

Pynchon Anthologized

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Forms of the Novella: Ten Short Novels. Ed.

David H. Richter. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981.
833 pp. \$9.95.

Teaching Pynchon is an interesting business; graduate students often welcome the opportunity to wander in another literary labyrinth, while undergraduates react somewhat suspiciously to this strange text that was not sanctioned by the undergrad anthology's all-knowing editor. But Pynchon's writing is beginning to find its way into the anthologies, the latest example being The Crying of Lot 49 in David H. Richter's Forms of the Novella. What will insure this anthology's adoption by many Introduction to Fiction teachers is the blend of standard and not-so-standard novellas offered in addition to Lot 49: Gogol's The Overcoat, Melville's Billy Budd, James's The Aspern Papers, Chopin's The Awakening, Conrad's Heart of Darkness, Joyce's The Dead, Kafka's The Metamorphosis, Lawrence's St. Mawr, and Porter's Pale Horse, Pale Rider.

Richter opens the anthology with a twenty-six page Introduction (each writer and work also receives a three-to-six page introduction), outlining general principles for the formal study of narrative. This Introduction has a distinct Aristotelian flavor, as Richter follows some of his former mentors at the University of Chicago in presenting an adapted version of the Poetics. Richter tries to cover a lot of ground in presenting analytic principles, and for the most part his presentation is a coherent capsule of narrative theory. Too often, however, Richter seems to have forgotten the intended audience of his book--the undergraduate; indeed, Richter's "implied reader" appears to be the instructor who is conversant with the many different "novels" cited as representative of formal properties. For example, how many sophomores today could relate to the following: "In plots of this kind [where the fate of the protagonist is defined in terms of a change in consciousness], the focus of our concern may be on the protagonist's

developing capacity for making mature moral decisions (as in Dickens's Great Expectations) or, conversely, on his or her ethical degeneration (as in André Gide's The Immoralist)" (7-8)?

This example would perhaps have worked if The Immoralist had been included in the collection, but as is the case with many of Richter's other examples, the reference is to a text outside the student's immediate frame of reference. Richter's Introduction would have been stronger pedagogically if he had drawn more exclusively on his own anthology for references. Moreover, Richter ignores many current theories of narrative which have built upon, superseded, and sometimes contradicted the formulations of the Chicago School. Most notable by its absence is any mention of reader-oriented approaches to narrative, particularly Wolfgang Iser's important inversions of Wayne C. Booth's categories of the narrator, which Richter relies upon heavily. On the other hand, many might find Richter's narrow focus a good foundation for generating analytical disputes in the classroom. Thankfully, the novellas are not burdened down with the baggage of "Suggestions for Papers or Discussion."

The Crying of Lot 49 is mentioned three times in the Introduction, twice in interpretive examples of formal devices: "Some authors [Pynchon in Lot 49 specifically] keep all the characters more or less remote from us, maintaining an aesthetic distance that keep [sic] the agents on a 'storybook' level and defeats our desire to 'identify with' the author's creations" (16); "And overreading [in search of symbols] can have its dangers: Oedipa Maas, the heroine of The Crying of Lot 49, is a cautionary example--a woman who sees symbolic significance in so many places that she wonders whether the world is a hieroglyph to be deciphered--or whether she herself is crazy. It is a thought that has occurred to more than one possessed seeker after meanings" (20-21). If the latter statement is true, then it contradicts the former by postulating a group of readers, and especially fanatic readers of Pynchon, who could easily "identify with" Oedipa. In the third comment on the novel, Richter suggests one way his collection can be used: he groups Lot 49 with Heart of Darkness, Odysseus's descent into Hades, Dante's Inferno, and the

Egyptian Book of the Dead among other stories depicting "the archetypal night journey from life through death to a new rebirth" (25). As mentioned earlier, Richter could have used the anthologized texts more frequently as examples of the narrative principles he discusses, and Lot 49 could have easily been cited as an example of "depiction of the writer's milieu," "Irony," "Scene vs. Summary," and the narrator's "Privilege" among other devices.

Richter's specific introduction to Lot 49 presents what little is known of Pynchon's life, as well as short précis of V., Lot 49, and Gravity's Rainbow. Readers familiar with Pynchon's writing should not expect startling insights in this four-page essay, or much information in the one-page bibliography covering all of Pynchon's production plus some of the standard secondary materials, but a few errors need correction. Richter dates V.'s history from 1901; however, her first appearance is during the Fashoda incident of 1898. The discussion of V. also neglects Benny Profane. In the bibliography of secondary materials David Cowart's Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion has been left out of the general criticism, and Tony Tanner's and Frank Kermode's important essays on Lot 49 have not been singled out for special consideration among the criticism devoted to the novel.

Another special aspect of Richter's edition of Lot 49 is the addition of forty-four annotations explaining "proper names, foreign phrases, and technical terms not found in college dictionaries" (vii). However, it is not to be assumed that this is an exhaustive critical text, and some of the annotations will be trivial to most readers. For example, note 1 identifies Jay Gould--"U.S. financier and speculator (1836-1892), known for his 1869 attempt to corner the gold market, which caused a nationwide panic"--who should be familiar to any student who made it through high school American History, and who is possibly more familiar than Bartók, mentioned eight words before in the text; and note 2 informs the reader what Wendell ("Mucho") Maas's name means in Spanish. But it might be here that Richter has adequately analyzed his target audience, students. Lot 49 is a text saturated with early sixties culture, and some references--such as to Remedios Varo (here Cowart's work is essential),

Stockhausen, eschatology, a yucateco, and Biedermeyer furniture--need notation for some students. Moreover, since Richter's purpose was not to produce a scholarly, critical edition, teachers of Lot 49 will still have to depend on their own crowded marginalia to unlock some of the intricacies of Pynchon's text.

Finally, Pynchonian readers will appreciate the "Note on the Type" found on the last page of Forms of the Novella: "The text of this book was set in Palatino, a typeface designed by the noted German Typographer Hermann Zapf"; as far as I know, any connection between this book and Zapf's Used Books has yet to be proved.

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