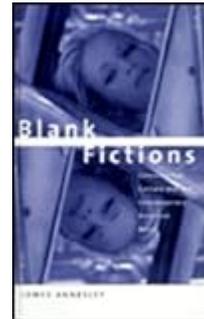


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**James Annesley.** *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary Novel.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. ix + 175 pp. \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-21535-4; \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-21534-7.



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What is “blank fiction?” The first sentence of the book, on page one, adds to the mystery: “You might not be sure what it is, but you can be sure that it’s out there.” Sounds like the opening for a Gothic novel.

London-based James Annesley goes on to name the chief practitioners of this kind of fiction, and the chief characteristics of their work: An emphasis on the extreme, marginal, violent. The limits of the human body become indistinct, blurred by cosmetics, narcotics, disease, and brutality. It all sounds apocalyptic—and anti-American, as much criticism from the British (especially the Birmingham School) tends to be.

Is he describing a “literary movement” or a recent fad? How significant is the work of his key novists—Joel Rose, Katherine, Texier, Lynne Tillman, Gary Indiana, and Dennis Cooper? I only raise the question, since I have not concentrated on their work. There is, Annesley claims, “continuities supported by a common context.” To this “context” he gives a name—Blank Fiction. The reaction to some of his favorite authors has not always been favorable or blank. For example, Bret Easton’s second novel, *The Rule of Attraction* (1987) was described as a “How to Manual on the Torture and Dismemberment of Women.” Another “Blank” author, Patrick Bateman, tells in great detail how his serial killer enjoys filming the results of his murders: “With Torri and Tiffany I use

a Minox LZ ultra miniature camera that that a 9.5 film, and sits on a tripod ...” (p. 13).

Then it dawns on the reader: this is the new way anti-Americanism pops up in a British culture that once ruled the waves, and now lives in the backwash. The “afflictions” of the modern world are laid at America’s doorstep: violence, kinky sex (even in the White House), sloppy shopping, decadence. These, according to author Annesley, are not mere “literary devices.” They are a mirror held up to a corrupt American society. In light of the recent Global Meltdown, and the impending collapse of the world economy, one wonders if the “villain” is confined to our shores.

Of course Annesley is not alone in seeing American society through a glass darkly, as have many Europeans (and Americans) before him. But one wonders: can some of that darkness be coming from his own culture? Is this a case where we should suggest “Physician, heal thyself?” Popular culture is much given to fads and fancies. Some are mere shooting stars, others turn into trends, even movements. Where does “Blank Fiction” fit into such a scheme? Of course it’s far too early to tell.

In any case, this makes for lively and controversial reading. In the final analysis, for me, it leaves me where his authors seem to take refuge: in the blank.

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