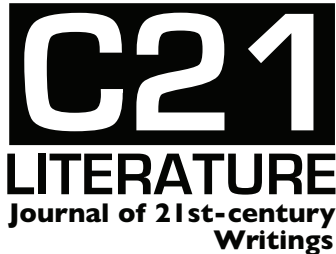




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Review

How to Cite: Koegler, C., 2020. "Book Review: *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction* by Paul Crosthwaite (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), ISBN 978-1108499569, 280 pages, RRP £75.00." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 8(1): 12, pp. 1–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.2918>

Published: 19 August 2020

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, which is a journal of the *Open Library of Humanities*.

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REVIEW

Book Review: *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction* by Paul Crosthwaite (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), ISBN 978-1108499569, 280 pages, RRP £75.00

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Keywords: Critical Branding; Literature and the Market; Literature and Economics; Critical Finance; Publishing Industry; Crosthwaite; Market Metafiction

The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction (2019) is an innovative contribution to an increasingly vibrant field of research—a field that engages with intersections between literature, culture, and economics via finance, branding, the market, neoliberalism, and corporations, to name but a few of the relevant themes. Initially influenced by postmodern conceptualisations of culture advanced by Fredric Jameson and Pierre Bourdieu, Paul Crosthwaite perceives a thoroughgoing permeation of literary production by ‘neoliberal market logics’ that play out diversely and unevenly in different historical periods and across different groups of writers and genres (260). The coercive market forces that emanate from the publishing industry and this industry’s interlinkage with the world of finance have long meant that literary writing is, at best, one step away from logics, priorities, and affects so often disavowed by writers and intellectuals. Taking his call from Bourdieu’s 1998 ‘The Essence of Neoliberalism’ and the postscript of *Rules of Art*, Crosthwaite is interested in Bourdieu’s concession that ‘the relative autonomy from market pressures enjoyed by earlier generations of cultural producers faces an unprecedented challenge in the form of “the increasingly greater interpenetration between the world of art and the world of money”’ (6). It is

as part of this process that Crosthwaite situates his own main framework, which he terms *market metafiction*. This is a specific kind of metafiction that operates 'across a varied array of narratives' and which is 'concerned less with the fictionality of the text as such, [than] with the ways in which that fictionality solicits or spurns the approval of the literary marketplace' (3). In other words, this is a kind of metafiction that reflects on its own relationship with the market, a metafiction that reproduces, rejects, strategizes its own position in the light of, or directly caters to, the expectations it encounters (or assumes it may encounter) in the marketplace.

Crosthwaite follows these research interests through the course of four main parts ('The Emergence of Market Metafiction'; 'The Phantasmagorias of Contemporary Finance'; 'The Market Knows'; and 'The Moment of Market Metafiction') and seven chapters in which he analyses a wide range of literary texts from the last fifty years. These include works by writers such as Iain Sinclair, Don DeLillo, Kathy Acker, Bret Easton Ellis, Chris Kraus, Percival Everett, David Foster Wallace, Colson Whitehead, Anne Billson, Hari Kunzru, Barbara Browning, Teju Cole, Ben Lerner, Tao Lin, Nell Zink, Joshua Cohen, Sheila Heti, and Garth Risk Hallberg. Crosthwaite scrutinizes how these authors envision thematic crossovers between art, literature, and literary authorship, on the one hand, and the market, on the other. He investigates how narrative and literary aesthetics absorb and negotiate the logics and aesthetics of financialisation and, in turn, how discourses of finance are influenced by narrative and the aesthetics of storytelling; indeed, how they replicate the styles and epistemologies produced in specific genres, such as fantasy. In the process of exploring these crossovers, Crosthwaite offers a compellingly broad set of theoretical influences upon which to rest his observations, ranging from Adorno to Jameson and Žižek, Foucault to Sedgwick, Smith to Hayek, to name just a few. It must be one of the study's most impressive aspects that it brings together such a wide array of influences, and with such apparent ease, not only describing but ultimately practicing the meaning of transdisciplinary inquiry. Across the seven chapters, Crosthwaite engages first with a variety of major postmodernist novels and their negotiation of market metafiction, arguing that the 'spaces of relative autonomy from the market' continue to shrink

even in the twenty-first century (59); he draws out the superstitious and psychotic facets of the 'credit economy' (74), this economy's reliance on narrative, as well as its imaginative reciprocity with literary genres and works that are themselves imbued with 'the fantastic, the supernatural, or the futuristic' (81). Crosthwaite offers examples of literary texts—sometimes short glimpses, sometimes more full-blown analyses—all the way along, and also dedicates an entire chapter to Iain Sinclair's works, illuminating epistemological commonalities between market metafiction (particularly genre fiction) and the world of finance (chapter 3). He explores how some novels structurally and epistemologically incorporate financialisation, and how they affirm or resist the Efficient Market Hypothesis that posits the market as the ultimate absorber-*cum*-arbiter of history, information (130), and its 'own logic, momentum, style' (152). Again in a longer analysis, Crosthwaite dedicates chapter 5 to DeLillo's *Players* (1977) and Hari Kunzru's *Gods Without Men* (2011), works which he reads on the basis of these premises. Coming full-circle, in chapters 6 and 7, the focus is on 'how – or if' literature *can* 'fulfil the author's simultaneous goals of being an expression of artistic, intellectual, and political autonomy *and* a marketable literary commodity' (190; emphasis in the original), featuring works of autofiction by Tao Lin, Ben Lerner, Teju Cole, Joshua Cohen, Nell Zink, and Sheila Heti; Crosthwaite here diagnoses a strong interrelationship between autofiction's conventional focus on the self and the marketisation of the author's persona. In his analysis of Teju Cole's *Open City*, Crosthwaite also draws on a postcolonial framework to elaborate some observations he has already made in chapter 1 regarding African American authors: how the market coerces these authors to resonate with white readers' exoticising and/or criminalising expectations of Black experience. In the 'Coda', Crosthwaite rounds off his analyses with an inquiry into Barbara Browning's *The Gift* (2017) and inspired by this, explores the idea of what a basic income for all might mean for the material conditions of art, literature, and creativity more broadly.

Throughout *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction*, it is of obvious importance to Crosthwaite to insist that writers are 'immanent to, but not simply determined by, the market' (7). He stresses how 'writers on the left' who are situated

within the literary marketplace have to 'internalise' its rules and obligations while 'contest[ing] [...] neoliberal ideology' (17). This seems to include Crosthwaite's own position which emerges as one of ambivalence inspired by Susan Sontag, Jackie Stacey, Carolyn Pedwell, and Robert Pfaller. The latter, drawing on Freud, is foregrounded by Crosthwaite as suggesting that 'in a state of ambivalence, properly understood, the coexistence of hatred and love correspondingly *intensifies* the libidinal relation to the object' (17); consequently, it is only at this 'vexed juncture of disavowal and attraction' (17) that a deeper understanding of market metafiction can properly occur. For a work that engages with such a wide array of texts and theories as *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction* and so effortlessly, Crosthwaite's self-explications regarding his 'vexed' relationship with market logics—indeed his pronounced investment in the writer's at least partial independence of such logics—cannot but catch the eye. And yet, these explications are representative of the fact that, in wide parts of the humanities (and in a marketised university system), academics share a keen readiness to assume that one's capacity for uncommodified critical distance has not entirely evaporated—a comforting though possibly unrealistic idea; and an idea often founded on a number of essentialist assumptions about a monolithic 'market' that pollutes critical thinking. In this vein, and unsurprisingly, Crosthwaite emphasises how the logic of capital (cultural, symbolic, etc.) cannot, or should not, universally apply because 'an all-encompassing, imperialist sociology of culture that can *only* see each and every cultural act as an attempt to accrue another nugget of social distinction or as a move in a "scripted game show" is unable to discern when something more may be at stake – aesthetically, economically, and politically' (23–24; my emphasis). At the same time, Crosthwaite suggests that the 'adoption of non-commercial narrative forms [by contemporary writers] cannot *simply* be dismissed as *mere* posturing or position-taking in a prestige economy that is *only* ever an indirect means of accessing the economy proper' (23; my emphases). Clearly, Crosthwaite's juxtaposition of 'commercial' and 'non-commercial', and his insertions of 'only', 'simply', and 'mere', signal a continuing investment in a binary and ultimately simplistic thought system that posits market 'permeation' (Koegler 2018, chapter 2) as a sell-out and/or degradation. In sum, *The*

Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction often leads significantly beyond still-popular Marxian frameworks of critical engagement—by bringing them ‘into closer contact with burgeoning work on money and finance in various overlapping fields of the social sciences, including economic sociology, economic anthropology, cultural economy, and the social studies of finance’ (Crosthwaite 2019, 7). However, affectively and rhetorically, the study simultaneously remains at least partially indebted to a more old-school position that perceives the market and marketable forms of art to be finally incapable of rendering much-needed, profound insights into what is truly ‘at stake’ in this world.¹

If Crosthwaite’s study thus offers a plethora of compelling insights into how and why markets and/or finance are imagined (or imagine themselves) in particular ways, how they dialogically structure epistemology in the here and now, and how one might read such dialogisms or overlaps, there is a sense in which Crosthwaite’s investment in an ultimately sceptical view of ‘market logics’ occasionally takes away from the diversity, complexity, and nuance of his study. Indeed, Crosthwaite’s scepticism limits our very understanding of what ‘market metafiction’ might be and what it can do: *is* only that fiction legitimately termed ‘market metafiction’ that signals a disavowal of ‘market logics’? Is ‘market metafiction’, in other words, automatically akin to a particular ideological position that projects ‘market logics’ as intrusive, limiting, corrupting, or symptomatic of pathology? *Could* market metafiction also include more diverse perspectives, such as figuring the market as offering paths to empowerment, however partial or uneven, for those disenfranchised? Could ‘market metafiction’ envision the market as fostering creativity, authentic inspiration, or profound social critique?

The necessity to ask such questions emerges particularly in those moments that Crosthwaite overtly addresses race and gender as diversifying parameters. Harking back to the soaring popularity and broadening recognition of African American

¹ Crosthwaite differs here from my own position developed in *Critical Branding. Postcolonial Studies and the Market* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

authors in the 1980s and 1990s, Crosthwaite asserts that ‘the growing attunement of the publishing industry to market signals [...] was a boon for writers of colour’ (48). Apparently, the conditions were such that ‘the industry was virtually obligated to diversify its list’ (48). While this could be read positively and trigger more in-depth exploration of how audience expectations (the ‘marketplace’) may pull the industry toward more balanced politics of representation, Crosthwaite signals reluctance to accept this possibility. He mentions Ishmael Reed who ‘urged African American writers to abandon “the myth that business and art do not mix”’ and is careful not to side with such a view. Crosthwaite concedes that ‘The growing role of market considerations in publishers’ decision-making over recent decades has had the welcome effect, then, of opening up new spaces for writers of colour in the literary field’ (49)—and yet this statement cannot but appear lukewarm at best as it is embedded in a larger narrative that relativizes this possibility and continues over several pages. Indeed, at this point, Crosthwaite has already begun to string together the old (and contested) narrative of Toni Morrison’s sell-out to Oprah Winfrey (the ‘alliance between Morrison’s canonical status and [Oprah] Winfrey’s commercial power’; 49), and the fact that Morrison worked, for some time, as a senior editor at Random House, both of which inspires Crosthwaite to compare Morrison to Reed and label her position as ‘similarly complex’ (48).

Crosthwaite’s main reference here is (white) John K. Young’s *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Experience* (2006), a study that critically reflects on how the predominantly white culture industry curates a particular account of ‘authentic’ black experience that presumably matches the (racist) expectations of audiences. Crosthwaite also refers to novels by ‘leading African American postmodernists’, namely ‘Clarence Major (*My Amputations* [1986]), Gloria Naylor (*Mama Day* [1988]), John Edgar Wideman (*Philadelphia Fire* [1990]), and Paul Beatty (*The White Boy Shuffle* [1996], *Tuff* [2000], and *Slumberland* [2008])’; all of these exhibit meta-reflection ‘on what can be said to constitute “authentic” Black experience, how such experience might be adequately represented, and how these representations are liable to be simplified and distorted as they circulate in

the wider culture' (49–50). Finally, Crosthwaite picks Percival Everett's 2001 satirical novel *Erasure* for a longer discussion, a novel which pictures an author-protagonist who, frustrated with the US audience's apparent craving for stories of black crime, exactly writes such a narrative out of scorn, and ends up receiving broad acclaim including winning the 'National Book Association (read National Book Foundation) Book Award' (52). While there can be no doubt that a range of heterodox authors, black writers included, face immense pressures to conform to pigeonholing perceptions (something which has also been shown to affect so-called 'migrant authors' or queer authors), the question remains why Ishmael Reed's position should be so entirely untenable and why Toni Morrison—after all one of those 'leading African American postmodernists'—is only branded as 'complex' in her non-conformance to Crosthwaite's preferred narrative. Surely, it is a strategic choice to represent Everett's satire over several pages (after all, a fictional text), rather than engaging with differing and significant positions such as Morrison's. Instead of being taken seriously and given a voice, Morrison remains, like Winfrey, a silenced object of disdain and disapproval in Crosthwaite's first chapter. Another example would be Crosthwaite's analysis of Nell Zink's work in chapter 7; here, Crosthwaite seems just a little too keen to assess Zink's abilities to conform to different genre conventions, and write to a market-driven schedule, against a screen of negative expectations. He seems to revel just a little too much in searching Zink's 'more recent work' for 'ugly feelings'—a phrase introduced by Sianne Ngai to describe how (in Crosthwaite's paraphrase) 'the very hyperactive intensity of zany spectacles of production and the very cloyingness of cute commodities mean that such phenomena are always at risk of pushing positive affective states (fascination, exhilaration, care, desire) too far so that they morph into negative states (unease, anxiety, hostility, revulsion)' (225). This screen of negative expectations of 'market-driven' practice ultimately limits Crosthwaite's own options when assessing Zink: he must read her either as verging on pathology when being able to work so efficiently and so successfully to market demand; or he must read her as aware, deep down, of the market's corrupting influences on artistic inspiration, something that turns her writing process into a vexed and shallow practice.

The question that inevitably arises is why we should level Zink's creativity in this way, particularly given that she is one of the few female authors discussed in *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction*.

We can also ask why we should attribute special attention to Zink's representation of market pressures as negative in *Nicotine* (2016); why is this the possibly only authentic and meaningful take-away—when the book was written to a similarly tight schedule as her previous works? Who can tell if Zink was not again catering to the expectations of a particular, in this case left-wing audience when writing these lines, knowing this audience's craving for stories that spell out the meanness and 'ugliness' of 'market logics', and the terrible pressures to which they subject the artist? Indeed we can ask if this kind of craving is actually so different from any other expectations that readers tend to bring to a particular genre, or novel. Is it so impossible to imagine that stories that depict market logics as evil, stories that lament the market's distorting effects on inspiration, would themselves be written to target a particular audience, intended to evoke the impression that this is hardcore-authentic, progressive criticism? Finally, the question is why we should limit ourselves to engaging, under the label of 'market metafiction', with a rather self-similar set of narratives, readings, and ideological positions. As a reviewer of this study with a keen interest in these questions, I would be delighted to read a follow-up article by the author that targets these issues.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

How to cite this article: Koegler, C., 2020. "Book Review: *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction* by Paul Crosthwaite (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), ISBN 978-1108499569, 280 pages, RRP £75.00." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 8(1): 12, pp. 1–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.2918>

Published: 19 August 2020

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