
Mary McAleer Balkun. *The American Counterfeit: Authenticity and Identity in American Literature and Culture*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. 181p.

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The American Counterfeit is a rare creature: it is an imaginative cultural criticism of 19th-century texts that is as enjoyable to read as the literature it engages. Balkun explores the formation of identity in relation to 19th-century concepts of authenticity and counterfeiting, which leads to an investigation of contemporary museums, the mania for collecting, the fears of forgery, and the increasing importance of objects in American culture. Despite the wide-ranging scope of this inquiry Balkun keeps the discussion rooted in such canonical texts as James' "The Real Thing," Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. She also takes on more obscure texts such as Whitman's *Specimen Days*, and Nella Larsen's *Passing*. While the approach is fresh and unusual, Balkun's conclusions are so convincing as to seem self-evident once she has mapped them out.

Balkun shows how the American myth of self creation (the "self made man") and the increasing consumerism of the 19th-century merge in a commodification of the self. Authenticity applies to people as well as to objects, and "where the two intersect—where one can speak of the personification of objects and the objectification of persons—is in the realm of material culture, which includes...museums, department store windows, catalogues, world's fairs and expositions, private collections, and even rubbish" (9). Chapter 1, "The Real, the Self, and Commodity Culture, 1880-1930," explores the ironies of James' "The Real Thing" and concludes with the ultimate irony: "In a world where 'models' are authentic, the real thing can only be a sham" (17).

Chapter 2, "Whitman's Natural History: *Specimen Days* and the Culture of Authenticity," argues that Whitman's organizational structure in *Specimen Days* is that of the 19th-century museum. "Whitman, while not writing a 'natural history' per se, does give the natural history museum a literary form" (40). Balkun looks closely at Whitman's poetic need to "create and re-create, to order and to name," and ties his project convincingly into her rubric of "authenticity" (40). Particularly strong is Chapter 3, "I couldn't see no profit in it'; Discourses of Commoditization and Authority in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*." Beginning with the "hair ball" scene where Huck offers Jim a counterfeit quarter to hear his future from the magic hair ball, Balkun unravels the complex interplay of ownership, identity, authenticity, and fraud as tropes in the novel. She reads Twain's novel as a devastating critique

of “the counterfeit nature of the American Dream,” and this is a must-read chapter for anyone who teaches Twain.

Chapter 4, “Connoisseurs and Counterfeits: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*,” views Lily Bart as a commodity on the New York marriage market. Chapter 5, “Dressing to Kill: Desire, Race, and Authenticity in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,” examines fashion and female desire in a commodity culture in relation to constructions of racial identity. The final chapter, “A World of Wonders: Collecting and the Authentic Self in *The Great Gatsby*,” is similar to Chapter 2 in that it argues an organizational structure, this time on the model of a “Cabinet of Wonders.” While the collectors are all men, and Daisy is the object of desire, Balkun goes beyond the obvious her to read the novel as an unveiling of counterfeit after counterfeit, and the eternal hope for the “real thing.”

I have not read a work of cultural criticism this sharp and compelling in quite a while. Balkun’s *The American Counterfeit* manages to have a broad general appeal while offering specific, compelling criticism of each of the subject texts. This one is a gem, and I recommend it highly. ✨