

**Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma**  
**University of Oklahoma**

---

Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art by Lloyd Schwartz; Sybil P. Estess

Review by: John Boening

*World Literature Today*, Vol. 58, No. 4, Homage to Paavo Haavikko, Our 1984 Neustadt Prize Laureate (Autumn, 1984), p. 603

Published by: [Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40140342>

Accessed: 30/10/2014 11:20

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma and University of Oklahoma are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *World Literature Today*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

the book's best single piece, "An End to Audience?," which describes the strategies of literary production, marketing and censorship. It is not the individual essays that distinguish this volume, however, but their interrelationship and development, as they document the gradual politicizing of the author's viewpoint. In the course of the 1970s her focus shifts away from the particular and toward the general forces of oppression, which, she believes, literature must expose and combat. Atwood as essayist is most persuasive when she addresses the writer's universally political situation: "Writers are always among the first to be lined up against the wall by any totalitarian regime, left or right. How many poets are there in El Salvador? The answer is none. They have all been shot or exiled."

These "second words" are united by the integrity of Atwood's critical voice and by her rare congeniality in pinpointing subtleties of atmosphere and content. The book—attractive and readable—should be seen as an indispensable companion volume to her novels.

Mona Knapp  
Salt Lake City

## Criticism

*Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art.* Lloyd Schwartz, Sybil P. Estess, eds. Harold Bloom, foreword. Ann Arbor. University of Michigan Press. 1983. xix + 341 pages, ill. \$18.50 (\$8.95 paper).

When Elizabeth Bishop died in 1979, her work was only just starting to find the recognition it deserved. Her poetry had always had its admirers within the literary circles of high modernism (Robert Lowell, of course, but also John Ashbery and Randall Jarrell, among many others). It was the awarding of the Neustadt Prize in 1976, however—and the accompanying special issue of *WLT* (Winter 1977)—that signaled the beginning of a wider acknowledgment of her stature as a poet. Now, some four years after her death, the literary press (the *New York Review of Books* and the *New York Times Book Review*, for example) is treating the publication of her *Collected Prose* and the new *Collected Poems, 1927–1979* (both 1983) as a literary event of the first magnitude.

All this belated attention to a life lived largely out of the limelight means that numbers of people will be looking for information, historical perspective and critical opinion on Bishop's esthetic and her literary practice. The anthology prepared by Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil Estess (both respected critics of Bishop's work) for Michigan's "Under Discussion" series is the perfect place for them to go. It includes many landmark essays (Helen Vendler's "Domestication, Domesticity and the Otherworldly" from the *WLT* issue, for example, or Lloyd Schwartz's own insightful "One Art: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop"), nearly 100 pages of reviews, arranged chronologically, from Marianne Moore's 1935 notice of *Trial Balances* to Mary McCarthy's 1981 admission of envy (in the *New York Times Book Review's* little "I Would Like to Have Written . . ." game), and a section entitled "In Her Own Words," containing interviews, notes, reviews, essays, book inscriptions and introductions, plus some miscellaneous items (such as her memorial tribute to Robert Lowell). There is also an excellent bibliography of primary

and secondary materials (through 1981). Taken together with the two newly completed editions of her poetry and prose, this compact yet estimable anthology will help to set our literary house in order by making one of our most accomplished, though certainly subtle and at times mysterious, writers accessible to all.

John Boening  
University of Toledo

Frederick R. Karl. *American Fictions: 1940–1980.* New York. Harper & Row. 1983. xiv + 638 pages. \$32.50.

Modern American fiction has always seemed an intensely rich and energetic field. Frederick Karl's long, comprehensive and painstaking study accentuates that richness and complexity. One of the reasons why he is able to see such depth and breadth in American fiction is that he has tremendous faith in it: "In America of the last forty years, no print medium has acted more responsibly as a moral force, as a means of making us see ourselves." This faith in modern American fiction enables Karl to see clearly the many influences it has responded to, while at the same time keeping him aware of its originality. Similarly, it has enabled him to point out its many weaknesses against this background of its amazing strength.

The depth and breadth of modern American fiction are the result of a large number of enormously talented authors tackling material of almost infinite variety. This variety is evident in the titles of many of the thirteen chapters. American writers of fiction have responded to the major aspects of American life: its enormous space, the pastoral experience, war, the "female experience" and politics, for example. Sometimes these experiences require new modes such as "minimalism" and the "nonfiction novel." (Karl does not acknowledge, however, the categories "black" novel, "woman's" novel, "Jewish" novel or even "white Protestant" novel—he places all these in the mainstream.) What American life has vigorously stimulated is an artistic achievement commensurate with its complexity and explosively changing ambience.

The authors Karl most admires are the ones he feels have moved the form and content of fiction forward through great talent and great risk-taking: Barth, Mailer, Pynchon, followed by Bellow, Hawkes, Roth, Gaddis and Malamud. Even with these innovators and risk takers, however, he can find fault. Of Bellow he says, "Moderation itself . . . appears to have hobbled his imagination." This criticism reflects the essence of the book's thesis: since modern life is so complex and chaotic, fiction that is traditional in form and content is simply not capable of adequately penetrating and reflecting that complexity and chaos.

The authors Karl sees as being most influential on the writers of the forty years covered—Kafka, Dostoevsky and Joyce—are examples of what he values most. It was their genius, coupled with their intuition that risks must be taken if fiction is to remain a viable art form, that made them great (he values Fielding for the same reason). At the same time, he judges those afraid to move from the known, in either form or content, as lesser authors (e.g., he considers *All the King's Men* "too ordered").

The book examines every important American writer and work of fiction from 1940 to 1980. Karl expresses some stunning insights and some startling conclusions. Not all readers