

Theodore Martin. *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*. Columbia UP, 2017. 264 pp.

In 1955, the Modern Fiction Club at Purdue University founded *Modern Fiction Studies* to advance scholarship on modern and contemporary fiction. The founding editors sought the latest thinking on literary modernism—the first volume included essays on William Faulkner, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf—but they left the door open to the emerging field of contemporary literature. With New Criticism ascendant, the editors published work by formalists committed to the intrinsic features of the text, but they faced the extrinsic historical challenge of distinguishing the modern from the contemporary, of historicizing the present. From day one, the field of contemporary literature has been animated by that tension between form and history, text and context. When and what is the contemporary? Can we know it as history? What do we talk about when we talk about the contemporary?

Theodore Martin's important new book *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present* identifies how the meaning of the contemporary has been obscured by the rift between formalists and historicists, from the New Criticism of the 1940s to the New Historicism of the 1980s and ever since. That is because the history of the contemporary, Martin argues, surfaces in the changes and continuities of generic form. The contemporary drifts, but it also drags. Today's contemporary is different from yesterday's, but they are not wholly unrelated. Genre provides a critical apparatus for measuring the distance from yesterday to today, for identifying the unique characteristics of our contemporary but also what binds it to the past. Martin suggests that the drag of genre—what remains stable about, for example, the novel of manners or the noir film—allows us to control for the drift of the contemporary. Formulating a theory of genre is a first step toward writing a history of the present. "Genre's blend of change and continuity, of drift and drag, makes it a privileged site for exploring the process of becoming contemporary," he writes (13): "Think of it as a controlled experiment in historical emergence." The larger ambition of Martin's experiment is to reconcile history with form by writing the former through the latter.

Martin is by no means the first to confront the problem of the contemporary. His study traces and synthesizes carefully observed critical genealogies of contemporary literary history and literary genre theory to conceptualize the historical present. Contemporary literary studies has long struggled with whether and how it fits into the

historicist paradigm that has dominated English departments since Stephen Greenblatt declared a desire to speak to the dead thirty years ago. The Post-45 collective, a group of midcareer scholars broadly interested in the institutions and sociology of writing and reading, has taken the lead in bringing historicism to bear on contemporary literary culture. But the group has, for the most part, set aside the theoretical question of what constitutes contemporary literature to get down to the business of rewriting postwar literary history. While the Post-45 collective has delivered revisionist histories of institutional creative writing, the Democratic Party, the suburbs, and the free market, it has worked around the edges of the contemporary as a critical concept.

Martin looks to genre to offer a theory of the contemporary and a history of our contemporary. The status of genre fiction has changed in the twenty-first century, he observes, with literary novelists and indie filmmakers turning to genre fiction to take a measure of the present as it relates to and departs from the past. Genre is having a moment in English departments, too. Literary scholars have increasingly recognized genre as a useful indicator of how literature registers and even anticipates historical change. Martin's key insight is that this treatment of genre as a historical tool, when applied to the contemporary, can turn the present into an object of historical analysis.

Contemporary Drift bridges the conversations being had by the Post-45 collective and the new genre theorists by reframing the problem of the present as a question of genre. The contemporary is constituted through a constant negotiation between old and new social structures and cultural forms. Martin argues that genre internalizes that negotiation, offering what he terms "an alternative model for practicing historicism" (7). It is a convincing and much-needed model because it pushes beyond the tendency among literary scholars to discuss the contemporary in the vague terms of uncertainty, ambiguity, and indeterminacy. It is a model that, without ignoring the challenges of the historical present, produces positive and specific knowledge about our contemporary. Genre, for Martin, is not just a critical shorthand but rather "a necessary starting point for coming to grips with the complex status of contemporary history. Genre shows us what differentiates the present from the past as well as what ties the two together." Genre serves a double function. It reflects the conditions of late-capitalist life, from the ecological devastation of climate change to the survivalist ethic of postindustrial labor. But it also makes historical emergence visible.

The organization of Martin's book signals that double function, with the first half committed to developing a transferable theory of contemporary history and the second half devoted to pinning down the specific contemporary in which we live. The first three chapters address the methodological difficulties of the contemporary through readings of the late twentieth-century "decade novel" (49), which tries to historically anchor the new novel of manners by attaching it to a particular decade (in chapter 1); the film noir revival, which meditates on the increasingly complex act of historically situating oneself in the postwar period (in chapter 2); and the twenty-first-century detective novel, which is less about detection and resolution than waiting (in chapter 3). The second half of the book turns to two defining crises of our time as encountered in what Martin calls "climate change Westerns" (142) in chapter 4 and, in chapter 5, end-of-the-world fiction in which survival looks an awful lot like endless work under neoliberal conditions.

But Martin's account of the contemporary is not all destruction and woe. The third chapter, for example, finds something redeeming in the wait that defines detective novels by Michael Chabon, Vikram Chandra, and China Miéville. Once a genre associated with airtight resolutions achieved through forensic science, detective fiction transformed in the second half of the twentieth century into a genre of disillusionment and irresolution. Think of the difference between Arthur Conan Doyle's ever-logical Sherlock Holmes and Thomas Pynchon's disoriented and overwhelmed Oedipa Maas. Martin wonders—after the September 11 attacks and the financial crisis made risk a defining characteristic of twenty-first-century life—whether the aesthetic of irresolution hasn't run out of steam. Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* (2007), Chandra's *Sacred Games* (2006), and Miéville's *The City and the City* (2009), he argues, introduce an alternative to the uncertainties of our time by telling stories not about resolution or irresolution but waiting. The act of waiting mediates between the known and the unknown by reminding us that knowledge unfolds over time. Not knowing is a time-bound state. The Frankfurt school knew this. Siegfried Kracauer declared waiting the solution to a world divided between ideologues and nihilists, while Walter Benjamin articulated his vision of messianic time as a kind of waiting. Martin suggests that the wait of the twenty-first-century detective novel recalls what Kracauer and Benjamin knew and what we should know as readers: that knowledge comes to us in time, page by page.

Contemporary Drift introduces a much-needed new way to talk about the emergence of historical consciousness. Part of the challenge for scholars of the contemporary is that, as Martin points out, their contemporary doesn't stay contemporary for long. It drifts. But it is precisely that idea—and the drag of genre that illuminates it—that will make Martin's book a critical resource for future contemporaries who will one day look back on today as a distant historical past. "Without the privilege of critical distance, without the time-tested judgment of hindsight, without the power to foresee the future course of current events, we are still," Martin concludes, "able to know something about the history of our contemporary. This, finally, is what it means to historicize the present" (197). Even as the contemporary of Chabon, Chandra, and Miéville drifts into the past, *Contemporary Drift* shows us what it means to be contemporary, if only for a time.

JOSEPH DARDA

Texas Christian University



Jeffrey Sever. *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*. Columbia UP, 2017. 311 pp.

One of the great joys of reading new scholarship on David Foster Wallace is discovering networks of meaning and allusion you had not previously noticed. There is much of this joy to be had in Jeffrey Sever's *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*, a work that glories in detail. Before the end of the first chapter I found myself scribbling notes to refer back to later, making connections beyond those Sever draws, and finding new light for my own work, existing and ongoing. Sever identifies fascinating links and engages in the kind of microreading that is truly rewarding with Wallace: the term "axiology," for example, provides a crux in the introduction that tantalizingly links morality and embodiment. Points like these—small, but not minor—offer frequent flashes of brilliance that illuminate the whole field. Sever manages to tease out profound connections between the constitution of a self and the engagement with ideas of value, offering an astute framework within which to consider the abiding entanglement of transaction, ethics, and the individual. Adverting to this enmeshed relationship, Sever notes that we use the terms "value" (10)—as in the specific "values of 7 and 8"—and