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Danny L. Miller, Sharon Hatfield, and Gurney Norman, eds. *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005. 400p.

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In this age of ever increasing specialization no one can truly lay claim to the title “Americanist”; however, most of us in the field try to keep abreast of the general trends, categories, genres, and movements within the discipline. *An American Vein* is a useful tool for the non-expert—it is an effort to reassess a region’s influence, and the editors have amassed a collection of critical essays that offer a range of approaches to the often overlooked area of Appalachian literature. The anthology is a general introduction to an area that is central to, yet apart from, our mainstream concept of America. Because we all have images of Appalachia in our minds, the collection aims not only at introducing literature from the region, but it asks us to reevaluate our preconceptions and to offer “resistance to the negative stereotyping of mountain people” (xvii). While assessing my own “knowledge” of Appalachia I was chagrined to discover that it was largely drawn from movies and television: feuds, hillbillies, coal miners’ daughters, dueling banjos, and *way* too much Ned Beatty. If your concept of Appalachia and its literature is as limited as mine was, *An American Vein* is an easy way to correct the deficiency.

The 29 articles collected in the anthology range in time, from Dayton Kohler’s 1942 article concerning Jesse Stuart and James Still to contemporary essays written expressly for the anthology, such as Elizabeth Englehardt’s “Nature Loving Souls and Appalachian Mountains: The Promise of Feminist Ecocriticism.” Despite the differing decades, critical approaches, and quality of the essays, the collection as a whole provides a tight, neat overview of its subject. The book is well arranged with a detailed index, brief biographical information for contributors, and a section devoted to “Supplemental Notes on Authors” which is particularly useful for newcomers to Appalachian literature. If you are new to the subject, I would suggest starting with the supplemental notes to get a sense of the authors, works, and time periods covered in the anthology because that information is not clearly expressed in the otherwise useful introduction. Some of the names will be familiar—for example, Cormac McCarthy, John Crowley, and Jo Carson—while others will be less recognizable.

For scholars focused on a single author such as McCarthy or Carson, they are well represented in the text; however, the real value of the collection is in its overall project of contextualization. The first two essays in the anthology, Cratis D. Williams’ “New Directions: Folk or Hillbilly” and Jim Wayne Miller’s “Appalachian Literature at Home in this World,” are broad treatments of the general topic of

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Appalachian literature, and they help contextualize the more specific treatment of individual authors that come after. Williams looks at a range of depictions of Southern Mountaineers in novels and short stories, and gives an interesting account of historical realities and literary portraits of “hillbillies.” It is an educated look at both the danger and value of labels in regional writing. Miller’s article is an overview of the range of Protestantism found in regional writing, and the role of religion in forming an Appalachian literary identity. He uses the split between the “worldly” and “spiritual” mountaineers to point out how the literature of a specific place can “constitute a metaphor for the essential human experience” (24).

The subsequent 27 essays address particular works or authors, so rather than try to summarize each article, I will simply list here the authors discussed in the anthology: Harriette Simpson Arnow, Jo Carson, Fred Chappell, John Crowley, Wilma Dykeman, John Marsden Ehle Jr., Denise Giardina, Cormac McCarthy, Jim Wayne Miller, Robert Morgan, Gurney Norman, Mary Lee Settle, Lee Smith, James Still, and Jesse Stuart. While a few of the essays go back to the ’40s, ’50s, and ’60s, the majority of the works are more contemporary (’80s or later). Overall, the quality of the criticism is high—Joyce Carol Oates is a contributor—but, as is to be expected in such a wide-ranging anthology, the quality is not consistent throughout. Nonetheless, this is a valuable addition to any “Americanist’s” bookshelf, and a solid collection of essays.

In their introduction, the editors set each of the critical responses and authors within a larger framework of regional literature and history, and ask the reader to re-imagine Appalachia apart from stereotypes and misinformation. They list their goals clearly, and perhaps their chief hope is to spark interest and further critical commentary. The overall thrust of the anthology is to present Appalachian literature afresh, and to point out its centrality to American literature as a whole while establishing it as a legitimate regional literature. The editors acknowledge that no single work can accomplish all this, but *An American Vein* is a strong beginning and an excellent introduction to an underappreciated vein of literature. ✱