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Literary Research and American Postmodernism: Strategies and Sources

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Literary Research: Strategies and Sources

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This volume continues the series of *Literary Research: Strategies and Sources* and contains common elements of the series: introduction to online searching, general literary reference, library catalogues, bibliographies, indexes and annual reviews, scholarly journals, reviews, periodicals and newspapers, microform and digital collections, manuscripts and archives and Web resources. The author faces the dilemma of presenting information for a novice searcher (whether an advanced undergraduate or a professional scholar) who is working in a complex conceptual environment, in this case, American postmodern literature, defined here as 1950–1990. Postmodernism itself is a fraught term and a controversial concept, both within the field and without. A guide situating postmodernism in a literary context and reflecting the debates that raged as the literature was developed, and the discussions it continues to provoke would be welcome. Unlike its counterpart, *Literary Research and British Postmodernism* (Hartsell-Gundy and McCafferty, 2015), this guide does so most directly in the section covering dictionaries, encyclopedias and companions to the postmodern period.

Underpinning the book is the desire to teach how to “hone in on a research question” and “locate and assess quality sources” (p. ix). This needs to sift through a large number of hits results in a guide focused on setting up the parameters for searching and evaluating in an era of abundant information. Clearly over-supply is the case for most searchers in this era; however, it does leave the searcher who gets too few or no results at a loss.

Overall, the author does an outstanding job of describing in writing processes that consist of complicated sets of steps relying primarily on visual cues. There is a fair amount of library jargon used throughout that could frustrate a beginning library user, e.g. “proxy server” or “digital rights management”. Her descriptive skill and

approachable style are not served by the poor quality of the illustrations throughout, which makes them less useful or even, at times, incomprehensible.

Chapter 1 is devoted to the Basics of Online Searching, divided into six steps: Create a Research Question; Brainstorm Keywords; Understanding MARC Records; Building a Search Strategy; Choosing a Database; and Searching the Internet. In the current search environment, step three, Understanding MARC Records appears to be out-of-place in the sequence of steps. The library catalogue is one of many databases that could be used, especially as more and more libraries offer integrated catalogue and database searching. More logical would be: choosing where to search; searching the library catalog (including MARC records); and searching the internet.

In Chapter 2, General Literary Reference Sources, the author lists and annotates a solid selection of companions and handbooks to general literature, postmodernism and American literature from the time period. Given the time at which the book was probably sent to press, it is not surprising that the *Handbook of the American Novel of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Müller, 2017) and *A Dictionary of Postmodernism* (Niall, 2016) were not included.

Library Catalogs are discussed in Chapter 3. After describing how catalogues work in general, including authority files, the author explores union catalogs (including *WorldCat* in detail) and the Library of Congress. Last, she turns to “discovery services”. These services, controversial among subject-specialist librarians, are treated with scrupulous fairness, the author pointing out the pros and the cons of using a multi-database search *vis-à-vis* more targeted sources.

Subsequently, those more targeted sources are addressed: bibliographies, indexes and annual reviews. Under the heading of “general” literature bibliographies and indexes, the author includes *JSTOR* and *ProjectMuse*, reasoning that “these databases are often used as indexes in their broad coverage of a variety of subjects” (p. 54). Scholarly journals are covered in Chapter 5, something that will be appreciated in particular by graduate students or anyone looking for places in which to publish. Chapter 6 quite thoroughly covers searching for reviews. There is important guidance as to how to work with archives and how to locate archives and material in archives, in Chapter 8.

The seventh chapter, Magazines and Newspapers, gives indications of places to look for newspaper content written by or about postmodern literary figures. It is a little uneven as to coverage, mentioning *LexisNexis* but not *Factiva*, for example, and omitting the *Alternative Press Index*. Choosing Web Resources to include as Chapter 9 must be a difficult task, one that initially the author pulls off with dexterity when presenting

Scholarly Portals, Author Sites, Catalogs and Electronic Text Archives. The difficulty arises when forced to choose among the many candidates for Cultural and Historical Web Resources and Organizations and Cultural Awareness Resources. Those two categories are less well defined and offer a less coherent approach.

The final chapter is devoted to Researching a Thorny Problem. In this chapter, the author describes in detail ways that she would approach a reception study of Octavia Butler, the renowned science-fiction writer who died in 2006. The Appendix contains important reference sources in disciplines related to Postmodern American literature, beginning with the general and ending with the social sciences.

This guide to *Literary Research and American Postmodernism* will be useful to those who take the time to read through the approachable text and to educate themselves on literary research, as well as for anyone who dips in and out of the book for a guide or a database that may be useful at a given moment.

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Literary Theory: The Complete Guide

Mary Klages

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Guides to terms have traditionally focused on literary forms (like poems and novels) and stylistic features (like sonnets and epistolary

novels and metaphors), with some grammatical and linguistic features thrown in. This relative narrow compass has radically changed and now incorporates a wide range of philosophical and ideological, psychological and historical, cultural and racial and gender-based ideas. Students at school, college and university levels need all this critical apparatus to understand and interpret the literary and cultural material presented to them in the classroom, in personal investigation and in their general response to their environment.

Mary Klages offered an attractive and popular introduction to this frame of reference in her 2006 guide *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Klages, 2006), following it up with her *Key Terms in Literary Theory* (Klages, 2011). This *Complete Guide* is an amalgamation of the two earlier works, with expanded and updated material (on such topics as deconstruction and post colonialism), updated reading, some new citation of key texts, further advice to teachers for classroom use and a consolidated index. Her keynote theme of humanism (in the sense that literary theory helps us understand literary and cultural experiences as human beings, and not, say, the rejection of religious belief) appears in the introduction, and pervades the material in a generalized sense after that.

This is a useful and realistically priced item for the student at (above all) college and first-/second-year university levels, and will hold its own against numerous competitors (above all in the area of philosophical ideas and where, as in postmodernism, there is a wealth of print and online information) for at least three years of shelf life. The paperback comes in a durable format, and the availability of ePub and PDF variants will make it more accessible to library users. As well as the wider frame of reference referred to earlier, two things strike the reader with this book. The first is, for all the familiarity of most of the ideas and material, they have been selected and packaged conveniently for the intended readers (mainly students and their tutors and teachers), making the discussions transparently relevant. These discussions are also helpfully presented in an unpretentious and clear manner, and this is not always the case with reference works dealing with continental philosophical and cultural theory.

The second is that a successful attempt has been made to guide students in what class discussions might offer them, how themes might be followed-up in personal research; and beyond that, how tutors and teachers might develop and incorporate ideas and research inquiries into their teaching programmes. With