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Reconstituting Authority: American Fiction in the Province of the Law,

William E. Moddelmog

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Reconstituting Authority: American Fiction in the Province of the Law, William E. Moddelmog Ina"Reconstituting Authority, "aWilliam Moddelmog explores the ways in which American law and literature converged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through close readings of significant texts from the era, he reveals not only how novelists invoked specific legal principles and ideals in their fictions but also how they sought to reconceptualize the boundaries of law and literature in ways that transformed previous versions of both legal and literary authority.Moddelmog does not assume a sharp distinction between literary and legal institutions and practices but shows how writers imagined the two fields as engaged in the same cultural process. He argues that because the law was instrumental in setting the terms by which concepts such as race, gender, nationhood, ownership, and citizenship were defined in the nineteenth century, authors challenging those definitions had to engage the law on its own terrain: to place their work in a dialogue with the law by telling stories that were already authorized (though perhaps suppressed) by legal institutions.The first half of the book is devoted in separate chapters to William Dean Howells, Helen Hunt Jackson, and Pauline Hopkins. The focus shifts from large theoretical concerns to questions of contract and native sovereignty, to issues of African American citizenship and racial entitlement. In each case the discussion is rooted in a larger consideration of the rule (or misrule) of law. The second half of the book turns from the rule of law to the issue of property, specifically the Lockean version of the self that tied identity to legal conceptions of property and economic value. In separate discussions of Charles Chesnutt, Edith Wharton, and Theodore Dreiser, a"Reconstituting Authority"areveals authors as closely engaged with those changing perspectives on property and identity, in ways that challenged the racial, gendered, and economic consequences of America's possessive individualism."

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