Thomas Koenigs, *Founded in Fiction: The Uses of Fiction in the Early United States*

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For a long time, literary history seemed to teach us that there was no American literature proper before the 1850s. The mid-nineteenth century was seen as the “American Renaissance,” especially in the wake of Francis Otto Matthiessen’s seminal *American Renaissance*, published in 1941. The renowned literary critic saw in the works of Melville, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Emerson the shaping of aesthetic characteristics constitutive of literary Americanness. His view fashioned for several decades our conceptions of American literary history, influencing later critics, such as Marius Bewley, who, for his part, considered Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and James as the founding fathers of the “classic American novel” (*The Eccentric Design*, 1963), or Lawrence Buell who, in his more recent work, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (2014), located that dream largely in the aftermath of the Civil War, with some earlier expressions in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), and Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Situating the birth of the “great American novel” in the middle of the nineteenth century, these literary historians long obscured what has more recently been labelled as “early American literature.” This category generally spans the antebellum period, from the early years of the young American Republic, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, to the early 1860s. The study of this era of literature is not a new phenomenon, however, and began in the early years of the twentieth century, with the excavation and retrieval of early American texts, notably with the publication in 1907 of the first book dedicated to post-revolutionary fiction—
Lillie Deming Loshe’s *The Early American Novel*. This first panorama of American literature between 1780 and 1830 was later completed by Henri Petter’s exhaustive study, *The Early American Novel* (1971). Petter’s work found an echo in France a few years later with the very first history of American literature focusing specifically on the antebellum years—*La Littérature américaine jusqu’à 1865* by Jean Béranger and Maurice Gonnaud (1974). Yet, these studies of early American literature remained isolated occurrences, until the 1970s-80s saw a rapid growth of new academic interest in these works, signalled by the foundation of a journal specifically dedicated to this period, *Early American Literature*. In France, the early American years have remained largely uncovered until recently, when histories and anthologies of American literature started to take into account writings by early American authors. The extensive work of Juliette Dorotte, *La quête et l’inquiétude: la naissance du roman américain, 1789-1819* (2016) came to confirm early American literature as an area of academic study. As proof of this recognition, the anthologies and students’ textbooks of American literature that came out in the last decade all devote a whole section to that period (for instance, Amfreville et al.; Ludot-Vlasak & Pellegrin), testifying to the now widespread acknowledgement of these texts within American literary history.

Thomas Koenigs’s book, *Founded in Fiction: The Uses of Fiction in the Early United States*, published in 2021, takes part in that conversation, yet differentiates its purpose from these earlier literary histories. By choosing a title that carefully avoids the term “novel” present in all the above-mentioned examples, the author makes his point from the cover. His aim is precisely to veer off from earlier histories and a more general search for the supposed origins of the American novel by readjusting the lens and considering the so-called “rise of the American novel” from the vantage of fiction. Indeed, ever since Cathy N. Davidson’s ground-breaking *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986), the newfound interest in early American literature has largely focused on the novel. But, Thomas Koenigs claims, such endeavours tend to consider as novels texts that explicitly rejected the label. This misreading, however, comes from a tendency to apply to the antebellum period our own twentieth-century conception of the novel as synonymous with fiction: “our own persistent association of fictionality with imaginative liberation, aesthetic play, and literary artfulness has led us to overlook alternative conceptions of fictionality’s value and purpose” (7).

As this book very convincingly demonstrates, this overlap was actually shaped gradually through the tensions, debates, and contradictions that form the backdrop of early American fiction, as it negotiated its place in relation to the novel. In the late eighteenth century, when Koenigs’s overview begins, the novel was associated with frivolity, immorality, and unreliability, and was heavily criticised for that. Fiction, for its part, which became increasingly popular during the first half of the nineteenth century, carved out its place and legitimacy according to, while also defining itself against, these very presumptions.

To prove his point, Thomas Koenigs compellingly takes us through the decades between the 1780s and the early 1860s to challenge this notion of a “rise of the novel” and to show that,

this long-standing fixation on the origins of the American novel has obscured the remarkably diverse uses and understandings of fiction found in the early republic. Where later writers would grapple with what it meant to write a distinctly American novel, early US writers wrestled with a more fundamental question: what constitutes a legitimate form and use of fiction? *Founded in Fiction* reframes the
Starting in the 1780s-90s, when the increasing popularity of fiction in the early years of the Republic led to an amplification and generalisation of the criticism of fiction as corrupting readers and leading them away from their civic duties, the book takes us decade by decade until the early 1860s, when “fictionality had largely ceased to be controversial” (18). Through this overview, it untangles the evolutive relationships between fiction and the novel, while avoiding a teleological view that would identify the early years as the cradle in which the “great American novel” of the 1850s came to be forged.

The book is divided into two chronologically defined parts: Part I looks over a period covering the 1780s to the early 1820s, while Part II focuses on the surge of fiction between the 1820s and the late 1850s. In the first part, individual chapters each focus on a different decade, whereas in the second part, they foreground distinct categories of fiction in a loosely chronological order. This structure makes it very easy to follow the book’s claims and contributes to mounting a cumulative argument, which, although it can give out the false impression of a teleological unfolding at first, rather helps to highlight the many tensions and debates around the definition of fictionality and the various uses of fiction in the antebellum period.

The last decades of the eighteenth century saw an explosion of fictionality due to the rekindling of the importation of books after the War of Independence and the more extensive development of circulating libraries. In the face of this surge, the anti-fictional discourse gained traction, in particular in the burgeoning periodical press that blossomed in the late eighteenth-early nineteenth century. At a time when educating the citizens of the new independent republic became a dominant issue, fiction was seen as a pernicious distraction that corrupted the minds of the readers with false representations of the outside world. To avoid those accusations of fictionality, the novels published in the 1780s-90s claimed and exhibited their basis in truth and facts, as with William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789)—often regarded as the very first American novel—which asserts on its title page to be “Founded in Truth.” Thomas Koenigs aptly shows that those texts challenge our usual vision of a “rise of the novel” as they openly present themselves as novels, while simultaneously participating in the contemporary anti-fictional discourse. Those novels respond to the ongoing debate by marketing themselves as material for education rather than as another source of entertainment. In these texts, fiction is not to be considered in opposition to civic life, but an extension of it. For Koenigs, Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1805), Royall Tyler’s *The Algerine Captive* (1797) and Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* (1798) exemplify, among others, how fiction could be used either to tackle ongoing political and social debates or train readers to participate in them.

The book then moves on to the first decades of the nineteenth century—a period too often ignored according to Koenigs—to present the increasing acceptance of the possibility of instructive novels and a gradual shift away from the categorical disapproval of the genre in the previous century. The last chapter of Part I therefore focuses on the surge in moral fiction in the early nineteenth century as a response to the issue of the education of young women, which pervaded the debate at the time. The study of such a variety of texts as Judith Sargent Murray’s *Margaretta* (1792-1794, later known as *The Gleaner*), Rebecca Rush’s *Kelroy* (1812) and Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *A New England Tale* (1822) enables Thomas Koenigs to demonstrate that the conversation
drifted away from a view of fiction as meant to reproduce the real world towards a gradual take-over of a moral imperative that would come to prosper in domestic fiction later down the century.

8 As the book goes on to its second time period (1820s-1860s)—an era marked by the explosion of novel writing and publishing with, for the first time, new American titles exceeding the number of foreign reprints—the structure becomes less strictly chronological to trace the various, and often contradictory, uses and definitions of fiction across the period. As novel publishing bloomed and while the suspicion towards fiction was increasingly regarded as a reaction of the past, changing attitudes towards fiction took centre stage. Fiction gradually came to be regarded as “oriented towards moral self-culture, aesthetic appreciation, and private entertainment” (196) and started to be valued according to those standards, ultimately displacing the earlier dictates of truth and morality.

9 As a first example, Koenigs takes historical fiction, on the grounds of its unprecedented popularity in the wake of the immense transatlantic success of Walter Scott’s *Waverley Novels*. If such explorations of the national past were first presented as sources of reliable knowledge and pieces of history, these texts slowly came to be defined according to standards less associated with history and more with those of fiction. Koenigs thus closely reads the various prefaces of James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* to highlight the evolution from an emphasis on history to an explicit avowal of fiction, as the latter increasingly presents his work as an aesthetic piece and enhances its poetical associations.

10 To further this view of shifting lines between facts and fiction, Thomas Koenigs focuses in his next chapter on the literary hoaxes of the 1830s, and in particular on Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Sheppard Lee* (1836) and Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), which both play with the very blurring between facts and fiction that critics of fiction had earlier dreaded.

11 In the last two chapters, the book extends its inquiry into this continued and widely acknowledged overlapping of facts and fiction by focusing on the uses of fiction for social criticism in the 1840s and 1850s. The author shows that the fiction of the period takes advantage of a general pessimism towards politics to provide an alternative space to discuss social issues, such as temperance for instance. As the general public came to recognise the strong influence that fiction had over readers, its potential to achieve social change by shaping public opinion came to be more extensively used, and even more so in the struggle over slavery in the 1850s. By taking as its two examples *The Heroic Slave* by Frederick Douglass (1853) and *Linda; Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (1861), the chapter regards the particular resort in fiction to an omniscient narrator providing access to the thoughts of the characters—and in particular in those cases, enslaved people—as a means of directing the debate over abolition.

12 After this compelling overview of the evolution of the debates surrounding fiction in the antebellum period, the book opens in its last part, or “coda,” onto fiction in the 1850s, once fictionality is no longer an issue. By providing short studies of the “big names” of the American canon, such as Stowe, Hawthorne, and Melville, Thomas Koenigs shows that they are not so much the watershed of American literature, as they have long been regarded, as the end point of a long and evolving definition of fiction as it gradually became synonymous with the novel. With those works and the later
development in realism, fiction’s fictionality has become a tacit feature and those designated “great American novels” have been selected out not because they are the offspring of an “American Renaissance” but because they correspond more clearly to our contemporary understanding of fiction as “an aesthetically oriented work of art that reveals the world anew” (243).

Through this panoramic study of early American literature, where the famous names (James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Brockden Brown) stand alongside lesser known writers (Leonora Sansay, George Lippard, Rebecca Rush, etc.), Thomas Koenigs manages to both take us through a journey across eighty years of literary history and treat us with close studies of various texts that marked the period. To Jacques Cabau’s famous assertion in *La Prairie perdue (Le roman américain)* that, “The history of the American novel is first of all the history of the impossibility of the American novel” (Cabau 12, my translation), Thomas Koenigs’s book responds by saying that this impossibility stems from a definition of the novel as we currently understand it. By refusing the exact synonymy of novel and fiction and by focusing instead on how they came to overlap, the author contradicts this impossibility and sheds light on the variety of fictions that were produced before and while the novel became the predominant form. Rejecting a binary opposition between fiction and non-fiction, Koenigs takes into account “extra-novelistic varieties of fiction” (3) that both lead us to reconsider our assumptions about the definition and history of the novel as a genre and enable us to view early American literature from a different standpoint.

Koenigs starts by saying: “In tracing the historical emergence of the idea that fictionality is a sign of literariness (in its later nineteenth-century sense), I hope to denaturalize an understanding of fiction that we too often take for granted” (4). Closing the last pages of the book, we realise that he successfully did so, questioning all along the meaning, value, understanding, and uses of fiction throughout the antebellum period. Thomas Koenigs navigates smoothly through a wealth of texts that are, for some of them, little known to scarcely read, introducing his readers to close textual studies, adding to our understanding of American literary history, plunging us into the mindset of the time, all the while giving us an insight into the periodical press and literary criticism of the antebellum period and taking us through the political, social, aesthetic, and literary debates of a fascinating and far too long underestimated period.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Koenigs privileges the original title, rather than Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by herself, as we more commonly know Jacobs’s narrative today.
2. “L’histoire du roman américain, c’est d’abord l’histoire de l’impossibilité du roman américain” (Cabau 12, my translation).

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AUTHORS

PAULINE PILOTE

Université Bretagne Sud