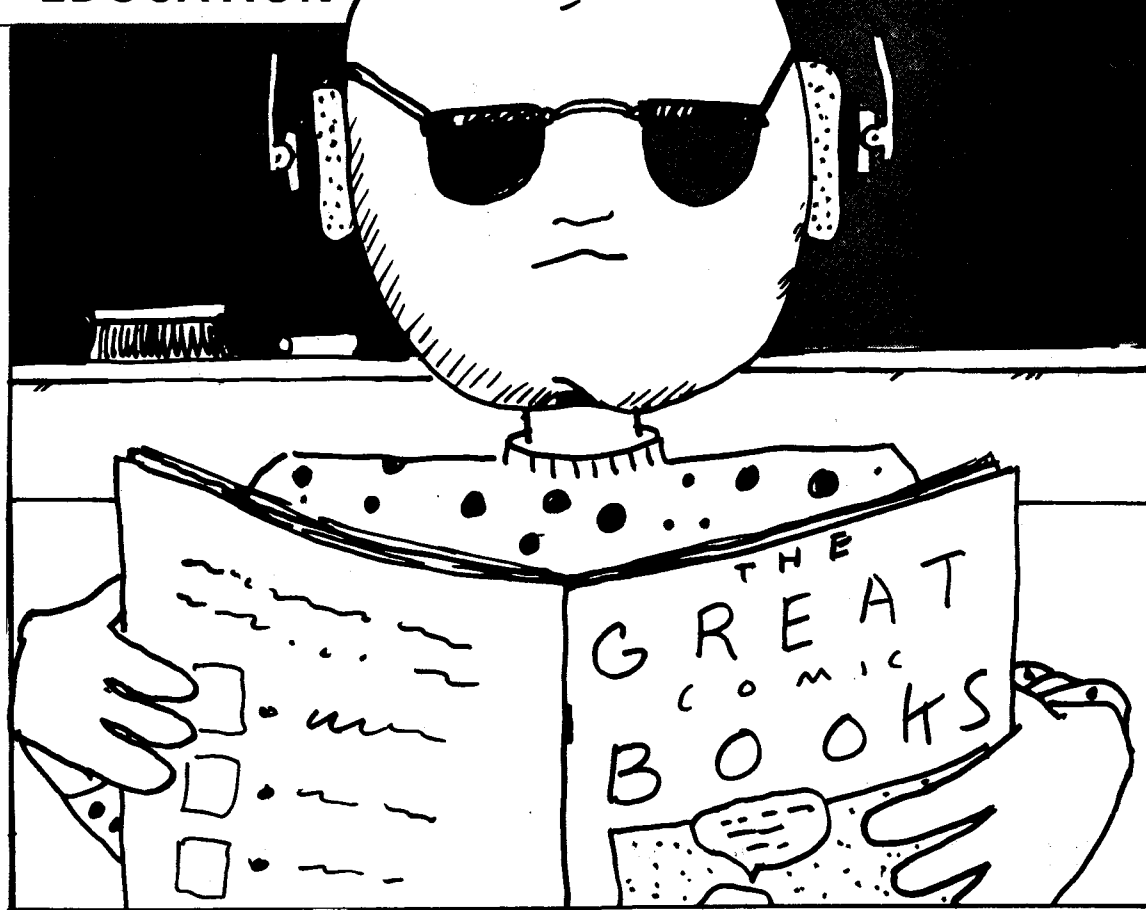


**Professing Literature:  
An Institutional History**  
By Gerald Graff  
University of Chicago Press  
315 pp., \$24.95

By William E. Cain

## EDUCATION



## Closed minds and the perils of professing literature

**G**ERALD GRAFF'S *PROFESSING Literature* is a far more interesting and important book than either Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* or E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*. The superiority of Graff's study to its popular rivals is clear. It is more detailed, tolerant and thoughtful in its analyses and arguments, and its recommendations for educational reform are humane and "progressive." But one of the merits of *Professing Literature*—its refusal to make easy, and easily marketed, moral appeals—has so far prevented it from reaching audiences outside the academy.

Both Bloom and Hirsch say superficial, but vivid, things that encourage people to believe that the failures of American education are obvious and easy to fix. Unlike Bloom, Graff does not denounce the faculty, indict the students, stamp the '60s as the crucial period of ethical disintegration and educational collapse, or insist that a saving remnant might find its humanistic haven through rapt absorption in a few Great Books.

Nor does he echo Hirsch's view that the problem lies in an absence of information among students—a problem that Hirsch tells us could be remedied by filling young minds (like computers) with millions of bits of decontextualized facts. *Professing Literature* cogently helps us see the marked shortcomings—and also the familiarity—of Bloom's and Hirsch's proposals.

Graff focuses upon the emergence and growth of literary studies in the U.S., beginning his account with the classical college of the early 19th century and closing it with an insightful treatment of today's burgeoning (if confused and conflicted) field of literary criticism and theory. Scholars will learn much from Graff, as he traces the origins and history of literary studies. But *Professing Literature* considers a wide range of cultural, social and political issues and, in this respect, it offers a good deal that will intrigue and stimulate non-specialist readers.

**Dicey revisionism:** Graff contends, for example, that it is misleading to urge that teachers and students embrace "tradition" and return to past educational methods. When conservatives lament the loss of a close attention to and rigorous interpretation of the classics, they are forgetting that this "close reading" approach was judged to be terribly radical when it first hit the academic scene in the '30s and '40s. Back then, it seemed to invite impressionism, with each reader locating his or her own array of meanings

in texts, or else it appeared certain to scant the luminous beauties and moral gems in the texts that students so industriously set out to explicate.

What is now naturalized as a traditional truth that we have sadly lost was, in fact, an educational trend that met fierce resistance. As Graff rightly maintains, we cannot reform education by looking backward to a past that never was, idealizing approaches and values that were, as the historical record shows, very much in dispute.

Graff makes another compelling point when he reviews the efforts at the University of Chicago in the '30s and Harvard in the '40s to install "Great Books" programs. The idea seemed so wonderfully attractive: highlight the masterworks of the West and guide the students toward the best that has been thought and said. But this apparently good idea failed at both universities, and—Bloom take heed—it would surely fail again, for it fatally assumed that the Great Books "teach themselves."

No matter how great the books are, they do not announce how we should read them. To read them profitably, we must think about interpretive methods, contexts and history. We need, in a word, to in-

volve ourselves in discussion of (and debate about) all of the difficult, competing interests that advocates of the Great Books and core-curriculum model find so troublesome and with which they want to dispense.

**Myth of coherence:** What is to be done? A good first step, Graff advises, would be to acknowledge the peculiar way that "conflict" is screened from students. The academy and media are filled with heated, often angry arguments about how education, especially in the humanities, should proceed, yet little of this actually enters into the curriculum or classroom.

It's as though we believe education can work only if we present a united front to the students. Faculty, administrators and legislators fight out matters of policy and then, once the dust has settled, students passively get handed the results. We fondly hope that education will at last prove "coherent" and effective, only to discover yet again that what seems coherent to some educators and students seems incomplete, inadequate and unfair to others.

Graff sees the problem as a relatively simple one, though it is one

that we keep trying to dodge or deny: America's faculty and students are too diverse in their backgrounds, needs and goals for any single model to succeed in providing a coherent education for everybody. If any model is to work, it must be based on highlighting and exploiting the inescapable fact of conflict and disagreement about educational aims.

Here Graff recalls his own experience as a student in the mid-'50s. He put together a solid-looking English major, yet found his work to be fragmented and unclear in its purposes. It was only years later that he realized the "intensity" of the debate about education, literary studies and critical methods that had been going on while he was a student. And it was precisely this debate about central issues

**It's as though we believe education can work only if we present a united front to the students.**

that "might have given my study the context that it lacked" and made it seem crucially a part of the political and cultural life of the society as a whole.

**Educational "add ons":** Graff notices something important about the structure of literary studies and, by implication, other departments in the college and university. When faculty face the challenge of a new theory or methodology, they do not reconceive and reorganize their discipline and curriculum, but, instead, "add on" the challenge itself.

By adding a feminist critic to their ranks and a few courses on women's literature, for instance, the members of a department can keep their curriculum up to date even as they feel free to ignore whatever the feminist critic might be doing in her teaching. Graff claims that we need to imagine how we might paradoxically but profitably make education coherent through foregrounding conflict—conflict like the one between feminist and other approaches to literature, conflict that is usually masked from students and consigned to department meetings and conversation in the cafeteria.

Team-taught courses, interdisciplinary curricula, programs in cultural studies—these exist in some institutions already, and they help point the way toward making disagreement and conflict seem not dangerous but inevitable, and therefore obviously central to a serious, honest approach to educational reform. What we have now, Graff observes, is "patterned isolation," a situation whereby each teacher meets privately with his or her students and rarely, if ever, articulates differences from (or agreements with) colleagues.

Unaware of the lively debates that might energize and connect their work in various courses, students have frequently struck their elders as lost and aimless and uninterested in their education. An Allan Bloom or E.D. Hirsch then appears with a resolutely toned answer to the present crisis, an answer that receives a wide hearing but that effects no real change because it assumes we can impose coherence on a diverse and often divided group of faculty and students.

We end up back where we started, waiting for the next militant spokesman for bracing discipline to arrive on the scene. By proposing in *Professing Literature* that we imagine how we might build our different views about educational theory and practice into the curriculum, rather than keeping it outside and away from the students, Graff points in a promising new direction. ■

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## Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America

By Michael Denning  
Verso, 259 pp., \$13.95

By Eric Lott

AT ONE MOMENT IN *THE RISE of Silas Lapham* (1885), William Dean Howells advances an Arnoldian view of culture: "We must read," says the patrician Bromfield Corey, "or we must barbarize." He doesn't mean casual reading, and he doesn't mean dime novels.

Howells here is a kind of cultural policeman, defining the boundaries of the civilized, offering injunctions to those petit-bourgeois readers dangerously on the verge of the feral. Anybody lower simply doesn't count. "If our writers," said Howells elsewhere, "were to begin telling us...of how mill hands, or miners, or farmers, or iron puddlers really live, we should very soon let them know that we did not care to meet such vulgar and commonplace people." So much for cheap stories, and *later* for their readers.

This remains pretty much the present perspective on the levels of taste that occur in a class society. A subcivilized residue attaches to the lower levels even in arguments that say Americans are free to read what they please. Fortunately, not everyone has shared this kind of contempt. Antonio Gramsci, for instance, wrote that readers of mass-market fiction "enthuse about their authors with much more sincerity and a much livelier human interest than was shown in so-called cultured drawing rooms for the novels of D'Annunzio or is shown there now for the works of Pirandello."

**Beyond stale debates:** This faith in the moral passion of popular enthusiasms allowed Gramsci to unset-

# Dime novels, not dim novels: when the working class is the reading class

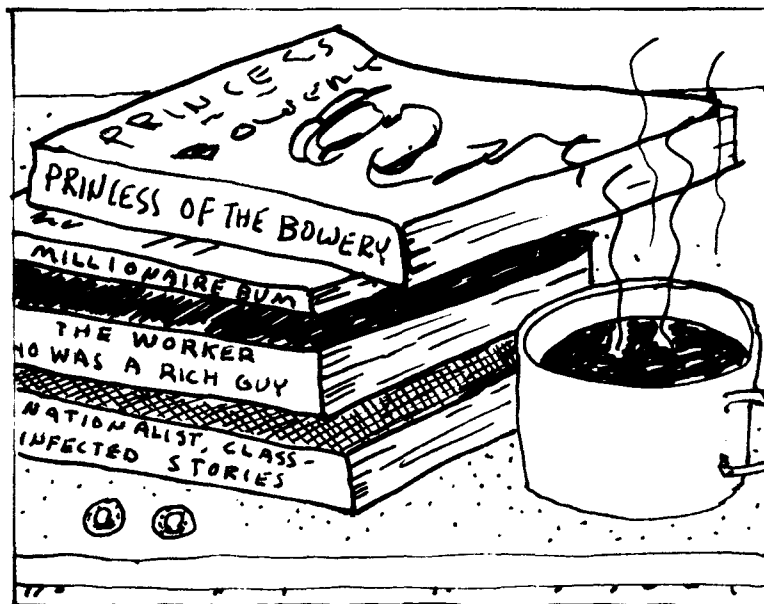
tle the old antinomies that have structured our understanding of popular and working-class culture. Following Gramsci's lead, Michael Denning's *Mechanic Accents*, a brilliant investigation of the place and practice of dime novels in 19th-century working-class life, moves well beyond the stale debates that pit

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reading against barbarism (the reactionary version) or culture-industry domination against a "people's culture" (the left version). As Denning demonstrates, things have never been that simple or that clear.

Produced in "fiction factories" that relied on a strict division of labor (often even separating the conception of stories from their execution), dime novels of tramps and outlaws, honest mechanics and working girls came out of one of America's first real culture industries. And they were read largely by working-class readers, Denning argues, most of whose reading consisted of dime novels. Yet this didn't mean a simple transfer of factory relations to the sphere of leisure. The stories were in no sense the "class expression" of working people, but neither were they preemptive bourgeois fantasies of the good life.

These stories were imprinted with the values of those to whom they appealed; Gramsci says they at once took the place of and favored workers' imaginations. "Dime novels," Denning writes, "were neither the vehicle of workers' self-expression nor the propaganda tools of capitalists; they were a stage on which contradictory stories were



produced, with new characters in old costumes, morals that were undermined by the tale, and words that could be spoken in different accents—representations alternately claimed, rejected and fought over.

**Knights and ladies of labor:** These stories have sometimes been taken as fables of conservatism. In them workingmen are revealed to be noblemen in disguise, and are restored to their "rightful place"; working women (actually heiresses) fight to preserve a seemingly genteel sense of virtue. But Denning's crucial emphasis on culture as a sphere of conflict re-accents them. The purpose of their mysterious figures and absurd conventions, he argues, was to enact social cleavages and conflicts.

Their narrative formulas in turn provided symbolic resolutions to the social contradictions they raised, and while historical pressures (strikes, depressions) at times revealed such resolutions to be indeed

imaginary, they were often useful and convincing. When, for example, the codes of genteel culture made virtuous working-class womanhood a contradiction in terms, a fictional fight to preserve it—missing from middle-class novels of the day—was a move of heroic agency. Workers in dime novels, in other words, became precisely knights and ladies of labor: imagined inheritors of a republic they had been denied.

Hence these stories, in the period of prolonged crisis, class conflict and labor organization provided a "terrain of struggle about class, about the lineaments of the 'characters' that made up the republic." They were a shared space in which the outlines and allegiances of working-class heroes could be collectively struggled over. These novels took many forms, from "mysteries of the city" to exploits of famous outlaws, from honest workers unjustly accused to millionaire tramps.

**Stealing from thieves:** But the

story they told again and again, says Denning, was a variant of the artisan republicanism recently explored by the new labor history: "nationalist, class-inflected stories of the American Republic, interrelated, if sometimes contradictory tales of its origins and the threats to it." And just as republicanism was differently accented in working-class ideologies, so story conventions could take on a utopian dimension—the final distribution of prizes, pensions and husbands in dime novel happy endings was, in Denning's phrase, "a redistribution, an expropriation of the expropriators."

*Mechanic Accents* is a signal contribution to debates in labor history, American literature, popular culture and Marxist theory. It is premised on a revisionist history of the 19th-century American novel and it vivifies current debates about the nature of the popular, all underwritten by Denning's commitment to a materialist conception of narrative and history. This also gives the book a currency that is absent from much academic writing. While it's true that the reading of the few still depends on capitalism's systematic "barbarization" of the many, there are limits and resistances to this equation that Denning clarifies.

Finally, his investigation of popular narrative conventions reveals the irony that novelists like Howells weren't as removed from "vulgar and commonplace people" as they thought. *Silas Lapham* itself is shot through with dime novel figures: a cross-class marriage, a princess incognito and, when Silas loses his house, a metaphorical tramp. These Denning forces us to see as figures of social division, unsuccessfully policed. ■

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# Flying over a familiar landscape

## The Pilot and the Passenger

By Leo Marx  
Oxford University Press  
357 pp., \$29.95

By Daniel Harris

VARYING DRAMATICALLY IN quality, the 17 essays in Leo Marx's *The Pilot and the Passenger* represent pardonable self-plagiarism of a thesis that he developed in his seminal work on 19th-century romantics, *The Machine in the Garden*. Unlike this earlier work, however, here he applies the information he gleaned from classical American literature to contemporary culture—to Susan Sontag and the North Vietnamese, to Irving Howe and the New Right.

Essentially, Marx has created a cottage industry out of one idea, and his work suffers as a result from staggering iterations. In its simplest

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form, his major premise is that all classical American literature from *Walden* to *Huckleberry Finn* constitutes one long exhortation against capitalist industrialism, a form of novelistic invective fired by vague longings for the pastoral world of the colonialists. As stated in one of the collection's best essays, "The American Revolution and the American Landscape," conditions inherent in the terrain itself—the seeming limitlessness of its space, its freedom from history and tradition, and its promise of superabundance—gave

the colonialists both the symbolic topography and imaginative impetus for revolution.

And yet the same conditions that favored independence and radicalism were soon exploited for the purposes of industry and "progress." Thus, the genre of pastoral, arguably the most ersatz of literary forms, quickly became the dominant paradigm by which 19th-century American novelists criticized the unscrupulous acquisitiveness of their culture.

**Hippie hazards:** According to Marx, the pastoral agenda re-emerged—intact, unchanged—in the somewhat implausible form of New Left radicalism. Activism in the '60s, he explains in "Susan Sontag's 'New Left Pastoral,'" took the distinctly pastoral form of disengagement, withdrawal into oneself, repudiation of the dominant culture, and a return to a simpler life—in effect, an intensely psychological revolution whose philosophical forebears are classical literary dissidents like Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, Twain and Whitman. The hip-

pie and the dropout are in his view 20th-century manifestations of a venerable form of American activism, namely, a kind of radical nostalgia exemplified in musty shibboleths like "Back to the Garden" or "Back to Nature," as well as "Make Love, Not War."

But despite this often brilliant analysis, I see *The Pilot and the Passenger* as another example of the failure of literary criticism (deconstruction being perhaps the most egregious contemporary example) to make meaningful political statements. Marx ultimately fails, not only because he joins suit with the growing number of authors who would write the New Left into innocuous oblivion by denying the '60s any trace of *Realpolitik*.

In the '80s, the first thing you can expect even a writer as left-leaning as Marx to do when dealing with the student movement is to play down its political dimension and play up its psychological one. Psychologizing a political event, rummaging after motives—bourgeois dissatisfaction, tantrums against Mommy

and Daddy, the spoiled brat at war with his class—are widespread tactics for trivializing an event, denying it the status of a rational, purposeful action, and making it instead a personal fantasy fueled by all sorts of extra-political miseries and complexes.

The happy, quiescent hippie, as some of us in the '80s malignly misremember him, did not always shuffle about on Cloud Nine in a simpering, drug-induced stupor, a joint in one hand, a shepherd's crook in the other, as the whole demeaning concept of the pastoral would seem to suggest. By emphasizing the bucolic and psychological aspects of the movement—disengagement, internal revolution, withdrawal, dropping out—Marx unwittingly obliterates the visible and pragmatic aspects, the protests, the organization and, most importantly, the specific, concrete responses to specific, concrete circumstances. ■

Daniel Harris is literary editor of the *Boston Review*. His work has appeared in *The Nation* and *Book Forum*.