Depression culture merged escapism, hope

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Recorded in 1931, Bing Crosby's version of "Dancing in the Dark," Morris Dickstein points out, evoked not only a bleak ballroom, but "our darkest feelings, the existential limits of the human condition, and the ongoing troubles of the Great Depression." And yet, the idea that Americans could "face the music together" became an article of faith of the New Deal "as well as a pulsing antidote to self-indulgent romantic despair."

A professor of English and Theater at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, Dickstein argues in "Dancing in the Dark" that Depression-era Americans' had a split personality: they wanted to understand the unprecedented economic catastrophe; and to escape from it. And so they helped sustain culture rich in "fantasy and trenchant social criticism."

The literature of the decade, Dickstein reminds us, has not stood the test of time. But if John Steinbeck, Erskine Caldwell, and Clifford Odets don't stack up against Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner, they did capture essential features of their times. With but a few exceptions, Dickstein asserts, '30s writers shared their readers' "special longing for heroes — but also an uncommon skepticism about them."

Dickstein is especially good at illuminating Depression culture by comparing writers with one another. "The Grapes of Wrath," he suggests, was shaped by John Steinbeck's concern for desperately poor, decent, men and women, "trying to survive and yet preserve their dignity." By contrast, in "Miss Lonelyhearts" and "The Day of the Locus," the satirist Nathanael West focused on people who have "neither the inner resources nor the sheer endurance for the Joads' form of stoic heroism." For Steinbeck, California was one of nature's favored places; for West, there was "something monstrous" about the migration to the Golden State, and the "tacky, flimsy, manmade world" the migrants found there.

In his analysis of music and movies, Dickstein tends to pounce on a straw man — the notion that popular culture distracted Americans from their struggles. Nonetheless, he's right to illuminate the darkness beneath the surface of the glamour, grace, and good cheer. Cole Porter's songs, he observes, shrewdly, are actually about trying — and failing — to escape. "You're the Top," for example, relies on self-abasement: "I'm a worthless check, a total wreck, a flop./ But, if, baby, I'm the bottom./ You're the top." Similarly, Frank Capra's iconic film, "It's A Wonderful Life," remains in touch "with something raw and vulnerable a memory of humiliation, struggle, and inner resolution."

Acknowledging that changes in the '30s are hard to pin down, and that writers trafficked at times in "harsh exposure" and "fizzy abstraction," seeking without always finding a universal audience, Dickstein makes large claims for the impact of literature and popular culture. Creative artists, he concludes, helped New Dealers foster "a dream of community, a vision of interdependence" that "contributed to a tempered optimism about the future."

They also helped prepare Americans for the patriotism and sacrifice of World War II.

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