



The Dream of the Great American Novel

Lawrence Buell

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The idea of "the great American novel" continues to thrive almost as vigorously as in its nineteenth-century heyday, defying 150 years of attempts to dismiss it as amateurish or obsolete. In this landmark book, the first in many years to take in the whole sweep of national fiction, Lawrence Buell reanimates this supposedly antiquated idea, demonstrating that its history is a key to the dynamics of national literature and national identity itself.

The dream of the G.A.N., as Henry James nicknamed it, crystallized soon after the Civil War. In fresh, in-depth readings of selected contenders from the 1850s onward in conversation with hundreds of other novels, Buell delineates four "scripts" for G.A.N. candidates. One, illustrated by *The Scarlet Letter*, is the adaptation of the novel's story-line by later writers, often in ways that are contrary to the original author's own design. Other aspirants, including *The Great Gatsby* and *Invisible Man*, engage the American Dream of remarkable transformation from humble origins. A third script, seen in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Beloved*, is the family saga that grapples with racial and other social divisions. Finally, mega-novels from *Moby-Dick* to *Gravity's Rainbow* feature assemblages of characters who dramatize in microcosm the promise and pitfalls of democracy.

The canvas of the great American novel is in constant motion, reflecting revolutions in fictional fashion, the changing face of authorship, and the inseparability of high culture from popular. As Buell reveals, the elusive G.A.N. showcases the myth of the United States as a nation perpetually under construction.

The Dream of the Great American Novel Details

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angie says

Top-notch for research purposes or personal reading, The Dream Of The Great American Novel has everything to please a true blue book lover: history, perspective and lots and lots of rare or long-forgotten titles for people who love the classics. You don't have to be a former or present English major to love this, but Lawrence Buell's book may make you giddy if you are one! :)

Mark Patton says

A bit of a slog (plus I hate the word "unpack" when used to mean "elaborate on," or "discuss," or "explain," but this is one of the author's favorite words).

The Advocate says

"This 565-page study, much longer than The Great American Novel should be, is so long and myriad in its shifting focuses and seeming digressions as to defy useful summary and evaluation in a short review; but 'The Dream of the Great American Novel' doesn't justify a long one."

Read more here.

Carol Storm says

Not since LOVE AND DEATH IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL by Leslie Fiedler has a single work presented the entire history of the American novel (and the search for the Great American Novel) in such a readable format. This delightful book is truly a classic in its own right!

Lawrence Buell defines the "Great American Novel" as a story that is culturally unique yet so universal that it gives American literature a lasting place in the literature of the world. It celebrates American values and by its very nature must be accessible to readers of all classes and backgrounds. Buell further explains that the quest for this type of story can be traced back to the search for national unity that came just after the American Civil War. He discusses all of the high school classics and many obscure titles as well. Often times, he puts two American classics side by side, comparing THE GREAT GATSBY by F. Scott Fitzgerald and AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY by Theodore Dreiser, exposing the similarities and the contrasts in a way that makes for fascinating reading.

Predictably, as a Harvard academic, Buell seems biased towards difficult and scholarly works. Popular favorites like HUCKLEBERRY FINN get short shrift, while he provides page after page of careful analysis of obscure and sometimes opaque works by Toni Morrison and William Faulkner. While he goes out of his way to express his appreciation for "popular culture" the author sometimes seems quite arbitrary in his judgments. For example, he wastes several pages trying to renew scholarly interest in the clumsily written

and embarrassingly dated U.S.A. trilogy by John Dos Passos while devoting less than a sentence to formidable modern contenders such as William Styron and Kurt Vonnegut Jr. It's also very unclear why Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is high art while Alex Haley's equally momentous saga *ROOTS* is merely "middlebrow entertainment."

Buell is plainly very well aware of having to reconsider all of the old favorites of American literature in the light of modern political correctness. He understandably wants to make amends by celebrating the more diverse authors of the modern age. No one can fault the respectful attention he gives to Toni Morrison, or the concise summary he gives of the actual plot of *BELOVED*, a novel which is heartfelt and sincere in its loathing for slavery but unfortunately almost impossible for the general reader to absorb in a single reading.

On the other hand, it seems very peculiar that in an otherwise excellent discussion of *NATIVE SON* by Richard Wright, Buell takes it upon himself to inform us that Richard Wright intended readers to be "horrified -- horrified" (and undoubtedly also "shocked -- shocked") by brutally unrepentant murderer and rapist Bigger Thomas' legendary snarl of defiance, "I never knew I was alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for them. I feel all right when I look at it that way." Whether one approves of Bigger Thomas' foul deeds or not, it's always very risky for an academic to put words in an author's mouth. My suspicion is that Wright meant readers to be horrified, not by Bigger's rage and defiance, nor even by his deplorable rape of a white woman, but by the unspeakable brutality of American racism and the hypocrisy of white America. At any rate, it seems somewhat simplistic to say we're meant to be "horrified" by Bigger Thomas' vengeance on the white woman, any more than we're meant to be "horrified" by Ahab's vengeance on the white whale.

As Ernest Hemingway once said, The Great American Novel is not for the faint of heart.

Rose says

What defines The Great American Novel? Does one even exist? Dr. Buell discusses some likely candidates from "The Scarlet Letter" and "Huckleberry Finn" through "Gravity's Rainbow." Interesting consideration of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Nice style keeps things moving.

Simone says

Writing a review of this, much less admitting that I read it, seems in some ways incredibly pretentious, but I am interested by the concept of the Great American Novel and this seemed to good to pass up. I liked it, and it's well written. I have read very few of the novels he discusses here, but Buell does a great job summarizing them. I also thought he did a good job seeing around the Great American Novel as an excuse to write about great white men (though admittedly it is hard to do completely.) Anyway, it's long and dry but also interesting.
