

**Ichiro Takayoshi, *American Writers and the Approach of World War II, 1935-1941: A Literary History*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 333pp.**

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Pre-war writers who responded in prose to the pivotal events of the 1930s and early 1940s shared one characteristic, with a few exceptions— all were “popular” writers addressing their works to the “middlebrow” audience (146). In *American Writers and the Approach of World War II, 1935-1941: A Literary History*, author and scholar Ichiro Takayoshi captures the “unprecedented” historical fulfilment of the “respectable,” in a manner that defined itself against the popular but illegitimate, and the unpopular but prestigious, solidifying itself during the turn of the century when “all these pre-war writers were born” (147). In a seminal work that focuses on authors who based their works on worldly events that induced an anti-fascist interventionistic attitude, and those that maintained a level of pacifism generated from a non-interventionistic defiance, Takayoshi’s complex style of conveying thought presents a provoking look at a variety of authors and their “artistic clairvoyance” during this era (4).

As Takayoshi asserts, roughly between 1935 to 1941, during the prolonged run-up to America’s direct participation in the global conflict, countless artists, writers, critics, thinkers, and journalists were exercised by the war they saw coming in slow motion (4). While proposing that the pre-World War II period was rife with the emergence of the bourgeois, albeit proletarian that were focused on “mass entertainment,” the prominent and preeminent writers of the time are cited in depth in Takayoshi’s analysis. The author relies heavily on defining how prominent and well-known writers used their pens to have an impact on the social fabric of the era. From Ernest Hemmingway to Reinhold Niebuhr and intellectual pacifists like Dalton Trumbo, Takayoshi conveys that their works responded to turn the public’s interest

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from the economic depression at home to the menace of totalitarian systems abroad (148). Takayoshi thematically infuses this amalgamation of culture and with business, superimposed over the common feeling of isolationistic neutrality.

The omens proliferated from far across the sea with conflict in places like Ethiopia, Spain, Czechoslovakia, Poland, France, and England as a premonition of a slow advent of war pervading what Takayoshi calls “all departments of American letters,” from song writing to books of fiction (4). While most writers and their notable works remained preoccupied with economic upheavals and political strife on the domestic front, some of the most celebrated authors of social protest emerged during this time. In that light, the likes of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* soon gave way to dividing attention between domestic and foreign issues (7).

One of the most thought provoking theories Takayoshi offers in this book is that the pre-war culture dramatized what he considers a readily apparent “truism,” in that geography was amenable to symbolic manipulation (29). Expanding on this thought, Takayoshi conveys how radio, when used as a means to artistically present thought in line with the written word, determined how depression-era Americans understood “distance,” becoming an indispensable prop to effectively circumvent distance and bring foreign wars to the domestic audience (39-40). A premise of Takayoshi’s work is that playwrights, both on the stage and on the radio from 1935 to 1941, “destroyed” the most obstinate of all superstitions involving the problem of time and problem of space (41, 43).

This book is compartmentalized into nine chapters initially chronologically tracing events leading up to America’s stake in World War II in the last of the pre-war years, as signified by Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” speech in January 1941 (237). With a mix of writerly concerns focused on internal domestic politics, attentive to economic challenges brought on by the great depression, and then upon the international conflicts that drew the western world into the global war, Takayoshi masterfully interweaves examples of salient writers who significantly impacted the American psyche at a time where US support was uncertain.

Takayoshi rightfully claims that today the collective memory remembers little of the phenomenon that worried the likes of Wallace Stevens that the pre-war literary culture was much more alive and its participants much more numerous than has been acknowledged (7). *American Writers and the Approach of World War II, 1935-1941: A Literary History* prevails as a volume describing how the pre-war culture irremovably changed American’s most concerted assumptions about their nation’s role in the world. As a result, no longer can those living within the confines of borders ignore a

protracted national purpose along the lines that those had during the run-up to World War II. As in the pre-war era the written and spoken word undoubtedly defines the character of the nation in times of conflict both domestically and abroad.