



# Secret Histories: Reading Twentieth-Century American Literature

*David Wyatt*

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*Secret Histories* claims that the history of the nation is hidden?in plain sight?within the pages of twentieth-century American literature. David Wyatt argues that the nation's fiction and nonfiction expose a "secret history" that cuts beneath the "straight histories" of our official accounts. And it does so by revealing personal stories of love, work, family, war, and interracial romance as they were lived out across the decades of the twentieth century.

Wyatt reads authors both familiar and neglected, examining "double consciousness" in the post-Civil War era through works by Charles W. Chesnutt, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Booker T. Washington. He reveals aspects of the Depression in the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Anzia Yezierska, and John Steinbeck. Period by period, Wyatt's nuanced readings recover the felt sense of life as it was lived, opening surprising dimensions of the critical issues of a given time. The rise of the women's movement, for example, is revived in new appraisals of works by Eudora Welty, Ann Petry, and Mary McCarthy.

Running through the examination of individual works and times is Wyatt's argument about reading itself. Reading is not a passive activity but an empathetic act of cocreation, what Faulkner calls "overpassing to love." Empathetic reading recognizes and relives the emotional, cultural, and political dimensions of an individual and collective past. And discovering a usable American past, as Wyatt shows, enables us to confront the urgencies of our present moment.

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