

AMERICAN LITERATURE READINGS
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Series Editor: Linda Wagner-Martin

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**LITERARY LEGACIES
OF THE FEDERAL
WRITERS' PROJECT**

Voices of the Depression in
the American Postwar Era

Sara Rutkowski



American Literature Readings
in the 21st Century

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Literary Legacies of the Federal Writers' Project

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Postwar Era

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*To my parents, Alan and Rendene Rutkowski, and to my partner,
Dean Dalfonzo, and our son, Sam*

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Introduction: A Literary Venture, Sidestepped

The contribution of the Program to American literature can only be measured in years to come when future readers and researchers will have the picturization of American life obtained and delivered first hand by the thousands of workers who were given useful employment in an enterprise attempted in the face of the emergencies of appalling proportions. Likewise private industry has been stimulated and aided by the Writers' Program since the publishing industry, with millions invested, has been provided, during the 1930's and '40's, with hundreds of books which otherwise would have remained unwritten. The cooperation of communities, sponsors, and thousands of anonymous workers has produced social benefits as well as a lasting heritage in American literature.

—Internal Memo, [1942](#) (FWP, “Objectives”)

Abstract The Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project (FWP) set out to influence the course of American literature. Federal writers, many of whom would become famous in the postwar era, collected oral histories, folklore, and ethnographies that served as raw material for their own writing. Yet studies of the FWP have been almost exclusively undertaken not by literary scholars but by cultural historians who have perceived its unique place in Depression-era history. This introductory chapter chronicles the FWP's mission to influence the course of American literature and then cites three reasons why the Project has long

cluded literary criticism: its influence on later writing is diffuse and difficult to identify; its documentary form is often associated solely with 1930s' social realism; and its role as a bureaucratic arm of the New Deal has precluded it from being recognized as an agent in the creative process.

Keywords American literature · Creative process · Cultural historians · Depression era · Documentary form · Ethnographies · Federal Writers' Project (FWP) · Folklore · Social realism · New Deal · Oral histories · Works Progress Administration (WPA)

From its inception in 1935, the Works Progress Administration's (WPA's) Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was expected to influence the course of American literature. Scores of administrative reports and correspondence, press clippings, speeches, and scholarly essays all attest to the widespread speculation that this unprecedented experiment in state intervention in the arts would imprint itself on literary innovations in the years to come. Though the quality of that influence was never specified, the fact of it was rarely doubted; it was readily assumed that the task the Writers' Project had engineered for itself—to peer into every corner of the country and essentially write America's biography during a time of profound crisis—would invariably serve to transform American writing. “It is not too much to expect that important literature will result indirectly from the ideas and information which thousands of writers at work for the government are coming into contact with every day,” wrote the FWP's director Henry Alsberg in an internal letter (qtd. in Hirsch *Portrait* 32). Similarly, the critic Lewis Mumford wrote, “[T]his apprenticeship, this seeing of the American scene, this listening to the American voice may mean more for literature than any sudden forcing of stories” (qtd. in Mangione 247). In his 1942 survey of American literature, *On Native Grounds*, Alfred Kazin concluded, albeit somewhat disparagingly, that the Project's documentary output was “all too often only a sub-literature, perhaps only a preparation for literature.” Although he also maintained that it offered a “record of what most deeply interested the contemporary imagination” (489).

Such opinions can be appreciated now with the knowledge that the Project hired and trained many of the nation's soon-to-be most famous writers, including Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, John Steinbeck, John Cheever, Arna Bontemps, Saul Bellow, Jack Conroy, Nelson Algren, Claude McKay, Conrad Aiken, Margaret Walker, Dorothy

West, May Swenson, Tillie Olsen, Kenneth Patchen, Frank Yerby, etc., and the names go on. In fact, the list of notable federal writers is so extensive that it comes as a surprise when a writer from that era *did not* work for the Project.

As much during its own time as now, the very idea of the FWP—a relief program to supply thousands of inexperienced writers with government paychecks in exchange for reports of American life—was audacious, what W.H. Auden termed “one of the noblest and most absurd undertakings ever attempted by any state” (qtd. in Mangione 51). In practice the Project was no less venturesome. It established a bureaucratic network that spanned 48 states and that trained and managed a workforce with otherwise mostly unserviceable skills in a devastated economy. Unlike the other WPA arts projects collectively named Federal One—the Federal Art, Theater, and Music Projects—which were smaller with limited scopes, the FWP reached into nearly every pocket of society, employing some 6,000 out-of-work professionals and producing hundreds of published guidebooks, collections of folklore, and oral histories over eight years. Yet even in the New Deal spirit of social investment, the Project garnered charges of boondoggling and government meddling. Among staunch conservatives, it was worse: a channel for communist propaganda. When Congress began to investigate organizations with suspected communist ties in the mid-1940s, the FWP was put on trial by the House Committee on Un-American Activities led by Congressman Martin Dies of Texas. But during its brief lifespan, the Writers’ Project also commanded a good measure of public respect, not least for its ability to celebrate American culture at a time when so many Americans felt bewildered by their collective sense of misfortune. Called upon to transcribe and report on the *real* America, federal writers sought countless fresh perspectives and abundant raw material that would, many argued, stimulate new literary interpretations of the nation and help usher in the social change promised by the New Deal.

Since the Project officially folded in 1943 when the war effort rechanneled government resources, its influence on American writing has never been disputed. But nor has it really ever been verified. Over the last few decades, a handful of scholars have examined how specific documents that individual writers produced for the FWP are echoed in their later fictional work. For example, Carla Cappetti charts similarities between Nelson Algren’s FWP interview with a prostitute and a monologue delivered by the character Mama Tomek in his novel *Never Come Morning*, and Rosemary Hathaway explores how Richard Wright’s depiction of Chicago’s South Side in *Native Son* follows many of the details he included in an ethnographic essay he wrote

for the Project. Others have noted that Meridel Le Sueur's novel *The Girl* (1939), about a young woman thrown by poverty into prostitution, reportedly features direct material from her FWP interviews with women in Minnesota (Le Sueur was blacklisted during the McCarthy era and her novel was not published again until 1978). According to Jerre Mangione, Sam Ross's novel *Windy City* (1979) chronicling Chicago's jazz scene was based on Ross's extensive FWP fieldwork in jazz clubs. But most critics addressing the FWP have made claims about its significance to American writing without attempting to articulate the quality or scope of its literary achievement. In his recent chronicle of the program, *Soul of the People: The WPA Writers' Project Uncovers Depression America* (2009), David Taylor argues that while the Project shares "a link to remarkable contributions to American fiction," defining or measuring that link is a "tricky matter" (221). Instead, Taylor concentrates his engaging study on the experiences of many FWP writers, weaving together letters, interviews, speeches, and biographies to create a collective portrait of the program's vibrant and unprecedented venture.

Taylor is right: teasing out the Project's direct ties to later writing is complicated. The notion of *influence* is itself slippery; fallacious connections can easily be drawn between what writers experienced during their tenure with the Project and what they later wrote. Although thousands were employed by the FWP, only a relative few became famous, and those that did wrote under a constellation of influences, their brief stint with the Project often being a minor one. Of course, the Writers' Project itself was influenced by a range of cultural and economic factors, by the politics of the Depression and the aesthetics and concerns of both proletarian and modernist writers, by the high-minded promise of democratic pluralism, and the ground-level wrangling of a government bureaucracy. Moreover, the extraordinary number and variety of FWP materials were not all guided by the same principles and methodologies; they range widely in quality and depth and have been subject to varying levels of analysis. To put it simply, the FWP cannot be pinned down or easily summed up any more than the diverse group of writers who participated in it.

But it is curious that the FWP has not been examined in terms of its relationship to literary developments, especially given its leaders' expressed interest in cultivating new literature, not to mention subsequent critics' assertions that the FWP had succeeded in doing so. Instead the subject of the FWP has been almost exclusively in the possession of historians and cultural critics who have rightly perceived in its unique place in New Deal