

Yes David, It Is: A Response to David Perkins' work, *Is Literary History Possible?*

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Krista S. Peterson

Thesis Advisor  
Dr. Linda Hanson

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Linda S. Hanson". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined.

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 1999

Date of Graduation:  
8 May 1999

SPC  
700  
-  
242  
137  
1999  
P478

**Abstract:**

*Yes David, It Is* was inspired by Is Literary History Possible?, a text by David Perkins that presents factors that Perkins' asserts make the writing of literary history an impossible task. *Yes David, It Is* is a response to Perkins' work that offers solutions to these conditions. Perkins' argument is presented in summary, followed by a proposal addressing American literary history that overcomes the problems that he presents.

The proposal fundamentally presents the idea that American literature, when broken down into smaller classifications and revised from one generation to the next, rather than being dealt with as a whole, is very presentable as literary history.

## **Acknowledgments:**

*Thank you to Dr. Linda Hanson, my thesis advisor, for her assistance, support and unending knowledge. Thanks to Dr. Dennis Hoilman for first sparking my interest in the field of literary history and to Dr. Hanson for reinforcing those interests in class, in conferences and abroad. Finally, thanks to my mom who kept reminding me how good this would feel when it was completed; she was right!*

## Preface

“Is Literary History Possible?” David Perkins presents us with this question, suggests that the answer is no and explains that contradictions in the organization, presentation and structure of literary histories in combination with unsuccessful attempts by literary historians to explain the development of literature have brought him to this conclusion.

Initially, I dove into Perkins’ work anxious to agree with him, rapidly scribbling down his reasons and justifications for his claims that literary history was indeed impossible. I looked into literary histories by Robert Spiller, Peter Conn and Holman and Harmon, and saw many differences in structure, organization and authors and works selected to represent “American history.” However, as I continued to research, I began to disagree with Perkins’ assertions. I found very few complete comprehensive attempts to compile literary histories of America. What I found were countless texts on different aspects of American literary history, histories that covered specific genres, regions, movements, or cultures within America’s literary history.

I began with the idea that literary history is possible based on the underlying assumption that whether or not an author is attempting to illustrate the views and developments of society or of literature itself, once he has put pen to paper – this task becomes unavoidable. After this is established it must also be recognized that everyone’s account represents history. In *The Complete Fate*, Marius Bewley writes these characteristics of American Poetry: “Security and faith in one’s own experience (whatever that experience may be), a reliance on will and assertion, and a feeling that

one's own experience is pretty important." This belief justifies the existence of literary history on any level.

I've presented Perkins' argument, and highlighted his main concerns, and responded to them through research of literary history theory and through comparisons of some actual attempts at literary history. I've selected five texts that I will compare. Two are attempts at all-encompassing complete literary histories of the United States. The other three are examples of breaking this history down into parts so that it is feasible. These five works are used to illustrate ways that the complication that Perkins' presents can be overcome.

Along the way, I offered some words as to what the term literary history actually encompasses and approached the role of education and the canon in literary history. I've also presented the need for constant revisions and reconstructions of history, both literary and otherwise by every generation, and included a few interesting charts that help to illustrate these things.

The only aspect of literary history that is impossible is the task of trying to tackle it all at once and record it in one volume. One's life span would not allow the time to complete such a task. In other words, literary history did happen, and the concrete historical events of society along with the works themselves compose this. However, the attempt to compile a chronology of the subject must be attacked in sections, so that a historian is not faced with more history than he or she has the ability to organize.

## *Introduction*

“Viewing literary works in relation to their historical content, we can achieve a more just interpretation and a more complete appreciation than is otherwise possible. We can explain features of texts as products and expressions of the social structures, ways of life, beliefs and literary institutions of the communities in which they were created” (Perkins 2).

David Perkins summarizes the common attitude that was held in regards to literary history during the first 75 years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the above quotation. According to Perkins’ text, Is Literary History Possible, during this time literary history experienced an unquestioned prestige based on three fundamental assumptions: That literary works are formed by their historical context, that changes in literature take place developmentally, and that these changes are the result of the unfolding of an idea or principle. Perkins argues that these claims can no longer be assumed; that literary histories are unsuccessful attempts to explain the development of literature.

Perkins’ main argument asserts that the evolution of the genre from generation to generation to include more and more works, the problems with the organization of such a large quantity of material and contradictions in the process of selecting what works qualify to represent this “history” – make the act of compiling an accurate “literary history” virtually impossible.

In 1977 the committee on the Literatures and Languages of America was formed with the purpose of reconstruction of the canon. The committee stated, “adequate

American literary history requires a model based on a multi-ethnic and multiracial, rather than a European theory of culture” (Ruoff 3). These movements resulted in four new

literary histories:      Minority Language and Literature

                                 Afro-American Literature

                                 Three American Literatures

                                 Studies in American Literature.

This marked an evolution in literary history. The already large canon had theoretically just tripled in size. In addition to cultural and racial expansion, literary history also grew in terms of genre. Perkins compares the act of constructing a literary history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to doing so today. “One confronted much less anxiously than literary historians now do, fundamental questions about the definition and scope of literature” (Perkins 5).

The growth of the canon created many more decisions for literary historians. In addition, they are faced with the decision whether or not to include literature outside of the canon in their compilations. “Is literature for the purposes of literary history, only the “best” writings or does it include popular works that are judged qualitatively inferior?” (Perkins 5).

This massive expansion is essentially responsible for the organization and selection problems that Perkins claims literary historians face today. The amount of literature that is recognized as American today is vastly different than what literary historians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were faced with to select and organize. Perkins gives an example of questions that the literary historian must answer in organizing American

literature. “Does literature mean only works in certain genres – poems, dramas, novels or does the literary historian also exhibit – not as background only, discourses in philosophy, theology, politics etc.?” (Perkins 6).

A common theory that is often imperative to organization is the concept of developmental history. Perkins defines developmental history: “an event goes through a series of changes which each is possible only on the basis of the previous one” (Perkins 4). This method explains a work by what it immediately evolves from – assuming that history is a series of phases where every phase preserves much of the former. According to Perkins, this is an unreliable way to organize works in a history - - or to explain the development of literature, because literary works may be modeled on ones other than those in the former phase; they could be modeled on works produced centuries earlier in alien societies.

Indeed, the Western Literary Association, having already limited itself to a specific region of literature, cites organizational problems in their construction of the Literary History of the West. “Admittedly, as always, there are problems in the court of literary evaluation. The editorial problem, in fact, has not been how to find western literature of quality but rather how to organize and present an enormous and remarkably varied body of such literature” (WLA xvi).

The WLA stated similar problems when it came to selecting the works of western literature to include in the pages of their historical account, and those to leave out. “As the table of contents makes clear, the editorial decisions are a series of compromises” (WLA xviii). This process of selection frightens Perkins. Indeed, it may seem as if history were being written by the editors of the compilations. Perkins refers to the

decision of Charles Richardson and Barrett Wendell who claimed, “that there was virtually no literature worth mentioning in America for the first 200 years of settlement” (Perkins 5). He fears that others may also be swayed as these two were by the aesthetic criteria of their time and place and make equally rash decisions.

The canon also plays an important role in the selection process. Paul Lauter defines the canon in his book Canons and Contexts as “The set of literary works, the grouping of significant philosophical, political and religious texts, the particular accounts of history generally accorded cultural weight within a society” (Lauter 4). Literature that is selected for canonization tends to be the literature that is taught in American educational institutions. Therefore, omissions are costly. LaVonne Brown Ruoff addresses this issue in Redefining American Literary History. “Growing numbers of teachers called upon to teach American literature have begun to question the works to be included in a literary history of America, the place of works in languages other than English, and the intellectual, cultural and political implications of selecting certain works and rejecting or ignoring others” (Ruoff 2).

Not only do the selection problems with the construction of the canon parallel those of historians attempting to construct a literary history, but the canon also may influence the decisions made by literary historians as to what is worthy of being included in a literary history. Thus, canonized literature becomes the staple of education, of writing history, of chronicling the best, and what wasn’t selected is repeatedly omitted, resulting in a stilted view of history. This process is similar to the selection of works for a literary history. Those that are left out are most likely to be forgotten.

When David Perkins presents his argument against the possibility of compiling an accurate literary history he cites organization, selection and the evolution of the genre as the major hurdles that must be overcome. Perkins presents 185 pages of justifiable points as to how these elements can get in the way of literary history. However, he neglects to offer any solutions as to how these hurdles can be overcome. I have cited literary historians that claim that they encountered problems with organization, selection and the constant evolution and growth of literature while compiling their takes on literary history. My research has revealed countless works of literary history, that have overcome these obstacles and stand as accurate sources of a history of the literature of the United States.

## *Pre-requisites to the Discussion*

In order to argue for the existence and relevance of literary history, a definition of the subject in question should be established. Much of the debate regarding whether or not literary history is indeed possible can be resolved by agreeing on what is meant by the term, “literary history.” Perkins may be referring to the idea that being able to put onto paper and publish a specific volume or work is impossible, while others may start with a definition of history, attach “literary” to it to specify a certain aspect of history and claim that this concept is unavoidable.

Kreyling defines literary history in the preface to his book, Inventing Southern Literature, as “the narrative of literature cooperative with the narrative of history” (Kreyling ix). He explains, “It is not so much southern literature that changes in collision with history, but history that is subtly changed in collision with southern literature” (Kreyling ix). Kreyling brings up an interesting point. The same question is touched on by Perkins who uses an analogy of a mirror and a lamp. Does literature reflect the movements of society (like a mirror), or does it present (or illuminate) ideas to society? When the two “collide” as Kreyling says, we are faced with the question, does literature influence society or is it influenced by society?

The connection between literature and education is one that is also relevant to a discussion on literary history. In Paul Lauter’s book, Canons and Contexts, he examines the role of education in society similarly to the way that Jones explored the relationship between literature and society. Lauter views education as a tool for societal development and change. “School has been a primary agent of individual upward mobility” (Lauter 4).

Supporters of Lauter's view agree that education is a source of change. However, others argue that from change comes education. Similar to the relationship between the influence of literature on society and vice versa, both sides are probably somewhat right. But either way you look at it, both viewpoints support education. Neither side is saying that the two aren't related and neither is arguing that one way is necessarily bad. The difference between this argument and the one for literary history, is that opponents of literary history like David Perkins for example, argue that literature does not always accurately reflect culture and therefore should not be viewed in this way.

Some historians have attempted to get away from the concept that literature and culture are reflective of each other and focus on literature as words on paper. Archie Jones writes in the introduction to A History of American Literature 1607-1783 (published in 1878 by Moses Coit Tyler) which he edited and re-issued in 1967 of one of the most important modern theories of literary history; "That which calls for a history of literature as literature, not as an expression of the culture in which it is produced" (Jones xvii). Jones defines this theory as one which states that the role that literature plays as a reflection of society is one that should be avoided in the construction of a literary history. "Literature must not be conceived as being merely a passive reflection or copy of the political, social or even intellectual development of mankind" (Jones xvii).

This theory uses the words "reflective" and "copy" interchangeably which is where the argument falters. Although literature should not be viewed as a "copy" or miniature of the society that it was written in, I don't believe that an author can prevent reflecting the views, beliefs or movements of that culture. The author is a part of that culture, he is that society, and his work will reflect that society and culture that he

belongs to whether he intends it to or not. Jones supports this standpoint when speaking of the literary history written by Tyler.

Tyler was emphatically not writing the history of “literature as literature.” As he put it in the first chapter of the Revolution volumes; “The chief purpose of the present work is to call attention to these writings, not so much for their independent, artistic value as for their humanistic and historical value, interpreting as they do, with direct and undisguised speech, the very spirit and life and inward process of the American Revolution (Tyler xvii).

Bartholow Crawford also shares this view. In the preface to American Literature, he too states that the chief purpose of his work is, “Relating the literature to life, vitalizing ideas and ideals, and integrating broad intellectual and philosophical connections” (Crawford vi). Crawford makes the point that in order to investigate ideas, movements, ideals and periods (which is how many literary histories are organized) you must relate the literature to culture.

Both society and literature are influences on one another. Regardless of how you choose to look at it both views support the importance of literary history, and are evidence as to why we can’t deny its existence nor its accuracy. “Not only is literature related to life: literature is life itself” (Crawford vi).

Although we have established that literary history is an unavoidable entity, it is only capable of avoiding the complications addressed by Perkins if it is presented properly. Considering the vast amount of material from every region, every ethnicity, every state,

and any period or movement of the past two hundred years, the fundamental solution is to break-it-down and present it within these sub-categories.

The heterogeneous make-up of the United States has led to the development of a variety of audiences. Historian must keep in mind a specific audience who would be interested in the part of American history that they are chronicling. These divisions provide solutions to the problems of organization and selection presented by the evolution of the genre, and render accurate and detailed accounts of the literary history of this country.

## **Break-it-Down**

*“The Southern identity is important because it is. Whether or ought not to be is irrelevant. The facts are that there existed in the past, and there continues to exist today an entity within American society known as the South, and that for better or for worse the habit of viewing one’s experience in terms of one’s relationship to that entity is still a meaningful characteristic of both writers and readers” (Kreyling 5).*

The existence of literary history is undeniable. The events happened, the literature was written, and those facts cannot be argued. The actual method or selection of works that are chosen to represent the events can be disputed, but all in all, no matter what works are chosen to represent someone’s experience, during a specific time in history. Again, Kreyling makes this argument for southern literary history. “What is Southern literature will always be recognizable by a formula as constant as the thing itself, for the south and its history are facts and entities that remain intact in and impervious to literary representation” (Kreyling xi).

Whether or not an author is attempting to illustrate the views or developments of society or literature itself, once one has put pen to paper or she is creating a relevant literary history. The relevance of the work in a “specific” history is disputable depending on what type of literary history one is compiling.

The simple solution to Perkins’ arguments is that historians and reader must recognize that a “complete” literary history that isn’t specific to any particular grouping is impossible due to the incredible magnitude of literature. However, literary history is capable of being broken down into numerous groups and every literary work fits

somewhere into some historian's group. Two examples of attempts at comprehensive literary histories are discussed in the next chapter followed by three examples of successful "break-downs."

"The assumption that the various genres, periods, schools, traditions, movements, communicative systems, discourses and epistemes are not baseless and arbitrary groupings, that such classifications can have objective and valid grounds in the literature of the past is the premise that empowers literary history" (Perkins 4).

## *Attempts at Totality that Fail*

Although most American literary historians in this century have begun to approach the task of organizing the vast amount of literature that falls under the heading “American Literature” into subgroups whether by region, race, period, gender, etc. there have been attempts at comprehensive one volume summaries of “the most important works” over the course of the past 200 years. The first, probably most renowned, is Robert Spiller’s, The Cycle of American Literature, published first in 1955, and revised in 1967.

Especially in the last two decades, the endeavor of compiling a work that could possibly “highlight” the peak moments in American literary history has been greatly discouraged, perhaps in part by attitudes like those expressed in 1977 by the Modern Language Association, which called for multi-racial and multi-cultural expansion of the American Canon. However, in 1989 Peter Conn undertook the challenge and published Literature in America, An Illustrated History. Although his work is much more comprehensive and much less biased than Spiller’s, both in that he admits from the beginning that his account isn’t the only presentation nor does it include “everything” and also, in his approach and overall intent, his text still lacks detail and accuracy.

In the preface to his first version in 1955 Spiller speaks of the development of “a distinctive literature,” a “literary renaissance,” “a unified culture,” and “an organic whole.” He explains that “suddenly” American literature has come together as one whole and that the process of getting to this place has produced many patterns and relationships. Spiller’s Cycle of American Literature is the literary history of this process.

There is no similar agreement on the reasons for this, or for the apparently sudden cultural maturity of a people which, throughout nearly two centuries of political

independence, has thought of itself as heterogeneous and derivative in its racial and cultural make-up (Spiller viii).

In 1989, Conn offers many of the same puzzle pieces, but not the whole completed puzzle. In fact, Peter Conn doesn't offer any ideas on how to put the puzzle together, which is more along the lines of what the MLA had in mind in 1977. Instead of unification and wholes, Conn writes in his preface of "variety" and of "many voices." "Literature in America is addressed to all readers who are interested in the history and variety of literary achievement in the United States" (Conn ix).

However, Peter Conn's good intentions are not enough to make his text work. Although his aims include variety and diversity, the immense amount of material that he must organize forces him to pick and choose. Essentially, the difference between Conn's history and Spiller's is only that his goals were more representative of a heterogeneous society, which consequently just made his job even more difficult as he had even more works and authors to select from and more to omit.

Spiller's intentions include clearly defining the relationships and patterns of the history of American literature that have allowed it to come together as a distinctive whole. Similarly, Conn strives to describe literary movements, and to connect literature and history. The two differ in that Conn's three-part purpose of Literature in America is rounded out with, "defining and exemplifying in some detail the work of a large cross section of writers" (Conn ix). This statement translates to a total reconstruction of Spiller's history. Conn writes in his preface, "I have been guided by the assumption that American literature is best conceived as a dialogue involving many and plural voices" (Conn ix). Spiller seemed to accept the idea of the many voices of American literature; it's just that he found some to be more important than others.

By the same token, Spiller, similar to Conn, claimed to be attempting to discard prejudices, and reevaluate the list of authors that “made history.” “There was no good reason why, with the old prejudices cleared away and the relationship between American literature and American life clearly established, the real literary history of the United States could not begin to take shape” (Spiller x). Spiller, however, was held back by his own place in that history; as was common in the sixties, Spiller’s account focuses only on the white-European experience.

Although Spiller left a great number of influential authors and moments out of his history, he did get a few things right, namely, the argument in favor of the relevance of literature in the construction of history. “Literature, therefore, has a relationship to social and intellectual history, not as documentation, but as symbolic illumination” (Spiller x). Secondly, he presented the idea of the cyclic development of literature, allowing for specific beginnings and endings of periods, movements and authors, which is an essential pre-requisite to the concept of literary history.

The individual organism follows the circular pattern of life; it has a beginning, a life cycle, and an end. This simple principle may be discovered in the structure of a poem, in the biography of an author, in the rise and fall of a local or particular cultural movement, or in the over-all evolution of a national literature (Spiller xi).

Finally, Spiller asserts that this second edition to The Cycle of American Literature is necessary if for no other reason than that the world has changed and thus the story has changed. “A new edition of The Cycle of American Literature is prompted mainly by time because time itself is history” (Spiller vii). In this statement it seems as though Spiller wouldn’t necessarily

expect his account of the literary history of the United States to hold up thirty years later, but that he would anticipate that a Peter Conn would rewrite it.

Perhaps Spiller's biggest mistake was in his omission of certain authors that didn't fit into his aspired "total, singular experience." "The historian must select, omit, and reorganize from the great mass of available data so that a coherent view of the total literary culture can emerge" (Spiller xii). Spiller aspired towards a "singleness of vision," while thirty-four years later Conn strived for the identification of "many diverse voices." Both writers present a similar story, Conn adds a few characters that better represent his generation and his time in that history; however, he also falls a bit short. A comparison of the lists on the following page illustrate how difficult and inconsistent the selection process for a comprehensive history is.

## **The Complete “Incomplete” Lists**

The list compares the authors selected to represent American literary history according to Spiller, Conn, and William Fahey and Sarah Bolton. Bolton originally published Famous American Authors and Fahey revised it in 1954. Spiller’s original was published in 1955, and Conn’s in 1989.

The authors that are included in all three of the lists are in bold text. Notice that only six authors accomplish this. Conn’s list is used to illustrate the changes that occur over time, while Spiller and Bolton’s versions, only published a year apart, illustrate the drastic differences in history depending on the author or editor.

## SPILLER

Jonathan Edwards  
Benjamin Franklin  
Thomas Jefferson  
Washington Irving  
William Cullen Bryant  
James Fenimore Cooper  
**Ralph Waldo Emerson**  
**Henry David Thoreau**  
Edgar Allan Poe  
Nathaniel Hawthorne  
Herman Melville  
**Walt Whitman**  
William Dean Howells  
**Mark Twain**  
Emily Dickinson  
Henry James  
Henry Adams  
Frank Norris  
E. A. Robinson  
Theodore Dreiser  
Robert Frost  
**Eugene O'Neill**  
Ernest Hemingway  
T.S. Eliot  
W.E.B. Du bois  
Charles Chestnut

\* Bold text indicates that author appears on all three lists.

## CONN

Anne Bradstreet  
Edward Taylor  
Benjamin Franklin  
**Ralph Waldo Emerson**  
**Henry David Thoreau**  
Margaret Fuller  
Nathaniel Hawthorne  
Herman Melville  
**Walt Whitman**  
Emily Dickinson  
Henry James  
**Mark Twain**  
William Dean Howells  
Rebecca Harding Davis  
Stephen Crane  
Charlotte Perkins Gilman  
Frank Norris  
Henry Adams  
Henry James  
Edith Wharton  
Theodore Dreiser  
Booker T. Washington  
William Faulkner  
Paul Laurence Dunbar  
Gertrude Stein  
Ezra Pound  
T.S. Eliot  
Sinclair Lewis  
Ernest Hemingway  
Marianne Moore  
Wallace Stevens  
**Eugene O'Neill**  
F. Scott Fitzgerald  
William Faulkner  
Zora Neale Hurston  
Richard Wright  
Nathanael West

## BOLTON & FAHEY

Washington Irving  
James Fenimore Cooper  
William Cullen Bryant  
**Ralph Waldo Emerson**  
Nathaniel Hawthorne  
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow  
John Greenleaf Wittier  
Edgar Allan Poe  
Oliver Wendell Holmes  
Harriet Beecher Stowe  
**Henry David Thoreau**  
**Walt Whitman**  
**Mark Twain**  
Louisa May Alcott  
Edith Wharton  
Willa Cather  
Carl Sandburg  
Sinclair Lewis  
**Eugene O'Neill**  
Stephen Vincent Benet

**Three Examples of Literary History that Work : Evaluations**

- ***Modern American Poetry***
- ***The Literature of the South***
- ***A Literary History of Iowa***

<b>Title:</b>	<u>Modern American Poetry : Essays in Criticism.</u>
<b>Author/Editor:</b>	Jerome Mazzaro
<b>Copyright Year:</b>	1970
<b>Author's Comments:</b>	"There follow in the pages of this book, attempts of fifteen American critics (one Canadian) to deal with American poetry from a variety of points of view. The points of view span biographical, sociological, and aesthetical frames" (Mazzaro viii).
<b>Format:</b>	Essays
<b>Organization:</b>	Author, chronological
<b>Authors Included:</b>	Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, E.A. Robinson, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Robinson Jeffers, Marianne Moore, T.S. Eliot, E.E. Cummings, Hart Crane, Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass.
<b>Comments:</b>	<p>Jerome Mazzaro edits a fairly diverse and heterogeneous compilation of essays considering the copyright date. His literary history is more an account of styles of criticisms than it is of modern American poetry. However, he does go through the selection process, nevertheless, in choosing which poets to include. In addition, he must also select which modes of criticism to include. It is this diversity that he speaks of in his preface when he writes of, "a variety of points of view."</p> <p>He has limited himself to fifteen poets, which justifies those he has omitted. By focusing on the essays and criticisms rather than claiming to offer a chronology of modern American poetry he dodges having to justify why he chose those particular fifteen.</p> <p>At any rate, his fifteen are somewhat representative of the diversity of American Literature. Notice that E.A. Robinson, William Carlos Williams, Robinson Jeffers, E.E. Cummings, Hart Crane, Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, and W.D. Snodgrass all were omitted from Robert Spiller's "traditional history," Peter Conn's attempt at a "survey that</p>

acknowledges both diversity and excellence," (Conn ix), and William Fahey's revision of Sarah Bolton's list of "famous American authors."

Mazzaro's compilation of Modern American Poets is successful because it limits the amount of material that it intends to cover. Mazzaro has taken the term American literature, limited it to poetry, and again limited it to twenty famous American authors. This enables him to offer a very accurate account of this section of American literary history.

In addition, his format of essays leaves the text open to interpretation, meaning that he doesn't claim to offer "the" literary history of the United States, nor "the" literary history of modern American poetry. Rather, his intention is to present a "variety of points of view," which he does in his compilation of criticisms, and also to some degree in his selection of poets.

<b>Title:</b>	<u>The Literature of the South</u>
<b>Author/Editor:</b>	Richard Croom Beatty, Floyd C. Watkins, Thomas Daniel Young, Randall Stewart
<b>Copyright Year:</b>	1952
<b>Author's Comments:</b>	"This book undertakes to represent Southern literature from its colonial beginnings to the present. Critical commentary has been held to a minimum in order that we might offer the broadest representation of Southern literature possible and because we believe that the selections should, mainly, tell their own story" (Beatty xxii).
<b>Format:</b>	Anthology
<b>Organization:</b>	<p>Selections have been divided into four chronological periods: <i>The Early South (to 1815)</i>, <i>The Rise of the Confederate South (1815-1865)</i>, <i>The New South (1865-1918)</i>, <i>The Modern Renaissance (1918- to the present)</i>.</p> <p>"The authors represented have, in so far as was practicable, been arranged within each period by "type" and, within these smaller groupings, chronologically by date of birth. Exceptions have been made when they were dictated by logic: for example, the works of political authors are arranged according to the chronology of the selections themselves so that they trace a continuous development in political and social thought" (Beatty xxii).</p> <p>Text is limited to short biographies of the authors followed by samples of their work. Each of the four sections starts with an introduction that describes the characteristics of the period.</p>
<b>Authors Included:</b>	William Byrd, Patrick Henry, George Mason, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Taylor, Andrew Jackson, John C. Calhoun, Albert Taylor Bledsoe, George Fitzhugh, Robert E. Lee, Richard Henry Wilde, Edward Coote Pinkney, Thomas Holley Chivers, Philip Pendleton Cooke, Theodore O'Hara, Edgar Allan Poe, John Pendleton Kennedy, Hugh Swinton Legare, William Gilmore Simms, Henry Timrod, Paul Hamilton Hayne, David Crockett, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, Johnson Jones Hooper, Joseph Glover Baldwin, George Washington Harris, John Esten Cooke, Thomas Nelson

Page, Henry W. Grady, Walter Hines Page, Booker T. Washington, Sidney Lanier, Irwin Russell, Joel Chandler Harris, George Washington Cable, Mary Noailles Murfree, William Sydney Porter, William Alexander Percy, Richard Wright, Frank Lawrence Owsley, Paul Green, Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Randall Jarrell, Ellen Glasgow, James Branch Cabell, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Katherine Anne Porter, Caroline Gordon, Erskine Caldwell, Andrew Lytle, Jesse Stuart, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Peter Taylor, Stark Young, Thomas Wolfe, William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren

In addition there are sections of: Letters, Spirituals, Civil War Songs, Folk Tales, and Folksongs

**Comments:**

The Literature of the South offers evidence of the benefit of breaking down American literature into sub-categories, most obviously in that it includes the work of 63 authors while, Conn and Spiller only highlighted 38 and 25 respectively (others were mentioned) in their histories not only of the South but of "all" of American literature. This shows the increased accuracy, attention to detail and diversity that can be obtained by limiting the material that one attempts to cover.

The benefit of an anthology format allows the literature to speak for itself (as Beatty wrote in the preface) rather than having the historian attempt to illustrate how the author or work related to cultural beliefs or events of the time. Perkins was concerned that a historian could not be depended upon to explain the development of literature. The anthology allows the literature to do this on its own, Beatty and company only organized the works in an order that might aid in illustrating this development.

The combination of author biographies, selections of literature, and period introductions offer a linking of events, people and literature. The reflection of society on writing and writing on society is shown not told. Therefore it is not so much the editors that are creating the literary history, but the works themselves. This is very different from the narrative approach, in which an author tells of the connections and developments.

Beatty's comments on the organization of the material show how Perkins' doubt of the reliance of the concept of developmental history (events and development relate directly to what they immediately evolve from) can be overcome. Beatty made exceptions to his chronological order when it didn't follow the rules of developmental history and explained why he did so.

Overall, The Literature of the South is one of the best examples of a thorough literary history in the form of an anthology. I suppose that some may argue that an anthology doesn't qualify as a literary history, but in many ways I believe that it may be the most accurate way of presenting that history.

**Title:** A Literary History of Iowa

**Author/Editor:** Clarence A. Andrews

**Copyright Year:** 1972

**Author's Comments:** "This is a history of Iowa novels, short stories, poetry, and plays; it is also about the men and women who wrote them, and the degree of critical esteem which they received. The criteria which have been applied to the selection of material discussed in this history are: They must have an Iowa setting; the author must have lived in Iowa long enough to know the subject about which he was writing; the material must be primarily of interest to those of high school age and beyond; the material must have been published in book form or contained in an anthology, or have some other major production format. If the author were born in Iowa, then he must have lived in the state until maturity. If he came to Iowa in later life, then he must have been in the state long enough to write with authority about his subject" (Andrews ix).

"It is clear that this body of fiction has unique and lasting value as social history to the people of the state. In its variety, its concreteness, its insight, it can never be matched by formal chronicle or scholarly history. Without it our cultural heritage, our understanding of the present, and our appreciation of the past would be immeasurably impoverished" (Andrews x).

**Format:** Narrative

**Organization:** "As much as possible, the literary materials and the authors have been put in an historical and social context. For the reader who wishes to become an expert, the sources on which this history is based have been carefully identified- the literary works themselves, the biographies and autobiographies, the critical reviews, the newspaper and magazine accounts" (Andrews ix).

**Authors Included:** Numerous, woven into the text. (Does not include a list, and is not sorted by author.)

**Comments:** Once again, the reduction of the subject American literary history to the literary history of Iowa demonstrates the impossibility of compiling a complete and all encompassing

literary history of the United States. Andrews illustrates the influence and impact that authors like Phil Stong, and Frederick Manfred whose works include, *The Golden Bowl* (1944), *King of Spades* (1966) among numerous others have on Iowa's culture, history and development. Most of the authors that Andrews highlights most probably have never heard of, and are far from being included in any history of American literature. However, they are authors of American literature and their work has been influential in the literary development of one section of that history. Therefore there is no reason for their omission.

In addition, a history like A Literary History of Iowa provides a smaller level illustration of the overall developments and movements in American Literature. Iowa undoubtedly experienced the same presidencies, wars, revolutions etc. as did the country as a whole, and the literature of an individual state can illustrate these same happenings. At the same time, extensive detail and accuracy (in even greater proportions than Modern American Poetry, and The Literature of the South), can be presented because of the even greater limitation of content.

Most of the literary histories that I encountered were in narrative form. For my purposes, these were the most difficult to evaluate, and in my opinion the least likely to be used as a reference to literary events and history of the United States because of the lack of sectioning or categorizing or listing of authors or dates. I also think that this is the easiest way to avoid having to select major authors or works, which I suppose in effect is the best way to avoid leaving anyone out. Therefore, the narrative form is the easiest and quite possibly most effective solution to the selection problems identified by Perkins.

## *Conclusion*

Perkins has built an argument based against literary history based on problems with organization, selection and the evolution of literature against literary history. His argument is logical, and complete. He has compiled 185 pages of evidence as to why literary history is impossible. However, at the conclusion the one thing that Perkins leaves out is any solutions to the problems that he has presented.

Perkins' questions are extremely justified. The examination of the problems that he presents is essential to the study of literary history, and all are questions that every literary historian must ask him or herself as one compiles a version of literary history. Nevertheless, the existence of these problems does not make literary history impossible. On the contrary, I have asserted that literary history is an entity that is inevitable. Although the methods of compiling the history and the decisions made in the process can be questioned, the existence of the activity itself cannot.

“The United States is a heterogeneous society whose cultures, while they may overlap in significant respects, also differ in critical ways” (Lauter 9). In the United States it is especially difficult to compile “a” literary history because of the diversity of the American population and the disparity of cultures.

“We are not only an increasingly pluralistic society; we are increasingly conscious of that pluralism, as can be seen in governmental statistics on minority hiring and in publishers' advertisements for new or newly discovered works by Black, Hispanic, Asian-American and female authors. The traditional American response to the pressures of real and felt pluralism has been simple: expansion” (Lauter 37).

The expansion of the literary canon over the past few decades has opened the door to American literature for countless genres, races, styles etc. But, in compiling a literary history, expansion is not the answer. Already, the Cambridge Edition of American Literary History, published when white, male literature was the only work that was accounted for, occupies eight volumes, and is only dated through 1945. How could any historian expect to organize the amount of data that the term American literature has grown to encompass?

The answer lies in breaking down American literature into a sub-category and exclusively covering the history of that culture, that period, that region. The History of Southern Literature. The Literary History of the American Revolution. Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives on Women's Regional Writing. Gothic America. The History of Native American Literature. Historians have discovered that the diversity of the literature of the United States requires specificity. The above titles were taken from the Bibliography that follows this paper. Unless an author plans to spend the greater part of his or her life compiling a literary history, these breakdowns are necessary.

Sub-categorization also appeals to the genre of literary history, in the sense that diverse societies produce diverse audiences. "Indeed, the very first battle this artist must fight is precisely that defined by Zola: making readers like or, more to the point, find interest in, matters and people quite outside their experience" (Lauter 22).

Any piece of literature must have an audience. In the heterogeneous United States, where disparity among culture, ethnicity, race, state, movement, region, age, social class, etc. is rampant, literary histories specific to each audience are necessary.

Attempts to appeal to the masses would only result in omissions, inaccuracy and vagueness.

Breaking American literature down into sub-categories solves the problems of organization, selection and evolution presented by Perkins in *Is Literary History Possible?* Fundamentally, the less material one has to begin with, the fewer the omissions and the easier the data is to organize.

As the genre continues to evolve, the advice of Spiller must be remembered. “Each generation should produce their version of literary history” (Spiller x). Archie Jones agrees. “Each generation should produce at least one literary history of the United States, for each generation must define the past in its own terms” (Jones vii).

As we progress into the future, the past, or the way we look at the past, changes. Without the present the past would not exist, but as the present changes so too does the interpretation of the past. It only makes sense that as what needs to be explained changes so too will the explanations – or the examples and inspirations that are highlighted from the past. “The historian’s history is always to a degree an attempt to use the past to explain the present” (Jones vii).

*“Although we are each but atoms, it must be remembered, that we assist in making the grand total of all history, and therefore are excusable in making our affairs of importance to ourselves, and endeavoring to impress them upon others”*

*“Struggles for Freedom” – Lucy Delaney.*

## *Bibliography*

- Andrews, Clarence A. A Literary History of Iowa. Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1972.
- Beatty, Richmond Croom. The Literature of The South. Chicago: Scott Foresman, 1952.
- Bercovitch, Sacvan. Ed. Reconstructing American Literary History. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986.
- Bewley, Marius. The Complex Fate. New York: Gordian Press, 1967.
- Bolton, Sarah K. and William A. Fahey. Famous American Authors. New York: Crowell Co., 1954.
- Conn, Peter. Literature in America: An Illustrated History. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989.
- Crawford, Bartholow V. American Literature. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1953.
- Goddu, Teresa A. Gothic America. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997.
- Harmon, William and C. Hugh Holman. A Handbook to Literature. Seventh ed. Upper Saddle River: Prentice, 1995.
- Inness, Sherrie A. and Diana Royer. Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives on Women's Regional Writing. Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1997.
- Jones, Archie H. A History of American Literature 1607-1783. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967.
- Kreyling, Michael. Inventing Southern Literature. Jackson: Univ. of Mississippi, 1998.
- Mazzaro, Jerome. Ed. Modern American Poetry. New York: David McKay Co., 1970.
- Perkins, David. Is Literary History Possible? Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993.
- Rubin, Jr., Louis D. The History of Southern Literature. Baton Rouge: Louisiana St. Univ. Press, 1985.
- Ruoff, LaVonne A. and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. Redefining American Literary History. New York: MLA, 1990.
- Spiller, Robert E. The Cycle of American Literature. New York: Free Press, 1955.
- Taylor, J. Golden. Ed. A Literary History of the American West. Fort Worth: Tex. Christian Press, 1987.

Tyler, Moses Coit. The Literary History of the American Revolution. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967.