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quality as do the entries themselves, and in some cases they suggest that writers were insufficiently informed on their topic. For example, the bibliography for C. F. M. Noland neglects both editions of his Pete Whetstone letters (1957 and 1979) and also overlooks an important American Literature article (1981). This information is, however, available in Trachtenberg. None of those writing on Russell Baker, Erma Bombeck, Art Buchwald, or Mike Royko lists Neil A. Grauer’s Wits & Sages (1984) which has long chapters on each of these columnists and essayists about whom little has yet been published. Although many of the entries in Encyclopedia of American Humorists are clear, fluent, and original pieces that humor scholars will want to consult, the problems of selection and thoroughness prevent it from being an adequate reference work.

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Few critics of American fiction would argue with the contention that the confidence man is a major, if not the major, character type in our literature. It also appears that few of these critics can agree on just what the precise nature of that enigmatic figure really is. William Lenz’s Fast Talk & Flush Times is the latest attempt to define that nature and, as with other studies, such as Susan Kuhlman’s Knave, Fool and Genius: The Confidence Man as He Appears in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Gary Lindberg’s The Confidence Man in American Literature, its many strengths are finally compromised by its own terms.

Lenz’s basic contention is that the confidence man is a product of the “boom and bust ‘flush times’” of the 1840s as found in “the new country” of the Old Southwest. He would distinguish the confidence man from “tricksters, promisers, shapeshifters, and rogues” who “appear in many genres and periods” (p. 23), insisting that the confidence man is a distinct type that uses fast talk, clever manipulation, and exploitation of ambiguity for personal (preferably profitable) advantage. Lenz further argues that the confidence man needs to be seen as a response to and an expression of the particular culture that gave him birth—the flush times of the Southwest. The book then traces the convention’s rise, its first full appearance in Hooper’s Simon Suggs, four “variations” of the type (Ovid Bolus, Sut Lovingood, Melville’s
The Confidence Man, and Billy Fishback), and finally the convention’s decline after the Civil War, when “the confidence man all but disappears from American fiction as the need to idealize intensifies” (p. 150). Only Twain in this “late” period carries on the tradition, and he does so to “illuminate the danger posed by the contemporary practitioner of confidence art” (p. 166). The twentieth century, Lenz concludes, “marks an end to the confidence man as a distinct literary convention” (p. 196).

Lenz is a perceptive reader of the works he examines. His remarks on the rhetorical nature of the confidence game and on Southwestern Humor are very illuminating. On this basis, his study is most worthwhile. But as an examination of the confidence man, the work is hampered by its own restrictions. Lenz’s argument that the confidence man is found only in a frontier setting is not convincing. Poe’s “Diddling” offers ample evidence that the character was well known in city circles. Lenz would account for this discrepancy by calling the frontier version a confidence man, the city version a diddler, but this is not a meaningful distinction, especially since Lenz does not define the difference he says exists. Furthermore, arguing that the confidence man is basically a type generic to Southwestern Humor leads Lenz to examine works that, by his own terms, do not always comfortably fit the convention he is describing. The Sut Lovingood yarns, for instance, may involve the world of the confidence man, but Sut himself does not easily fit Lenz’s depiction of the profit-seeking, shifty con artist. Finally, although Lenz would exclude the confidence man from the twentieth century on the grounds that the world that gave rise to him no longer exists and that current avatars are victims rather than victimizers, one cannot help but feel that modern variations such as, for example, Jay Gatsby, Randle Patrick Murphy, and many of Flannery O’Connor’s characters, are significant manifestations of the type and that excluding them is ultimately reductive rather than enlightening.

The above reservations are not intended to imply, however, that Lenz’s study is not worth careful consideration. His restrictions form a necessary counterpoise to the broadness of Lindberg’s recent study and the too-peripheral nature of Kuhlman’s. As a definitive statement on the confidence man in American literature, the work falls short. As an important piece in the puzzle that figure inherently presents, Lenz has given us a work that cannot be ignored.

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