

Catherine Morley. *The Quest for Epic in Contemporary American Fiction: John Updike, Philip Roth and Don DeLillo*. New York: Routledge, 2009. 226pp.

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In this slim volume (part of the excellent Routledge Transnational Perspectives on American Literature series, edited by Susan Castillo), Catherine Morley tackles three of the most critically acclaimed and most widely discussed American authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Morley concentrates on John Updike's *Rabbit Angstrom* series, Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* trilogy and Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, all of which have been praised as contenders for the title of the "Great American Novel." While these writers have been previously compared in other ways, Morley brings them together in a genre study; she considers the influence of the epic on their work, and their place in the epic tradition. In line with the overarching theme of the series, Morley suggests that these authors are not necessarily, or perhaps not even, the quintessentially American writers that they have been purported to be. Rather, she shows that their influences are equally European, and that their message concerning America is not a unifying one. In short, Morley argues that these are authors writing from a transnational heritage and to a fragmented America.

Taking issue with the term "Great American Novel," she suggests that these novels be considered in the tradition of the prose epic or epic novel, and isolates James Joyce, and in particular his novel *Ulysses*, as a unifying influence for all three authors. Certainly a large proportion of the text is given over to her analysis of Updike, Roth and DeLillo, but Morley also assigns about a third of her pages to discussing differing critical approaches to the epic and new directions in genre theory. In her introduction, Morley speaks historically about the purpose of the prose epic and the methods used to achieve these aims; she goes on to show how these identifiable characteristics were shared concerns of nineteenth-century American writers.

Morley follows this theoretical exploration of the epic genre with a chapter that addresses the specific impact of Joyce, both on the selected authors and the genre as a whole. While this section seeks to underline the importance of this transnational influence, Morley does not deny the effect of American forebears on Updike *et al.* Indeed, she makes some interesting comparisons between Joyce and writers of the

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American Renaissance, particularly Emerson; specifically, their concerns with nation-building, ordinary people and everyday realities, and the role of myth and parody in relating these themes.

The meat of this text comes from Morley's application of these historical observations to selected works from the canons of Updike, Roth and DeLillo. Although Morley covers some ground that is already well-represented by other critics – Updike's historicity and ties to white middle-class culture; Roth's attitudes towards assimilation and Americanisation; and the case for DeLillo as a postmodern writer – she uses this already established research as a means of furthering her own thesis that these authors write transnationally-influenced modern epics of America. While some attempts to tie in the authors' biographical details are unconvincing, the close readings of the various novels, especially in direct comparison with Joyce, are particularly enlightening, and there are asides in the notes appendix that are equally fascinating, if off-topic.

In her conclusion, Morley suggests other writers and their novels or series of novels that might warrant similar analysis, such as Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe trilogy and Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*. She also highlights the epic as a patriarchal genre and proposes that there is consequently scope, if not a need, for scholarship concerning female-penned epics (the authors she identifies include Marilynne Robinson and Maxine Hong Kingston).

This text includes an impressive array of references and I think it is to Morley's credit that while she acknowledges the breadth of influences on her chosen writers, she secures her analysis predominantly to Joyce and Emerson. In the three chapters concerned with the novels, this can make for some repetition at points where Updike, Roth and DeLillo overlap, and perhaps some direct comparison between these three would have also have been illuminating. However, Morley's narrow remit that was set out at the commencement of the book is certainly met, and in this text she has created a full but focused discussion of these contemporary epics.