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Contesting the Past, Reconstructing the Nation: American Literature and Culture in the Gilded Age, 1876-1893 (Amer Lit Realism & Naturalism)

Ben Railton

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Fables of American history embodied in Gilded Age literature

In this study of Gilded Age literature and culture, Ben Railton proposes that in the years after Reconstruction, America's identity was often contested through distinct and competing conceptions of the nation's history. He argues that the United States moved toward unifying and univocal historical narratives in the years between the Centennial and Columbian Expositions, that ongoing social conflict provided sites for complications of those narratives, and that works of historical literature offer some of the most revealing glimpses into the nature of those competing visions.

Gilded Age scholarship often connects the period to the 20th-century American future, but Railton argues that it is just as crucial to see how the era relates to the American past. He closely analyzes the 1876 and 1893 Expositions, finding that many of the period's central trends, from technology to imperialism, were intimately connected to particular visions of the nation's history. Railton's concern is with four key social questions: race, Native Americans, women, and the South. He provides close readings of a number of texts for the ways they highlight these issues. He examines established classics *(The Adventures of Huck Finn and The Bostonians)*; newer additions to the canon *(The Conjure Woman, Life Among the Piutes, The Story of Avis)*; largely forgotten best-sellers *(Uncle Remus, The Grandissimes)*; unrecovered gems *(Ploughed Under, Where the Battle Was Fought)*; and autobiographical works by Douglass and Truth, poems by Harper and Piatt, and short stories by Woolson and Cook.

These readings, while illuminating the authors themselves, contribute to ongoing conversations over historical literature's definition and value, and a greater understanding of not only American society in the Gilded Age, but also debates on our shared but contested history that remain very much alive in the present.

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