

WHAT KILLED AMERICAN LIT (2011)

Joseph Epstein

The Editors of *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* decided to consider their subject—as history is considered increasingly in universities these days—from the bottom up. In 71 chapters, the book’s contributors consider the traditional novel in its many sub-forms, among them: science fiction, eco-fiction, crime and mystery novels, Jewish novels, Asian-American novels, African-American novels, war novels, postmodern novels, feminist novels, suburban novels, children’s novels, non-fiction novels, graphic novels and novels of disability (“We cannot truly know a culture until we ask its disabled citizens to describe, analyze, and interpret it,” write the authors of a chapter titled “Disability and the American Novel”). Other chapters are about subjects played out in novels—for instance, ethnic and immigrant themes—and still others about publishers, book clubs, discussion groups and a good deal else. *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, in short, provides full-court-press coverage.



Illustration by John S. Dykes for *The Wall Street Journal*

“In short,” though, is perhaps the least apt phrase for a tome that runs to 1,244 pages and requires a forklift to hoist onto one’s lap. All that the book’s editors left out is why it is important or even pleasurable to read novels and how it is that some novels turn out to be vastly better than others. But, then, this is a work of literary history, not of literary criticism. Randall Jarrell’s working definition of the novel as “a prose narrative of some length that has something wrong with it” has, in this voluminous work, been ruled out of bounds.

Most readers are unlikely to have heard of the contributors to *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, the majority teachers in English departments in American universities. I myself, who taught in a such a department for three decades, recognized the names of only four among them. Only 40 or 50 years ago, English departments attracted men and women who wrote books of general intellectual interest and had names known outside the academy—Perry Miller, Aileen Ward, Walter Jackson Bate, Marjorie Hope Nicolson, Joseph Wood Krutch, Lionel

Trilling, one could name a dozen or so others—but no longer. Literature, as taught in the current-day university, is strictly an intramural game.

This may come as news to the contributors to *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, who pride themselves on possessing much wider, much more relevant, interests and a deeper engagement with the world than their predecessors among literary academics. Biographical notes on contributors speak of their concern with “forms of moral personhood in the US novels,” “the poetics of foreign policy,” and “ecocriticism and theories of modernization, postmodernization, and globalization.”

Yet, through the magic of dull and faulty prose, the contributors to *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* have been able to make these presumably worldly subjects seem parochial in the extreme—of concern only to one another, which is certainly one derogatory definition of the academic. These scholars may teach English, but they do not always write it, at least not quite. A novelist, we are told, “tasks himself” with this or that; things tend to get “problematized”; the adjectives “global” and “post”-this-or-that receive a good workout; “alterity” and “intertextuality” pop up their homely heads; the “poetics of ineffability” come into play; and “agency” is used in ways one hadn’t hitherto noticed, so that “readers in groups demonstrate agency.” About the term “non-heteronormativity” let us not speak.

These dopey words and others like them are inserted into stiffly mechanical sentences of dubious meaning. “Attention to the performativity of straight sex characterizes...*The Great Gatsby* (1925), where Nick Carraway’s homoerotic obsession with the theatrical Gatsby offers a more authentic passion precisely through flamboyant display.” Betcha didn’t know that Nick Carraway was hot for Jay Gatsby? We sleep tonight; contemporary literary scholarship stands guard.

The Cambridge History of the American Novel is perhaps best read as a sign of what has happened to English studies in recent decades. Along with American Studies programs, which are often their subsidiaries, English departments have tended to become intellectual nursing homes where old ideas go to die. If one is still looking for that living relic, the fully subscribed Marxist, one is today less likely to find him in an Economics or History Department than in an English Department, where he will still be taken seriously. He finds a home there because English departments are less concerned with the consideration of literature per se than with what novels, poems, plays and essays—after being properly X-rayed, frisked, padded down, like so many suspicious-looking air travelers—might yield on the subjects of race, class and gender. “How would [this volume] be organized,” one of its contributors asks, “if race, gender, disability, and sexuality were not available?”

In his introduction to *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham and most recently the author of *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Stories* (2009), writes that the present volume “synthesizes the divisions between the author-centered literary history of yesterday and the context-centered efforts of recent years.” Yet context is where the emphasis preponderantly falls. One of the better essays in the book, Tom Lutz’s “Cather and the Regional Imagination,” is only secondarily about Willa Cather. It is primarily about what constitutes the cosmopolitan ideal in fiction, which Miss Cather embodied and which turns out to be an imaginative mixture of wide culture and deep psychological penetration, lending a richness to any subject, no matter how ostensibly provincial. This is what lifts such novels of Cather’s as *My Antonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* above regional fiction and gives them their standing as world literature.

The Cambridge History of the American Novel could only have come into the world after the death of the once-crucial distinction between high and low culture, a distinction that, until 40 or so years ago, dominated the criticism of literature and all the other arts. Under the rule of this distinction, critics felt it their job to close the gates on inferior artistic products. The distinction started to break down once the works of contemporary authors began to be taught in universities. The study of popular culture—courses in movies, science fiction, detective fiction, works at first thought less worthy of study in themselves than for what they said about the life of their times—made the next incursion against the exclusivity of high culture. Multiculturalism, which assigned an equivalence of value to the works of all cultures, irrespective of the quality of those works, finished off the distinction between high and low culture, a distinction whose linchpin was seriousness.

In today's university, no one is any longer in a position to say which books are or aren't fit to teach; no one any longer has the authority to decide what is the best in American writing. Too bad, for even now there is no consensus about who are the best American novelists of the past century. (My own candidates are Cather and Theodore Dreiser.) Nor will you read a word, in the pages of *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, about how short-lived are likely to be the sex-obsessed works of the much-vaunted novelists Norman Mailer, John Updike and Philip Roth or about the deleterious effect that creative-writing programs have had on the writing of fiction.

With the gates once carefully guarded by the centurions of high culture now flung open, the barbarians flooded in, and it is they who are running the joint today. The most lauded novelists in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* tend to be those, in the words of another of its contributors, who are "staging a critique of 'America' and its imperial project." Thus such secondary writers as Allen Ginsberg, Kurt Vonnegut and E. L. Doctorow are in these pages vaunted well beyond their literary worth.

A stranger, freshly arrived from another planet, if offered as his introduction to the United States only this book, would come away with a picture of a country founded on violence and expropriation, stoked through its history by every kind of prejudice and class domination, and populated chiefly by one or another kind of victim, with time out only for the mental sloth and apathy brought on by life lived in the suburbs and the characterless glut of American late capitalism. The automatic leftism behind this picture is also part of the reigning ethos of the current-day English Department.

As a former English major—"Indeed! What regiment?" asks a character in a Lionel Trilling story—I cannot help wondering what it must be like to be taught by the vast majority of the people who have contributed to *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*. Two or three times a week one would sit in a room and be told that nothing that one has read is as it appears but is instead informed by authors hiding their true motives even from themselves or, in the best "context-centered" manner, that the books under study are the product of a country built on fundamental dishonesty about the sacred subjects of race, gender and class.

Some indication of what it must be like is indicated by the steep decline of American undergraduates who choose to concentrate in English. English majors once comprised 7.6% of undergraduates, but today the number has been nearly halved, down to 3.9%. Part of this decline is doubtless owing to the worry inspired in the young by a fragile economy. (The greatest rise is in business and economics majors.) Yet that is far from the whole story. William Chace, a former professor of English who was subsequently president of Wesleyan University and then Emory University, in a 2009 article titled "The Decline of the English Department," wrote:

"What are the causes for this decline? There are several, but at the root is the failure of departments of English across the country to champion, with passion, the books they teach and to make a strong case to undergraduates that the knowledge of those books and the tradition in which they exist is a human good in and of itself. What departments have done instead is dismember the curriculum, drift away from the notion that historical chronology is important, and substitute for the books themselves a scattered array of secondary considerations (identity studies, abstruse theory, sexuality, film and popular culture). In so doing, they have distanced themselves from the young people interested in good books."

Undergraduates who decided to concentrate their education on literature were always a slightly odd, happily nonconformist group. No learning was less vocational; to announce a major in English was to proclaim that one wasn't being educated with the expectation of a financial payoff. One was an English major because one was intoxicated by literature—its beauty, its force, above all its high truth quotient.

In the final chapter of *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, titled "A History of the Future of Narrative," the novelist Robert Coover argues that, though the technologies of reading and writing may be changing and will continue to change, the love of stories—reading them and writing them—will always be with us. Let's hope he is right. Just don't expect that love to be encouraged and cultivated, at least in the near future, in American universities.

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