



United States: Essays 1952-1992

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From the age of Eisenhower to the dawning of the Clinton era, Gore Vidal's *United States* offers an incomparably rich tapestry of American intellectual and political life in a tumultuous period. It also provides the best, most sustained exposure possible to the most wide-ranging, acute, and original literary intelligence of the post—World War II years. *United States* is an essential book in the canon of twentieth-century American literature and an endlessly fascinating work.

United States: Essays 1952-1992 Details

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Tony says

UNITED STATES: Essays 1952-1992. (1993). Gore Vidal. ****.

If anyone suspects that I didn't read all of the essays in this massive collection, he would be correct. The collection runs to 1271 pages plus an index. Fortunately, Mr. Vidal divided the book into three main sections: State of the Art, State of the Union, and State of Being. Since I was most interested in his views on writers and writing, I did read the State of the Art section. I also had to call it quits because of the sheer weight of the book in my lap – in addition to the fact that the library wanted their copy back. This book would make a marvelous gift for a friend recovering from a long-term illness – as long as the illness didn't involve his lap. There is no denying that Mr. Vidal has/had penetrating opinions on a variety of writers, opinions that were well thought out and penetrating. I can't even begin to quote all the places where I inserted my little stick-ums. This book won a National Book Award hands down (no pun intended), and it deserves a place on everyone's library shelves. Having your own copy of this one is almost a necessity, unless your library has a much lenient policy than mine. I guarantee that you will enjoy many, if not most of the essays included in this volume. Recommended.

Stevie says

Much more than an argument with Willaim Buckley.

Laura Leaney says

Pure freakin' genius!

It was totally worth the four years it took me to finish. All the once white pages are now a yellowy color.

I laughed through every essay. Gore Vidal accurately skewered our American paradise with wit and nuance.

Some favorite lines:

To read of Eleanor and Franklin is to weep at what we have lost. Gone is the ancient American sense that whatever is wrong with human society can be put right by human action. Eleanor never stopped believing this. A simple faith, no doubt simplistic--but it gave her a stoic serenity.

Is Howard R. Hughes the most boring American? Admittedly, the field is large; over two hundred million of us are in competition."

Every schoolboy has a pretty good idea of what the situation was down at Sodom but what went on in Gomorrah is as mysterious to us as the name Achilles took when he went among women.

It is no accident that in the United States the phrase "sex and violence" is used as one word to describe acts of equal wickedness, equal fun, equal danger to that law and order our masters would impose upon us.

Patriarchalists know that women are dangerously different from men, and not as intelligent (though they have their competencies: needlework, child-care, detective stories).

Favorite title:

Edmund Wilson, Tax Dodger

Gonzo says

Anyone at all surprised by Gore Vidal's pedophilia cannot be the kind of person who ever liked Gore Vidal in the first place. The man who recognized no distinctions between sexual proclivities—or if he did, did so with a discrimination usually seen only amongst Calvinist theologians—the man who never lacked reason to cite the fraudulent Kinsey Report, was of course a man who took yearly holidays to Bangkok with little interest in learning Thai. In a sick way, it would almost be disappointing to find Vidal was *not* a pederast; the licentiousness and cruelty of the man pointed him to such perversion out of logical necessity, and if he hadn't indulged in such Oriental pleasures he would have been admitting of great hypocrisy, which is after all the only mortal sin in our United States of Ambrosia.

Ah, that's a coining of yours truly. Vidal loved to pound out that phrase of his, United States of Amnesia, when insulting modern Americans, all the while woefully or willfully ignorant of the cause of that great forgetting. For this reason, Vidal's lifelong project of situating the United States in the context of world history—and this monumental work, *United States*, is Vidal's greatest accomplishment towards this end—is always perversely incomplete. To think that the American people are oppressed by their *lack of* hedonism becomes more damnably laughable each passing month of 2016. Vidal's black soul casts a shadow over this work, and it weakens the structure of his otherwise wonderful literary and political edifice. Vidal had a right to claim himself the greatest biographer of the United States since Henry Adams; that this chair proceeded from a wry cynic to a sodomite misanthrope is proof that Adams not cynical enough about Darwinism.

Aristocratic, witty, outrageous, and genuinely well-learned, Vidal at first appears to be a gift from the British, most obviously in the fact that, unlike most Americans, he does not badly suffer when compared to his British peers. Most of what passes for literary society in the United States is characterized by extreme banality, extreme shallowness, or a sick obsession with the academic. For this reason America can produce professors unable to muster the barest wit or literary merit; America can produce emotive, erratic, and overall shallow scribblers like Dorothy Parker. The American literary establishment has always been barren and moribund, and needed but a slight twerk to become what it is in the present day, a bastion for un-Jewish Hebrews whose beliefs have nominal connection with the historical West and whose lives and intellects are mere endurance against entropy. In this environment, Vidal's wit and learning make him a giant among men, or better than this, a Briton among Yanks.

Vidal's literary criticism is excellent, so good it seems to belong to a long ago era of liberal minds. "American Plastic" is a wonderful summation of what is wrong with the modern American novel, which manages to be turgid, insipid, and overly intellectual at the same time. Such analysis can be applied to every other aspect of aesthetic life as well. For all Vidal's often sterile libertarianism, he never loses sight of the fact that art cannot merely be ornament but must have some element of heart and soul driving it. The gap

between the “University Novel” and the “Public Novel,” as Vidal labels them, is less notable now that no one on a university campus can be trusted to be reliably literate, and juvenile literature must stand in the place of wisdom lit.

Vidal is too enamored with the fellow sex-case, Henry James, but his encomiums towards the other Henry—Henry Adams—helped guide me to the greatest writer America has yet produced. His advocacy of Calvino is almost sweet. In praising Eleanor Roosevelt, he expresses a nostalgia for the age of puritanism which his ilk helped kill. Mrs. Roosevelt is the one woman in American political history whose accomplishments deserve more than a limerick’s length. Her husband was intellectually and spiritually sterile; Mrs. Roosevelt provided brains, heart, and soul to the most momentous administration in American history, one which would constitute a bare technocratic takeover if not for Eleanor’s humanity.

Admirably for a scribbler, Vidal does not waste his time with trifles. His one-time “dauphino” Christopher Hitchens wrote fairly lousy literary criticism because he never rose above the level of personal pugilism; see particularly his terrible reviews of Philip Roth’s (admittedly lousy) late novels. When Hitchens lambasted Updike’s twilight novel, *Terrorist*, he hunts and pecks for lousy passages in a lousy book to write a lousy review which leaves the reader with no further insight beyond the fact that the one book isn’t very good. Vidal’s takedown of Updike (in *The Last Empire*) spans the author’s whole method and career, and whether or not the criticism is deserved, its magnitude certainly is. Vidal not only ravages Updike’s 1997 novel, but his famous 60s and 70s output; the genitalia Updike put in all his work speaks more to an emperor not having any clothes than literary or political transgressiveness. I still can’t pick up an Updike novel without thinking of Vidal’s savaging; this is how effective his criticism is.

Vidal’s takedowns of Scott Fitzgerald and Oscar Wilde are similarly wonderful. Fitzgerald wrote one great novel, one good novel, a handful of fine short stories, and reams and reams of dreck. He was a shallow, self-obsessed manchild; his best work found pathos in this sad self-obsession, but Fitz had nothing to offer beyond this. The idolatry of Fitzgerald is a testament not to Fitzgerald’s work, but to Americans’ own self-obsession. Don’t all of us poor dreamers have green lights on the ends of our harbors? Vidal’s criticism of Oscar Wilde is similarly sharp, because although Wilde’s intellect was far greater than Fitzgerald’s, his grand self-obsession was not justified in his literary work. Wilde’s early plays are tame melodramas with some fabulous one-liners; *Salome* is OK; *Dorian Gray* is one grand idea, bolstered by Wilde’s wit, dragged down by needless length, and overall a fatally inconsistent work of art. Only *Earnest* and a few essays are perfect. But like Fitzgerald, Wilde’s sad fate wins admirers, and one suspects his fans spend more time in contemplation of the man than reading his work. Who can resist placing a kiss on his sepulchre? This is what modernity has made of us: The only genuineness we believe in people is self-regard, and the only tragedy we can envision is when this self-regard is not fully realized.

Vidal’s war against “scholar squirrels” is quite wonderful. The emphasis on studying every envelope licked by ever author that ever made it into the New York Times was a sign that the value-less, work-for-work’s-sake mentality had infected academia, and paved the way for the value-less, don’t-even-do-any-work environment of modern academia. “Gender theory” has the benefit of being completely inscrutable. The scholar squirrels could be lampooned in *Pale Fire* and even gently lauded in *Possession*, but the Morlocks of today’s ivory tower are too monstrous to give answer to.

In politics, his cocktail party liberalism is enlivened by his open advocacy for the Southern Cause, and recognition that the evils of American Empire spread throughout the world in the 20th Century could be seen in utero in the wreckage of the Confederacy. If Vidal had done nothing but expose the NYRB clique to the Southerner’s side of history, his work may have been worth it. That Vidal’s just Lincoln-bashing had to be accompanied by rote bullying about Lincoln’s racism, his seeming agnosticism, and his possible

homosexuality, was just the price one pays for living in decadence. Broad minded readers could see that Lincoln's tyranny brought to bear questions at least as old as Sparta and Athens, as Caesar and Cato, without necessarily bringing in the indulgences of Oedipus and Socrates.

All of Vidal's historical work can be seen as an attempt to place America within the context of the world and of world history; this is to his great credit. Yet Vidal is not quite ready to place America in this context without the most American of creations, that which we might well call Scientific Hedonism. Strangely for a man who so clearly understood the immortal, unchangeable undercurrent which runs through all great literature, Vidal could not recognize the moral undercurrents which have united all great societies from Hellas to the Western Empire of today. And in fact, putting modern America into the context of history without the dubious insights of Freud, Sanger, and Kinsey would invite too many comparisons to the decadence of Rome and Greece. Though Vidal is clear-eyed about America's decline, he is unable to see that this decline has its roots in decadence, an oversight too great to be chalked up to ignorance. Surely the incisive eye of Literary Vidal cannot be the same eye casting sight over American history, which is so fatally glaucomic? This requires another question: Did Vidal ever think of his sexual politics as truly transgressive? or did his perversions come first, with libertarianism acting as a pretext for boy-buggery?

It's hard to tell. As far back as "The Twelve Caesars" in 1952, Vidal was inveighing against the moral taciturnity of Suetonius, who complained that a minority of them had proper sexual desires. The great Roman historians, Tacitus, Suetonius, Plutarch, understood that a system of government is only as good as its people. This is an immortal fact, along with the one that our sexual ethics extend into our political ethics. Julius' desire for sexual conquest extended into a desire for land and power; the sad0-masochism of Nero and Caligula extended to the torture of their subjects; the temperance of the Antonines was the basis of their just reigns.

Jesus Christ knew that a man who commits a sin is a slave to that sin; pagan Horace knew the same. Vidal has no honorable reason to be obtuse. Not only is his morality faulty, but his perversions sully his art. Can Vidal not see that the servile, sheeplike, American amnesiacs he lambastes are the product of decadence and convenience? That the "National Security State" which he inveighs against can have no opposition in a nation convulsed by pornography and commercial vice? The Puritans of New England could battle George III precisely because they had first tamed their sin; the stomachs made hard by fasting could endure the hunger of embargo, the souls made taught by spiritual warfare could endure the depredations of battle. Now that it allows in transsexuals, the modern Army cannot depend on its men being able to endure a pair of cotton trousers! We deserve to be slaves—and we are slaves—because we are first passion's slaves, waiting for a tyrant to suppress us.

It must also be said that Vidal would have been anathema to North and South in any other period of American history; he would have been anathema to the NYRB set if not for his homosexuality, but the acceptance of sodomy is as crucial a criterion in accepting a man today as it would have been justification for expulsion in the past. The lover and biographer of the United States would have rightly despised by almost everyone who had ever lived in it. In good societies, men like Vidal are castigated and their perversions exposed. In bad ones, they are confused for trifles, topics for ironical discussion. That Vidal knew we live in an almost fatally bad society is grand. But to understand the cause of this, he would first have had to discovered the cause of the wretchedness in himself. One broaches ugly Freudianism in making the assessment, but with Gore it is undeniable that all his valuable output first had to win approval from his genitals. Vidal's work is expansive and his understanding deep; yet who will remember the brilliant syntheses he wrought next to the chaos of his eternally shallow and fraudulent sexual politics? Who, in the future, will be able to remember the day when any consideration besides the mammalian existed at all?

United States should be a grand work, but grand works must to some extent come from grand men. To be such a man, Vidal would have had to transcend hedonism, the most tempting of all Americanisms which he otherwise tried so assiduously to hover above. More important than our politics, government, history or art is our appetite. We live in the United States of Ambrosia. Our material wants are so thoroughly sated that we rely on marketers to supply us with wants themselves; we have reached the point that we expect the hand that feeds us to also make us hungry again. This level of servility would abash the denizens of late Rome. But there is no turning back. To acknowledge history at this point is to give up the game; it is to admit that we have stripped and sodomized the balustrades erected by twenty generations' toil. A new Bill of Rights would ensure a man's right to pornography over provocation; a specious right to be defended rather than a right to defend oneself; a right to be free from God rather than the freedom to find His light yoke of temperance and charity. The disingenuous complaints about morality are below a man of his intellect, but this was Vidal's choice, who willfully placed his intellect on a level below his ejaculate; and Vidal's capacious work must be judged, as America will be, with mind to the children he defiled, and the stain he spread from New York to Italy into the Third World.

Josephine Waite says

For years I used this series of essays as a way of educating myself about literature and politics. In the beginning I heard them in his voice, but it became my own.

Jim Coughenour says

This superb collection confirms Vidal as a modern Montaigne, the best essayist of the 20th century. My personal favorite: "Pink Triangle and Yellow Star," surely one of the wittiest and most malicious pieces of polemicism ever penned.

Miriam says

The most important feature of my reading career is that books have tended to come along at the right time for me. This was especially interesting when I bought bunches of used books and stacked them biggest to smallest and fattest to thinnest--this makes for an eclectic order. But order there always was. And as I read more and more, my ability to make connections and fill in gaps improved and I probably even MADE the order myself. But there were still moments of coincidence and serendipity to fill my little reader's heart with joy.

That is all the long way of saying that, again, another book came to me at the right time. This is the penultimate on the reading list compiled of several reading lists of the "great books" of the twentieth century. And that's as it should be, given that Vidal takes on so many of the other authors I've read and is connected to so many other figures on the list. I would not have had half the appreciation for this book if I had not read so much beforehand.

Two cultural references before we go on. Before this, other than being aware that he existed, I didn't know much about Gore Vidal's career or major themes. The most direct reference I had was an episode of *Frasier* in which Frasier is convinced to go on a cruise because Gore Vidal wrote a blurb about how great it was and Gore Vidal "hates everything." So I knew I was in for snark and a good screed. The other is Jamie Lee Curtis's response to Kevin Kline's assertion in *A Fish Called Wanda* that apes don't read philosophy: "Yes, they do, Otto. They just don't understand it." In many ways, although I have read many works of the "canon" and "Littrator," I have done it from an untutored layperson's perspective. Unless a style really resonates with me or is incredibly unusual, I would not be able often to tell you WHAT makes writing great. I tend to focus more on plot and character, less on the craft of writing. I wouldn't be able to make half the observations and comparisons that Vidal (and others he chats with) makes in this book. I guess that's why we have a Gore Vidal: to make those connections.

OK. So his writing style. He has some witty one-liners and nice turns of phrase in which he manipulates the words of the figures he reviews. When I got the allusions, I felt smart and included. When I didn't, I felt excluded but like I couldn't ask or question it. And I think that's much the point of his writing style. He will often critique the writing of others (using [sic] or correcting their grammar or misuse of words or just saying it's bad) without articulating his standards. Because if you're in on it, it feels good to keep the boundaries up and hold the line against the barbarians at the gate. His writing is as clique-ish as his social circle. Which takes me to my next point: he is a terrible name/place dropper: when Norman Mailer and I were at a conference in Moscow, when I used to meet my grandfather on the Senate floor, barefoot, no less (Gore, not his grandfather the Senator from Oklahoma), when Tennessee Williams and I discussed art on my balcony in Rome. He ran in high circles, and he lords it over us. Sometimes he uses it to obtain credibility--well, Eleanor Roosevelt told ME that that's not how things REALLY were. My grandfather heard from Lincoln's close friend and associate that he (Lincoln) had syphilis and gave it to his wife and made her crazy and that's also why some of their kids died young. He says that people/historians/academics/critics objected to his insinuation that Lincoln had syphilis because it doesn't fit the "Great Men" narrative for our presidents. It bothers ME because it relies on gossip and his own credibility as a third-hand witness to such gossip. Portions of his writing rely on the credibility of his privilege. Sometimes this works, sometimes it's alienating--just like a clique-ish cocktail party would be. You wouldn't miss it, but sometimes you roll your eyes.

The book is divided into 3 sections: art, politics, and autobiographical/miscellaneous. The art section had many book reviews. Also, now I need to read Dawn Powell's work and *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino. When he likes something, he's able to convey what's good about it and get you excited to see for yourself. When he hates something, it's almost like you feel guilty for not knowing why or for not agreeing. The politics section spans the era of the Great Golfer all the way through Reagan and one or two references to Bush I. This is the other way that this book came my way at the right time: it is both comforting and horrifying to see how little we have progressed in all that time. Or, maybe better said, it shows the strange path along which our country has traveled that has brought us to where we are today. Trump is a little bit Harding (corruption, speculation), Hoover (Republican controlled government, more speculation), Nixon (paranoia, surveillance, listening to strong advisers), and Reagan (puppet for a scary agenda, mentally uncertain). Gore's review of history shows how long certain groups have been fighting for equality and how little they have gained from the more conservative/reactionary groups in our society. He has many good points: the Cold War allowed us never to demilitarize, to have "peace" and "war" at the same time, preparing the profits to businesses who can then funnel money into politics to get the candidates and policies they want to keep making profits. The fact that there really has only been, going back to the beginning of the Union, ONE party: the property party, which currently (at his time and ours) has two branches, the Democrats and Republicans. Both sides want to protect property and capitalism, the only difference is that the Democrats pay lip service to the civil and human rights of women, minorities, and the poor. The religious right wants to

punish women and the poor. This is a hard one for me. I know so many religious people; I grew up in the Lutheran church and I have very strong religious feelings still. But this book and my current experience of the justifications for policies toward women et al in this country have finally convinced me that the major political impulse of religious people in this country is to punish women--for being women they are inherently lesser, and if they choose to be sexual they alone must bear the consequences of their decisions (without being allowed abortion)--and minorities (not white, so lesser, less deserving of rights) and the poor (poor because they're lazy and so deserve punishment). I do not say this lightly. I know many religious people who believe in the teachings of Jesus to care for the oppressed. But the intersection of Christianity with politics emphasizes the need to punish the wayward and undeserving and unruly masses--don't give them health care and education, spend money on "defense" that doesn't make us safer and on policing the population at home. Gore's ideas emerge over more than a hundred articles, and I'd boil down his political, historical views into one seeming contradiction. Some of the founding fathers were elitist, didn't trust the masses, and wanted to preserve their property and position above all, but they formulated a system of government and set of guidelines that had the potential to serve a wider number of people. If only we didn't always pervert them in favor of the few and the powerful. The fight goes on...

Dan says

Excellent compilation of 114 of Gore Vidal's essays which won the National Book Award. The book is divided into three parts: State of the Arts, State of the Union, and State of Being.

The first section on the State of the Arts are essays about other famous authors and books and is outstanding. This is Gore Vidal at his best, as a book critic. There are six essays which were so good, witty, at times caustic, and certainly educational and have held up very well with the passage of time.

1. Norman Mailer's Self Advertisements
2. The Bookchat of Henry James
3. The Oz Books
4. John dos Passos at Midnight
5. Tennessee Williams
6. The Death of Mishima

The essay on Tennessee Williams was my absolute favorite.

The next section on the State of the Union is about politics, a topic which many people associate with Vidal. I personally don't think he is a great political writer. Most of the essays about politicians are irrelevant today and so short in duration there is little to be learned. I think the essay on Nixon however was quite good and written in Vidal's typically cheeky manner. The others were so so.

The last section on the State of Being was also good. In particular, an essay called On Flying is one of the best articles I have read. It is autobiographical and there are a surprising number of world firsts related to Vidal and his experience with early flight. It is fascinating.

So overall I would give the book 4.5 stars, there are numerous essays that are clearly among the best that I have read.

David Drum says

Writer and public intellectual Gore Vidal left in his wake two major collections of his essays which I recently completed. After reading *The Last Empire: Essays 1992-2000*, I then completed *United States: Essays 1952-1992*. These collections were my bedtime reading for several months.

I slept quite well after reading a couple of them each night, knowing that America had produced at least one fully educated man. His essays are good reading.

Vidal was an elegant writer and thinker, a consummately educated man with many opinions and insights who was almost never boring.

In his long career, Vidal produced more than two dozen novels, a dozen odd screenplays, 27 collections of essays, eight plays, and several works under pseudonyms. He found time to run for political office twice, make TV and movie appearances, and live his often controversial public life divided between a villa on the Amalfi Coast in Italy and a home in the Hollywood Hills. When he died of pneumonia at the age of 86, he remained one of the best-known progressives of his day.

Born in West Point, Eugene Luther Gore Vidal spent the formative years of his youth in Washington, DC, in the heart of American Democratic politics. As a young boy in Washington, Vidal the boy spent time at the knees of many of the leading political lights of the day who visited his various homes. His father Gene Vidal, said to be Amelia Earhart's greatest love, had a position overseeing air commerce in the administration of Franklin Roosevelt. His mother Nina was the daughter of blind Oklahoma Senator Thomas Gore, to whom young Gore was asked to read books as a young man. His high-stepping mother remarried Hugh Auchincloss, an East Coast establishment type who was the stepfather of Jacqueline Kennedy and gave her away at her marriage to Jack Kennedy. He was a distant cousin of former Vice President Al Gore and President Jimmy Carter. If Vidal was a populist with a patrician air, it was natural enough given his politically sophisticated and well-wired upbringing.

Joining the Navy at the outbreak of World War II, he came home to write a well-reviewed war novel, joining his contemporaries Norman Mailer and James Jones. Another early novel, *The City and the Pillar*, featured a homosexual as its main character and apparently earned Gore the antipathy of the reviewers at *New York Times*, an institution that he criticized like a man with a chip on his shoulder for much of the rest of his life.

Gore had public feuds with other high-profile writers such as the haughty conservative William Buckley, who called him a "queer," the pugnacious Norman Mailer, who head-butted him before an television talk show appearance, and the social-climbing Truman Capote, who were the butt of some of his stinging aphorisms.

In addition to the notorious *Myra Breckenridge*, one of the first novels featuring a transsexual, Vidal wrote a series of meticulously-researched historical novels tracing the development of the American political character as well as early television dramas and movies such as the historical drama *Ben-Hur*, which won an Academy Award for best picture.

A handsome man who apparently never publicly admitted that he was either handsome or gay, Vidal maintained that all people were naturally pansexual and this was what he claimed for himself and most everybody else.

Like Dickens and Mark Twain, Vidal often took the lecture circuit. I saw him speak a few years ago, at the

Writers' Guild Theatre in Los Angeles. Already in his 80s, Gore rolled majestically to the podium in his wheelchair and proceeded to mesmerize the audience with a voice that rang with authority, and forcefully-expressed, anti-authoritarian progressive ideas.

Vidal's many essays display an impressive knowledge of history, politics, and literature. Many critics consider his essays better than his novels. In reading them, it is amazing how much Vidal foresaw sixty years ago. By the 1960s he saw that Republicans and Democrats had merged into a single Property Party with no significant differences between them, that the military-security complex had already grabbed a frightening amount of power, and that we were running our natural environment into the ground.

Vidal the historian believed there were actually three different American republics. The first was the one we all learned about in grade school, which began in 1776. The second began when President Abraham Lincoln forcibly constrained the Southern states from leaving the Union (Vidal believed was a mistake – he thought Lincoln should have let them go). What he called the third American republic began under President Harry Truman, who formed a worldwide network of alliances overseen by the Central Intelligence Agency that resulted in the imperial American mega-state that we know so well today.

As a man of letters, Gore believed that he was writing at the end of American literature's golden age. He lamented that Americans bought and read less and less serious fiction. He pungently observed that what was left of our literature was being produced by writers holed up in universities who wrote books merely to be taught to classes of college students, rather than to be read by an enlightened and intelligent American public.

Gore's essays include loving looks at other serious writers such as Henry James, William Dean Howells, Thomas Love Peacock, and Frank Baum as well as somewhat disapproving looks at other writers such as Somerset Maugham, Henry Miller, E Howard Hunt, and Anais Nin, with whom he denied having an affair although she named him as a lover in one of her diaries.

At the end of 1,295 pages, I sadly laid *United States: Essays 1952-1992* aside. There is a sadness that mingles with satisfaction when you finish a book that stimulates you and you must move on. Gore Vidal was an intellectual giant whose public presence is missed, although he left a lot of good writing for us to enjoy.

Evan Wright says

Every year or so for at least the past decade a Vidal interview appears in print or on TV in which he makes grand, outrageous comments about how lame the United States is and also how stupid most of the public discourse about it remains. In his latest, he referred to the 13-year-old rape victim of Roman Polanski as a "hooker." In the public pronouncements he struck me as a clown curmudgeon. Worse, his public opinions are so predictable. Was it any surprise that he would characterize Bush as an idiot fascist? Of course not.

In 2005 I received a PEN award at a function at which he was also honored. At the awards dinner, attendees were each given a bag of books, mine and his and a bunch of others. After the torture of long speeches and even longer video presentations (why do they always have long video presentations at dinners for writers. Isn't video an insult to our craft?) I grabbed my free Vidal book and approached him, with my then 14-year-old nephew in tow, to ask for his autograph. I thought it would be cool for my nephew to meet him. Vidal

signed our books, but had no interest in small talk. Rude, but in a dignified way. Made him a appealing.

When I arrived home that night I cracked open United States, expecting to find four decades--toughly a thousands pages!--of predictable, curmudgeon opinions, as I knew Vidal from him public persona. From the earliest section of essays I was stunned. Vidal is such an astonishing and original thinker and observer in these. Beautiful prose and arguments. Such breadth of subjects and commensurate breadth of experience and thought bearing on them. Among my favorites are his essays on John Adams and John Quincy--second and sixth Presidents--H.L. Mencken and Watergate spook E. Howard Hunt. Vidal writing on Mencken is one the greatest reading pleasures I have had in the past few years. Vidal is certainly up there with Mencken as an American essayist. As far as I'm concerned, there is no greater compliment.

I have concluded there are at least two Vidals: Man of letters and media whore. The former is the one who matters.

Hollis says

Certainly one of the best essay collections published in the previous century and I'm not getting my hopes up that there will be anything to be surpass it in the present one. Vidal is sometimes angry and irascible but always witty and provocative, always erudite. His enthusiasm about certain authors is always infectious. I doubt that any reader will agree with all of his opinions. He denies that there are such things as heterosexuals and homosexuals: people just follow their sexual appetites and commit individual sexual acts wherever they might take them. I can't imagine huge amounts of people agreeing with that. He thinks that the Republican Party and the Democratic Party are really just two wings of one party: there are both paid and financed by businesses and there is no real choice for the people. He thinks that all English professors are hacks. I'll leave that one for you to ponder...

A lot of things he says are just plain right. He argues that monotheism is the worst disaster to befall the human race, which it is. He points out that academe has ruined the cultural lives of many people and spoiled their appetite for reading. Nearly all English students are involuntary readers: they have no real appetite for reading and will stop reading anything apart from the odd volume of housewife fiction or gormless fantasy trash as soon as they graduate. I remember sitting in on an English seminar once with some first-years and I was absolutely amazed by the fact that not a single one of them had read the assigned book: 'To the Lighthouse' by Virginia Woolf. I asked all of them in the corridor beforehand and no-one had read it. We get to the discussion and they are all able to give a magnificently fluent impression that they have read the book and can discuss it at length (although they fall strangely silent when it comes to the specifics). Truly wonderful: how to perfect the art of pretending to have books you haven't, suitable training for a lifetime of polite society. One guy next to me also admitted that he had not bothered finishing 'Jane Eyre'. He got halfway, got bored and then skipped to the last 50 pages and read the ending. Astonishing. It's amazing how

university arts departments have created a new kind of ignorance: educated ignorance.

Of course, the lack of voluntary readers is a larger symptom of the overall problems that affect us. It's sad but there is nothing that can be done if that is the way society is moving.

"World gone, no voluntary readers. No voluntary readers, no literature - only creative writing courses and English studies, activities marginal to civilisation" ~ from his essay on William Dean Howells.

Vidal's insight is really amazing: he penetrates through academia and media alike and goes straight to the heart of the debates in question. If you are able to read this volume straight through without having your eyes opened even slightly on matters of art and politics, then nothing will ever open them.

Crystal says

A wonderful historical perspective-throwing diversion from the yip-yip-yip of the 2012 election cycle or any other. I'm glad to own this collection on paper, in hardback.

Essays including "Theodore Roosevelt: American Sissy," "The Art and Arts of E. Howard Hunt," "What Robert Moses Did to New York City," and "Sex is Politics" (Playboy, 1979) should be required reading in any number of 20 C American History/American Studies courses. Most of the essays playfully seduce the reader to further investigation of persons or affairs mentioned often just in passing.

Plus, the essays are good background for observing and thinking about the politics of the current popular vogue for the fashions of *Mad Men* and *Boardwalk Empire*.

Raegan Butcher says

This guy is hilarious. I always enjoy his biting wit and sage wisdom: "Never turn down an opportunity to have sex or appear on Television." Right on!

Simon King says

Bitchy, exciting, incendiary, provocative, pugnacious, original, thoughtful, judicious. (Sorry about the adjectives.) If I wrote columns, they'd be along the lines of these.

Szplug says

Gore Vidal's sequence of novels that sprawl across the young American republic's two centuries plus of existence—*Burr*, *Lincoln*, *1876*, *Empire*, *Hollywood*, *Washington*, and *The Golden Age*—in my estimation are amongst the greatest series of historical novels ever written; and *United States* is surely one of the finest collections of essays by undoubtedly one of the greatest essayists that America has produced in the twentieth

century. Penned in Vidal's inimitable arch and elegant style, insightful, biting, witty and learned, and covering multiple topics over four decades in the States of Art, Politics and Being, this mammoth tome is an absolute treasure.

For a lengthy spell after I found myself single once more this book had pride of place as my *Bathroom Reader*, helping to make those secondary missions entertaining and edifying in addition to their biological necessity. Indoor plumbing and essaying prose—has their ever been a more boon set of companions for the seated individual? What's more, *United States* claimed that privileged position for quite some time, due to the undeniable fact that almost every one of its constituent pieces is a true treat and brilliant slice of informed and insightful thought. In particular, his droll exegesis of the postmodern novel—criticisms of personal favorites like Pynchon provide cool appraisals before delivery of the cutting blow, but all with a brow-bowed deftness that can't help but draw forth *some* acknowledgement, uncomfortable and/or rueful though its arisen presence be, while his pleasant surprise with the likes of Herman Wouk's *Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance* (a pair of books that I loved, what with Natalie and Byron's love story making my teenaged heart ache and sing) reveal the literary honesty that operated within the man—and his biting mordancy as he surveys the growth of Imperial America—including a near-surreal and comical interview with a pre-presidential nominee Barry Goldwater—regale and inform in equal measure. The highest recommendation.

RIP Gore Vidal—yet another singular and singularly *American* voice stilled by the inexorable tread of time's forward passage. Perhaps he and William F. Buckley, Jr. will exchange the epithets *Crypto-Fascist* and *Queer* with less heat and more fondness now that their existential energy has assumed a presumably less material and partisan form...
