

emphasize the chill of a fall night.

Though Reist dates his real career as an artist to that moment on a Manhattan street, his artistic roots trace back to his childhood in Peru, where his father was an American military attaché married to a Peruvian. Reist began painting in prep school; in college, the Adams resident took a House course on life drawing taught by Boston University professor Morton

Sachs. "Morton taught me how to see with a pencil," Reist recalls. "I learned how to translate three dimensions to two, but in a way you could still see the three dimensions." Sachs encouraged Reist to consider painting as a career.

Though he was accepted by Rhode Island School of Design, financial considerations led him to matriculate instead at Harvard Business School. "My dad

wouldn't pay for art school," he explains, "but he would for business school." But after his M.B.A. and two years at Time, Inc., he became a full-time painter. It wasn't always smooth sailing; he worked part-time as a consultant and taught business at a local college. "There was some good luck involved," he recalls, "but success enables more success. You can take chances if you are successful." ~STEVE POTTER

## Made in the U.S.A.

*Fiction and critique of American society*

by ADAM KIRSCH

THE PHRASE "The Great American Novel" means something more than the sum of its parts. There are plenty of great American novels that are not Great American Novels: Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* doesn't qualify, and neither does Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, or Willa Cather's *The Lost Lady*, even though everyone acknowledges them as classics. No, the Great American Novel—always capitalized, like the United States of America itself—has to be a book that contains and explains the whole country, that makes sense of a place that remains, after 230-odd years, a mystery to itself. If other countries don't fetishize their novels in quite this way—if the French don't sit around waiting for someone to write the Great French Novel—it may be because no country is so much in need of explanation.

Hardly anyone talks about

the Great American Novel without a tincture of irony these days. But as Lawrence Buell shows in *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, his comprehensive and illuminating new study, that is nothing new: American writers have always held the phrase at arm's length, recognizing in it a kind of hubris, if not mere boosterism. Almost as soon as the concept of the Great American Novel was invented, in the nation-building years after the Civil War, Buell finds it being mocked, noting that one observer dryly put it into the same category as "other great

American things such as the great American sewing-machine, the great American public school, and the great American sleeping-car." It was enough of a cliché by 1880 for Henry James to refer to it with the acronym "GAN," which Buell employs throughout his book.

Yet Buell warns us against taking all this dismissal at face value: "critical pissiness suggests the persistence of some sort of hydrant," as he puts it. Even today, in our endlessly self-conscious literary era, novelists are still writing candidates for the GAN. What else are Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, or Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, or Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, if not attempts to capture the essence of American modernity between two covers?

Buell, now Cabot research professor of American literature, does not spend much time theorizing about the Great American Novel. Instead, he seeks to illuminate the concept by analyzing some of the books that have laid claim to the title. Most of these are, by definition, mainstays of high-school and college syllabi, from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* down to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. But alongside these classics, Buell ranges a number of lesser-known works, showing how the basic "scripts" of the Great American Novel are played out by writers like Helen Hunt Jackson in *Ramona* and Harold Fredric in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*. And he takes account of contemporary works that respond to, challenge, and rewrite the classics, such as

Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Harvard University Press, \$39.95)

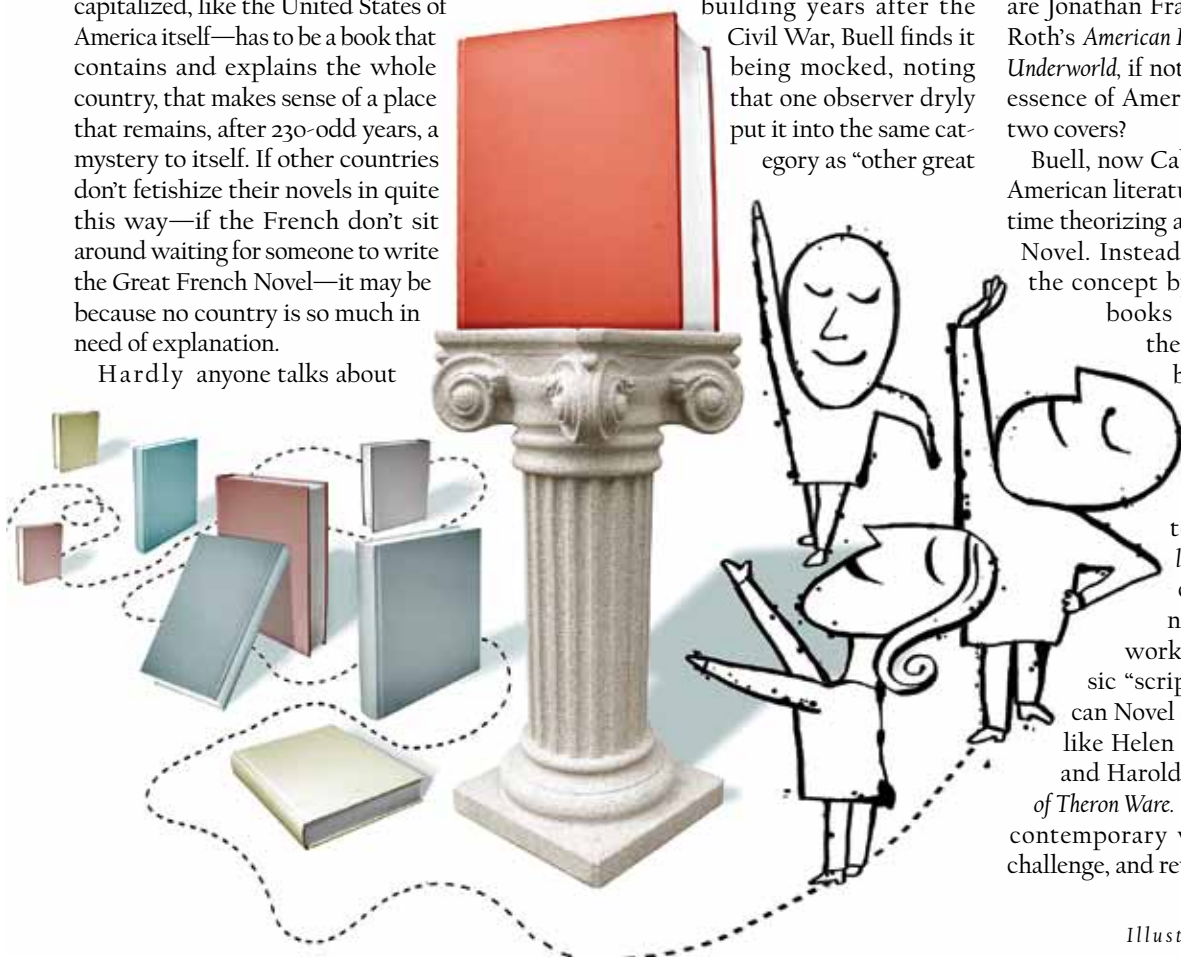


Illustration by Miguel Davilla

# Chapter & Verse

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone*, a parody of *Gone With the Wind*.

*Gone With the Wind* is not what most people would think of as a Great American Novel—surely it is too middlebrow, not to mention too racist, for that distinction. But as Buell points out, the themes Margaret Mitchell writes about—slavery, the weight of Southern history, “the old-order mystique”—are the same as those of an undoubted GAN, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*. (The difference is that “for every reader of *Absalom*, fifty had read *Gone With the Wind*.”) Buell proposes that GAN candidates tend to follow a few major “scripts,” and Faulkner and Mitchell are both using the same one: novels that seek to explain America by “imagining across or from within” the country's major social divisions, especially the divisions between black and white, and between North and South.

The GAN candidates that follow this script manage to remain controversial even as they attain the status of classics. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, is Buell's first example: a huge bestseller on publication in 1852, it was credited by some with helping to hasten the Civil War, thanks to its frontal assault on slavery. Yet as Buell notes, the book tries hard to depict slavery as a national problem, while sparing Southern sensitivities: Stowe “makes her arch villain a New Englander,” while “she makes her most brainy and articulate white character a slaveholder.” Though her depictions of black characters now strike us as deeply racist, “essentializing...Africans as inherently childlike,” Buell urges us to consider the novel as a “white person's attempt to comprehend nonwhites at a moment when even most white northerners considered them less than fully human.”

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* inaugurates a long tradition of GANs that try to bridge the racial divide—though later, more sophisticated works would focus on the ways it remained unbridgeable. Here the key example is Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the subject of one of Buell's best chapters. Like many GANs, Buell notes, Morrison's book “undertakes a far-reaching geographical scan of the...United States,” following its characters from Georgia to Delaware to New Jersey to Ohio. But the horrifying tragedy at its center—an escaped slave, Sethe, murders her daughter rather than

**Lorna Hallal seeks** the title and author of a work that describes children queuing for the gas chamber while a palm reader tells their fortunes. The refrain is “the wrong parents, the wrong parents.”

**John Gordon writes**, “I remember reading somewhere that after the 1746 Battle of Culloden, a British officer was informed that a mother and her children were outside his quarters looking for a place to spend the night, to which he responded, irritably, ‘Oh, hang ‘em!’ The next morning he was startled to find that they had all been, literally, hanged. I would appreciate a source on this.”

**Pete Hawkins wonders** whether anyone can provide a definitive citation for a

quotation widely attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche: “To forget one's purpose is the commonest form of stupidity.”

**“no moral right to decide”** (November-December 2013). Charles Hagen found “We have no right morally to decide as a matter of opinion that which can be determined as a matter of fact” in *Industrial Leadership* (chapter 4, “Results of Task Work,” pages 88-89), the published version of management consultant H.L. Gantt's Page Lecture series delivered at Yale in 1915.

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see her returned to slavery—means that it remains a far more challenging and refractory work than, say, *Huckleberry Finn*, another example of this GAN “script.” Buell quotes Morrison's own feeling that, in *Beloved*, she was treating an aspect of American history that “the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people won't want to remember.”

Yet as Buell insists, the GAN has always thrived by criticizing American society, not by celebrating it. “Great American Novels are not expected to be rituals of self-congratulation like July 4 celebrations or Hollywood melodramas,” he writes. “On the contrary, the historical record suggests that serious contenders are much more likely to insist that national greatness is unproven, that its pretensions are hollow, and that the ship of state is going down.”

That is certainly the approach of two other prime candidates for GAN-hood: John Dos Passos's *USA* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. These books, for Buell, follow a second script—the one originated by *Moby-Dick*, the grandfather of all GANs—which tries to encompass all of American life, in almost sociological fashion, through sheer breadth of vision.

They are “sprawling performances of encyclopedic scope with multiple agendas from the ethnographic to the metaphysical.” But where the democratic crew of the *Pequod* is destroyed by the monomania of Captain Ahab, the cast of *USA*—12 characters drawn from across the range of socioeconomic types—are dragged down by the mediocrity and money-madness of pre-Depression America.

As Buell cannily notes, the language of the characters in *USA* is not “the speech of the people,” as Dos Passos claims, but a manufactured “slanguage,” showing how Americans' minds have been colonized by “newsreel argot and the platitudes of professional wordsmiths.” Unlike Steinbeck's Okies, who are described in a poetic plural of “groupthink, grouptalk,” Dos Passos's people seem atomized: “social interaction becomes much more diffuse, fleeting, happenstance, compartmentalized, abstract, mediated.” One of the purposes of a book such as *The Dream of the Great American Novel* is to reintroduce us to forgotten classics, and *USA*, probably the least read of Buell's GAN candidates, is perfectly suited for re-discovery in our own Great Recession moment.

If these meganovels seek to take in all of American society, a third “script” for the GAN focuses on the representative career



of a single character on his or her quest for the American Dream. Buell calls these “up-from fictions,” and sees their archetype in Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, that story of successful self-invention. In novels, however, the journey is rarely so straightforward—whether it is the louche career of Augie in Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*, or the painful education of the nameless narrator in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

The most famous example, however,

and one of the first titles to come to mind whenever the Great American Novel is mentioned, is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby, who remains a cipher even as he transforms himself into a prince of Long Island society, is the antithesis of Franklin, who made a self by making his fortune. “To read *Gatsby* as a symbol of the great American dreamer, then,” Buell writes, “is to read the dream itself as already sealed and gone, locked somewhere in the remote inacces-

sible past.” But of course, if the American Dream weren’t still alive, somewhere in our culture and our minds, it wouldn’t be necessary for the novelists to keep writing Great American Novels. And Buell’s erudite study convinces us that the death of the GAN, despite all predictions, is not coming anytime soon. ▽

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## ALUMNI

## Dudley’s Square Deal

*An alumnus seeks a fragile balance in financing community development.*

**T**HIS JANUARY a long-defunct bus garage on a weedy 8.5-acre lot in Roxbury, one of Boston’s poorest neighborhoods, is slated to be demolished. Then Bartlett Yard will become Bartlett Place. Plans for the \$140-million development project call for 323 mixed-income

housing units (including some slated for the elderly and artists), a grocery store, and offices, along with a public plaza.

The site is a short walk from Roxbury’s main commercial district, Dudley Square, and is expected to play a major role in the area’s much-debated, slowly emerging

revitalization. The City of Boston is integral to the pending renewal, as is Boston Community Capital (BCC), based in the square. “Bartlett Yard was a polluted site, with bus fumes, and where repair work was being done in the garages, so you have a lot of paint and oil and gasoline—not a great environmental asset to have in the middle of a neighborhood,” says DeWitt “Dick” Jones ’79, M.C.R.P. ’82, the executive vice president of BCC, which is funding a portion of Bartlett Place. “The private developers were not chomping at the bit to do anything with it.”

In stepped one of BCC’s clients, the nonprofit Nuestra Comunidad Development Corporation, which bought the property and is leading the

**In Boston’s Roxbury neighborhood, DeWitt Jones visits the defunct bus garage at Bartlett Yard, which became an urban public-art space before its scheduled early-2014 demolition. Art festival organizers and the property’s owners invited well-known graffiti artists to paint dozens of murals on the walls of the garage buildings last spring. Such “Bartlett Yard Events” drew crowds and helped raise awareness of long-awaited community revitalization efforts. The local nonprofit Nuestra Comunidad, which plans to transform the site into mixed-income housing and commercial space dubbed Bartlett Place, is preserving only the murals that were painted on canvases. It has pledged to continue running artistic and cultural events, as well as farmers’ markets and other community gatherings, at a public plaza integral to Bartlett Place.**

