

# Shelf AWARENESS

Shelf Awareness for Monday, October 27, 2008

---

## Unfortunate but Good Timing: New Books On the New Deal's WPA

By Larry Portzline

On its 75th anniversary, there are at least four new marvelous books on the Works Progress Administration, FDR's New Deal program that put millions of unemployed Americans back on the job during the Great Depression. The titles unintentionally foreshadow the current economic meltdown. (Be warned: you might find yourself wondering if a "new" WPA could be in our future.)

Nick Taylor's exhaustive study, *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA* (Bantam), tackles the program's many achievements and challenges with enough insight and enthusiasm to please history buffs and dabblers alike. You'll be shocked to learn how much of the WPA's handiwork still exists coast to coast, from airports and dams to community parks and post office murals.

Kathryn Flynn and Richard Polese's handsomely illustrated *The New Deal* (Gibbs Smith) delves into the eclectic deeds of the WPA as well as Social Security, the short-lived Civilian Conservation Corps and Civil Works Administration--the latter two of which together preserved wilderness areas and created countless roads, bridges and public buildings.

One of the WPA's most controversial ventures, the Federal Theatre Project, gets a fresh look in Susan Quinn's *Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands Made High Art out of Desperate Times* (Walker). The FTP, along with the Federal Arts, Music and Writers' Projects (known collectively as "Federal One"), made up 1% of the WPA's enormous budget but, according to Quinn's lively and entertaining account, received the most Congressional scrutiny--and scorn--due to allegations of Communist infiltration (a subject of Tim Robbins's

film *The Cradle Will Rock*).

*State by State: A Panoramic Portrait of America* compiled by *Paris Review* deputy editor Matt Weiland and McSweeney's editor-at-large Sean Wilsey (Ecco) recreates the spirit of the WPA's famous "American Guide" series. While the Federal Writers' Project assigned thousands of out-of-work scribes to create a written portrait of the U.S., *State by State* employs some of today's best authors--including Dave Eggers (Illinois), Barry Hannah (Mississippi), Jhumpa Lahiri (Rhode Island) and Rick Moody (Connecticut)--to create a more quirky armchair road trip. (Don't miss the [Out of the Book movie](#) based on this from Powell's Books.)

More books on the WPA are on their way. Arriving later this month is *Posters for the People: The Art of the WPA* by Ennis Carter and Christopher DeNoon (Quirk Books), which documents the colorful achievements and far-reaching influence of the Federal Art Project's Poster Division. Historians consider the WPA's posters among the most noteworthy examples of public art in the U.S. They advertised exhibits and performances by the other arts programs, encouraged travel, warned against disease and helped to promote the nation's economic recovery.

And this February, David A. Taylor's *Soul of a People: The WPA Writers' Project Uncovers Depression America* (Wiley) will chronicle the work of future literary stars like John Cheever, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Studs Terkel and Richard Wright as they toiled to create the WPA's popular state and regional guidebooks.

--[Larry Portzline](#) is a writer and college instructor in Pennsylvania and founded *Bookstore Tourism*.

*Permanent Link:*

[http://www.shelf-awareness.com/ar/theshelf/2008-10-27/unfortunate\\_but\\_good\\_timing\\_new\\_books\\_on\\_the\\_new\\_deals\\_wpa.html](http://www.shelf-awareness.com/ar/theshelf/2008-10-27/unfortunate_but_good_timing_new_books_on_the_new_deals_wpa.html)