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Jay Parini, ed. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*. Oxford University Press, 2004. 2400p.

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A sound reference set should entice readers to read more widely and deeply, not dispense *ex cathedra* opinions or be guilty of countless sins of omission when it comes to exploratory writing. In my estimation, this encyclopedia fails to catalyze research and engages in opinion-mongering and a curious myopia about experimental writing.

At first glance I imagined that Parini wanted to distill the essence of *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies*, the sixteen-volume publication he helped edit in recent years, into a less unwieldy, more user-friendly set. That set, like this *Oxford Encyclopedia*, offers a traditional synoptic overview of major American literary figures through hundreds of brief essays ranging in quality from workmanlike to inspired, from a variety of academic authorities. It errs on the side of inclusiveness perhaps. Those sixteen volumes have been useful for some students writing papers seeking a concise overview, though my students prefer the greater brevity of *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, or any of the numerous Internet sites offering such information in easy-to-digest form.

Given the plentitude of sources for the traditional synoptic overview of major American authors, it is fair to ask why Oxford University Press needed to publish *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*. One obvious answer: there is more here than overviews of authors. There are dozens of analyses of the salient features of literary works and articles on themes, though the total number of entries in both these categories is far less than the number of traditional synoptic author articles. So a reader in judging the utility of this reference work would do well to look at the index in Volume Four and peruse the range of works and themes illuminated.

Is anyone in dire need of a plot summary of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*? If so, the turns in that novel of far-from-baroque complexity are richly explained. Does Plath's *The Bell Jar* call for a detailed chapter analysis? Or *Gone With the Wind*? On the other hand, a narrative summary of Herman Melville's epic poem *Clarel* might have been welcomed. Or an essay concerned with textual differences among the editions of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* would have been helpful.

If *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies* erred on the side of inclusiveness, the omission of major writers in this encyclopedia is astonishing. There are decent articles on Robert Creeley and Gary Snyder, but no article about the

poet who so richly inspired both, not to mention hundreds of others: Charles Olson. An article on “Black Mountain Poetry,” a highly controversial classification of writers invented by the editor Don Allen, mentions Olson and his writing superficially, a tawdry mistreatment given to many major experimental writers of the past half-century. The sheer provincialism and narrow conservatism informing the scope of this encyclopedia can be best judged by the following fact. Two movements in American poetry since 1980 have impacted hundreds of writers and thousands of readers. One is “The New Formalism,” a group of poets writing about contemporary subjects using traditional poetic forms. The others group, “the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school” consists of poets who radically experiment with innovative poetic form. “The New Formalism” is described in an eight-page hymn of praise by Gerry Cambridge that opens with “The rise of New Formalism was probably the most significant development in American poetry in the last fifteen years of the twentieth century.” Whether one agrees with Cambridge’s authoritative proclamation or not—and I don’t—it is revealing that the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school of poets receives no article of its own. There is not even a pretense of impartiality in dozens of articles in this work. Uncritical adulation is richly evident on the one hand (see the article on Muriel Rukeyser establishing her feminist sainthood for an example), character assassination on the other. Examine Philip Hobsbaum’s ill-tempered diatribe against several of the women poets in his article on “Confessional Poetry” for partisan criticism at its most flagrantly unjust. It seems that Hobsbaum just manically hated some of the writers he was assigned to explicate. Why did he bother?

A handful of the more balanced articles do succeed, among them the ones on “Nature Writing,” “The Long Poem” (which shows a knowledgeable respect for Olson’s key contribution to the evolution of that form), and “Native American Literature.” These are thoughtfully written essays, sadly surrounded by demonstrations of shallow cheerleading or poorly focused debunking. A fine encyclopedia of American literature should be a book to inspire awe and inspire close reading and independent research. This thinly-veiled bully-pulpit of an encyclopedia can only inspire cynicism about the future of a publisher with a noble track record of producing high-quality literary reference texts until now. ✨