
Christine Gerhardt (ed.). 2018. *Handbook of the American Novel of the Nineteenth Century*. Berlin / Boston: de Gruyter, 574 pp., € 199.95 / \$ 229.99 / £ 182.00.

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2019-0066>

The *Handbook of the American Novel of the Nineteenth Century* (2018) edited by Christine Gerhardt and published with de Gruyter in their series *Handbooks of English and American Studies* sets out to provide a broad overview of nineteenth-century literary themes in American novels. The volume brings together a wide variety of nineteenth-century novels while also reflecting on their historical context with attention to the reading and publishing practices of the time. Gerhardt describes the volume as an attempt to “move beyond the seeming conflict between older ‘text-based’ methods, and more recent ‘context-based’ readings and ‘theory-oriented’ approaches that followed in their wake” (8). As a consequence, the chapters not only provide close-readings of individual novels but embed each

literary text within its context of production, its publication history, and nineteenth-century book culture in general. The contributions also trace some of the most pertinent scholarly debates about each book. The volume eventually presents a variety of “contemporary critical perspectives that reflect their own historicity while discussing nineteenth-century novels in their respective historical contexts” (8).

In order to manage this undertaking, Gerhardt divided the volume into two parts. The first one provides an introduction to a variety of important literary, political, social, and technological themes for understanding the nineteenth-century American novel. The overview sections concentrate on a number of formal approaches and subjects ranging from “Sentimentalism” to “Romance and Gothic”, “Realism and Naturalism” but also “Race and Citizenship”, “Transnationalism and Transculturation”, or the role of “Nature and Environment” and “Media and Print Culture”. All of these chapters introduce a fundamental aspect of the nineteenth-century American novel to familiarize, as Gerhardt writes, present-day readers with nineteenth-century “practices of writing and reading and broader intellectual developments from decidedly contemporary perspectives” (9). These chapters bring their respective historical context to life by discussing exemplary novels. In doing so, this first part of the volume anticipates and often complements the second part of the handbook which is completely dedicated to the exploration of individual novels.

The essays in the second part productively continue the work of the first one. Contributors situate the novel at hand in its respective historical context and bring their material to life by highlighting fascinating moments in a novel’s history of production and consumption. Each chapter further provides a close-reading of the literary text exploring a particular relevant aspect of an individual novel. The essays conclude with a discussion of the most prominent theoretical approaches to a book. That organization of every chapter – historical context, a close-reading, and introduction of theoretical approaches – persuasively realizes the ambitions of the *Handbook* series “to offer students and researchers a compact means of orientation in their study of Anglophone literary texts” (editor’s preface v). Indeed, the chapters in the second part are especially noteworthy for their ability to offer a multi-layered discussion of their respective material.

Given the plentitude of nineteenth-century novels to choose from, Gerhardt furthermore acknowledges the challenges of the selection process. She explains that “[w]ith the overall number of chapters being necessarily limited, the handbook brings together novels that have been canonized as classic American novels and for whom newer approaches have continuously enabled new understandings [...] with novels that have been added to the canon more recently” (10). Of course,

due to its scope and ambition, the volume cannot address all vital aspects of nineteenth-century American literature. Opting for the novel, for example, the volume privileges one particular mode of literary writing in the nineteenth century. Although the introduction refers to alternative possibilities of thinking about literary texts in the nineteenth century – highlighting newspaper and magazine publications specifically – attention to the competing modes of literary production and consumption would have further contributed to an insightful overview. Regardless of such, often personal, preferences, the volume succeeds in indicating the complex role of literature in the nineteenth century and offers readers a vivid picture of its conceptualization, its contexts, and contemporary theoretical debates due to organization of the handbook. The fact that the volume also brings together many leading voices in their respective research areas who have written in an engaging yet nuanced fashion about their material further speaks to the quality of the *Handbook*. As the volume fulfills its promise of introducing readers to many important aspects of the nineteenth-century novel, this handbook will surely prove to be an excellent starting point for students and early-career researchers. Its overall quality will doubtlessly inspire further in-depth explorations of the American novel.

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DOI: 10.1515/ang-2019-0066

URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:465-20240701-144549-6

Meinel, D. (2019). Christine Gerhardt (ed.). 2018. Handbook of the American Novel of the Nineteenth Century. Berlin / Boston: de Gruyter, 574 pp., € 199.95 / \$ 229.99 / £ 182.00. *Anglia*, 137(4), 701-703. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2019-0066>

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