

Far less familiar—and more compelling—are the quirky narratives that arise at the margins of the better known histories: the amazing story of the defiant Edith Lanchester who narrowly escaped being put into an asylum because she had no intention of marrying the man with whom she lived (for decades) and to whom she bore two children, including the actress Elsa Lanchester; the startling account of Bridget Cleary, a young Irish woman who was burned to death—by her family—as a witch; the consistent engagement of Laura Ormiston Chant in what she viewed as intertwined projects of women's rights and social purity. In those cases, and many others like them, Freeman's extensive archival digging produces some truly new and fascinating understandings of a culture, a nation, and a year.

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MAURICE S. LEE, *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism, and Belief in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Pp x + 239. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Hardbound \$65.00 (ISBN 978 0 19 979757 8).

IN Chapter 47 of *Moby-Dick* (1851), Herman Melville's protagonist Ishmael famously identifies three 'fixed threads' on the 'Loom of Time' that form the warp and woof of human history: 'chance', 'free will', and 'necessity'.¹ For Maurice S. Lee, the nineteenth-century's unexplored fascination with the first of these three terms—'chance'—explains not only Melville's well-documented struggles with metaphysical belief, but the uncertainties of an entire generation of antebellum writers, from Poe and Thoreau to Douglass and Dickinson. According to Lee's *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism, and Belief in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, American writers of the antebellum period 'took part in a broad intellectual and cultural

shift in which chance became increasingly treated as a challenge to be managed but never mastered' (4). In so doing, they registered the emergence of a modern worldview that both recognized the limits of human understanding and pragmatically suggested 'ways of living and writing under conditions of doubt' (5).

Lee's definition of chance remains something of a moving target throughout the book, and rightly so. During the nineteenth century, writers and thinkers in fields as diverse as philosophy, theology, statistics, mathematics, law, and biology all began to sense that human events were reducible neither to divine will nor to scientific law. Ideas about chance and probability, long denigrated as irrational and atheistic in Western thought, gradually transformed into valuable conceptual tools for making conditions of uncertainty seem more certain. Through expansive and surprising readings across nineteenth-century literary and intellectual history, Lee convincingly shows that this intellectual shift compelled American writers to explore varied experiences of knowledge and ignorance, belief and unbelief, in the period before the Civil War. Lee's opening chapter, for instance, reveals that Edgar Allan Poe's interest in probability theory helped shape the narrative logic of his classic tales of ratiocination. The denouement of *Moby-Dick*, often regarded as American literature's great statement on the power of fate and the limits of free will, similarly starts to seem more like a matter of chance when read alongside Melville's extensive readings in meteorology and oceanography—not to mention the biblical story of King Ahab, whose death in 1 Kings 22:34 is said to occur 'at a venture,' an arcane turn of phrase that happens to mean (fortuitously, for Lee's argument) 'by chance' or 'at random'. As Lee also demonstrates, Frederick Douglass' political writings successfully reconcile the slave narrative's demands of exceptional selfhood with the probabilistic tendencies inherent in statistics, while Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) struggles with the inevitability of approximation and random human error in measuring the wild immensities of the natural world. The book closes with a chapter on the relationship between quotidian experiences of chance and Emily Dickinson's oft-discussed

¹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (New York and London, 2002 [1851]), 179.

poetics of ‘surprise’, and a Coda that questions the importance of the American Civil War in periodizing the intellectual history of chance in the nineteenth century.

The subject of Lee’s brief Coda also nicely distils the two main contributions of the book as a whole. First, *Uncertain Chances* convincingly situates the ‘rise of chance’ in American literature and thought in the period before the Civil War, which scholars have too readily identified as a discrete point of rupture. Lee’s second contribution is to establish the antebellum literature of chance as an alternative point of origin for pragmatism, America’s native philosophy of uncertainty. Thus Lee puts Poe’s engagement with probability alongside the work of Charles Sanders Peirce; Melville’s battle with ‘chance, free will, and necessity’ in *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, and ‘Bartleby’ alongside the writings of William James; Douglass alongside Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.; Dickinson alongside John Dewey; and so forth. This line of argumentation seems to limit the true import of Lee’s analysis. His readings shine on their own terms, at times brilliantly so, and it seems unfair to relegate the influence of the nineteenth-century doctrines of probability and chance to a small set of thinkers whose philosophical origins have been traced and re-traced nearly to the point of exhaustion. Nonetheless, some of the connections Lee establishes on this front remain insightful, particularly the section on Poe and Pierce, who are revealed to share a fascination with probability theory and the game of whist.

Overall, readers are likely to find *Uncertain Chances* to be a smart, surprising, and occasionally humorous book that contributes vitally to a growing body of academic work on the importance of faith, risk, and scientific knowledge to the literary enterprise. Chances are good that scholars of classic American literature will turn to Lee’s readings for years to come.

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JON STALLWORTHY, *Survivors’ Songs: From Maldon to the Somme*. Pp. xiv + 226. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. £17.99. (ISBN 9780521727891).

JOHN STALLWORTHY’s literary credentials are impressively diverse. He is the editor of both *The Penguin Book of Love Poetry* and *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*, both volumes distinguished by their scrupulous coverage of twenty centuries of poems, indulging readers with old favorites and increasing their breadth with unfamiliar or unexpected pieces. *Survivors’ Songs* is a testament to Stallworthy’s abiding scholarly interest in both love and war as perennial subjects of poetry. The overarching achievement of this volume, as with *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*, is to introduce readers to the varied nature of literary responses to conflict and violence. The essays reveal that war poetry is a far more inclusive and diverse genre than is suggested by the oft-anthologized crop of First World War battlefield poems. Though he declares in his essay on Siegfried Sassoon that ‘war poetry’ is ‘hardly a satisfactory label at the best of times’, it is not until the final essay that Stallworthy proffers his own broad and inclusive re-definition of war poetry: ‘Logically this category... should embrace any poem about any aspect of war: it should include Eliot’s *Waste Land* and *Little Gidding*; it should include Yeats’ “The Second Coming”.’

These essays have been written over a period of some thirty years, for different occasions and various audiences. As such, they vary significantly in tone and purpose: some are general surveys of texts; others are largely biographical, but all are engaging and informative. Together, they locate the literature of the First World War within a long tradition of writing about conflict and violence from the Trojan War to Vietnam, and chart not only the evolution of warfare itself, but also the evolution of attitudes towards warfare and the figure of the soldier in poetry. Crucially, war poems are regarded as both aesthetic objects and part of the lived experience of war.

The opening essay, ‘The death of the hero’ (Stallworthy’s introduction to *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*), charts the fall and rise of the soldier in the popular consciousness