Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. 368 pp.

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In *Cool Characters* Lee Konstantinou utilises an innovative methodology of character types – "the hipster, the punk, the believer, the coolhunter, and the occupier" (xii) – to emphasise how "characterological rhetoric is the common language with which artists, critics, and philosophers have debated the value of irony" (15). In telling the story of "how postmodernism became historical" (3), *Cool Characters* traces a path from irony to postirony in American fiction after 1945.

He begins with "the hipster," unusually coupling Ralph Ellison and Thomas Pynchon because both "turned hip irony into a principle of literary design that continues to cast a shadow over contemporary debates about irony" (55). Konstantinou aims to "revise many deeply ingrained assumptions about…[irony's] subversive power" (51). He provocatively suggests that Ellison "extends New Critical ideas of irony…in the service of a Cold War liberal vision of human freedom" (100). Konstantinou then focuses on how McClintic Sphere – a minor character from Pynchon's novel *V* (1963) – demonstrates "how one might simultaneously transcend the Beats and the postwar modernism that establishment intellectuals advocated" (90). For Konstantinou, the alternative, "third way" Pynchon's novel evokes is not as radical as Pynchon scholars usually claim (90). Convincingly, he concludes "the hipster – who signalled his exclusive knowledge through irony – lived in accord with the dominant spirit of the Age of Criticism" (102).

He defines "the punk" as a character type that "escalates the critical irony of the hipster" (106). He contends the punk was a "characterological way station from mid-century Keynesianism to neoliberalism" (41). Focusing on "two of [William]

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Burroughs's most important but least studied novels" (126), *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* (1971) and its sequel, *Port of Saints* (1973), Konstantinou "rebuts" the reading of Burroughs's work as utopian (125). He coins the term "positive dystopia" to describe the punk ethos Burroughs – and following Burroughs, Kathy Acker – develop: "[an] anti-Utopian genre that imagines human growth as arising not *from* destruction but precisely *in* destruction" (144). This highly revisionist first half of *Cool Characters* offers a convincing new way to reinterpret the legacy of postwar countercultural movements.

Entertainingly, Konstantinou begins the postirony segment with an analysis of the evangelical novel series *Left Behind*, as it "constructs an ingenious narrative technology for fostering readerly belief" (164). He suggests that David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers offer a secular version of this narrative technology, "the believer." In contrast to the exhilarating revisionism of the first section, Wallace's interpretation of postmodern irony has been outlined many times before, largely by Konstantinou himself. However, as a whole, *Cool Characters* places Wallace's career in a fascinating new historical context, and introduces interesting ideas about his influence. For instance, he contends that Wallace's "advocacy of the ethos of belief as a solution to the problem of postmodern irony has had far-reaching consequences" (193). One such consequence is Dave Eggers, who wants to enable his readers to develop a "characterological countertype to the incredulous ironist" (169). To counter "snark," Eggers and his cohort promote a "quirky" aesthetic, which Konstantinou outlines via an interesting reading of *The Museum of Jurassic Technology* (169), as well as Eggers' numerous literary and non-literary projects. To be quirky "might well be the stylistic and institutional form the avant-garde takes when it reconciles itself to the reality of the market" (203). Throughout, Konstantinou questions how these character types distort or disable political engagement.

He outlines "the coolhunter" through brief readings of Alex Shakar's *The Savage Girl* (2001), William Gibson's Pattern Recognition (2003), and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). He coins the term "*autoreification*" to suggest how these writers counteract – and are largely unconcerned by – the processes of reification, i.e. enacting "self-subsumption" instead of being subsumed under some "domineering, falsifying concept" (263). Egan's novel evokes how the author is "both a producer and a consumer of culture, something like a professional shopper" (269). Like the "quirky" aesthetic of Eggers, this is a "somewhat weak position from which to fight exploitation or abolish class" (269). In contrast, by radically revising Fredric Jameson's concept of "cognitive mapping" – and by rehabilitating Naomi Klein's much-maligned *No Logo* (1999) – Konstantinou posits that in *Pattern Recognition* "brands" point to the wider processes of capital: "brands have the potential to become windows onto the

underlying production processes that make them profitable in the first place, processes usually concealed within a global maze of anonymous subcontractors" (252).

Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* (2013) and Jonathan Lethem's *Dissident Gardens* (2013) embody "the occupier" type. They loosely allegorize the history of irony traced throughout *Cool Characters*: "Both novels suggest that in order to become something like an occupier, one must traverse from a state of political naivety through a phase of cynicism or postmodern irony, arriving finally at a state of postironic political commitment" (275). *Cool Characters* is a monumental statement. Huge in scope, this book is a new touchstone for anyone studying irony in literary or cultural studies, and a fascinating approach to understanding the legacy of postmodernism.