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Janis P. Stout. *Through the Window, Out the Door: Women's Narratives of Departure, from Austin and Cather, to Tyler, Morrison, and Didion.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998. 304 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-0908-4.



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Home Again: Charting the Female-Authored Journey Narrative

Janis P. Stout refers to her current volume as “an extension and rebuttal” of her 1983 *The Journey Narrative in American Literature: Patterns and Departures*, correcting the masculine focus of the first book. *Through the Window, Out the Door* seeks to present the particular versions of the journey narrative utilized by American female authors.

Stout's book is more ambitious and inclusive than the title implies. Though she dedicates a chapter each to the five authors in the title, she first places these authors in the context of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, as somehow representative of the boundaries of the period examined as well as the range of American female authors' relationship to home/departure. In the body chapters, she discusses each author in the context of the other featured authors, as well as in relation to additional female American authors, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Eudora Welty, Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, and Gloria Naylor. The effect of Stout's method not only demonstrates the significance and richness of the female-authored journey narrative, but also evokes the sense of

an American female writing community, distinct from male traditions and influence.

Stout's work is extremely well researched, providing full biographical background and critical debates for each author examined. Her selection of authors also provides a range of female attitudes and strategies toward the magnetic poles of home and departure. Stout demonstrates that departure may be no more liberatory than the return to the boundaries of home—the frequent references to windows and doors reveal her authors' and their characters' valuing of both enclosure and journeys. While Tyler's wandering and interesting characters function “within conventional marriage and child-rearing,” Morrison and Didion specifically advocate to women a more active relationship to history and politics.

As the relationship to home—as a source of strength and/or confinement—is often unstable, so is these authors' relationship to gender. As characters move from “feminine” domestic domain to the “masculine” external world, this binary of gender construction is broken down. Stout sees as a consistent thread in these authors' work a sincere questioning of gender roles and a valuing of an-

drogyny.

Her readings of the featured authors' novels—and the work of additional authors—are fluid and insightful, and they work together to provide a portrait of the issues and ambivalences surrounding departure and home for these authors and American women in general: “[these authors] have gone down a variety of roads, but have continued to detour, in their own ways, by home” (p. 232). Stout refers to these frequent detours as “looping back home,” with this looping-journey narrative possibly what differentiates these authors' journey narrative from their male counterparts: their travelers—whether male or female—rarely sever themselves from where they began.

Though Stout presents her featured author within a rich context of writing by American women, their place within the context of American writing and American journey narratives as a whole is missing. Though these authors may have been particularly drawn to other female authors as role models, it seems unlikely that all five authors were only influenced by other women. Stout seems to assume that the reader already knows how the journey narrative functions in the work of their male contemporaries, instead of fully demonstrating the way

American female authors extend and subvert the trope of the American quest.

Stout's lively and engaging book establishes the richness of work by American women over the past hundred years while demonstrating these authors' commitment to enriching men and women's personal experiences through their narratives of home and departure. Stout closes her discussion by relating her own experience of the classic film, *The Wizard of Oz*. Though from a male perspective, the final scene may seem drab and confining, Stout finds Dorothy's return to the farm as rich and satisfying as the wistful “Somewhere over the Rainbow.” The richness of these women authors' novels come not from their descriptions of faraway places or great adventures—but from their insights into the personal, transformative journeys of their characters.

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