Birte Christ. *Modern Domestic Fiction: Popular Feminism, Mass-Market Magazines, and Middle-Class Culture, 1905–1925*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013. 370 pages.

This impressive, detailed and meticulously researched monograph explores an uncharted territory (well, almost uncharted): women's popular fiction, published in the US between 1905 and 1920. Until recently, the focus of academic analysis of women's popular fiction was the domestic novel, also referred to as the sentimental novel, published, as agreed upon by most critics, in the period usually delimited by the years 1820–1870. Most women's literature courses move on from the domestic novel of the mid-nineteenth century directly to the realist fiction of the serious turn-of-the-century writers: Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton. One can sometimes expect a cursory nod to the local colorists, particularly if they were from New England, like Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman. Popular fiction and popular women's culture since the 1920s has also received its share of critical attention from feminist scholars; here one should mention, for example, Janice Radway's work on the romance and Tania Modleski's writings on Harlequin novels and soap operas. Yet there is hardly ever any questioning of what happens to the immensely popular female bestsellers of the 1850s, produced by the "damned mob of scribbling women" which Hawthorne famously ridiculed. Popular women's fiction seems to disappear off the radar of critical attention after the Civil War. Birte Christ changes this state of affairs and shows how the sentimental tradition evolved as it entered the twentieth century.

The texts analyzed in the volume are the successors of the nineteenth-century domestic tradition and Christ methodically shows how they are inspired by, and how they "modernize" the "plot-lines, characters, concerns, aesthetics, and audience" (8) of their predecessors. Christ takes as a starting point Nina Baym's reading of domestic fiction from her early *Woman's Fiction* (1978), according to which such novels should be read as basically protest literature; protest against contemptuous and trivializing views of women. They not only took women seriously but also empowered them by positing them as active agents in the shaping of their lives, even if they were not allowed to step out of the domestic sphere. According to Baym's arguments, these texts made domesticity bearable and offered strategies for resistance. Jane Tompkins makes a similar arguments in *Sensational Designs*, where she develops the concept of "cultural work." It is true that particularly Baym's reading has been challenged by more contemporary critics, some of whom point out that reading life stories of heroines of the early domestic novels (*Wide, Wide World*, *Lamplighter*) as lessons in female independence requires mental calisthenics and pointed to the political dimension of the readings offered by early feminist

scholars as purposely applying the category of "transgression" as the primary tool of analysis (cf. Noble).

Yet Baym's argument, originally made in relation to fiction from the period 1820–1870, seems to actually hold water much better when applied to the popular fiction of the period Christ is discussing. Not only are the plots of the novels openly welcoming of female independence but the careful analysis of the biographies of the writers (Dorothy Canfield, Zona Gale and Inez Haynes Irwin)—Christ openly admits here to be analyzing these novels through the assumption of authorial intentionality—reveal that these were women who held strong feminist convictions and who deliberately chose to work through popular aesthetics, precisely because they were interested in a reaching and educating a mass middle-class audience (19). Christ theorizes that even though in their own lives the female writers rejected tradition, for example by abstaining from childbearing and/or marriage, the choices made by the protagonists of their novels are much less radical, possibly not to alienate the audience. The popular novels analyzed by Christ differed from nineteenth-century domestic fiction in their emphasis on the later period of the heroine's life (often marriage and motherhood), as opposed to adolescence and closure with marriage in the earlier texts. The texts show the consequences of particular decisions made within the domestic sphere from, as Christ argues, a feminist position. Christ insists that the work of all three writers analyzed contains within itself a strong didactic component. In other words, they all attempted to purposely convey a message of empowerment and advocate for specific choices within the domestic lifestyle

The (often serialized) novels analyzed by Christ can also be seen as forming a certain "missing link" between the sentimental tradition of the nineteenth century and Hollywood's domestic melodramas of the 1930s and 1940s. Many feminist scholars (Kaplan, Gledhill) trace the roots of the "women's weepie" to the domestic novel. Christ sees modern domestic fiction as performing cultural work on its readers "by employing the intertwined aesthetic modes of sentimentalism and melodrama" (26). Not only does this seem, almost at first glance, like a legitimate assumption but Christ also proves her thesis very methodically by showing how the texts expected from the reader the capacity to read "relationally." She opens the books by a comparison of a 1916 commercial for the Globe-Wernicke bookcase, published in a popular women's magazine and compares it with Zona Gale's domestic novel *A Daughter of the Morning*. This juxtaposition stresses that the reading of popular middle-class literature was a domestic pursuit in itself and that "the home and its values of connectedness and community are at the heart of modern middle-class literature" (317).

Christ's approach is most certainly a cultural approach and in a way this seems to be the only drawback of the analysis, but only if one thinks of the work of

cultural criticism as already a thing of the past. True, most of the groundbreaking cultural scholarship on women's popular culture was carried out in the 1980s and 1990s but there clearly still exists a need for this kind of reading as long as one can still locate gaps in what this type of critical discourse has discussed. Christ identifies one such gap in scholarship on women's popular writing and sets off to fill it in. She does this both gracefully and diligently and deserves the greatest applause both for the effort and for the style in which she achieves her goal.

Works Cited

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Justyna Włodarczyk
University of Warsaw

Florian Freitag. *The Farm Novel in North America: Genre and Nation in the United States, English Canada and French Canada, 1845–1945*. Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2013. 364 pages.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, farming, in its modern-day, North American form of industrial agribusiness, gets understandably little attention from fiction writers. Agribusiness seems devoid of artistic potential. As a system whose essence is control—of plant, animal and soil fertility, crop production, and mechanized labor input—it does not yield easily to the imaginative processing that thrives on human drama, passions, and the surprises of fate and nature. If contemporary American writers turn to farming as their subject, it is either to dramatize in their novels the struggle for survival of the anachronistic traditional family farm (Wendell Berry, Barbara Kingsolver, Jane Smiley), or to document in a nonfictional format their own exploits as gentle(wo)men/weekend/city farmers