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**Book Review: Şimşek, Erhan. *Creating Realities: Business as a Motif in American Fiction, 1865-1929*. New York: Transcript Publishing, 2019. 253 Pp.**

Historians tend to be captivated by the fiction of the periods they study. Yet many economic and business historians, especially those of us who like to spice up our syllabi with some fiction, often do not find much economic coverage there. Erhan Şimşek's new book is a helpful resource in that regard, as it discusses depictions of business in American fiction over a 65-year span. Although the book is not meant to be comprehensive, it tells a convincing story about the changing depiction of business in American literature and offers numerous examples, including detailed treatments of two relatively overlooked novels that perhaps should be required reading for any American economic or business historian.

A key theme of the book is how the center of literary gravity shifted from Romanticism to Realism to Naturalism as America moved from agriculture to industry to mass production. A related change was that authors increasingly wrote for the marketplace, as opposed to relying on wealthy benefactors. American literature often struggled, both commercially and artistically, to respond to the changing society. The book's last two chapters describe one more recent transition, from Naturalism to Modernism. The book is not so much about business novels, which were scarce at the time, but fiction that uses business as a *motif*, i.e., as a meaningful element in the story. As the terminology may suggest, this is a work of literary criticism. As an economic historian with limited exposure to literary criticism, I am admittedly not qualified to judge this book on its own terms. Instead, I will try to identify how the book is useful to historians.

The first two chapters describe the aforementioned societal transition. One might assume that people moving closer together would have brought them together in a psychological sense as well, but Şimşek argues that within these dense and diverse communities people experienced a strong sense of dislocation. The new urban dwellers, he says, had lost touch with their original communities and the small-town institutions that had grounded them in certainties about what was real and true. They wanted fiction that reflected the realities of their time. Romantic novels, which tended to be set in the distant past (*The Scarlet Letter*) or in the wilderness (*Moby-Dick*), did not do that. Postbellum fiction contained much description of urban capitalist society, though perhaps less for the sake of accuracy than verisimilitude. Realism, Şimşek says, was more about *seeming* real than depicting reality, warts and all. Realist stories tended to have virtuous protagonists who triumphed or flawed ones who came to see the errors of their ways and embrace Victorian virtues.

Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches novels are perhaps the ultimate in pious Realist fiction. Şimşek devotes a few pages to Alger, but a more literary Realist novel, William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), gets a whole chapter. This book was one of the best-selling novels of the decade. Silas is a man of modest origins who has become a wealthy paint manufacturer in Boston. Although sympathetic as a hardworking, basically well-meaning underdog who is looked down upon by his old-money neighbors, he is also grasping and immature. Much of the book's plot unfolds at the paint factory. After several plot twists, Silas

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passes a crucial moral test, loses his fortune, and returns to his roots. Despite the book's success at the time, it has long since been eclipsed by works by contemporaries like Mark Twain, Henry James, and Edith Wharton. The deepening drama of the Gilded Age, from bloody labor confrontations to anxiety over monopolization, generated a demand for fiction that was more intense, less optimistic, and bigger in scope.

The Naturalist movement provided that fiction. Novels like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Frank Norris's *The Octopus* and *The Pit* vividly described the worlds of the meat trust, the railroads, and commodities traders. Naturalist fiction included unpleasant and sometimes disgusting details. Upbeat moralism was absent. In a reflection of society, immoral characters often triumphed and injustice persisted. Şimşek seems most drawn to the Naturalists, as he devotes his longest chapter by far to Theodore Dreiser's 1912 novel *The Financier*. The title character is a bona fide Robber Baron, a financial speculator a la Jay Gould with the guile and the resources to manipulate markets. Its climax takes place during the Panic of 1873. Gilded Age business and economics are front and center in this book.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's Modernist novel *The Great Gatsby* is covered briefly but effectively. Unlike the Naturalists, whose grisly narratives were reformist or anti-capitalist, Fitzgerald, as a Modernist, was opaque in his opinions of the business and society he depicted in his book. Readers have to form their own opinions of Gatsby, his business dealings, and more. Into that artful confusion Şimşek introduces a neat suggestion by Anne Crow: What if Gatsby was murdered by one of his business associates? It's a promising rabbit hole for anyone looking to explore or heighten the business motif in *Gatsby*.

All told, Şimşek's book has much to offer to economic and business historians looking to connect American literature to their subject. I did have some issues with it, however. First of all, it needs an index. The book would be much more useful as a reference to business-related stories if finding them did not entail so much page-flipping. Some of the book's jargon seemed gratuitous, in particular the repeated use of the word *Darstellung*. This is a German word that the author introduces briefly and says will be used interchangeably with "representation" in the book. Yet *Darstellung* is used at least a couple hundred times and slowed me down every time. If they're interchangeable, why not just use "representation"? I got a lot out of this book, but it may not be the best introduction to the intersection of history and literature in postbellum America. In particular, Alan Trachtenberg's classic *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982) is more accessible and historically minded.

Ranjit S. Dighe, State University of New York at Oswego, United States

### Works Cited

Trachtenberg, Alan. 1982. *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. New York: Hill and Wang.