



Jesse Zuba. *The First Book: Twentieth Century Poetic Careers in America*

Jesse Zuba. *The First Book: Twentieth Century Poetic Careers in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. xiii, 213p. ISBN 9780691164472. US \$39.50.

On the face of it, the notion of a “poetic career” seems contradictory. As Jesse Zuba acknowledges, the benefits can be obscure, retirement plans nonexistent. But the strength of *The First Book* is its articulation of contradictions at the heart of this idea, and how twentieth-century American poets from Wallace Stevens to Louise Glück work them out. Zuba shows how the tension between poetry as a calling and poetry as a profession has coursed through American “debut culture” (154), especially in first collections, since T. S. Eliot had Prufrock fret, “And how shall I begin?” Zuba conceives of poetry as a Bourdieusian field of cultural production incorporating poets, publishers, and scholars. He grounds his reading of the development of the poetic debut in the nineteenth-century negotiations of the Fireside Poets between the print market and vocational integrity. Ultimately, he traces its origins to the self-fashioning Stephen Greenblatt first theorized for early modern authors. This genealogical context lends Zuba’s study interest to scholars of the development of professional authorship who, along with specialists in modern poetry, may find its dynamics compelling once established in an American context.

The First Book is at its strongest when tracing the dialectic between historical factors – such as the professionalization of poetry in post-war English departments and the coeval proliferation of publishing house-sponsored first-book prizes – and the ways ideas of “career” or “calling” register in the poetry itself. Although this dialectic is not as systematically charted in the discussions of John Ashbery and Glück, these chapters articulate Zuba’s conceptual framework in compelling close readings. Particularly welcome is his re-imagining of Ashbery not as surrealist outsider but as an institutional insider. Zuba shows how Ashbery was given a leg up by W. H. Auden when his debut was published in the Yale Series of Younger Poets (over the heads of Yale University Press editors), and argues *Some Trees* can be read as a perfect example of the kind of hermetic poetry the New Criticism was conceived to grapple with. Attending to the influence of print and pedagogical institutions as Zuba does highlights the inadequacy of the “insider/outsider” binary in scholarship on 1950s American poets. I found the readings of early essays by Glück and college letters by Marianne Moore and Sylvia Plath – documents of prodigious engagement and often thwarted ambition – equally touching and thought-provoking, pointing to potentially fruitful future work in understanding the relationship between gender and poetic career (especially given Stevens’



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earlier anxiety about poetry as a “lady-like” profession).

Zuba brings the twentieth-century development of the poetic debut as a defined type of literary production up-to-date in his conclusion, transitioning from poets thinking in codified terms of creating a “debut collection” into the contemporary moment through a reading of paratexts in first collections by Allison Hedge Coke and James McCorkle, among others. Using the rhetoric of introductions by established poets and, inventively, prize submission guidelines to show paratext shaping literary (and subsequently scholarly) production, Zuba convincingly argues that modern authorial self-fashioning is dependent on the figures and institutions involved in the publication of a poetic debut. *The First Book* is an insightful, wide-ranging study of the cultural production of modern American poetry.

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