

# Defending a Few Hills and Valleys

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J. Arthur Bloom

*From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920–1965*

By Jon Lauck

(University of Iowa Press, 2017)

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From the end of the Civil War to the end of World War I, the Midwest reigned politically, economically, and socially pre-eminent among regions of the United States. During that time, the area produced five out of nine presidents and remained prosperous, wracked neither by the burgeoning class strife of the industrial Northeast nor the post-Reconstruction malaise of the South. America may have been born on the East Coast, but it grew to maturity between the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. It was there that Americans came closest to realizing the ideal of Jeffersonian independence.

Today the Midwest's glory days are behind it. Last November, the political class was unpleasantly surprised to find out that people still lived there, and that some of them even vote. Intrepid scribes from New York and Washington parachuted into the Rust Belt as if it were Kiev or Baghdad. They conducted themselves like foreign correspondents in their own country, all hoping to find out what came over their provincial countrymen. This impulse to figure out what's wrong with midwesterners, with their authoritarian personalities and paranoid

style, has a long history. There is always something the matter with Kansas.

A new book by Jon Lauck, *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge*, goes back to the early twentieth century to find out “how the Midwest as a region faded from our collective imagination, fell off the map, and became an object of derision.” It builds on his previous book, *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History*, which argues for a return to forgotten traditions of regional study. This time, Lauck focuses on the ways midwestern literature was dismissed by the national—which is to say, eastern—literary establishment and how midwestern authors tried to push back against the caricature of a bland, repressive, cultureless wasteland whose only worthy literature was about trying to flee from it. In the words of a *Harper's* editor in 1950 that express the snobbishness of the time, “Only nobodies lived west of the Alleghenies.”

The image of the Midwest as cultural wilderness was first put forth by *The Nation's* literary editor Carl Van Doren in 1921. Grouping together works by novelists Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald,

and the poet Edgar Lee Masters, Van Doren described what he called the “revolt from the village.” To this day, Van Doren’s condescending depiction is a theme of literary criticism about the era. A 2011 book on Grace Metalious’s *Peyton Place*, for example, talks about the “hagiographic status” of the small town, situating its subject in a tradition of shattering the “carefully guarded belief in the nation’s small towns as the purest, most upright, and moral places in the land.”

Yet Lauck meticulously assembles evidence that many midwestern authors did not see their own work in this way. Fitzgerald’s most famous character, Nick Carraway, first describes the region as the “ragged edge of the universe.” Later, after coming to know New York, he regards it more positively as the “warm center of the world.” Though *The Great Gatsby* is not generally mentioned in the same list as *Main Street*, *Spoon River Anthology*, and other more typical village-revolt literature, it shares some qualities with them as well as posing interpretive challenges. While the main character leaves the Midwest for an exciting life in the big city, he does return home, having grown quite disillusioned with the eastern elite.

Nor was a village revolt typical of the Midwest’s literature at the time. Masters, for example, nursed an unfashionable affection for the Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley. He also seems to have despised Chicago, the closest midwestern equivalent to an eastern metropolis. Sherwood Anderson expressed “confusion” about Van Doren’s interpretation to its author himself. “I do wish to stand by these people,” Anderson insisted. Of the eastern critics, Anderson wrote that they “think the United States ends at Pittsburgh and believe there’s nothing but desert and a few Indians and Hollywood on the other side.”

Sinclair Lewis was a tougher case because of his peregrinations around the region and self-promoting tendencies. But he nonethe-

less supported regionalist writers and vehemently contested suggestions that he had set himself against his people. “If I didn’t love Main Street would I write of it so hotly?” he asked. He was angry at the small-town Midwest because he also recognized its virtues and promise.

But in literature, as in so many other things, people see what they want to see. The village-revolt interpretation gained currency and eventually became conventional wisdom for several reasons. Among them were the growth of radical politics and aesthetic modernists’ attack on “Victorianism.” In America, the Midwest’s traditions of personal modesty and hard work served as a home-grown proxy for the ostensible hypocrisy of Christian, bourgeois morality. Lauck traces the idea that Puritan traditions migrated west to the literary critic Van Wyck Brooks, who wondered what Mark Twain could have become had he not hailed from the “dry, old, barren, horizonless Middle West,” “the barrenest spot in all Christendom.” It did not occur to Brooks that *Huckleberry Finn* could hardly have been written by someone born anywhere else.

Most influential among the Midwest’s enemies, though, was H. L. Mencken, implacable enemy of what he called the “booboisie.” The “literature of satire, sneer, and smear of such men as Mencken and the *American Mercury* group,” wrote University of Kansas historian James Malin, promoted “ridicule of the typical American, the common man, and his institutions.” By and large, this account is accurate. Mencken once described the whole regionalist movement as “imaginary” and said of Willa Cather, “I don’t care how well she writes, I don’t give a damn what happens in Nebraska.” On the other hand, Mencken extended writing opportunities to the Iowa-based writer Ruth Suckow, whose German ancestry intrigued him, and wondered if authors close to the regionalist movement were its biggest victims by association.

Unfortunately, these gestures were less widely recognized than his scorn.

Lauck's second chapter focuses on what he calls the "failed revolt against the revolt" by midwestern scholars and novelists who rejected elitist caricatures of their region. Most of these figures were new to me, which perhaps speaks to Lauck's point that their midwestern counterrevolution was a bust. Important among them was John T. Frederick, founding editor of the literary journal *The Midland*. Around this magazine, Frederick cultivated a circle of regionalist voices, most notably Suckow and Jay Sigmund. The former, first published in Frederick's magazine, went on to write *Country People* and *The Folks*, novels that focused on small-town life. Sigmund was a close friend of regionalist painter Grant Wood, published more than a thousand poems, and collaborated with Betty Smith, author of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

The members of this circle were not just regressive provincials. The Wisconsin writer Hamlin Garland was a follower of Henry George. The social reformer Dorothy Canfield Fisher hailed from Kansas. The midwestern milieu even produced one Communist Party member in the actress and children's book author Meridel LeSueur. Lauck notes that LeSueur "attempted to fuse an existing regionalist orientation... to newer forms of radical protest" but concludes that this tendency was not widely accepted.

The final part of the book examines how and why the once-robust field of Midwestern Studies was eclipsed after the Second World War. The Midwest was discredited politically by its tradition of noninterventionist foreign policy. When "isolationism" became a slur, the reputation of the Midwest took a serious hit. In the '50s and '60s, regional concerns were further pushed aside. The idea of an independent midwestern culture was challenged on the one hand by a Cold War anticommunism that emphasized national unity, and on the other by a left that subor-

dated regional concerns to issues of class and race.

Academic trends also played a role. As the universities grew dramatically in the decades after the war, several factors militated against regional studies. One was a growing professional hostility to "amateur" historians and local historical societies, the traditional seedbeds of regional history. Another was the transformation of colleges serving their immediate areas into enormous institutions competing for national stature and federal research dollars. Under these conditions, scholars themselves found less and less reason to remain connected to their own places.

Lauck ends with a call for reviving regionalism in history and in literature. Such a revival, he argues, will produce salutary effects both for the Midwest and for American democracy as a whole. This literary and historical "resistance" is to be waged by defending a few "hills and valleys, not on winning a culture war by defeating the invading forces of mass culture all along the line." It sounds a bit like Rod Dreher's Benedict Option for regional believers.

Lauck calls for midwestern rebels to strike a more joyful tone than "catastrophist" critics of urban homogeneity like Lewis Mumford. One wonders, however, if Lauck has appended his call to arms to what is basically a lovely if somewhat belated eulogy. A healthy regionalism would certainly try to hold its own against coastal cultural imperialism. Alas, it does not do so today. Even in the Midwest, regional identity gets expressed in the tones of Sarah Palin, not Ruth Suckow.

A handful of new publications highlighting midwestern literature, such as *Midwestern Gothic* and the *Old Northwest Review*, give reason for hope. Yet it could be the case that mass culture and declining economic prospects have taken their toll and that there is simply less to distinguish a midwesterner from his coastal or southern counterparts than there used to be. That does not mean

midwesterners have been pacified, but it may make them more amenable to channeling their grievances through a New York television personality. Lots of people say they want to make America great again. What about Sauk City or Iowa Falls?

Lauck occasionally frames his argument in terms one associates with the political left, decrying the “colonialist attitudes” of literary critics—fighting words in the twenty-first-century academy!—and appealing to pluralism. But there is something fundamentally conservative about the desire for a community worthy of one’s affections, the frustration of which has prompted a rash of books about cultural estrangement by religious authors including Dreher and Archbishop Charles Chaput. Lauck’s remedy, however, is less political or theological than artistic. It lies in remembering that your forebears produced great things right where they were and that it is a high calling to live up to their example. Failing that, you might try learning their names.

The alternative would be to prove that Manhattan was right all along; that the Midwest is nothing but a hinterland, taking its cultural cues from New York and California or, at best, musically from Nashville. Lauck has taken an important step away from that conclusion by making a persuasive case that there is something attractive about the worldview of his subjects. Concerning the future, he is more hopeful than this reader, writing, “The Midwest—if distorting interpretive fogs and the clutter of other agendas are cleared away, and if forgotten midwestern regionalist voices are recalled and an older school of midwestern history is revived and put to work in the service of regionalism—can be found again.” That’s a mouthful and perhaps a quixotic goal. But only a heartless person would wish Lauck anything but success.

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