

Critical Insights: Literature in Times of Crisis

“This is a very timely and topical book for literature studies in the wake of a global pandemic and other great concerns across our globe. I selected this one to review as it butts up against my PhD topic of literature in society. **Editor Robert C. Evans has assembled a robust collection of essays from literary scholars that address the overlap of fiction and drama with the real-life challenges that surround their creation.** It is a safe bet that COVID-19 will play at least a supporting role in a great deal of novels, plays, and movies in the near future. (Indeed, I have to share that I have read two novels in the last three months that include the pandemic shutdowns as plot points.) It is therefore enlightening to look back at a broadly defined spectrum of crises through the lenses of works classical through contemporary.

Literature in Times of Crisis begins with a contextual comparison of 16th and 17th century plague literature with the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. A leading scholar in the field, Rebecca Totaro, breaks down the characteristic themes of the historical literary voices and draws comparisons with contemporary experience. Then, Evans invites historical and literary scholars to examine, through essay, the contexts of disease and war in literature ranging from Greek tragedy to contemporary American fiction. **These first two sections alone demonstrate the interest and validity of critical readings that take a dive into crises.**

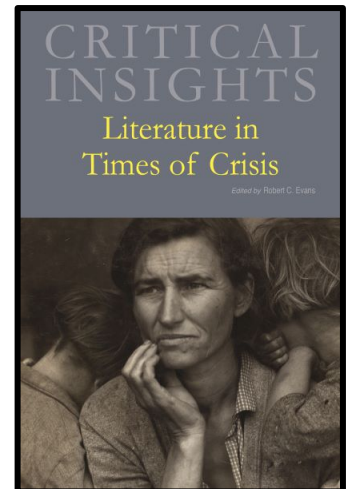
In the remaining sections, readers are treated to a selection of essays examining specific readings of great literature with an eye for the influence of crisis on the work. These are arranged in roughly chronological order from the Iliad through contemporary works as late as 2018. In light of what would unfold later in 2020 and 2021, this book has the sense as being an opening number for forthcoming scholarship that will pick up this theme. **Literature in Times of Crisis is an excellent addition to the Critical Insights series which would be a worthwhile edition to any literary studies library...**”

“ATG Reviewer Rating: I need this in my library. (I want to be able to get up from my desk and grab this book off the shelf, if it’s not checked out.)

-Against the Grain, 2024

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REVIEW



Pub. Date: January 2021
ISBN: 978-1-64265-754-8
List Price: \$105

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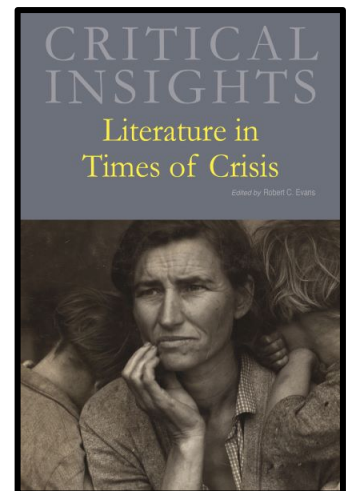
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Critical Insights: Literature in Times of Crisis

"A number of books have come out recently on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority being nonfiction analyses. How, one wonders, will the pandemic be reflected in literary works? This volume in the *Critical Insights* series addresses the question by looking at past crises resulting in social change, from plagues to war, from Homer to Cormac McCarthy. **Defining "crises" variously and broadly, this collection of informed, scholarly essays is divided into three major sections: an introduction** (written, interview-style, with scholar Rebecca Totaro on themes of plague literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and similarities to the world created by COVID-19 response) **and two critical essay sections, comprising 11 essays in all.** The first essay section treats ancient and Renaissance literature and themes, and the second addresses more-modern literature, film, and theater. **Each essay gives a historical perspective, an overview of relevant secondary writings, an analysis of the work(s) under consideration, and (if applicable) a comparative analysis of two authors or works.** Essays end with notes and works cited, and some are extended by black-and-white reproductions. The volume concludes with a list of additional work (books examining both literature and the impact of crisis); a bibliography that broadens the focus to related topics; notes on the editor and contributors; and comprehensive indexes of persons, characters, works, time periods, places, topics, and writers. As contributor Joyce Kelly notes, "We recognize crisis as potentially damaging, [but] it can also bring necessary change." **An excellent addition for college and university collections with a focus on literary criticism.**"

– *Booklist*, 2021

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