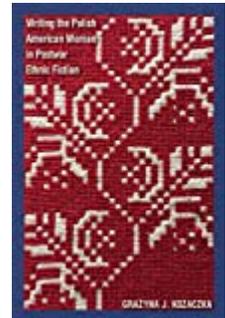




**Grażyna J. Kozaczka.** *Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction.* Polish and Polish American Studies Series. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019. Illustrations. xvii + 271 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8214-2339-4.



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**Commissioned by** Anna Muller (University of Michigan - Dearborn)

With *Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction*, Grażyna J. Kozaczka delivers a valuable work that fills a gap in scholarship about the ethnic female immigrant experience in the United States. Namely, she focuses on stories about Polish women immigrants and Polish American females of various generations, exploring the obstacles they face and/or overcome as they attempt to assimilate into American culture. In doing so, Kozaczka unfolds for readers the ways Polish American women writers from the mid-twentieth century to the early twenty-first century represent identity construction for their female characters. As they take part in this process, Kozaczka contends, the characters are influenced not only by race, class, and gender but also by the gender restrictions placed on them by the Roman Catholic Church, the political realities of Poland at various times in the twentieth century, and American perceptions of Polish ethnicity. As she traces these stories of identity construction over half a century, Kozaczka ultimately argues that while the characters in earlier texts tend to live and move in Polish

American communities and come to an awareness of the restrictions placed on them by patriarchal systems, later texts portray Polish immigrant and Polish American women who have moved toward lives that are more independent from ethnic centers and who have begun to rebel against restrictions. As they do so, they assimilate more easily, create unique identities, and learn more and more to express their voices in ways that were not possible before.

Overall, *Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction* makes a compelling argument. Kozaczka's choice to study texts from the 1930s to the early twenty-first century, as well as her choice to cover a large number of texts (at least two to three in most chapters) allows her to show a clear trajectory of change in characters' identity construction over time. The range of topics that Kozaczka explores—from motherhood to girlhood, from the trauma of leaving Poland in exile in the 1980s to “transgressive sexual behavior” in more contemporary books—moreover shows

that she has considered her subject matter in impressive depth and through various lenses (p. 114).

Of particular interest is Kozaczka's chapter titled "(Im)migrant Homelands in the Early Twenty-First Century," in which the author compares characters' responses to Poland, the United States, and Canada in texts by Dagmara Dominczyk, Liliana Arkuszewska, Joanna Pawluśkiewicz, Natalia Bielawska, Hanna Bakula, and Agnieszka Topornicka. Through all of these texts, Kozaczka argues that immigrant characters' reactions to the United States as a new homeland depends largely on how well they are able to adapt to the new culture. Characters who assimilate well make a homeland of the United States and may never return to Poland, seeing it as "an unlivable dystopian space" (p. 152). On the other hand, for those who are unable to adapt, the US often becomes the "unlivable space." With evidence from multiple contemporary texts, Kozaczka makes her point in this chapter with particular strength.

Beyond the strength of her arguments, Kozaczka's text is extremely well researched. This is clear in her detailed and helpful notes for each chapter, as well as in the myriad of scholars cited in the text and her thorough bibliography. In her research, Kozaczka privileges Polish and Polish American scholars like John J. Bukowczyk and Kamila Budrowska. This is a natural choice, as many have focused their scholarship, as Kozaczka does in this book, on Polish and Polish American studies. However, Kozaczka also supports her arguments with the work of foundational literary scholars like Harold Bloom, essential feminist scholars like Judith Butler, and such well-known ethnic studies scholars as Chicana writers Gloria Anzaldúa and Alicia Gaspar de Alba. This is to say nothing of the scholars of queer studies, psychoanalysis, and other theories that she references.

Kozaczka organizes her book in chronological order, starting with a chapter that discusses female gender roles in the 1950s stories of Monica Krawczyk. Following this are, respectively, chap-

ters that center on short stories published in the 1960s, novels published in the 1970s and 1980s, Leslie Pietrzyk and Ellen Slezak's works of the 1990s and early 2000s, and, finally, four chapters focusing on texts published mainly in the twenty-first century. Because Kozaczka's purpose is to showcase the changes in Polish American identity construction over the course of half a century, this organization is logical. However, her final chapter, "Fifty Years of Girling," does not quite fit into the chronological progression. While Kozaczka's other chapters explore the identity construction of Polish American women in literature published in various succeeding eras, this final chapter focuses on stories about young girls published from the 1960s to the early 2000s. At first glance, this chapter may seem like the odd one out because it breaks the overall pattern of Kozaczka's text. However, "Fifty Years of Girling" greatly adds to the value and scope of the book in its consideration of children's literature alongside literature that tells women's stories.

All things considered, Kozaczka's *Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction* is an important addition to Polish American scholarship. It provides a significant resource to anyone researching Polish American studies, feminist studies, and/or ethnic studies.

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