This Companion examines the full range and vigor of the American novel. From the American exceptionalism of James Fenimore Cooper to the apocalyptic post-Americanism of Cormac McCarthy, these newly commissioned essays from leading scholars and critics chronicle the major aesthetic innovations that have shaped the American novel over the past two centuries. The essays evaluate the work, life, and legacy of influential American novelists including Melville, Twain, James, Wharton, Cather, Faulkner, Ellison, Pynchon, and Morrison, while situating them within the context of their literary predecessors and successors. The volume also highlights less familiar, though equally significant writers such as Theodore Dreiser and Djuna Barnes, providing a balanced and wide-ranging survey of use to students, teachers, and general readers of American literature.

Timothy Parrish is Professor of English at Florida State University. Author of Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America (2012), he has published widely in journals such as Contemporary Literature and Studies in American Literature. He is editor of The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth (2007).

A complete list of books in the series is at the back of this book.
THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
AMERICAN NOVELISTS

Edited by
TIMOTHY PARRISH
Florida State University
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The novel existed before the United States of America, but American history has been peculiarly conducive to the novel's formal possibilities. When Miguel de Cervantes wrote arguably the first novel, the globe was still terra incognita. The story of Don Quixote (1605, 1615) was largely the story of antiquated assumptions about culture, history, and identity being subjected to and in a sense destroyed by new ways of perceiving, knowing, and imaging that ever since that period have persistently been called “modern.” Even as the form of the novel spread throughout Europe and on to America and elsewhere, its persistent preoccupation has been the question of individual identity. The novel has charted the relationship between an individual consciousness and the world around it. To Cervantes, Quixote’s quest to assert the will of his self, though, was unsettling and fundamentally comic. Previous heroes such as Achilles, Odysseus, or Aeneas fulfilled their destiny; they did not create it. The prospect that an individual could fashion himself as a protagonist, a hero, without the consent or even the interest of the gods and despite the prevailing wisdom of social institutions such as the church was the beginning of a new conception of identity. “In the absence of a Supreme Judge,” Milan Kundera suggests, the world of Don Quixote “suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity” as the “single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parceled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the novel, the image of and model of that world” (6).

From a broad perspective, the story of the American novel comes out of two historical developments: the invention of the novel and the invention of America. These two inventions have always been intertwined. The core subjects of the Cervantean novel – innocence, idealism, violence, human depravity, and corruption; a boundless faith in possibilities that are betrayed by reality; a poignant and trenchant sadness; the desire for adventure motivated by the belief that you can invent your own identity and that your identity may be at odds with those surrounding you – are at the core and
compose the history of the American novel. Arguably, *Don Quixote* as both a hope and a delusion predicts the main line of the American (and Latin American) novel much more than it does the English novel, since Quixote’s quest is rooted in the creation of a reality opposed to the one he encounters. Classic American characters such as James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, Willa Cather’s Antonia Shimerda, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, and J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield would not be lost or out of place on the plains of Quixote’s windmills. The self-consciousness that characterizes many classic American novels emerges precisely out of a tension existing between expectations that one is discovering something already existing out there and the intuition that one is inventing that something through one’s imagination. The history of the American novel tells us over and over that America has never been discovered but is ceaselessly being invented.

Kundera says that “the sole *raison d’être* of a novel is to discover what only the novel can discover,” and as a form the novel has been mostly preoccupied with the relationship between individual perception and formal innovation (Art §). Looking back through the history of the novel as a form we can see how Quixote’s faltering individuality anticipates the sustained novelistic investigations and formal experiments concerning individual consciousness that will come with writers as different as Samuel Richardson, Leo Tolstoy, and Marcel Proust. The history of the form connects these writers to one another, even if their works were fashioned from different vernaculars and cultural assumptions. Without disputing Kundera’s point that the novel is at heart a formal practice, one may also say that the novel inevitably reflects the society and the history of the society in which it is being written. The picaresque form of *Don Quixote* illuminates the society of early seventeenth-century Spain, just as Richardson’s novels illuminate the emergent middle-class consciousness of eighteenth-century England. Novels are at once a specific literary form and a living place that readers inhabit through their shared imaginations, cultures, and histories. “America” is one such living place that the novel has inhabited and tried to imagine. The American novel is an ongoing literary practice that engages a material reality, but it is more fundamentally an imaginary construct, an invention.

*The Cambridge Companion to American Novelists* begins with Fenimore Cooper, but it would be as naïve to insist that Cooper literally begins the American novel as it would be to insist that America itself has a definite point of origin. When the Spanish “discovered” America and tried to domesticate it according to their ideals, they brought with them not only guns (technology), maps (science), and the Bible (religion), but *Don Quixote* too. Whole print runs of *Don Quixote* were completed in Seville to be loaded on
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ships headed to the New World, and there is the sense that for the Spanish conquistadores the New World existed as an epic novel to be written. A work such as Bernal Díaz’s *The Conquest of New Spain* (1632), which told the story of adventurers trying to possess a world that seemed to them as strange as it was magical, can be read as the first New World or American novel, just as it might be read as the kind of book Quixote would have written had he been a *conquistador*. In North America the most readily available books during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were the Bible, almanacs, and *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678). *Don Quixote* and *Pilgrim’s Progress*, which Willa Cather remembers as a staple of her reading in the late nineteenth century, assume different types of heroes, yet it is not too difficult to see how these works would speak to readers making their way in a new land as adventurers who also wanted to believe that their stories were the consequence of having been chosen to pursue them.

Rather than identifying the precise origin of the American novel, it is worth recalling that the novel evolved as a literary form for expressing a new sense of the individual consciousness at roughly the same historic moment in which America, or the United States, was evolving as a material form for expressing new European understandings about science, political theory, and religion. In the Old World the novel was written over existing literary forms; in the New World, the novel was an indigenous form, born with and alongside America itself. As a genre, the novel arises out of the particular and carries the particular with it, a generic fact that has been fundamental to the way in which the American novel has developed and flourished. Despite the inevitable and important differences among American novelists, there remains the feeling that American novelists self-consciously engage the invention of their own national story in ways that classic English or French novels do not. In this respect, American novelists are always in conversation with each other through their competing inventions of American reality.

In its inception during the eighteenth century, the United States was understood to mark a radical departure from existing forms of government. Its government was an experiment that promised to do away with antiquated forms of authority and would instead place its power in the hands of the many rather than the few. Its society was conceived less as an experiment in community than as something that would protect and further the possibilities of individual Americans. Consistent with the prevailing assumption that the United States of America was a departure from European forms of government was the expectation that out of this “new nation” would evolve a distinctive and original culture. Perhaps the most famous exposition of this perspective was in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1837 address “The American Scholar,” in which he explicitly called for the creation of an American culture
as radical and as exceptional in its practice as the American Revolution was in its break from England. What forms these cultural expressions might take Emerson could only grandly point toward, but his assumption was that, regardless of how they manifested themselves, the “new” American culture would somehow reflect what he took to be the nation’s epic origins. Although Emerson was a near neighbor of Nathaniel Hawthorne, he did not anticipate that the American novel would provide the form in which his questions would receive their most thorough analysis and most lasting expression.

More than one hundred and fifty years after Emerson first outlined his exceptionalist view of American culture, scholars rightly point out the contradictions inherent in an exceptionalist understanding of American history. While the new American nation was predicated upon congeries of contradictions that disguised the fundamental inequality of American society, it is equally important that we recognize that as a historical and political entity the United States of America came into being as a type of human invention. The ubiquitous phrase “Founding Fathers” implies a definite point of origin for the existence of the United States of America, but the term “America” is only imaginary since its enabling premise is that its arrangement might have been otherwise but for this or that political conception. Clearly, the form that the novel has taken in America inevitably emerges from the shifting cultural, geographic, and material reality that is America, but it does so to pose American reality as its own invention. The inevitable term “the Great American Novel” persists in our literary imagination because American literature is bound by the quixotic wish that the essence of America might be perfectly embodied in a single aesthetic artifact. American material reality makes this wish impossible, but the living desire to fuse an ideal of America with the aesthetic possibilities of the novel gives the American novel its aura of continuity.

“If the novel had not existed at the time the United States started becoming conscious of itself as a nation,” Ralph Ellison observed, “it would have been necessary for Americans to invent it.” The sense of being American, or not being American, endures in American novels, whether the hero is Henry Roth’s David Schearl or Maxine Hong-Kingston’s Wittman Ah Sing, yet most classic American novels are framed according to characters or stories resisting the definition of the American society in which they find themselves. “In the beginning was not only the word, but its contradiction,” Ellison further notes (Collected 702). American heroes such as Natty Bumppo, Hester Prynne, Melville’s Ishmael, Huckleberry Finn, Ellison’s invisible man, Sal Paradise, Holden Caulfield, and the kid of Blood Meridian (1985) stand opposed to or outside the status quo of conventional American society. They
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become quintessentially American heroes to the extent that they stand in opposition to some existing notion of Americanness and propose their own vision to replace what they oppose. Herman Melville praised Hawthorne because his works shouted “NO – in thunder,” and this shout can be heard from Harriet Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) to Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977).

Any critical anthology of American novelists can only be a snapshot of always changing literary practices and cultural orientations. Critical tastes shift violently. There is always a battle between what the past seemed to say about itself and what the present has determined it needs to say about the past. As I write this Introduction, many scholars argue that a model for understanding literature that is based on “nationality” makes little sense in a world where geographic boundaries seem permeable and the identities of nations and peoples fluid. Where words such as “English” or “American” once were perfectly obvious descriptive terms to place before the word “novel,” many now prefer to use terms such as “postcolonial” or “transnational” to describe novels. Certainly, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) is a postcolonial novel, just as *The Ambassadors* (1903) is a transnational one. One can be too precise about one’s terminology, though, in that definitions always work to render in discrete forms experiences that may be otherwise continuous. Terms such as “postcolonial” and “transnational” are indeed useful, but rather than replacing a nationalist logic they may redirect that logic along a different axis. The most basic point about a novel is that it constitutes a literary form that can be practiced potentially by any person of any nationality and as a work of art need not be known by labels of nationality. As Roberto Bolaño suggests in a remark that echoes the quest initiated by *Don Quixote*, “every writer becomes an exile simply by venturing into literature, and every reader becomes an exile simply by opening up a book.”

Following *The Cambridge Companion to English Novelists* (2009) this *Companion* is organized around chapters dedicated to individual authors, and in all cases the literary merit of the author’s work is part of the author’s story. The narrative innovations of these authors helped to define the history of the form, while their stories have remained persistently relevant to readers and would-be writers of new versions of the American literary and cultural tradition their works embody. Variety of aesthetic preoccupation and cultural experience is to be expected of a form that has been tested by artists of different historical periods and aesthetic temperaments over a long period. Writers such as Djuna Barnes or Vladimir Nabokov clearly occupy different spaces as “American novelists” than do Willa Cather or William Faulkner. John Updike and Kurt Vonnegut lived through roughly the same era, but their works are so different that the champions of one
author may not recognize the achievement of the other. The two most influential nineteenth-century American novelists, Mark Twain and Henry James, could not read each other’s works, yet the American novel, however defined, is inconceivable without both of them. While the writers in this Companion clearly respond to the history of the novel as a particular form and ongoing possibility, their works achieve a certain collective resonance when read against each other as the work of American novelists.

The proverbial Great American Novel has many incarnations, by more novelists than this volume can contain. The reader of this book should be engaged in an ongoing conversation that has been enacted by each novelist, a conversation that evolves not only through his or her works but also through readers’ historical encounters with these works. Some readers may be disappointed not to find a chapter devoted to a favorite and deserving author, living or dead, but the absence of that author should not be construed as a lasting literary judgment. Living authors (born before World War II) have been included to indicate and make accessible to readers, students, and experts the continuing vitality and the living continuity of the American novel. The purpose of this book is not to entomb the tradition of the American novel. What matters is that even as new writers and voices, dead or living, enter or fall out of the conversation that constitutes the tradition of American novelists, the conversation does exist and it continues.

Five hundred years ago, Don Quixote set out on a comic quest to explore the limits of his own identity against the changing world of his time. Quixote never left Spain, but the new narrative form that contained his story traveled to the New World, where it was taken up by American novelists seeking to define the limitations and possibilities of their American world.

James Fenimore Cooper was arguably the first American novelist to be understood as a representative “American” novelist. As the author of the five novels that constitute the Leatherstocking Tales, Cooper created a mythology of American identity and history that revealed, in D. H. Lawrence’s famous formulation, “the very-intrinsic most American.” Stephen Railton points out, though, that it was “much harder for Cooper to make American literature new” than Emerson’s stirring statements on the “American Scholar” had seemed to suggest. Cooper’s “unflinchingly autonomous” heroes, as Railton terms them, enacted a story in which one becomes American by turning one’s back on America. This gesture would be taken up by Melville and Twain, just as Cooper’s romances about what occurs when civilized whites collide with the frontier and the racialized Other appear again in the works of Cather, Faulkner, and Cormac McCarthy.
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If Cooper suggests an American identity in flight from itself, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novels – what he called “romances” – created a psychological profile that located an American consciousness within an ongoing – and terrifying – Puritan present. As Robert Milder demonstrates, Hawthorne’s development of the American romance-novel is persistently concerned “with versions of the conflict between the ‘I want’ and the ‘thou shalt.’” Faulkner’s later sense that the past is never past is already evident in Hawthorne, just as his nuanced portraits of an individual’s psychology anticipate the novels of Henry James. In The Human Stain (2001) Philip Roth finds the spirit of Hawthorne in the impeachment of President Bill Clinton. To read Hawthorne is to understand that the American is not necessarily blessed and that one’s American optimism comes at the terrible, perhaps exorbitant, psychological cost of repressing sins that remain unacknowledged.

Herman Melville dedicated Moby-Dick (1851) to Nathaniel Hawthorne, and, like The Scarlet Letter (1850), it stands as an unquestioned American masterpiece. Although Ahab’s monomaniacal quest for the white whale makes the novel a thrilling adventure story for beginning readers, Melville also portrayed the imperial will to power that drove Americans along with the subjugation of blacks and Indians that this will demanded. As powerful as Melville’s political imagination was, though, so was his commitment to experimenting with the form of the novel. As Clark Davis notes, Melville was drawn to Shakespeare as what he called a “thought-diver” – a writer whose language made it possible to achieve “those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality.” At its best, Melville’s writing exemplifies this ideal, and among Melville’s many achievements in Moby-Dick was to instill a Shakespearian majesty in the language of the American novel. Virginia Woolf recognized Moby-Dick (which she admired over Ulysses [1922]) as a kind of proto-modernist novel in which the voice of the narrative was an achievement beyond the novel’s plot. Likewise, The Confidence Man (1857), with its emphasis on the “inventedness” of identity, betrayed an experimentalism that made Melville a forerunner to the symbolists, the surrealists, and the modernists.

Ralph Ellison argued that the moral tradition of the American novel begins with the recognition that a society that was forever proclaiming its commitment to equality and freedom nonetheless was rooted in the practice of slavery. This paradox, as Arthur Riss makes clear, is at the heart of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. On the one hand, Stowe’s novel was perhaps the most important text in “helping transform slavery from a debatable political question into an absolute moral issue about which compromise was impossible.” Yet, having sold 2.5 million copies in its first year of publication and with perhaps as many as ten readers to each copy, Uncle Tom’s Cabin may also have been responsible for perpetuating racial
stereotypes among its readers, a marker, as Riss notes, of the ways in which “race and slavery … were indivisible, mutually sustaining terms, not independent concepts.” Riss’s Stowe reveals how inextricably bound the fact of race is with so many classic American novels, while setting the stage for the replies to Stowe by Richard Wright and Toni Morrison.

Mark Twain is often understood as a quintessential American moralist despite his famous warning at the beginning of Huckleberry Finn (1885) that “persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished.” Indeed, as Peter Messent argues, the novel is structured around a series of moral oppositions, “and the very instability they reveal … taps into a common ground that goes far beyond the audiences and historical conditions of Twain’s own period.” More self-consciously than Stowe, Twain portrayed the moral ambivalence of white Americans’ relationships with black Americans. Equally important, as Messent makes clear, one of Twain’s great achievements was to introduce an “American vernacular” into the novel that was “readily accessible and comprehensible to a national and international English-speaking audience.” Ellison would hear a black American dialect embedded in Huck’s speech, while Hemingway found the beginning and future of the American novel. The biting moral ironies of Twain’s voice would find their echo in the postmodern novels of Kurt Vonnegut. Perhaps more obviously than any other American writer, Twain marks the intersection where other American novelists have found direction and meaning.

One essential American writer who did not stand at Twain’s crossroads was Henry James. Of all American novelists, perhaps none has been so self-consciously concerned with the question of literary form. Early works such as The American (1877), Daisy Miller (1878), and Washington Square (1880) defined American identity as something markedly different from the wise primitives of Twain or Cooper. Not unlike Hawthorne, James was preoccupied with the self’s limitations rather than with a sense of its unlimited grandeur. As Thomas J. Otten argues, “the American novel’s ways of managing meaning changes radically with James.” For James, the definition of character was a consequence of seeing, of literary form. Otten suggests that James’s works best demonstrate the nineteenth-century shift from “stable” characters embodying (or not) an inherent moral worth, to “personality-driven” characters with an “emphasis on flux, growth, and the vicissitudes of desire.” James thus points the way toward the modernists’ radical narrative experiments in which character is the function of an often-volatile perception. This “endlessly experimental James,” as Otten says, so playful in his characterizations and formal innovations, is still our contemporary, and even today we are catching up with, in Wallace Stevens’s words, the keener voices and ghostlier demarcations of the Jamesian way of seeing.
Often misleadingly compared to her friend Henry James, Edith Wharton had a vision of society that was more encompassing than his for she was more truly a historian of manners and a specific social caste. As Pamela Knights suggests, her works “provoke questions about the nature of emotion, the psyche, language, creativity and belief, within cultures driven by the forces of finance, consumerism and technological innovation, and divided by gulfs of privilege and inequality.” In novels such as *House of Mirth* (1905), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Wharton perceived that James’s sense of form was a mechanism for portraying the complex social relations that determine identity. Moreover, in her depictions of the shifting plights of female characters, her works predict contemporary understandings of the performance of gender.

Transcendentalists spoke of the need for the self to be transformed, but Theodore Dreiser portrayed Americans seeking self-transformation through an engagement with the seemingly infinite sense of material possibility. As Clare Eby explains, “Dreiser is the consummate chronicler of that mythic American ascent narrative because he understands to his core the allure of money … [and] uses the quest for money to examine the meaning of America.” In *Sister Carrie* (1900), the heroine embodies the transition away from an agrarian society. For Carrie the city is the repository of desire, the place where the self might be endlessly transformed. The transcendental American soul that James imagined in Isabel Archer takes on in Carrie a corporeal and material form. Dreiser’s novels, especially *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* (1925), portrayed the American capacity for living in a state of endless desire that would make F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby into a representative American hero.

Contrasting with Dreiser’s urban novels of the American self in perpetual transformation is Willa Cather’s historical vision of a pastoral America that epitomized the virtues of civilization. Infusing the epic into the novel and mixing history with fiction, Cather created works that challenged the conventional boundaries of the novel. Cather’s novels looked to Virgil’s example to create a founding narrative of an America perfectly balanced between the virtues of European civilization and the extraordinary natural landscape that had housed pre-European civilizations. Cather’s America, like Virgil’s Roman Empire, is the product of a variety of civilizations. In novels such as *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) Cather located the origins of American civilization in the work of Spanish missionaries in the Southwest and French missionaries in Quebec. In *Song of the Lark* (1915) and *My Antonia* (1918) Cather created female characters capable of possessing worlds ordinarily dominated by men, just as she portrayed characters who need not find a conventional heterosexual marriage
in order to be fulfilled. In challenging many conventions of the American novel while creating her own landscape of America beyond New England or the South, Cather’s works occupy a singular place in the American canon.

Although F. Scott Fitzgerald is known as the writer of the Jazz Age, the short, lyrical *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is for many readers the ultimate American novel. Something as prosaic and as typically American as Benjamin Franklin’s guide to becoming a better person becomes in the figure of Jay Gatsby a twentieth-century myth more entrancing than Twain’s Tom Sawyer or Cooper’s Leatherstocking Saga. As Ruth Prigozy notes, upon its publication T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and Edith Wharton recognized the novel’s importance, recognition that has not faded. Bob Dylan once suggested that in American culture there is no success like failure and failure is no success at all. *Gatsby*’s doomed grandeur enacts the logic of this aphorism even as it suggests why, for instance, Dreiser’s heroes were willing to immolate themselves in their quest for the elusive American dream.

Ernest Hemingway earned his reputation as the epitome of the American machismo, a pure and male heroic. At the core of both Hemingway’s appeal and the feeling among some readers that his work is now dated may well be Hemingway’s ongoing interest in exploring the notion of heroism in a world in which the heroic was no longer possible. Emphasizing that Hemingway is “inescapably a modern writer,” Eugene Goodheart suggests that “at his best, Hemingway takes us behind the scenes of courage and heroism, where we find psychic wounds, fear, anxiety, depression and the threat of nothingness.” As a close student of Ezra Pound and, especially, Gertrude Stein, Hemingway created works that stand up because of their extraordinary prose—a style of writing that might be referred to as the American vernacular and one that is essential to the history of the American novel. “No American writer of the twentieth century has had so great an influence on our literature and culture as Hemingway,” Goodheart adds, an influence evident in the later writers Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and Raymond Carver.

Other than Henry James, William Faulkner has written more novels considered to be masterpieces than any other American writer. He said that not until he realized that the “postage stamp” of his Mississippi might house a universe of fiction as rich and diverse as the world created by Balzac was he able to begin to realize his talent as a novelist. This is as much a tribute to Faulkner’s extraordinary experiments in literary form as his much discussed historical vision. Faulkner’s novels evoke a mythic view of the southern past, but as Philip Weinstein argues here, “his great work – the work that reveals Faulkner as Faulkner – sees strenuously through this myth. Indeed, the act of seeing through this myth enables Faulkner to become the most powerful white novelist of race relations this country has yet produced.” Although
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Faulkner’s novels can be read as critiques of the myth of the Confederate past, for many readers they memorialize that past as if it were the lost Troy of American literature. In exploring this myth, Faulkner’s novels experimented radically with narrative form and point of view and, as in Twain’s works, often gave lyrical voice to characters whose lives were uneducated and thus whose narrative complexity was startling to encounter in a work of literature.

Like Ralph Ellison and Djuna Barnes, Henry Roth is known for one novel. *Call It Sleep* (1934) was initially dismissed as a Depression-era Joycean indulgence, but in 1964 the critic Irving Howe reclaimed it as a classic American novel. In a nation of immigrants, *Call It Sleep* is arguably the definitive American novel since no other American novel so profoundly captures the simultaneously exhilarating and alienating experience of becoming American. It is also an unparalleled portrayal of childhood as well as being one of the few American novels to depict the grittiness and complexity of urban life. Hana Wirth-Nesher suggests, though, that its true appeal as a “modernist masterpiece” is “through its articulation of loss conveyed through word play that negotiates a web of accents, dialects, and languages” and that ultimately Roth “makes a space for the drama of Jewish American literature and culture in the making.” Sixty years after his first novel Roth completed another long work, *Mercy of a Rude Stream* (1994–8), that arguably did justice to and in a sense completed his earlier achievement, one that is unique within American literature.

Despite the critical imprimatur of T. S. Eliot and despite being arguably the most impressive and demanding work of American modernist prose, Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936) remains famously unknown. In its structure and language, the novel reflects the logic of her remark that “there is always more surface to a shattered object than its whole.” Even as she is read and reread, Alex Goody suggests, Barnes “remains inassimilable, a writer who made a profoundly singular but nonetheless profound contribution to the history of the novel.” Like other modernist landmarks such as *Ulysses* or *The Waves* (1931), *Nightwood* shatters the whole of the realist novel and reconfigures it as a constellation of narrative fragments in which each piece seems to comprise its own infinite reflecting surface. At the same time, the novel enacts a relentless exploration of sexuality that serves as a point of departure for contemporary debates regarding the relationship between sexuality and identity.

Before becoming a novelist, Zora Neale Hurston worked with the eminent Columbia University sociologist Franz Boaz and as a researcher documenting black folk customs in the American South and in Haiti for the Library of Congress. Hurston had an extraordinary verbal facility that allowed her
to realize a central aim of the Harlem Renaissance: to translate into literary form the vernacular language and folk consciousness of postslavery blacks. Although Hurston’s work was largely rejected by the major figures of the Harlem Renaissance, her achievement anticipates Ellison’s in *Invisible Man*, and her novels would inspire subsequent writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. As Lovalerie King emphasizes, “Hurston’s outstanding work in the woman-centered narrative is an important link between African American women’s literary production in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond to African American women’s literary production in the nineteenth century.”

In *Black Boy* (1945) Richard Wright had described the almost unimaginable journey he had completed from being born a poor black boy in racist Mississippi to becoming the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *Native Son*. When the sociologist Robert Park met the author of *Native Son* (1940), he reportedly asked, “Where in the hell did you come from?” Wright’s searing portraits of blacks suffering the material and social degradation of their place in American society destroyed forever the image that American blacks could be content with a subordinate place in American society. Wright’s work became a critical point of departure for writers as diverse as Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison. As William Dow argues, “Wright was the first to portray a distinctively black psychology,” one that emphasized ghetto life from the perspective of the poor and the self-consciously undereducated. Wright’s novels, however, were not merely sociology but also acts of literary philosophy. The existentialism of his work earned the admiration of Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and his experimentation with identity and narrative earned the approval of Gertrude Stein.

While recasting Raymond Chandler’s novel *The Big Sleep* (1939) into a movie (with the assistance of screenwriter William Faulkner), the film director Howard Hawks was uncertain about the plot so he wired Chandler to clear it up. To Hawks’s question of “What happened?,” Chandler famously responded, “NO IDEA.” As Leonard Cassuto demonstrates, a novel like *The Long Goodbye* (1953) is “fueled not so much by plot as by Marlowe’s emotions” as he confronts a world in which “surface glitz spreads a thin veneer over pervasive hollowness within.” Cassuto further suggests that Chandler was committed to “using genre fiction as a platform for unique artistic achievement.” In Chandler’s works plots never serve to reveal an ultimate truth (in part because there is no ultimate truth to be revealed): the texture of conveyed experience matters more than the action. In this respect, Chandler is as “modernist” as he is “hard-boiled.”

Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) endures as one of the most read and taught of American novels. Because it engages major authors such as Fyodor
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Dostoevsky, Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, James, Faulkner, James Joyce, and Richard Wright, among seemingly countless others, *Invisible Man* is arguably the most self-consciously canonical novel in American literature. The novel is also richly African American in that much of its narrative vitality depends on Ellison’s scholarly though always deft use of black folk culture – slave tales as well as blues and jazz. His ultimate achievement as an artist, though, was not to demonstrate his comprehensive knowledge of the American literary history and the African American folk and intellectual tradition, but to write a novel that confirmed the basic premise of literature: that readers may make imaginative affiliations across cultural lines. Thus, in a gesture of American inclusiveness, Ellison affirmed – against the stacked odds of history – the democratic ideals of the American republic by presenting his African American hero as the voice of all readers willing to recognize him. As David Yaffe’s essay suggests, “We are still living in a country imagined by Ralph Ellison.”

J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) is perhaps the most well-known twentieth-century American novel. Its hero, the skeptical adolescent Holden Caulfield, recalls Huckleberry Finn as he questions the mindless conformity of his society. Sarah Graham points out that the “phoniness” that Holden discerned in an American society “mired in self-serving superficiality” can be read as Salinger’s protest against white Americans’ cheerful willingness “to settle for the consolations of post-war prosperity.” Salinger’s work thus tried to unsettle a too comfortably settled America as it enacted an “openness to experience and a commitment to finding enlightenment.” In this respect, Salinger’s work marks an intersection between the spiritual quests found in Jack Kerouac’s “beat” novels and Ellison’s challenge to the moral complacency of white Americans in *Invisible Man*.

Like Chandler, Patricia Highsmith is known as a writer of genre fiction, but as Joan Schenkar argues, her works were “corralled into categories that couldn’t begin to account for their depth.” After Henry James, whom she read closely, Highsmith’s novels refuse the assumptions of conventional heterosexuality. *The Price of Salt* (1952) was one of the first American novels to depict an openly lesbian relationship, and it made waves because its protagonists were given a satisfying and mostly happy relationship. In works such as *Strangers on a Train* (1952) and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), “Highsmith is as unconscious a ‘gay male novelist’ as Ernest Hemingway, and as gifted an anatomist of male sexual anxiety as Norman Mailer,” Schenkar suggests. Her most famous creation, Tom Ripley, recasts Tom Sawyer and Gatsby with a sense of charming menace while his story is also a rich and subversive rewriting of James’s American abroad novels. A deeply original writer, Highsmith created works that patiently turn inside out the
assumptions of many classic American novels and are in their way more truly revisionist than those of more praised authors such as Don De Lillo and Thomas Pynchon.

Born in St. Petersburg the son of a Russian nobleman during the time of the tsars, Vladimir Nabokov made himself over as an American writer unlike any other in the canon. Nabokov liked to joke that in order to become an American writer he first had to invent America, a task he fulfilled in *Lolita* (1955), one of the extraordinary novels of the twentieth century. His novels are verbal mirror games, dense with textual illusion, and very much literary palimpsests that emerge out of a dazzling array of sources. Works such as *Pale Fire* (1962) and *Ada* (1969) refract modernist innovations in ways that are unrecognizable in Faulkner, though taken up by other American writers such as John Barth, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon. As Julian W. Connolly suggests, though, Nabokov’s works cannot be restricted to nationality, and he is probably American literature’s most obviously transnational novelist.

Along with Saul Bellow, Jack Kerouac was the major prose poet of the American self in the twentieth century. Influenced by Thomas Wolfe and Marcel Proust, Kerouac’s subject was the self and its relation to time and experience. In Proust and Faulkner, the reader encounters dense narratives in which a single incident is understood to be central to understanding a character’s existence. Their intricate narratives ceaselessly venture away from and return to that single moment: a whole life in the bite of a madeleine or the chiming of bells. Kerouac’s novels, however, arise out of a new postwar experience of subjectivity as “fragmented and indeterminate.” As a result, Joshua Kupetz suggests, “Kerouac’s protagonists are invariably dashed against the rocks of an unknowable internal coast, a liminal space where the multiplicity of possibilities for one’s personality refuses to adhere into a unified identity knowable to either the reader or to the protagonist.” Kerouac’s famous “bop prosody” was a carefully wrought prose style fashioned to negotiate his sense that “universal assumptions of nationhood and citizenship” were breaking down. Perhaps his greatest achievement, though, was to adapt the modernist narrative imperative that Virginia Woolf identified as “moments of being” into a jazzy, American voice in opposition to the mechanized, post–World War II American cultural landscape.

Saul Bellow occupies a peculiar place in post–World War II American literature. His most ebullient works can be said to celebrate the self in all of its contradiction. In *Herzog* (1964), his most famous creation, Moses Herzog, discerns all around him what he calls the “wastelander” outlook, which he understands to be a commitment to alienation. Nonetheless, Herzog insists upon his quest to become a “marvelous” Herzog. His defiant assertion of self