

A New Literary History of America

Greil Marcus (Editor) , W. Sollors

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America is a nation making itself up as it goes along a story of discovery and invention unfolding in speeches and images, letters and poetry, unprecedented feats of scholarship and imagination. In these myriad, multiform, endlessly changing expressions of the American experience, the authors and editors of this volume find a new American history.

In more than two hundred original essays, "A New Literary History of America" brings together the nation's many voices. From the first conception of a New World in the sixteenth century to the latest re-envisioning of that world in cartoons, television, science fiction, and hip hop, the book gives us a new, kaleidoscopic view of what Made in America means. Literature, music, film, art, history, science, philosophy, political rhetoric cultural creations of every kind appear in relation to each other, and to the time and place that give them shape.

The meeting of minds is extraordinary as T. J. Clark writes on Jackson Pollock, Paul Muldoon on Carl Sandburg, Camille Paglia on Tennessee Williams, Sarah Vowell on Grant Wood's "American Gothic," Walter Mosley on hard-boiled detective fiction, Jonathan Lethem on Thomas Edison, Gerald Early on "Tarzan," Bharati Mukherjee on "The Scarlet Letter," Gish Jen on "Catcher in the Rye," and Ishmael Reed on "Huckleberry Finn." From Anne Bradstreet and John Winthrop to Philip Roth and Toni Morrison, from Alexander Graham Bell and Stephen Foster to Alcoholics Anonymous, "Life," Chuck Berry, Alfred Hitchcock, and Ronald Reagan, this is America singing, celebrating itself, and becoming something altogether different, plural, singular, new.

Please visit www.newliteraryhistory.com for more information. "

A New Literary History of America Details

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Diann Blakely says

Co-edited by one of this country's most dazzlingly wide-ranging, prolific, and intellectually charismatic writers, Greil Marcus, among the most celebrated nonfiction volumes in the past year, this vast, wickedly vibrant--Ann Marlowe on Linda Lovelace?--education between covers must come with a small note of warning: an extended trance state induced by the treasure-like essays here can produce incidents such as dropping "the Harvard book" on one's still-asleep-foot, causing it turn bruise-black and viciously painful, to say nothing of the volume's own spine!) This 50-state endeavor was, astonishingly, followed by a compendium of Marcus's work on Bob Dylan, which has already attained canonical status (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archi...>), and WHEN THAT ROUGH GOD GOES RIDING: LISTENING TO VAN MORRISON (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/boo...>), is likely to attain a similar one. Marcus rightly points to Peter Gerstenzang's New York Times review of the Morrison work as the best interpretation — Gerstenzang writes that it is "more a series of nonfiction short stories than a straightforward analysis." Marcus also writes that the chapter devoted to "Take Me Back" was happy-making in the process of its composition. When "Real Life Rock Top Ten" ran on SALON, which inexplicably dropped it, to speak, Marcus made me very happy by, among other things, praising the film version of ABOUT A BOY, though I don't share his reservations about Jennifer Jason Leigh's performance of the Morrison song in GEORGIA (<http://www.salon.com/2002/05/28/69>).

Reviews of "the Harvard book" have been stellar, of course, and like the Dylan volume, it's one to be savored, an essay at a time (also a good means of preventing household accidents such as that described above). Marcus' partner in this enormous undertaking was Harvard's Cabot Professor of English Literature and African-American Studies, Werner Sollors, but the pair worked with a board of editorial writers, who, Marcus said drolly in a NEW YORK TIMES interview, sometimes nominated themselves as well as others. The final list must have been daunting to behold. Then Marcus and Sollors were faced with an equally Herculean task: choosing writers for the pieces, which didn't always go according to plan. Surely the most amusing anecdote about the construction of the book was the editors' attempt to wrest a knowledgeable piece combining discussion of two 1936 classics, William Faulkner's ABSALOM, ABSALOM! and Margaret Mitchell's GONE WITH THE WIND. (In case anyone cares, I place the former novel with ULYSSES as the past century's greatest achievement in the Anglophone variety of the genre, and I agree with Marcus' assessment of Faulkner's gorgeously intertwined and overlapping stories—which are far easier to figure out than Joyce's, at least if you've read The Odyssey—as "scary. Much more so than THE SOUND AND THE FURY, which is more nihilistic.") Yet when Marcus contacted Virginia's Lee Smith and Kentucky's Bobbie Ann Mason, neither had ever read Mitchell's book. Next stop: Carolyn Porter, a native of Texas and professor emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley. "Read it?" she replied. "I've memorized it." At this point in American history, literary and otherwise, more people have seen the movie than plowed through Mitchell's long road of red clay, causing me to wonder if Robert Polito's superb latest book of poems, HOLLYWOOD AND GOD (University of Chicago Press) shouldn't have been titled Hollywood IS God.

Matt says

Took a little while to get through (two years!). A deeply satisfying anthology of bite-sized literary history and criticism. The wide-angle lens on the stories that made America has been a vital balm during the end-

times of the Trump presidency. Anyone interested in the project of America would love the hell out of this.

Matt says

Dave Hickey and Ishmael Reed's essays, on Hank Williams and Huck Finn respectively, are brilliant. There's a tremendous amount of amazing material here- a few mediocrities, to be sure, and some clunkers, maybe, but the overall effect is stimulating, accessible, creative, and often counter-intuitive, which is precisely how I like 'em...and a book about American literary (more like cultural) history deserves no less...

Julieann Wielga says

It took me three and one half years to read this book. Sometimes I would read a couple a day and sometimes I would not read any essays for a months.

Some of the essays flew over my head. Some were very thought provoking.

The interpretation of Literary is very broad. I learned these things from this cultural history. History happens all the time. It happens on all scales to all people. We cull our stories to fit in a particular grouping. Lots of stories are about guys and written about buys and most of those guys are white.

I was completely drawn to the people who contributed to the cultural/historical story line who were not white and or were not men. This book brought some to the forefront that were new to me: Frederick Douglas, Susan B. Anthony, my favorite Ida B. Wells (black woman) who printed a pamphlet on the story of lynching in 1895, Paul Dunbar, Willa Cather, Frost (OK he is a guy and so is Hawthorne, Manie Smith, Ralph Ellison, Billy Holdicay, Maya Angelou and Tony Morrison.

Jennifer Arnold says

This one has some serious heft - both figuratively and literally. It would have taken me ages to read all of the essays, but it was fun to read through the ones that caught my attention during the 3 weeks I had it from the library. From the Revolution through the election of Barack Obama, the essays trace the history of the United States through literature. My favorite essays covered Hurricane Katrina, the legalization of gambling in Nevada, the Book of Mormon, Hawthorne and Melville, and an analysis of Sister Carrie and the House of Mirth, two of my favorite American novels.

Alex says

For a literary history, this book seems to do everything it possibly can to avoid being about books.

The back cover should give you a clue about this. It mentions essays like:

- The name 'America' appears for the first time
- The president delivers a six-minute speech
- D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* is released
- Bob Dylan writes "Song to Woody"
- Barack Obama is elected

The thing you might notice is that none of these essays are about books. And so goes kind of a surprising number of essays in the collection. Some of them are more about books than they seem to be - "Two Days in Harlem" turns out to be about Ralph Ellison - but some aren't. "Citizen Kane" is about Citizen Kane, which is not a book. Much of American literature is either ignored or mentioned only glancingly.

And the quality of the essays is uneven, too. The piece on slave narratives is absolutely terrific, but the one on Huck Finn totally reads the book wrong.

This is worthwhile if you can find it used, but it's not as great as you're hoping it'll be.

Evan says

I was excited to get my hands on this, but it let me down. The main problem with it was (what I perceived as) the too-heavy impact of at least one of its editors (Greil Marcus) on the contents; I'd been hoping for more of a palimpsest, a cacophony of different voices, but many of the essays shared the same hyperallusive style that pervades Marcus's writing. (The most noticeable exceptions, intriguingly, came from some of the biggest-name contributors: Ishmael Reed on "Huck Finn," Michael Tolkin on *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Walter Mosley on hard-boiled detective novels, Sarah Vowell on "American Gothic." There were some implicit teachable moments about how to balance erudition and accessibility.) Also, the ceaseless gratuitous references to the Bush era and to the promise of Obama's inauguration are going to date it very badly within a decade.

Sarah Finch says

A challenging, engrossing, and wonderfully rewarding compendium of essays on this country's literary history -- from John Smith to Phillis Wheatley to Edith Wharton to Miguel Pinero. It focuses primarily on the written word, but also on visual arts: one of the best pieces in the book is on Maya Lin and the Vietnam Memorial, while another great essay discusses the Hays Code and the question of film censorship. This studies a canon of work that is wonderfully varied, and part of the joy is stumbling from an essay on, say, Harriet Beecher Stowe onto one about Linda Lovelace. It is also deeply committed to addressing questions of representations of those Americans who may be nonwhite, female, Jewish, LGBTQ, and beyond. That said, I was disappointed there was not one mention of the September 11th attacks within the scope of culture, nor any references to any Arab-American artists. And an essay that handles the birth of the Asian American cultural movement in the sixties does not mention the internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII, something I found an egregious oversight. I also would have loved to see essays on *Roots*, on *To Kill a*

Mockingbird, on Barack Obama's 2004 DNC speech (the book discussed several other political addresses, including JFK's Inaugural Address and FDR's Fireside Chats), and to see even a mention of science fiction writing and/or films. These quibbles aside, it is a monumental work that enhanced my appreciation of American cultural history.

James Murphy says

Well, there aren't enough stars in the "heaventree" of the goodreads system to do justice to A New Literary History of America. This book collects 200 essays to trace America's literary history from 1507 when the name America first appeared on a map to the election of Barack Obama in 2008. In between is an incredible journey celebrating not only the important moments in our literature but such other significant things as song lyrics, hallmark speeches and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Some of these essays are remarkable. The ones on Lolita, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the long history of the jeremiad in political speeches, continuing even today, stood out for me. I think some are brilliant--Stephen Schiff's 6-page essay on Lolita is as good as anything I've ever read on Nabokov's novel. I feared that subjects and writers this varied would produce more negative views. I can recall only 3 of these essays I considered rants by people with an ax to grind, one by an Amerind and 2 others about race. I thought they had no place in such a commemorative jamboree as this. Overall this book of insightful and thought-provoking essays is essential criticism tracing our history and our literature.

Ted Morgan says

This comprehensive literary history and commentary on American literature presented in fairly brief essays on our history startled and intrigued me. I still refer to it from time to time because as yet I have not exhausted its insight and charm. I am a great fan of Greil Marcus and now Werner Sollors.

I found fresh articles that introduced me to literature I had not know and means to further explore those entries.

Lindsay says

This is probably going to take me forever, but it's awesome so far!

Started again 9/1/14.

I'm not going to mark this as "currently reading" because my present strategy is to average at least one essay a night...meaning, if I actually keep it up, it will take me over half a year (if not longer) to get through the whole thing. Plus, I REALLY wish there was a Kindle version...it's enormous!

Tuck says

a MUST have for anybody who is serious about their fiction in the 20th century west (and 21st some too). So get this and keep it next to your dictionary. much better than any google or wiki could ever be. why? because greil marcus put a lot of thought, sweat and soul in here too. Think of this as the Oxford Atlas of the World or Roget's or Websters or OED of cool lit.

Kyo says

This is a really good collection of essay, but it does take some time getting used to. There is a lot in quite a small space (and font) and you should not expect the essays to explain what the stories/movies/speeches/etc. are about: they give really interesting arguments and views, but if you don't know the basics of the thing the essay is about you might get lost. That aside, this is a perfect way to get a glimpse into the cultural/literary history of the United States through a lot of different stories, views and ideas. It's is not a whole, not one big story from the beginning to the end, but it is a collection of different moments, of different events throughout US history.

~~I read this for a semester long course, and clearly I have not read the whole thing, but the parts that I read were overall great!~~

Jeff says

Some numbers: 1044 pages. 223 essays. Five pages for every essay. 201 essayists. Three essayists (the editors, Marcus and Sollors, plus David Thomson) with three or more essays. Twelve editorial board members, recruiting, a number of whom write twice. Fourteen contributors *without* University affiliation, only one of these on the Editorial Board. Five of the so-called "Seven Arts" (Painting, Literature, Theater, Sculpture, Architecture, Dance, Music) represented among the 223 with an essay. One essay on Architecture -- one more than on Dance or Sculpture. Eighteen essays on poetry. Fifteen essays on movies. Five essays on painting. Ten essays on Twentieth Century poetry. Twelve poets with book publication entrusted to write essays. Two essays on rock 'n' roll music. Six other essays on vernacular music. Eight essays on jazz and popular music. Three essays on theater. 47 essays on the novel. Etc.

Some description: The essays focus on a year, sometimes a date, sometimes an hour on a date in a year, and move chronologically, 1507-2008. An event, say, Allen Ginsberg's October 7, 1955 reading at the Six Gallery, in San Francisco, of his new work, "Howl," will be isolated, not for its capacity to de-mystify some canonical text (as in The New Historicism), but for its being a harbinger of a mode of responsibility among the youth culture which would, in the case of "Howl," valorize the poem over the next decade.

Some inferences. "Literary," as in the book's title, is that which is provided by the preponderance of literary scholars who make up the rolls of 201 contributors. One of the editors, Marcus, talking to the New York *Times*, claims that the title A New Cultural History was avoided for being too trendy, but this is

disingenuous, since if it was a cultural history the numbers tabulated above would need to at least seem representative, and the editors have not bothered. No, for the editors, it is a literary history, so we're left with the question, how does the volume construe "the literary"? And for the moment, at least, I'm left with the obvious reply, that the literary is supplied by those writing about these cultural and historical moments emended for some reason or another.

Now, surely this distorts the traditional service philological scholars are thought to provide in establishing texts. More pointedly, the editors have merely sloughed off the blurring of cultural/literary *text* "history" can partake of but criticism better damn well have in focus. I graded the volume at three stars -- an absorbing if parochial survey -- until late I reached Joshua Clover's essay on Dylan, the first in the volume to encounter "the literary" of its title in relation to the cultural formation its claim enacts.

Michael says

Mainly gold, with a little dross.
