

Book Review

THE FARM NOVEL IN NORTH AMERICA: GENRE AND NATION IN THE UNITED STATES, ENGLISH CANADA, AND FRENCH CANADA, 1845–1945.
BY FLORIAN FREITAG.
ROCHESTER, NY: CAMDEN HOUSE, 2013. 364 PAGES.

Studies of Canadian literature that hail from continental Europe appear regularly, but are not read, reviewed or cited as often as works by Canadians. In the case of Florian Freitag's *The Farm Novel in North America*, this common occurrence is a shame: at a time when traditional academic focuses on Canadian or American literature are increasingly complemented by claims to a wider North American area of study, *The Farm Novel* offers an original continent-wide focus.

Freitag identifies the farm novel as a genre that engages with the farm as a “symbolic space” of the nation in American, English Canadian and French Canadian contexts (4). His central argument—that farm novels “dramatize the relationship between farming and constructing the nation” and reveal farming as a “social practice that has helped to articulate the nation” (5)—is a welcome addition to a vast body of work that examines the construction of national identities. It is also unique in that it grapples more directly with the question of nationhood in the Americas. In fact, the book's tripartite focus is itself a compelling statement insofar as it regards three geographical units—one a sovereign state, and the others socio-linguistic areas of another sovereign state—as separate nations. This move allows Freitag to unpack the peculiarities of what are essentially three different national myths: the American farm novel's depiction of farming as a means to achieve the material and nonmaterial successes associated with the American dream; the English Canadian variant's use of settlement and farming to represent order, control and good government; and the French Canadian farm novel's preoccupation with the ability of farmer families and dynasties to ensure French cultural survival in the Americas.

This structure reveals precise differences among what could broadly be called North American settlement novels. A mastery of these critical traditions also allows Freitag to notice some of their shortcomings: for example, the fact that American literary criticism's ongoing shift towards

the transnational usually tends to ignore Canada's role in a continent of hybrid identities (10).

Inevitably, however, the scope of *The Farm Novel* makes for some shortcomings. As impressive as is Freitag's reach, a study that covers a full hundred years of literary output is forced to move quickly. Aside from these issues with periodization, its focus on three large literary traditions results in critical omissions. Freitag accounts for some of these, such as when he declares that his engagement with the farm "de-emphasizes the category of the pastoral" (12). On the other hand, in a passage about genre and English Canadian farm novels, he states that "the adequacy and relevance of the terms 'realistic' and 'romantic' themselves need to be questioned" (54), yet fails to mention that influential works by Glenn Willmott and Colin Hill have done just this. At another point, he adulterates a compelling survey of historicist positions with an unnecessary discussion of thematic criticism (48–49).

Still, many of Freitag's arguments succeed in combining larger ideas with increased specificity. The first chapter squares its argumentative ambition with a rigorous methodology, using a New Historicist model of intertextuality in conjunction with the work of Ansgar Nünning. As a result, Freitag can argue that farm novels "simultaneously draw on and contribute to nationally distinct historical discourses" (12) while grounding this idea with Nünning's formulation of the way literary texts imitate historical contexts rather than strive to represent some broader reality (25). This impressive critical range makes for many refreshing propositions, such as when he finds in early American settlement novels similarities with the Teutonic germ theory that later would be used to explain continuities between American and European institutions (80). In chapter seven, one finds the compelling argument that all three literary traditions explore the intrusion of linear time in a world still governed by cyclical movement (268).

Despite some missteps, Freitag's ambition dovetails with a willingness to put forward strong critical positions, and the result is a forceful work of literary criticism. And, at a time when new monographs seem to be addressing ever smaller and more obscure corners of familiar topics, his large ideas seem especially useful. One wishes there were more works ambitious enough to take a comparative approach to the literatures of North America's "three nations," or even to articulate the differences between these entities in such a way. Still, Freitag's concluding paragraphs perfectly encapsulate the monograph's combination of striking originality and sporadic general-

izing. Here, one finds a typically wide-ranging and creative rumination that links the English-language farm novel to the era of globalization and the war on terror. A preceding statement that the French Canadian farm novel “ceased to function as a productive genre” (310), however, is as laconic and constraining as the above denouement—and much of *The Farm Novel*—is expansive and exciting.

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