



Raintree County

Ross Lockridge Jr.

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In 1948, three young authors published first novels that indelibly changed the landscape of American letters...THE NAKED AND THE DEAD by Norman Mailer, THE YOUNG LIONS by Irwin Shaw and RAINTREE COUNTY by Ross Lockridge, Jr. Whereas Mailer and Shaw went on to write many other novels, Lockridge died by his own hand at the age of 34 in that same fateful year.

This panoramic epic of the 19th century in Raintree County, Indiana (particularly of the Civil War and its effects), was produced after six years of research, writing and revision. It continues to command attention and respect as a stylistically unique work of considerable force.

Raintree County Details

Date : Published 1948 by Houghton Mifflin Company

ISBN :

Author : Ross Lockridge Jr.

Format : Hardcover 1060 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Classics, Novels, Romance

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From Reader Review Raintree County for online ebook

Sarah says

Some reviewer wrote that the author knew a lot of words and used them all in Raintree County. It's true, on occasion he could have benefited from a more careful editor, but with the exception of a few tedious passages, I was very happy with this novel. It was creative, interesting, and thoughtful. The main character, Johnny Shawnessey, is a complex person. This is a good thing because the book is 1060 pages and it darn well better be gripping. I enjoyed the conceit of the entire novel spanning one day in 1892 with flashbacks throughout his life. It's too bad that Lockridge killed himself shortly after completing the book because he was talented and had a lot to say! Probably the book would be better known today if he had lived and written more, I don't know. But I'm glad I read it and I'm keeping it in my permanent library.

Frederick says

This gets a mention (or two or three) in Thomas Mallon's excellent novel about the year 1948, DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN. I've read bits and pieces of RAINTREE COUNTY, but the reason I know anything at all about it is that, sometime in the 1970s a dual biography of its author and the author of MISTER ROBERTS was reviewed on the front page of THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW. Both authors had huge bestsellers the same year (1948) and, even though they did not know each other, they both did something very shocking, which was this: They committed suicide. I was immediately drawn to RAINTREE COUNTY, a nearly-one-thousand page book, a copy of which was in my father's study.

It takes place on the 4th of July (the date of my review.) Different Fourth of Julys are described in the different chapters. The characters are from Indiana and grow up to fight in the Civil War. It's an epic. In 1994, Ross Lockridge's son wrote an excellent book about his father called SHADE OF THE RAINTREE. It details his father's attempts to tailor his masterpiece to the will of the publisher, then to the will of the Book-Of-The-Month Club and then to the will of M-G-M, which had bought the rights. M-G-M had a lot of say over a book which hadn't yet been published, and certainly the Book-Of-The-Month Club had a lot of control over it too. Book publishing has never actually been a gentlemen's profession. Ross Lockridge's son says in the biography something to this effect: "In a very real respect, my father died for a book."

The story behind the publication of RAINTREE COUNTY is, in itself, epic.

The cover of the paperback I've reviewed retains the artwork of the original dust jacket. It's a landscape which is a woman's body, a page being turned and a river with initials in its curves.

Paul says

It is really unfortunate that Lockridge didn't live to write more. He is amazingly prescient in speaking to the future of the United States through a story about its past. His characterizations of the actors on the American stage are pitch perfect, the slimy politician, the corrupt financier, a hypocritical preacher man, a powerful Feminist, an actress whose character is a prism of the stage, and, while I leave an important number out, a quiet poet who remains home in the midwest while his friends take the first train out of town.

The book takes place in the years before, during, and after the civil war. The lessons of that War speak volumes on our present political situation. But even more telling, perhaps, is his rendering of the Gilded Age.

He is a white man writing in 1947, but even so he balances the great number of misogynistic patriarchal Male characters in this Civil War novel with a vision for how we might be, told through the eyes of the main character.

Kathy says

Quotable:

He was always arriving in train stations from parts unknown to meet himself departing for unknown parts.

He emerged from his schooling with the conviction that Liberty and Union were one and inseparable, that George Washington was the greatest man who ever lived, and that two plus two equalled four in Raintree County and throughout the universe. Above all, he acquired a holy faith in the printed word.

Now we all agree, do we not, that no man can or does exist in rational society without a brain. May I say that in Kentucky, whence I have lately come, I felt some disposition to modify that statement, but——

extree-ordinary

In a way, all stories, no matter how badly written and printed, were legend—and eternal. Each book was sacred, a unique copy that had somewhere in its crowded pages the famous misprint, the cryptogram, or the lithograph of a beautiful woman whose nudity was signed with the faint signature of her mortality. Wherever paper was covered with print, the papyrus rush shook down its seed again by the river of life, the music of Nilotic reeds was carried on the air of summer. The strange linkage of a sound and its visual symbol was invented by men who lived beside a river, saw a cursive shape written on the earth, heard the continuous sound of flowing water.

As for the Bible, said the Perfessor, it's just a lot of old Jewish myths and archives, some of it pretty dull stuff. If we have to believe in myths, what's wrong with selecting something beautiful. I would rather contemplate Venus' cute behind than old Moses' withered puss. Not that the Hebrews didn't toss off some wonderful poetry now and then. They were wise, those old beards, and they knew the wine and the roses of life, as well as the ashes.

Did we not weary ourselves in a rhythm of rowing, daylong on the inland waters?

Apparently he had a fatal talent for picking out girls who liked to take off their clothes by lonely waters.

A woman who gives herself for love only, and without hope of moral security, is she not more courageous than the other kind?

[E]very book which she read... was graven upon her memory with a stylus of flame. Nature, Humanity, Liberty, Poetry, Passion, Love, these became meaningful concepts to her and summarized eternal images of life on the earth.

[W]e have the Indianapolis News-Historian to remind us that we're living in a new age, the age of the Modern Man, or perhaps still better, the Common Man—common because he's becoming commoner all the time and more and more like every other man. The reason for this is that through the free press and the blessings of literacy he shares the atrocities of mankind more fully with his fellows.

[T]he remorseless, strange river of his life had carried him beyond another anguishingly brief intersection.

Americans, the eternal children of humanity! Rootless wanderers, creators of new cities, conquerors of deserts and forests, voyagers on rivers, migrants to westward, they kept eternally in their hearts the fact or fiction of the childhood home.

In Economics as in everything else, Mass and Vitality prevail. Can't you see it coming yourself? Freedom, friends—freedom and democratic institutions—were manufactured by happy gentlemen with prosperous acres and contented slaves on the fringe of a wilderness. They and our tradition of rugged individualism, our capitalists, our log-cabin presidents, our millionaire paperboys—all belong not only to the youth of America but also to the youth of the human race. Americans are the frontiersmen of history, and America is running out of frontier. As Cash says, the times are changing. In America history has been speeded up. Wealth and all the power and prestige that go with it have flowed into huge concentrations in the hands of a few individuals. Industrial empires own whole towns, railroad systems, States, and—yes—the Senate of the United States. In a sense a few great combines may be said to own the country. But they own it how? By the remarkable acquiescence of the people they exploit. In creating these empires of wealth and power, our Capitalists have created the instruments of their own destruction. Behold, the day is almost at hand! When several million men suddenly awaken to find that they are forging with their toil the chains that bind them, when, I say, that historic moment arrives, they will find also that they have in their hands the simple means of emancipation. Then will come, gentlemen, the Great Confiscation! For the workers will say, These machines belong to us because we are the people who work them. Then it will also occur to them to say, We are the Government. That, friends, will be the end of our free and easy, hell-for-leather, capitalistic democracy, and the Revolution will be here!

The Perfessor leaned back, vastly satisfied with himself.

—The trouble with you, Perfessor, Cash Carney said, is that you read too much.

[T]he whole universe is implacably interconnected. It was all necessary to produce me, and I am all necessary to produce it.

The noblest love is the intense awareness of another being, Mr. Shawnessy said. Love is the all-important discovery that one is not alone in the world.

Whoopsala says

This forgotten beauty is close enough to the Great American Novel for me. It has everything such a idea contains: a sweeping look at America's most turbulent time on its own shores, a tremendous love story, glorious writing shot through with poetry, a mystical center that ought to lie at every story. People should read this. They need it.

Stuart Desbrisay says

A wonderful, unique novel that deserves to be better known today. There may be too much of it, but it's overall quality is impressive. It is an elegiac portrait of America and Americans that is moving and sly and like nothing else! If you don't know this book, you should seek it out, it is an overlooked masterpiece.

Rachel Mahoney says

There's a review already here by Sonnetal (sorry if I spelled this incorrectly) but it says it all. This is one of the GREAT American novels and it's been neglected. Lockridge killed himself in despair only two months after it was published, and selling well. His publisher had cut the extended dreamlike ending and it seems to have tipped over an already tippable soul. They were probably right. As it stands, this novel is almost perfect. I too love the Russians. Here was our Russian.

Bonnie says

Legend has it Johnny Appleseed wandered the midwest, carrying among his apple seeds a single, exotic seed from the golden Rain tree. (Looking for a place it would flourish and grow, he planted it somewhere in Henry County, IN, the place where Ross Lockridge grew up.) Legend has it that those who find the Rain tree discover the realization of all dreams. Mr Lockridge takes us on a journey to find this sacred tree of life through the wanderings of John Wycliff Shawnessys life.

The story begins on the morning of July 4, 1892 and ends on the same day after many flashbacks which take us from the early remembrances of Johnny to the current day. Contained within these memories are the women who had a profound impact on him. His mother; his adolescent crush, Nell; his first wife, Susanna Drake; an actress whose name and demeanor changed several times; his 2nd wife, Esther Root and finally the story comes full circle with his daughter Eva who wanders off in the swamp and when found has flower petals from the magnificent Raintree.

Our story spans history from 1844, when Johnny is a mere child of 5 to 1892 as he ponders where his life has led him over his 53 years of life. During this time he has led a type of Forest Gump glimpse of life in the witnessing and/or discussion of: the election of James Polk as president, The War with Mexico, California gold rush, Republican party founded, slavery is brought to the forefront, the Peoria Speech given by Abraham Lincoln, John Brown's raid and followed hanging, Lincoln's election, Confederate government formed, all the battles leading up to, including and forever named as the Civil War, the destruction of Atlanta, Sherman's march to the sea, Lincoln inaugurated to a 2nd term, Lincoln's assassination, Custer massacre at Little Big Horn, Centennial 4th in Philadelphia and The Great Railroad Strike. Sprinkled within these events are the coming and going of government officials and presidents. The concept of freedom is pondered and fought for. All of these topics are touched upon either through Johnny's participation or through wonderful lively discussions at social events or gatherings at the town square.

As Johnny remembers the events of his life it is with the wisdom and knowledge of hindsight. The Raintree he sought and the life lessons he gleaned are all put together and give him the answer he always knew in his heart:

"Raintree County being but a dream must be upheld by dreamers. So he learned that human life's a myth, but that only myths can be eternal. So he learned the gigantic labor by which the earth is rescued again and again from chaos and old night, by which the land is strewn with names, by which the river of human language is

traced from summer to distant summer, by which beauty is plucked forever from the river and clothed in a veil of flesh, by which souls are brought from the Great Swamp in the the sunlight of Raintree County and educated to its enduring truths.”

I began this read in December but had to put it down and begin again after the holidays when I had more time...

I had a hard time adjusting to the rhythm of this book. The author’s use of flashbacks were noted by a date and place, usually, but when the forward portion was entered upon the only indication was Johnny was known as Mr. Shawnessy in that portion. It took a couple times for me to realize this. One of the characteristics of Mr. Lockridge’s writing I looked forward to seeing was the use of partial sentences at the end of a chapter, which then continued within the first few words of the next chapter’s beginning. Very clever.

After reading this book I rented the movie – bad idea. The movie had very little in common with the book other than the names of the characters, where they originated and a few plot points. The ending was completely incorrect. The development of the characters was choppy and inaccurate as well. The movie itself was focused on one small theme plucked out of a chapter and inaccurately portrayed. The book had so many facets where the movie was one dimensional. Very disappointing...

Read the book... Skip the movie...

Gregory Garland says

I have ambivalent feelings about this book, one that some consider an overlooked Great American Novel. At 1,100 pages, I found it by turns frustrating, enjoyable and exhausting. I almost put it down and gave up on it more than once. It ultimately was interesting enough to keep me reading to the end, though. I was okay with the structure of switching back and forth in time -- that wasn't a problem -- but the author went off several times on pages of poetical and philosophical flights of fancy that I found annoying and which seemed to me to be self-indulgent. It was sort of like reading a book like Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward Angel* interspersed with passages from *Leaves of Grass*. I stuck with it but can't recommend it.

Cym Lowell says

It may seem odd to be writing a review of a book written more than 60 years ago. In my case, the book is vibrant and meaningful. Raintree County is set in a mythical part of Indiana close to where I grew up, in Bloomington. The author, Ross Lockridge Jr. lived just down the street from my family. He was a young man. He was also a friend of our neighbor, Alfred Kinsey, for whom my mother, Mildred Hawksworth Lowell a Professor of Library Science at Indiana University, was librarian for Dr. Kinsey’s famous Human Sexuality Institute.

Upon publication in 1947, Raintree County was an instantaneous best-seller leading shortly to a major studio contract for a movie starring Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift. One of the Lockridge children, young Ross, was my classmate in elementary school at Elm Heights Elementary. He would share the details of the

movie process and, as I recall now more than 55 years later, being charmed by the famous players in the movie when the family visited the sets. I could only have been 7 or 8 at the time (born in 1946) but the magic of living in the midst of a famous novelist and the wonder of a Hollywood film are vibrant memories.

At the peak of professional success, Mr. Lockridge committed suicide in a garage. I recall being dumbfounded as a child. “Why would he kill himself?” I asked my mother. “He had achieved so much.”

I do not exactly remember my mother’s response. But the question has lingered in my heart ever since. I have assumed the answer to be along the lines of – “Life is complex, son, even in the lap of glorious success one can become lost. Is this all there is for all of my work? Mr. Lockridge was a fine man. He must have had a torment that another cannot imagine.”

From that time to this, I have always dreamed of being a writer. I have done non-fiction professional books for many years, and am only now into the fiction business. For some reason, the image of these questions has always crept into my mind when I have focused on the possibility of success as a fiction writer.

“What would it be like to succeed? What did Ross Lockridge Jr. feel when his first and only novel achieved instantaneous critical and financial success, followed by a major league movie contract? What would drive him to end his life?

In recent years, I have moved from writing fiction manuscripts and putting them on the shelf to seeking a route to commercial publication. As I began this journey, I wanted to go back and see if I could answer these questions of a lifetime. First, I read the biography of Mr. Lockridge written by his son Larry, *Shade of the Raintree*. Then I picked up *Raintree County* itself, a tome of some 1,060 pages in the edition that was given to me as a birthday present by my sweetheart.

Raintree County is a masterpiece, obviously written in the hopes of becoming a Great American Novel. It traces the life and times of an absorbed young writer (John Wickcliff Shawnessy, a/k/a Johnny) from a rural county before, during, and after the Civil War. The central characters twist and turn through all of the pages as they age. The chronology of time switches back and forth, challenging the reader to keep all of the pieces in perspective. The characters include an elusive young lady whose nudity by the river and innocent frolic in a haystack reverberate through the story (Nell Gaither), a teacher and confessor (the Perfessor), a Southern belle who frolics with our hero one afternoon after too much cider and claims pregnancy, then becomes his first wife, an athletic arch-enemy who becomes a prosperous national businessman (Cash Carney), a competitor for the femme who becomes a U.S. Senator, and a cast of other characters that create the magic of the story.

Like *Gone With the Wind*, *Ulysses*, and other sweeping stories, one gets to the end (when Johnny comes marching home from the War) wondering what the point of the story is. Johnny began with the hope, aspiration, and innocence of youth, seeking answer to the riddle of the naked woman in the post office. In the end, Johnny seems to be seeking to find what he has lost along the way, perhaps the answer to the riddle.

One can never know why this skilled author took his own life. Perhaps the answer is that he poured himself into this fascinating story that is so full of life, complete with its riddles, paradoxes, and mysteries, and lost his way in the process, finding himself unable to deal with the adulation that poured over him (or the frustration of dealing with publishers, agents, studios and the other characters in a story that he had not charted or, maybe, even contemplated). As Lockridge ended the story with Johnny’s determination that “each man had to build his world again [periodically:]!” It is difficult to return to the idealized world of the young, as Cash Carney laments in an epitaph to lost youth (on page 848 of this edition).

The thoughtful framework of Raintree County, the life of its author, and the biography of his son seem to cry for a re-telling of the story in another generation.

In short, Raintree County is the great American novel and should be back on reading lists. The essential issues and messages that are explored in these pages are present in the lives of each of us.

Keith Wright says

The saying that it is not the destination but the path comes to mind when I think of this book. Johnny's attempt to find the mythical raintree, from which flows endless prosperity is the destination; however, it is the path, strewn with prototypes from American history, that stand out most in my mind. The prose remember in this way; in addition to being lyrical, like a river, each chapter ends in an incomplete sentence that is finished by the subject of the first sentence in the next chapter. It is a good time to pause and contemplate the interconnectedness of all things, and sometimes to laugh at the incongruity of it all.

Sonnenatal says

"Raintree County" is an American version of Tolstoy's "War and Peace".

I've actually read "War and Peace". Lockridge's "Raintree County" rises to that level--and, in my estimation--surpasses it. I love the Russians--Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev. And I love Walt Whitman and Ross Lockridge for the same reason. They all have what the Spanish call "duende," what the American blacks clamor to express by the word "soul". These aren't weak, spineless, effete Victorians afraid of beauty, passion, shame and awkward emotions.

They cast light into the dark corners of the human soul and throw open man's collective experience for all to see--something rarely achieved in typically dryer Anglo-Saxon literature.

Ross Lockridge's "Raintree County" astounded me. It left me wondering how this great American genius has been ignored, neglected. The only thing I can think of is that Lockridge makes the fatal mistake of being honest, of writing too accurately about the time-period, of not lying and indulging in historical revisionism. As a result, spineless readers wince when the "N" word is used, or terms like "pickannies," "darkies" or various other period vulgarities are employed by despised side-characters.

For this reason geniuses like Booth Tarkington are banned and suppressed.

It's sad. They want to revise the past and make it "acceptable" for modern audiences. But if you sanitize, you gut, you neuter, you destroy the hard edges which give the time-period texture, verisimilitude. (I mean, if slaves were well-treated why did we fight the Civil War?) But modern hacks would have writers keep all profanities out of it, re-write it so that nothing crude or insensitive made its way in.

If you want lies, watch a Hollywood movie, read a trash novel; if you want genius, poetry, brilliant insights and literary talent, give "Raintree County" a try. Maybe, with enough of us protesting, the prude schoolmarms with tenure at universities will be nudged from their slumber and realize that they have neglected one of the titanic achievements of modern American literature.

Gezagaz says

A big beautiful book, lost to us, but it shouldn't be. It is so American, so poetic, so magical. Come back, Mr. Lockridge. You shouldn't have killed yourself.

Karl says

This is a hard book to review: it will definitely not be everybody's cup of tea. I had started it once years before, then set it aside, and finally read it at a point in my life when I had the time and the patience. It is massive! But I've never read anything at all like it. It's about America and Americans, Time, Fantasy, the 19th Century, and lots more. Ultimately I found it to be a fascinating, provocative, and important work of American literature. At this point in time the 1957 MGM movie adaptation is more famous than the source novel. That's a pity. The movie is interesting in its own way, although its really not very good. And it barely begins to capture the scope of the novel; its plot follows the novel's outline in only the most cursory fashion. The novel RAINTREE COUNTY is a challenge, for its size if nothing else. But, for me, it remains one of those handful of books that crept into my psyche and changed what I thought a book should be.

Kim Rendfeld says

This book has an interesting story and gives the reader a look at 19th century Midwestern life before and after the Civil War. Its non-chronological structure places several emotional climaxes at the end.

However, it could have used tighter editing. This reader could have done without the dream sequences and did not need to know the characters' opinions of every philosophical subject. Some of the sexual attitudes expressed were also disturbing, even though this book is tame by today's standards.

Yet the main character is likeable and the reader roots for him despite his flaws. And despite its length, the story held my interest until the end.

Heather Moore says

I have a first edition of this. Great story! Love, loss, friendship, war; it has it all and is written perfectly.

Stephen Gallup says

This is an ambitious work, probably a conscious attempt at achieving the elusive Great American Novel. My copy is old, with small print that doesn't contrast well on somewhat yellowed pages -- and so my first reaction on picking it up was to question whether reading it would be worth the trouble. A few paragraphs in, the intelligent, sculpted prose settled that.

Still, I agree with reviewers who say the book is too long. My edition is 985 pages and by the time I got into the last few hundred I was thinking it could easily have been wrapped up by then. In fact, a shorter, more focused version would likely have been better (and more conducive to the rereadings that would improve one's appreciation for what is done here).

The story follows the life of John Wickliff Shawnessy, born in 1839 in a fictitious part of Indiana. He grows up fascinated by vaguely sensed mystical implications of a local river and of remnants from a long-forgotten past. He ponders the meaning of the "Republic" in which he lives. (Actually, the word *Republic* is used heavily throughout, until one gathers that it means something broader than the USA. Late in life, Shawnessy defines it as "the world of shared human meaning.") Anyway, he comes of age loving a woman. Garwood, his rival for her affections, turns into a lifelong friendly rival—one of three men with whom he matches wits throughout life. He marries another woman, and sorrow results. In the Civil War he joins the army and participates in Sherman's March to the Sea. Wounded, he's sent to a hospital near the Capital, and his first act on getting out of bed is to attend a play at Ford's Theatre on that fateful night. Later in life, he is sometimes a self-effacing but much-admired teacher, sometimes an aspiring author or playwright trying to make his mark in the Big City, and sometimes a small-town philosopher given to implausibly pithy observations while sitting on porch swings with his old friends (e.g., "The Americans are a mythical race. We are making a new myth... It is the story of the hero who regains Paradise.") All this is set forth in segments that segue abruptly from one point in his life to another.

Beyond those particulars, I think the story is ultimately about creation, or more specifically the mysterious process by which phenomena (sometimes) emerge out of formless chaos and acquire names, meaning, and significance--and then move past immediate relevance. Edenic metaphors abound. I might even say they are hammered on repeatedly.

When geography is the subject, there's the question of how this timeless piece of land, currently known as Raintree County, came to be something presumably understood and rendered on a map, its landmarks named.

When language is the subject, there's the question of how living speech ("the exclamations of young republics") acquires "the tranquil beauty of ideas."

When war is the subject, there's the question of how the utter chaos of a battle resolves into a general understanding that something has been accomplished.

There are predictable meditations on the millions of tadpole-like messengers that must expire so that one can complete the mission and begin a new life.

From the perspective of the other end of life, "Perhaps it was better to have no legends at all, no letters composed into rigid words and pressed on sheets of paper. Break up the forms and melt the letters back. Let there be no more legends on the earth. Let life live and death die, and let there be no names for sorrowful recollection."

In between larger issues, the same pattern occurs again and again in the experience of daily life. A character with poor eyesight sees an approaching person first as a vague, "black twisting shape" that finally resolves into someone with discernable features. People waiting for a train see it transition from promise to reality. More--or less--recognizable images of people who've sat for portraits take shape on the photographer's glass plates.

One thing I particularly like about the writing is the way the author weaves threads together, especially when he does so in real time (so to speak). There's a delightful scene, for example, in which Johnny is reading a newspaper that has the text of Lincoln's address at Gettysburg and is distracted from it every couple sentences by rowdy conversations going on around him.

The same device is somewhat less engaging on the larger scale. Because of the segues mentioned above, everything in Johnny's life seems to be happening at the same time. The War is always over, the War is always being fought. Johnny is always a serene old man; always a young man with inexhaustible vitality and a strong competitive heart. Reading this and trying to rearrange the narrative in chronological order, I was reminded of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, which as I recall proposed that time is an illusion. I also noticed, as the pages went by, that important pieces of the story were missing. For example, what happened in that long-anticipated foot race with Flash Perkins? What exactly happened to Johnny's son before Johnny joined the army? And for goodness sakes what happened to the lovely Nell, with whom he'd corresponded faithfully while away at the war? Toward the end of the book, these loose threads are tied up, and make for some powerful climactic scenes (especially the foot race). Because they involve pain, backing away from them for as long as possible reminds me of what is done in another novel, *Catch-22*. (I wonder if Vonnegut and Heller were influenced by Lockridge.)

This is an impressive, sprawling saga. I think the author intended to make a permanent mark in serious literature. There's a lot here that reminds me of Joyce, and also some that points the way toward *East of Eden*, although on the strength of this single book you can't put Lockridge alongside either Steinbeck or Joyce. The writing convincingly brought 19th century America to life for me--the nation's clumsy, good-hearted adolescence. A little more of Johnny's internal life would have suited me, and room could have been for it made by cutting some of the speechifying. It's a pity that Lockridge wrote nothing further and that his book has pretty much dropped out of the picture. It's the most interesting discovery I've made in a while.

Beth says

Herman Wouk wrote in his intro to the edition I have that this is the Great American Novel. Well, maybe not, but it IS a great novel. This is one of those books that you could open at nearly any page and find something wonderful to quote. Lockridge creates his characters as inextricably tied to the very land of Raintree County; it shapes them, gives them life, calls them home, and helps them know their own identities. Its chronological setting is the latter half of the 19th century, with its center as the Civil War. Lockridge sees the War as the major creation (of a nation) event of the 19th century, and he's convincing in that. You can't help but applaud the protagonist as he loves and suffers and philosophizes and grows old. One negative thing: you absolutely must suspend disbelief any time you're reading conversations between friends in this novel. Lockridge's characters are all philosophers, it seems, and they don't converse so much as they take turns giving speeches! In that, though, it reminds me of epics--figures in *ILIAD*, *ODYSSEY*, *AENEID*, *BEOWULF*, *SONG OF ROLAND*, *NIEBELUNGENLIED*, *PARADISE LOST*, and a host of others give speeches and boasts, and perhaps that is why Lockridge's impulses were to follow that tradition. In any case, this is a book for pondering.

Patrick says

Raise your hand if you have heard of Raintree County by Ross Lockridge, Jr.? I hadn't until Jared Carter handed me a copy of the book a few months ago. I very much wish I had found this book earlier, though, perhaps, I may not have enjoyed it as much (I did not really appreciate *Moby-Dick* until well after college). Speaking of *Moby-Dick*, I have always considered that novel THE American novel. Raintree County does not displace Melville's masterpiece, but it definitely comes in with the silver medal as far as I am concerned. This is an astonishing book. A family tale. A war story. An epic. A story that teases out the myths of youth

that we carry forward to adulthood. A story about creation and loss and love. A local story. A universal tale.

The novel is so lusciously sprawling that a summary is futile. The story ostensibly takes place during the course of July 4, 1892. But the day is splintered by memories that reach back to the 1840s and reach forward to 1892. John Wickliff Shawnessy is the hero of the novel, but he is flanked by a mesmerizing cast of characters: Garwood Jones, Professor Jerusalem Stiles, Nell Gaither, and Susanna Drake among others. Each character is fully formed, but they are archetypal at the same time.

* Jones is the great friend and archrival. A politician so successful that you feel the slipperiness of him because he knows how to read the public and ride on the wave carrying the largest bloc of voters. He becomes a Union Army colonel at the tail end of the war--late enough to avoid real fighting but soon enough to boast of his soldiering credentials.

* Stiles's middle name is Webster, and if you think of Webster's dictionary, you've thought correctly. A man who debates fluently with Shawnessy about any number of things, metaphysical to sexual.

* Nell is the true love of Shawnessy, a woman for whom he has framed an entire myth around, but also a woman always just out of reach or time to truly be happy with. Something or some one is always a barrier to their final happiness.

* Susanna is a troubled Southern girl whose mental anguish, stemming from a Faulkner gothic family, whose tormented mind is metaphorically the result of the conflict of the slavery in pre-Civil War America. The hypocrisy of freedom, the commercial abuse (i.e., an honest wage for honest labor), and moral degradation of the enslavers....all come into a debilitating mental conflict. To the northern Shawnessy, she is a beautiful mystery. Even a scar whose importance only becomes apparent later is mysterious and erotic to the young Shawnessy.

I am leaving out a host of minor characters of the kind that fill small towns throughout America. However, another major character in the novel is America itself. Lockridge often riffs off of Whitman in long prose-poem passages:

America was a city by a river, a city of gloomily eclectic buildings, confused unhappy domes and spires of buildings that were trying to be the most beautiful buildings that ever were but couldn't be because they hadn't any souls. America was faces in the Avenue of the Republic, eager, excited faces with mobile eyes. America was the place where all the world sent its third-rate art and gaudiest claptrap and where it was all piled up together and then became something hushed, exciting, wonderful because it was in America.

Another non-human character is a central myth built into the mind of Shawnessy, of the fabled raintree and the creature of the lake. These myths and America weave in and out of the novel, haunting the edges, inspiring the noblest of human passions, and acting as the unmovable background on which all the characters act.

As the day moves along and the 1892 characters become visible in the past, the story of where they are and what they've become emerges as a record of memory, though memory is not revealed as an American specialty. The Civil War necessarily looms large in the consciousness of the memory. Shawnessy joins the war effort a couple of years after the conflict begins, but he enters the war to participate in Sherman's march to the sea. Lockridge captures adequately, I think, the pervasiveness of slavery and the North/South tensions and also all the uncertainty of whether war was inevitable.

One of the minor characters, Flash Perkins, the fastest man in Raintree County until defeated by Shawnessy in a drunken race is with Shawnessy's unit. In a looting tangent, they face a small group of Confederates. Perkins wounded, keeps fighting until

Here, surely, was the strongest life that ever lived, and it was dying, it was beating itself out in blood and fury.

There was nothing good about the way Flash Perkins died in a forest near Columbia, South Carolina. He died choking with his throat full of blood, still trying to beat some unseen competitor who was too much for him.

What I find so admirable in this passage is that it captures both the dignity of the man and the horror of war. Those emotions are enmeshed within the structure of the sentences themselves.

I could carry on randomly like this for some time because there is so much that is delightful in this novel. I am still absorbing the weight and breadth of the novel, but I am certain it is a triumph. Lockridge, sadly, killed himself shortly after this novel was published in 1948, but he left behind a masterpiece of fiction and I hope that others will discover its richness.

Wooden Boater says

They say this is the Great American Novel and it is. Few seem to know it. Few seem to have read it. But it's exactly what the Great American Novel ought to be. Poetic, mystic, a deep connection to the land in a time of great turmoil, the conflict between the North and the South, and a mythical Raintree somewhere in Indiana. Superb.
