

Panic! Markets, Crises, and Crowds in American Fiction. By David A. Zimmerman. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. xii + 294 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations. Cloth, \$59.95; paper, \$22.50. ISBN: cloth, 0-807-83023-2; paper, 0-807-85687-8.

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In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the securities markets and commodities exchanges in the United States gained striking national visibility, in large part due to the periodic panics convulsing them. While it was still uncommon for most Americans to own any instruments of high finance, average citizens nevertheless grew acutely aware that the fate of the nation's markets affected everyone. Not surprisingly, many citizens struggled to understand financial panics, particularly what (or who) caused them and how such market disturbances might be prevented.

In his meticulously researched and equally well-written book *Panic!*, David A. Zimmerman utilizes fictional literature about financial panics, written in the period 1898 to 1913, as a lens to reveal how both authors and their readers tried to interpret panics and, in general, how they attempted to cope with the widespread financial and social changes then taking place. Zimmerman wisely does not attempt to cover exhaustively every work of panic fiction from the Gilded Age through the Progressive Era. Although he discusses a range of novelists, Zimmerman centers his analysis predominantly on five of them, and his choice is both interesting and bold. While the names of some (like Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, and Thomas Lawson) are likely to be familiar to many literary scholars and financial historians, Zimmerman tends to analyze their lesser-known works. He also dwells on less-well-remembered novelists (like Frank Norris and Frederic Isham), making a compelling case for the resurrection of their works of panic fiction. Utilizing this eclectic combination of fictional literature, Zimmerman delivers an informative, thoughtful, and entertaining book that highlights the powerful degree to which critical analysis of fiction may illuminate the past. Zimmerman also renders a major contribution to the nascent field of "panic scholarship," which heretofore

predominantly has focused on antebellum fictional literature. Literary scholars and historians alike are bound to find Zimmerman's book compelling.

Historians of the stock market may find particularly valuable Zimmerman's commentary on Thomas Lawson, who was not only an important financier and financial reformer but also, as Zimmerman emphasizes, a crafty stock promoter and a popular writer of both nonfiction and fiction. Lawson is best remembered for *Frenzied Finance*, his muckraking exposé about insider manipulation of Amalgamated Copper stock. While Zimmerman credits Lawson, and that book, with playing a major role in inciting the panic of 1904, the degree to which Lawson, and not other factors, was responsible may be debated. Theoretically, a closer examination of the extent and characteristics of Lawson's readership base might help illuminate Lawson's true impact as panicmonger, but such detailed historical information is unlikely to be available.

Certainly, Lawson himself claimed credit for creating that market hysteria, and viewing his trial panic as a success, Lawson tried to galvanize his army of readers to strike another, more devastating blow to the System. This time, he not only resorted to muckraking journalism but also invoked the power of fiction, writing the novel *Friday, the Thirteenth* (1907). Lawson's timing, however, was poor; the panic of 1907 preempted and thwarted his plans, and afterwards he was never again able to generate sufficient readerly outrage to create another panic. This failure seems odd if Lawson indeed had been able to generate the prior panic in 1904. Zimmerman suggests that the public may have grown tired of Lawson sounding the panic alarm. Yet perhaps Lawson's words from the beginning commanded less power to move markets than he and others believed.

While Lawson attempted to create panics (both fictional and real), other fiction writers, like Frederic Isham, tried to quell them, believing that the restoration of the status quo would benefit society. As Zimmerman details, Isham's historical fiction *Black Friday* (1904) centers on the relationship between the heroic railroad baron Richard Strong and his weak-willed wife, Elinor Rossiter. Gould's infamous corner of the gold market in 1869 serves as the backdrop, as Strong's wife is seduced by one of Gould's accomplices. Isham casts Strong and other enemies of Gould "not as anarchist revolutionaries" but, rather, "as capitalist avatars" (p. 70). Strong seeks to defend the

financial system, just as he seeks to restore his marriage. When his wife flees to France (at the moment when the Paris Commune is forming), Strong acts. He goes to Paris to “rescue” Elinor from the chaos, and perhaps most especially, from the dangerous company of the *petroleuses*, the female supporters of the Commune who allegedly burned down much of Paris during the agitation. Isham does not explicitly conflate the Commune with the gold panic, but Zimmerman persuasively argues that Isham intended readers to equate the two “as commensurable threats to social order, and [to] associate both with the most dangerous developments of modernity: feminism, free love, popular culture, class mingling, repudiation of private and public bonds, and liberalism run riot” (pp. 42, 43). Isham really wants marriage bonds and other societal obligations, not just unruly markets, brought back to order, and the novel’s conclusion witnesses just such a restoration.

Can markets, though, truly be controlled? In *The Pit* (1903), novelist Frank Norris tells the story of a bold Chicago speculator, Curtis Jadwin, who confidently believes he can corner the wheat market. Zimmerman nicely contextualizes *The Pit*, explaining how it reflects both New Psychology and New Thought. While the protagonist Curtis Jadwin initially seems to exercise hypnotic control over the wheat market, he ultimately discovers that the market, like a mechanical organ, is an ungovernable machine that responds to the touch of an invisible hand, and not to his own. Jadwin, the mesmerist, ironically himself becomes mesmerized by the market.

The panic theme also figures prominently in Upton Sinclair’s *The Moneychangers* (1908), which is based on a fictional bankers’ plot purportedly at the root of the panic of 1907. Zimmerman delivers a complex and nuanced interpretation of this book, focusing on “the ethical dynamics of complicity—the moral risk of outsiders becoming implicated in conspirators’ designs” (p. 151). Indeed, as Zimmerman notes, *The Moneychangers* conveys a notion of widespread accountability, one in which naïve outsiders who unwittingly contribute to a panic nonetheless share in the moral responsibility for it.

The notion of accountability is further featured in Theodore Dreiser’s *The Financier* (1912), a novel that takes place over the course of two panics. In the first, occurring after the Chicago Fire of 1871, amoral financier Frank Cowperwood loses his money in the market and then relinquishes his freedom when he is convicted of

embezzlement. In another panic two years later, however, Cowperwood recovers his fortunes and, despite the efforts of his enemies, is never held fully accountable for his unpaid financial and ethical obligations. Zimmerman's analysis of both this particular book and the more general aims and objectives of Dreiser's fiction writing is thorough and masterful.

Zimmerman conveys his considerable literary and historical expertise in examining the panic scholarship of not just Dreiser but also the other novelists he highlights, especially Norris, Sinclair, Isham, and Lawson. Notably, the cover of Zimmerman's book features an illustration accompanying Edwin Lefevre's short story "The Man Who Won," from *McClure's* magazine in August 1901. Zimmerman himself has scored a victory with this book. *Panic! Markets, Crises, and Crowds in American Fiction* is a winner.

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