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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9390>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.9390

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Chrysavgi Papayianni, "James Peacock, *Understanding Paul Auster*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Book reviews, document 13, Online since 03 October 2011, connection on 31 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9390> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.9390>

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South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2010. Pp. 230. ISBN 978 1 57003 864 8

- 1 Paul Auster's impressive gamut of work continues to incite fascination and controversy. Indeed, his compelling storytelling style taken together with his mixing of crime fiction and absurdism has made his readers and critics vacillate between praise and condemnation. James Peacock's *Understanding Paul Auster*, sheds new light to otherwise obscure aspects of Auster's novels, films, and other works undermining in this way the negative criticism of the past and thus creating a new appreciation for the complex and often confusing universes he creates.
- 2 As the title suggests, the book attempts a more thorough understanding of the author in question. Following an introduction, the book is divided into 6 more chapters that discuss the whole trajectory of Auster's work, such as *The Invention of Solitude*, *The New York Trilogy*, *In the Country of Last Things*, *The Music of Chance*, *Moon Palace*, *Mr. Vertigo*, *Book of Illusions*, *Smoke and Blue in the Face*, *Timbuktu*, *Oracle Night*, *The Brooklyn Follies* and *Man in the Dark*, as well as his 5 poetry collections. Overall, Peacock discusses in detail the unconventionality of Auster's language, character and style in general, underlining that the absurdity permeating his work is very intentional, aiming at making the reader realize that there is no such thing as truth or reality. In fact, throughout the Austerian universe "chance... rules" (115), as the quest for identity becomes more and more agonizing. The perennial quest for truth and identity is the focal point that brings together his early and his late work, ranging from his complex poetical production to the most positive renderings of his films *Smoke and Blue in the Face*, as well as such novels as *The Brooklyn Follies*, and *Man in the Dark*. Unfortunately, this very quest

is doomed from the beginning due to the problematic, often impossible, relationship between language and the individual, which also tortures him as a writer. As Peacock puts it, “the attempt to pull together the fragmentary evidence into a coherent picture results only in further diffusion and vagueness, so that Auster is never able to say exactly what he means” (26).

- 3 It is this overriding sense of failure and nothingness that has often made critics reject Auster’s work. However, Peacock comes to rectify this by positing that Austerian uncertainty and vagueness, in other words the sense of nothingness and disorientation, is, in fact, productive since it becomes the stepping stone for success. In his discussion of “The Book of Memory,” for example, he explains how Auster’s “success lies in his failure” (41). This is more evident in Auster’s later work which is decisively more optimistic. Especially, his post 9/11 fiction brings this point home by promoting a more sympathetic view of the individual’s attempt at making sense and connecting with others. As Peacock argues in his discussion of *Oracle Night* (2003), “the narrative describes the transition from self-absorption and isolation to willing involvement in the life of others” (184), and he continues to explain that in the same way in *Man in the Dark* (2008) “there is the solidarity and solace of our loved ones to console us and keep us moving forward” (191).
- 4 Expanding Peacock’s argument that “encountering an Auster poem, then, is hard work” (169) I would add that encountering any Auster work is a demanding task, a task that requires our full engagement. *Understanding Paul Auster*, definitely makes this work easier. Short and concise, the book employs simple language which turns it into a comprehensible, useful, and enlightening companion for Auster readers. By focusing on certain recurrent elements such as the missing person, father-son relationships, mortality, the difficulty of knowing another person, and the importance of chance (1-2), the author manages to draw connections between his early and later works showing how it is better “to view Auster’s work not in linear terms...but as an amorphous set of ideas that constellate in new forms at appropriate moments in time” (48).
- 5 .

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