his life: his crowning as Prague's King of May and subsequent deportation in 1965. It was really a celebration of Czechs' return to a period of normalcy after the long period of anything-but-normal "Normalization." It was one of many such visits by Western cultural icons such as Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Ed Sanders, Joan Baez (as well as the real return of Czech artists who had been in exile, like Vratislav Brabenec, Jaroslav Hutka and Karel Kryl). At Bob Dylan's

first Prague concerts (he played three days in a row), it was as if you were at a combination PEN club congress and underground happening—it seemed like every Czech and foreign intellectual and writer was in attendance. The symbolism of the concerts by these “1960s” artists in 1990s Prague was lost on nobody. Let the good times roll—again—finally!

The Prague scene in the 1990s *was* special. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of the Iron Curtain and lifting of strict visa requirements, the long European dichotomy of East–West was broken, and a new era of Central Europe had begun—one in which cheap rents (\$20 per month in Prague in 1990) and cheap jet fuel attracted not only Europeans but people from all over the world. Many of these were artists.

Václav Havel, dissident-writer-as-president of the new republic, attracted those artists who felt under-appreciated. “Second Chance City” is one of Alan Levy’s monikers for Prague (Levy was an American journalist who was in Prague in the 1960s, was in “exile” in Vienna in the 1970s and 1980s and who also returned to Prague in the 1990s, seeing himself as a sort of icon of the English-speaking Prager). Freedom for Havel meant freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom from hassles by the police. For artists, the incredibly relaxed atmosphere of this atheistic, low-rent, low-crime country was akin to paradise. They came to Prague in droves.

And why not? It was the time of a renaissance in every sense of the word: a half-century of forbidden books were being published, a half-century of dilapidated buildings were being repaired, where there had been no telephones there was now internet. Armand’s introduction does a good job of recounting the beginning of the story—the reasons are obvious (freedom and economics), and he mentions how Czechs were helpful, welcoming and instructive to non-Czechs. Most of those non-Czechs are gone, and the reasons for leaving are various, but not mentioned—the loss of some freedoms, Prague’s commercialization, higher rents and not-great salaries. Changes in visa and residency laws after the entry of the Czech Republic to the EU have dramatically changed the dynamics of the foreigners living there over longer periods, thus also changing the idea of a foreign “community” in Prague.

Every anthology is criticized for its inclusions and omissions; editorial decisions are what make anthologies unique. One of the things I feel the introduction is missing is a rationale (for the inclusion of certain texts or exclusion of certain texts—often this is due to copyright reasons or royalty payments, but it should be mentioned). Any reviewer can quibble with content choices; two Czech writers who are found in the book, Jáchym Topol and Jaroslav Rudiš, have written excellent examples on the theme of Paradise Lost, Prague under the bad influence of outside cultures (“the Kingdom of May is too beautiful to last more than a month”)—not told in the introduction: Topol’s *Výlet k nádražní hale* (A Trip to the Train Station, 1995) and Rudiš’s *Potichu* (Quietly, 2007).

Also on the minus side, I feel the introduction is amiss in not mentioning the role of the American Embassy and the British Council on the literary

scene—not only in Prague, but throughout the Czech Republic. Czechs as well as non-Czechs working in those organizations brought so many writers (numbering in the hundreds!) on both sides together to discuss disparate pasts, common presents and uncertain futures—and made a concerned effort to include Czech and Slovak university students in these discussions. These meetings and readings had a profound influence on not only the writers, translators and students from both sides, but also in fostering a real international intellectual community.

The anthology's major bonus to scholars is its 45-page bibliography of Prague books and literary journals in English—including cover art, which is a glimpse at another facet of book production in Prague during the past twenty years: the visual art/book art which went hand-in-glove with much of the literary output. This is sure to be a gold mine for future literary scholars. Nevertheless, the bibliography has some mistakes: books published in the Moravian city of Olomouc should not be included under the rubric of “Prague Publications,” and even though Prague is a major city as well as a capital city, the inclusion of authors who are identified strongly with other Czech cities and regions (an obvious example is Martin Reiner from Brno) as “Prague” authors is wrong. One omission here, at least to me, is the American Jon Davis, who has published two books in his “own” Czech, which should surely be mentioned somewhere in an anthology that attempts to be definitive.

But in the end it all comes down to the poetics: is the *Lion* for real? I can make a few generalizations: the non-Czech writers tend to be more experimental in form, while the Czech writing is more focused—this contradicts the oft-repeated cliché that compared to the samizdat writers, the post-1989 Czech generation found themselves with “nothing to say.” Overall I think the book would be much the weaker without the Czech authors found there, and for non-Czech readers who do not know Czech writers, this might be a good place to start. One non-Czech writer who does have something to say is Justin Quinn, the Irish poet, translator, and editor, who in tone and content I believe has really become a Prague poet. There are also some good finds among the English-language writers here: Jane Kirwan (England) and John McKeown (Ireland) are two fine poets, and from what few pages are here Myla Goldberg (USA) seems a very interesting novelist (the excerpt is from her novel *Cirkus*, about a multi-generation Czech circus family). There are bound to be more.

Most of the interesting writers are connected to Howard Sidenberg's Twisted Spoon Press—an English-language literary publisher in Prague which by now has not only a long tradition but a long shelf of quality literature under its imprint. Litteraria Pragensia as an English-language academic publisher in Prague looks as if it too is developing an international reputation.

However, this is not a purely academic book—the bulk of the material is fiction, poetry and drama, with each author receiving one to twenty pages, usually five or six. Many have the feel of written texts for what were originally spoken word performances; the heavy weight of the book makes it too big to

take to the beach on holiday, but the short length of the individual texts makes the tome an ideal companion for that most intimate of reading chambers.

The anthology's 1000 pages are a slap-in-the-face answer to allegations that there was no Prague literary scene after 1990: if anyone says so, throw the book at them. Hemingway called Paris in the 1920s "a moveable feast" and we can't help but recall Jonathan Swift's lines (a translation) about a famous Irish feast held after a long battle. If you substitute "Prague" for "O'Rourke" you get a fitting epitaph for Prague as a writers' feast in the period from 1990–2010:

*Prague's noble fare
Will n'er be forgot—
By those who were there,
Or those who were not.*

Matthew Sweney
Palacký University, Olomouc
Czech Republic

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