Z. Kolbuszewska on Kenneth Millard’s *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*.

Millard points out that in the novels exploring adolescence the loss of innocence is conceived of as the moment of coming of age that coincides with locating the elusive point of the protagonist’s origin whereby he or she comes to understand him/herself. These transformations are considered against the background of a broader panorama of historical and social changes. The critic emphasizes the fact that the tension between, on the one hand, a vision of the sovereign individual’s self-invention and historical determination on the other, is characteristic of contemporary coming-of-age novels and shapes their political perspective. Millard argues that it is “in the tension between the autonomy of the individual and the shaping pressure of history that the political ideology of each novel lies” (10). Millard stresses the mediated character of the adolescent voices in the novels he has chosen for analysis, and points out that youthful innocence is an idea
seized upon by adult writers as a means of expressing in a narrative form the anxieties, pressing concerns, and urgent needs of the contemporary moment. In this way the critic manages to historicize and make local the universalizing narrative of the American as Adam.

4 As befits an initial chapter and a point of departure for further analyses, the introduction brings together discussions of origins and briefly outlines subsequent developments of the discourses and genres within which the coming-of-age novel can be situated. Therefore Millard briefly touches on the origin, history, and characteristics of the Bildungsroman. He interrogates the relations between bildungsroman, autobiography and the coming-of-age novel and shows how the coming-of-age novel can be regarded as a sub-genre of the bildungsroman.

5 Divided into six chapters, Millard’s book discusses twelve novels belonging to the coming-of-age genre. The genre’s founding novel, i.e. Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, constitutes a subtext for most of them. The chapter “In the Name of the Father” investigates two novels devoted to the search for an absent father and the discovery of a surrogate father figure in an ethnic male that finally facilitates the protagonist’s entering into adult society governed by the Lacanian Name of the Father. Russell Banks’ Rule of the Bone (1995) and Brady Udall’s The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint (2001) are the two novels under examination. The novels discussed by Millard in the chapter “I Change Therefore I Am: Growing up in the Sixties,” Geoffrey Wolff’s The Age of Consent (1995) and Gish Jen’s Mona in the Promised Land (1996) are of particular interest because they hark back to the 1960s, which Millard interprets as a return to the times when “the contemporary United States was coming of age as a nation” (46). Millard classifies Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides (1993) and Rick Moody’s Purple America (1997), discussed in the chapter “Citation and Resuscitation,” as “broadly postmodern” in their problematization of “ideas about knowledge, epistemology and representation” (72) and their depiction of exhaustion, where “the paralysis of adolescence is a symptom of the paralysed culture” (72). In Scott Bradfield’s The History of Luminous Motion (1989) and Mark Richard’s Fishboy (1993), analyzed by Millard in the chapter “Language Acquisition: Life Sentences,” the metaphor of the journey of self-discovery implodes due to the intervening “baulked narratives of loss, failure, and defeat” (98). In both novels, the male first-person narrator shows “a particular interest in the body of the mother” (98). In the chapter “Lexicon of Love” Millard discusses Marilyne Robinson’s Housekeeping (1980) and Josephine Humphreys’ Rich in Love (1987). These two novels transform the coming-of-age genre in that they narrate the stories of adolescent girls’ struggle to become women by contesting the stereotypes of domesticity, and of their search for a language that would enable them to express a subjectivity shaped outside of “the prescriptive determinations of patriarchal culture” (131). Dorothy Allison’s Bastard out of Carolina (1992) and Elizabeth Wurtzel’s Prozac Nation (1994), discussed by Millard in the chapter “Memoirs and Memorials,” are first-person narratives of traumatic childhood. Physical and emotional anguish, pain and violence inform the protagonists’ day-to-day existence whose powerlessness impels them to write as an act of overcoming their predicament.

6 An interesting pattern emerges from the composition of Millard’s book, although it is difficult to determine whether this is by the author’s conscious design. The order of chapters, and thus the order in which he discusses the coming-of-age novels, repeats with its trajectory an outline of the coming-of-age process and the symbolic formation of American identity, in which parentlessness and self-invention are foregrounded. Millard
sets out from analyzing novels that focus on the search for an absent father (Banks, Udall) and proceeds to consider the concomitant coming of age of individuals and of the nation (Wolff, Jen). He thus moves within the limits circumscribed by the Name of the Father. The critic then goes on to discuss coming of age as a paralysis induced by weak fatherhood or fatherlessness and overwhelming demands of the mother (Eugenides, Moody) and continues his interpretative trip to explore the novels that emphasize the impossibility of a return to the original union with the mother’s body (Bradfield, Richard). Subsequently, Millard presents readings of texts in which parentlessness is a salient feature of adolescence and where children are compelled to assume parental functions and manage the household (Robinson, Humphreys). In the last chapter, the critic discusses the life stories of adolescents whose coming of age is marked by hopelessness and helplessness in the face of historical, material and psychological circumstances, but who transcend those circumstances through artistic creativity. Writing enables them to assume control over how their coming of age is narrated and thus invent themselves, or fashion their artistic identities (Allison, Wurtzel). These cases of self-invention, or of artistic self-begetting, can be regarded as representative of what Harold Bloom calls American sublime.

7 Millard’s readings of the coming-of-age novels presented in Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction testify to his admirable critical acumen and encourage readers to explore further the genre along the lines staked out in his book. Owing to the interdisciplinary character of his interpretations, Millard’s book will be useful to readers interested in contemporary American literature and to those interested in cultural studies. Moreover, it is a very interesting text in its own right; intellectually stimulating, informed by empathy and political passion.

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