

BOOK REVIEW: *EXPLORING CAPITALIST FICTION:
BUSINESS THROUGH LITERATURE AND FILM*

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Edward W. Younkens: *Exploring Capitalist Fiction: Business through Literature and Film*. New York: Lexington Books, 2014. ISBN: 978-0739184264, 346 pages.

Edward Younkens is an energetic scholar. If I'm counting right, during the past decade he has written or edited four books: *Philosophers of Capitalism* (2005), *Champions of a Free Society* (2008), *Ayn Rand's "Atlas Shrugged"* (2007), and *Flourishing and Happiness in a Free Society* (2011). Now comes a fifth: *Exploring Capitalist Fiction*. In this book he addresses himself to a topic that has been studied before, but perhaps never with such a large variety of examples. His book is a close examination of the ways in which capitalism and capitalistic business are presented in 25 works of fiction, and it is at least a summary treatment of many others.

Younkens' intellectual framing of these works is especially interesting, because it points to the important role of literature in the study and creation

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of values. Literature tells stories of life, but it also helps people to create their own life stories. Speaking of fiction with “moral purposes” (which, I would add, is most fiction, in one way or another), Younkins says:

People who read or view normative fiction are likely to be better prepared to recognize and attend to moral dilemmas in their own lives. Literary authors and filmmakers frequently present life-altering events that involve fundamental normative questions and decisions. One benefit of such works is to activate the process of self-examination. They act as catalysts prompting a person to step back to gain a better perspective on the important things in life...

It follows that studying business fiction can provide understanding to business people and students regarding real life situations. Fiction can also stimulate people’s imagination, judgment, and entrepreneurial vision. Each person’s life has a narrative structure and fiction can help in creating one’s own story. (1-2)

I have quoted this passage at length because it offers an antidote to a common tendency of analysts of social and economic trends, the tendency to consult statistical tables, government reports, academic research studies, polemical statements of opposing political entities—anything but the vast array of stories that reveal, in the greatest conceivable detail and diversity, the life options that people seriously entertain. Readers and movie watchers know it, and analysts of society should know it too: “imagination,” as Younkins says, is “a way to illuminate facts” (1).

Important also is the fact that Younkins recognizes that there is a film literature as well as a print literature, and that some basic rules of fiction that operate in one literature operate in the other too: stories require conflicts, meaningful stories require conflicts of values, and readers or watchers can gain insight into their own values by seeing the ways in which fictional people deal with their value conflicts.

Younkins, though a libertarian, is admirably catholic in his selection of material. One cannot learn what people believe about capitalism, how they believe it and why they believe it, by studying only the literary exponents of capitalism. Younkins’ summaries are even-handed and free from propaganda, though he does not neglect to observe important differences between fact and fiction, when fiction is used for propaganda purposes. Some of the works he treats are of superb literary value (e. g., Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*); others have no literary value at all (Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* or Henry Hazlitt’s good-heartedly libertarian *Time Will Run Back*). Most are respectable mid-range offerings (Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, David Lodge’s *Nice Work*). A few are eccentric personal visions that can be read with profit by people who discover their existence

(Theodore Dreiser's *The Financier*, Frank Norris's *The Octopus*). It's good to have Younkins on hand, pointing out these works and developing their significance. And it's refreshing to see works chosen because of their importance to the subject itself and not because of the current ideological or professional interests of academics (of whom, I confess, I am one).

An older colleague of mine once opined that "if a book isn't on the reading lists for college courses, it is dead." I don't think that's completely true; no one teaches *Gone with the Wind*, but it is very much alive; and *The Lord of the Rings* was alive before it was certified by any college course. In general, though, my academic friend was right. College literature courses provide the most significant guidance to young people who want to know what's out there in the literary world, and right now the guidance is probably less sufficient than it ever was, even in the days of the "genteel tradition." Works once prized for supreme artistic achievement still appear on the reading lists, but they are often used only as platforms for "ist" readings—feminist, Marxist, post-colonialist, post-post-structuralist. The other bad academic habit is to assume that a literary period can be represented mainly by ephemeral publications (pulp novels, propaganda pieces, comics, porn), unearthed by a professor's grad-school research into social "formations" and "conditions." What "people in literature" generally don't value, or in many cases know anything about, is the accomplished mid-range novel (William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*), the ungainly masterpiece (*The Octopus*, *The Financier*), and the ideological text that doesn't cut their own way (Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*). Younkins examines those books, and more. In fact, if a work about his subject omitted books like that, it would have no claim to represent the field.

Exploring Capitalist Fiction is divided into four major sections: an introductory summary of the 25 works it treats in detail, then a chapter on each, then a conclusion briefly summarizing a variety of works about business, and appendices listing a still greater variety. There is also a survey of college professors' rankings of "the best novels and plays about business." Younkins' arrangement of his material produces a certain amount of repetition, but it's a good basic way of proceeding. His summaries are always judicious and fair. He never succumbs to the temptation to perform a literary apotheosis on works he appreciates on philosophical grounds, while condemning to hell those he doesn't. This is a real accomplishment, of which few writers in this area have ever shown themselves capable.

Younkins is willing to provide perspective on false claims, such as those made in the film *Tucker: The Man and His Dream* about the knightly opposition of its eponymous hero to big corporations and big government. As Younkins indicates, Preston Tucker wasn't exactly that kind of hero. While reading the

book, however, I was often impressed—and in a way, amused—by the severity of Younkings’ scholarly restraint. Going through his chapter on Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, a utopian novel that manages to combine an almost sadistic dullness with lampshade-on-the-head absurdity, I came to a passage in which Younkings explains, with a straight face, that in Bellamy’s imagined society “crime is nearly nonexistent because everyone receives the same credit [to buy goods and services] and, therefore, there is no need to steal” (30). I couldn’t help picturing the heroic agony in which Younkings repressed his desire to add, “The reason ‘crime is nearly nonexistent’ is that Edward Bellamy has no imagination about human motives.” Younkings’ effort at self-restraint succeeds. I am happy to say, however, that a few pages later he can resist no more. He notes that although *Looking Backward* is the story of a workers’ state, “ironically, we never see anyone actually working, striving, pursuing, or producing anything” (33). It had to be said, and I’m glad he said it.

Of course, no work that has the scope of Younkings’ can be free from faulty generalizations or simple mistakes. Contrary to what Younkings says, Sinclair Lewis did not receive the Nobel Prize for *Babbitt* (6). It is probably his best novel, but the Nobel Prize in Literature is given for a career, not a work, and Lewis, as prolific as Younkings, published five other novels between *Babbitt* and the Prize. It’s not clear what Younkings means when he says that before “*Babbitt* (1922) the businessman had consistently been portrayed as a rugged individualist” (278). I’m not certain that’s true even about the Horatio Alger books. In fact, businessmen had been portrayed in almost every way it is possible to portray the members of a large and diverse profession, with rugged individualists a distinct minority in such portrayals. When Younkings observes that the post-Civil War era was characterized by a “materialistic philosophy” that “promoted a widespread sense of distrust” (273), I wonder what exactly was that philosophy? Who stated it? Who argued for it? What was its importance when compared, for instance, to that of Christian evangelicalism, then at high tide in America, with plenty of effects on businessmen and literary representations thereof?

Naturally, I’m also going to carp about some of Younkings’ omissions. Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* is one of America’s most important novels of capitalistic progress, and Cather is universally regarded as a major, perhaps preeminent, American novelist; but neither she nor any of her books appears in *Exploring Capitalist Fiction*. From America’s long list of popular fiction—which often means good fiction, too—Younkings might have culled such novels as Ruth Suckow’s *The Folks*, Edna Ferber’s *So Big*, and Booth Tarkington’s *Alice Adams*, all fine literary works and all fundamentally concerned with the cultural effects of business and capitalism. Speaking of

Sinclair Lewis, his *Work of Art*—also absent here—may offer the fullest account of an American business (hotel keeping, in this case) ever to appear in a good novel. (Yes, it's even fuller than the account of railroads in *Atlas Shrugged*.) On the list of novels of capitalism by purely libertarian writers, Younkings could have found Isabel Paterson's *The Golden Vanity* and Rose Wilder Lane's *Free Land*, both very good works of literature. If he had wanted to drain the dregs of embarrassingly best-selling literature, much worse and much more popular than, say, Upton Sinclair's undeservedly famous *The Jungle*, to which he gives significant notice, he might have discussed the big, big seller of the 1920s, Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows*, in which Jesus is revealed, not as a humble, "effeminate" preacher, but as the world's most dynamic advertising man. (Don't object that this story is supposed to be non-fiction.) And if he wanted to sample the novels of Upton Sinclair, why not a better book than *The Jungle*? Try *Oil!* (which here gains only a one-line listing, in an appendix).

Now I'll carp about movies that are missing from Younkings' book: Erich von Stroheim's megatherium, the great, repellent *Greed*; the second half of *Gone with the Wind*, which has a lot to do with business; Rosalind Russell's glorious comedy *Roughly Speaking*, which should warm any libertarian's heart; and James Cagney's magnificent musical *Footlight Parade*, which shows how competition leads to innovation, and romance too. *Citizen Kane* is very briefly mentioned in the book, in a paragraph about pro-business films (280)—a puzzling placement, since much of the film consists of attacks on capitalism. Orson Welles' other film, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which derives its plot from the conflict between old money and innovative capitalism, is listed but not discussed. And where is *The Little Foxes*, a feudalist treatment of capitalist investment, written by a communist? That this melodrama should have been popular in America says something about a lot of things.

At this juncture, I know what readers are doing: they've stopped paying attention to my list and are compiling their own. The real fun is to compare lists, to see what's on Younkings' and see what's on mine and see what's on yours. And the point is that Younkings' lists are responsible for creating the fun. It would be the rare reader who did not learn from Younkings and, having made a good start with *Exploring Capitalist Fiction*, which is certainly a valuable production, feel better prepared for his or her own explorations of the field.

