

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89907-9 - The Cambridge History of the American Novel

Edited by Leonard Cassuto

Excerpt

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General introduction

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Hundreds of thousands of novels have been published since the first novel was written by a North American in the early days of the republic. Between 1789 and 1800, about thirty novels written by Americans were published in the United States, at a time when “American” meant something very different, and much less separate, from what it means now. During that period about 350 other titles were published,¹ creating a distinctly transatlantic (and very British) literary landscape.^a As late as 1875, the number of novels both written and published in the United States had never exceeded 175 per year. Not until the 1880s, in a booming economy – now featuring what has been termed “the industrial book” – did new American fiction titles exceed 1,000 per year.² The numbers have been climbing exponentially ever since, flagging only slightly during economic downturns. The total had doubled again by the 1950s, and again by the 1980s. It had doubled yet again by the 1990s, and once more in the 2000s.³ At this writing, near the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a book of fiction is being published in the United States every hour, on average (and that figure excludes vanity press and self-publishing ventures).⁴ That’s more than 10,000 works of fiction – mostly novels – each year. Not only do rumors of the death of the novel appear greatly exaggerated, but these numbers alone (and the swiftly shifting landscape they portend) suggest that we need to consider the history of the novel anew.

Any history of the American novel must pick a path through the multitudes of books, and provide a rationale for that path. Like all literary histories, *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* is a document of its time. It reproduces the categories of its time and the debates of its time even as it produces new

a Various characteristics of this early transatlanticism are addressed in many chapters in the first part of this volume, including those by Paul Giles, Bryan Waterman, Anna Mae Duane, and Ronald Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray. In Part Two, Nancy Glazener considers the transatlanticism of American print culture during the postbellum period.

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ones alongside. But unlike most of its notable predecessors, it calls attention to its own internal conflicts and especially to the contingency – historical and otherwise – of its methodology and approach, and of the categories that it creates. It is with that contingency in mind that this book has been organized.

To begin with, this history synthesizes the divisions between the author-centered literary history of yesterday and the context-centered efforts of recent years.

The older American literary histories (that is, the ones before the mid-1980s) practice different versions of the Great Man Theory, arguing that literary history is the story of illustrious writers seeking timeless truths, allowing their books to rise above quotidian surroundings. Context, where it does appear in these older books, is often straight biography, and historical apparatus centers on grouping writers into movements which are then aligned with a thesis-driven, millennialist narrative of American literary exceptionalism and national progress.⁵

Richard Chase's widely scoped and still influential *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957) is a case in point. Chase sought the "originality and 'Americanness'" of the American novel in the ways that it "incorporate[es] an element of romance."⁶ Monumental summative works by Alfred Kazin, Charles Feidelson, R. W. B. Lewis, Richard Poirier, and others present similarly thesis-driven surveys of large chunks of American literary history, almost always concentrating on the longer fiction by the famous men whose precincts scholars, critics, and readers have since widened.

These ambitious weavers of American literary historical fabric frequently reviewed each other's works, mostly generously. Their less guarded moments of mutual critique offer a window onto their own views of their vaulting literary historical projects. Consider Lewis's 1954 review of Charles Feidelson's *Symbolism and American Literature* (1953), written while Lewis was presumably finishing his own such reappraisal, *The American Adam*, which appeared the next year. In *Adam* Lewis would hold up his method ("intellectual history") as a way to expose "the dominant ideas of a period, or of a nation."⁷ But in his reading of Feidelson, Lewis places himself at an ironic distance from such monumental critical tasks, and proposes instead that the practice of critics and historians reflects the preoccupations of their own times.

Is American literature not, asks Lewis in his review, overly "susceptible to the big idea?"⁸ That question serves to unify the brief critical historiography that I've been unfurling here. From D. H. Lawrence forward, histories of the American novel (and of American literature more generally) long centered on the "big idea." Big ideas – displayed, for example, in a raft of older books with

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the phrase “American Mind” in their titles – have charisma, but they reveal pitfalls. Most notable of these is tendentiousness. Or as Lewis puts it: does the big idea “not sometimes skirt those rare exceptions” that don’t fit its frame?⁹ Books built around big ideas rarely squint, but there is much more focus today on those “rare exceptions,” which turn out not to be so rare after all. The expanding literary canon, a salutary and ongoing development, demands that we squint.

The most expansive literary histories of our era have sought to uproot and overturn the old vision of the big idea. These more recent works have nearly all been multi-authored collections, as the big idea gives way to a diversity of ideas – and to diversity itself. In the era of the expanding canon, it may be that no one person can fully represent the diversity of the American literary tradition, even within one genre. Bernard W. Bell’s important survey of the African American novel succeeds by limiting its scope in order to cover a lot of chronological ground, but most of the ambitious and influential works of American literary history during the past generation have been wide rather than long. The contributors to this volume have benefited, for example, from the work of Cathy N. Davidson’s new historicist reading of the early American novel (which also makes use of methods from book history), and from Jane Tompkins’s fusion of literary criticism with some of the methods of cultural studies, and Amy Kaplan’s innovative use of postcolonial and transnational scholarship.¹⁰ These major new visions have brought new ways of reading old books and focused our attention on new ones; they encompass approaches and methodologies that have emerged in recent decades to offer different models of inquiry – but without much historical sweep. The histories that cross periods these days (that is, diachronic works) have been books with many authors.

Literary history has also confronted new ways of doing history itself. Intertwined with parallel trends in historical study (which has lately focused on the travails of ordinary people rather than famous ones), the current emphasis in literary study is strongly bottom-up rather than top-down, stressing the idea that literature is of its time, and that writers do not (and indeed cannot) transcend their contexts. Newly invigorated by historical scholarship, multiculturalism, and cultural studies, literary study has become not only more historical but also more generally interdisciplinary in its approach during the past twenty-five years, developments which are reflected, for example, in the monumental *Cambridge History of American Literature*.¹¹

Accordingly, the 1991 *Columbia History of the American Novel*, the last major effort along the lines of the present volume, is divided up into chapters whose

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titles mention no author by name, and whose literary-historical approach entwines the novelists into a many-branched narrative that is fully context-driven. This fine book initiates some of the projects that continue in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, such as the study of the novel in the book market, and the sustained analysis of minority literatures in the context of a larger literary whole. The result of the “thematic” approach of the Columbia history is a rich depiction of backdrop – the setting against which American novels have been written – that de-emphasizes individual writers.¹²

But writers may also have influence that can allow them to affect the course of literary history beyond their own times. (For example, a chapter in this volume argues for the influence of Herman Melville on the Beat writers of the 1950s; another traces Ernest Hemingway’s influences on post-World War II Jewish novelists.) We can learn a lot from the context that produces a novel, but as critics of earlier generations remind us, there is also much to learn from the mind of the author who wrote the book.

The Cambridge History of the American Novel accordingly aims at a Howellsian “middle way” that synthesizes the shifts in method and emphasis of this generation, but without tossing out the idea that writers can influence history as well be influenced by it. It’s appropriate that Howells has emerged as a figure of signal importance in this history who is discussed across a number of chapters. “The Dean” proves significant not so much for his own novels (which receive their due here) as for his central role – coupled with his awareness of that role – in promoting realism as the most truthful, most democratic way to tell a story.^b Howells knew that his novels, reviews, editorial pronouncements, and support of younger authors were both shaping and reflecting a new turn in American literary history, even if he didn’t know what that history would look like later on. In this literary history we have highlighted the ground that we’ve covered even as we seek future trailheads.

The dialogic method

How *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* works is inseparable from the thick braid of interwoven stories that it tells. So let me turn briefly to the structure and inner workings of the volume.

^b For discussions of this aspect of Howellsian realism in this volume, see the essays by Michael Elliott (“Realism and radicalism: the school of Howells,” chapter 17), and Carrie Tirado Bramen (“James, pragmatism, and the realist ideal,” chapter 18).

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One might say that *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* is founded upon a series of productive collapses. I don't mean the kind of collapse where something (or someone) falls apart, of course. Rather, a productive collapse mixes things together, creating new juxtapositions of the familiar and unfamiliar, new similarities and contrasts, and an expanded overall scope.

This book is founded on the idea that a narrative history by many hands must necessarily be a collaborative history. Moreover, such collaboration should, for the sake of unity, be as explicit as possible.

Accordingly, the most important collapse that structures this volume is the breaking down of the boundaries that ordinarily separate the contributors to an edited volume. So many such volumes convey the effect of the contributors laboring in a row of hermetically sealed glass booths, unable to talk to each other until after the task is done. (There have been cases in my own experience of writing for scholarly collections when I haven't even learned who else was in the table of contents until I saw the finished book.) The process of writing and editing *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* combines the immediacy of a conference proceeding – in which the contributors actually converse with one another – with the rigor of a carefully planned and structured literary history. The overall goal has been to foster collaboration at every stage to create a multivoiced yet integrated literary history.

We've drawn on twenty-first-century technology to promote dialogue, combined with the old-fashioned notion that the writers of a collective history should read each other's work as they write their own. To promote that goal, we posted contributors' work – starting with abstracts and continuing through successive drafts – on a wiki, a shared private website that enabled contributors to access each other's work in progress. Throughout the composition process, the editors have noted who might benefit from reading whom, and have relayed this information to the contributors, who have also read freely on the wiki on their own.

Having read the work of their colleagues, chapter authors have engaged each other *within their chapters* in order to create literary conversations within and across time – just as American novels do. Readers of *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* will find tangible results of that dialogue in the form of many intramural references within. The footnotes in the text are exclusively devoted to reproducing such dialogue, with traditional bibliography reserved for the endnotes. But the main results of this collaborative approach go beyond intramural references. They guide and structure the story that's being told by linking the chapters through various pathways threading among them. The effect, as one of the contributors to this book noted at a

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2009 conference, invokes hypertext: numerous links that draw chapters together, and with them the book as a whole.

The strong dialogical emphasis in this book generates horizontal and vertical continuity (that is, unity within and across time). It also generates productive disagreement. For example, *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* represents the current identity categories that drive today's study of the American novel, especially in its more recent incarnations. But the volume also contains a critique of those categories that describes them as "neoliberal" and criticizes them for attending to racial and ethnic identity rather than economic inequality.^c These dissenting views explicitly clash in ways that allow the reader to witness the ongoing process of creating literary history.

The Cambridge History of the American Novel thus intertwines multiple texts and contexts to create a web of interlocking conversations and overlapping conflicts rather than a master narrative or even a giant diorama (an image which also connotes orderly representation).¹³ This book surveys the field differently. The tradition of the American novel is tangled, and the goal of this book is to represent that tangle and follow many strands within it, not to unravel it in search of any separate strand.

This goal entails more than bringing groups of books together (though this history surely does that). The chapters in the volume speak to each other in a way that encourages the migration of themes, ideas, and authors across boundaries. As an example, consider race and the American novel, a subject treated on its own in scores of scholarly books. The editors have sought to keep matters of race (and African American novels) from being relegated (we might say "segregated") to chapters that separately trace the African American tradition. Eric J. Sundquist has written of "the necessity of living with the paradox that 'American' literature is both a single tradition of many parts and a series of winding, sometimes parallel traditions that have perforce been built in good part from their inherent conflicts."¹⁴ *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* enfolds such conflicts so as to show the complex interrelationships among them. Sundquist's important 1993 book, even as it guides efforts to reconceive literary history along these lines, nevertheless scrutinizes race separately from other issues. One of the advantages of assembling a history of this scope lies in the opportunity to complicate race and turn it outwards in a way that extends Sundquist's paradigm and embodies his larger purpose.

c See Walter Benn Michaels, "Model minorities and the minority model – the neoliberal novel" (chapter 61).

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All of this interchange is possible because the authors have read and referenced each other in ways that follow themes from chapter to chapter, and place them in different contexts. At seventy-one chapters, *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* has more than twice as many chapters as its most recent predecessor. The large number is designed to generate a multiplicity of literary-historical perspectives that weave together (and sometimes bump into each other) in complicated ways. That means, for example, that Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian *Herland* (1915) is read in one chapter as an outgrowth of the sentimental tradition, and in another chapter as a forerunner of the queer gender-bending that proliferated in the twentieth century, in a third as a meditation on American imperial adventures, and in a fourth as a protest novel. From the discussion of protest the reader may follow the theme of propaganda (in protest novels) into a discussion of the influence of mass media on the literary representation of protest, and from there into the proletarian tradition of the 1930s, and so on – with all of these linked via footnoted references. As with hypertext, one may follow the links of one's choice to create one's own literary historical narrative.^d Such internal dialogue within this history corresponds to the property that Mikhail Bakhtin says is “the fundamental constitutive element of all novelistic style.”¹⁵ The form of this history thus dovetails with that of its subject.

It may be that future literary histories will be found on the internet, where actual electronic hypertextual references will allow readers to bounce from entry to entry. That approach will have its strengths and weaknesses (and some of these are assessed in forward-looking analyses by Ursula Heise and Robert Coover in this book). But today, right now, *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* represents an innovation: a narrative history by more than seventy tellers working together in virtual space.

Invention versus discovery

What kind of collective story is being told by these more than seventy tellers? The sheer number of American novels, and the accompanying reality that no one can read them all, together raise the question of whether historians – literary and otherwise – create the story or uncover it. Exactly what do literary historians make up (or construct) in a case like this and what do they discover?

d Chapters referenced here include “The woman's novel beyond sentimentalism” (34); “Reimagining genders and sexualities” (57); “Imperialism, Orientalism, and empire” (32); and “Novels of civic protest” (23), as well as “The novel, mass culture, mass media” (41) and “Steinbeck and the proletarian novel” (40).

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And how much “there” is already there? The post-Civil War movement toward realism in American fiction, for example, is a heavily documented literary historical event. Likewise, the fame and influence of, say, Nathaniel Hawthorne in his own time is a fact that literary historians ignore at their peril, though they will naturally interpret that fact differently. We may expect legitimate literary histories to consider such matters. On the other hand, what is the significance of introducing a category like *manhood* into American literary history?

The focus on “invention” of the story in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* is twofold. First, we’ve sought to invent new categories that reshape old histories. Accordingly, this book is the first-ever history of the American novel to devote a chapter to the “worlding” of the American novel (a category which encompasses, among other topics, the development of the American novel after the attacks of September 11, 2001), to name one example. And following developments in the new field of masculinity studies, *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* identifies and follows the relation between changing meanings of American manhood and changes in the American novel.^e

But another aspect of invention centers on devising histories for new things that simply didn’t exist at the time of earlier histories. This volume sets aside space for analysis of televised book clubs and other twentieth- and twenty-first-century reading communities. These communities descend from earlier reading groups whose development is also chronicled here, but are also distinct from them because they have evolved in different media. Consider also the example of graphic novels, an ambitious recent outgrowth from comic books that now cross-pollinates with literary fiction, the memoir, and the movies. *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* is the first history of the American novel to bring graphic novels into the larger narrative of the novel as a genre – and in tracing the separate history of the graphic novel, old *Krazy Kat* cartoons come into view as precursors, and these then become part of the diverse root system of the American novel.

One may justly question the way that this history singles out the United States. The most tempting response is pragmatic: people already study American literature and American novels, so those categories already exist, and there is practical value to extending discussions that have already been joined. In the preface to one of the earliest scholarly histories of American

^e This thread begins with “Manhood in the early American novel” (chapter 11) and extends through many later chapters in the volume.

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fiction, Arthur Hobson Quinn tasks himself with showing the development of the nation's fiction as "an artistic form" that will "show its relation to American life."¹⁶ Leslie Fiedler, in one of the first expansive histories of the American novel alone, defended his theme ("Love and Death") as the necessary method to serve his exceptionalistic purpose ("to make clear the divergence of our own novelistic tradition from the continental ones").¹⁷ Assumptions stack atop each other like cordwood in the introductions to these books, and Quinn's and Fiedler's reasoning can easily be made to look self-referential despite the continuing value of their books.

The structure of this history acknowledges the contingency of ideas about nation even as its organization argues for the value of tracing national literary traditions and the shared literary self-consciousness that they provide. In other words, if the novelists wrote with an idea of America in mind, there's value in tracing the tradition they created that coheres about that idea. Even so, from its consideration of the transatlanticism of the early American literary scene to its focus on the complex literary interchanges surrounding the borders of the United States, *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* also contributes to what has recently been termed the "hemispheric turn" in American studies.^f

But why separate the story of the American novel from the rest of American literature? To answer this question, let's go back to what happens when we consider the graphic novel as a kind of novel. By making a case for the significance of the graphic novel, Jan Baetens shows that we must perforce consider – and consider in a new and different way – the significance of the wordless woodcuts of the 1920s that are, along with cartoons, another important source for the graphic novel. The enormous flexibility and absorptive qualities of the novel (called "hybridity" in the current critical lexicon) make the case for studying its history. Or as one of the genre's eminent practitioners, Emile Zola, puts it, the novel is an "eminently seductive form" that "has monopolized all space, absorbed all genres . . . It is what one wishes it to be."¹⁸ In short, the novel is a cultural prism with enormous power to focus and refract its surroundings, bringing history and culture into view from simultaneous and differing perspectives.

Analysis of new "invented" categories like graphic novels and the culture of readers and reviewers on Amazon.com may be distinguished from efforts to interpret literary phenomena that we agree are significant (e.g., what was realism all about?– a "discovery" question). This history presents the two together. The volume continues the discussions that explore traditional

^f Chapters with a central hemispheric component include those by Gretchen Murphy, Rodrigo Lazo, and Ramón Saldivar (chapters 33, 65, and 62 respectively).

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literary historical categories, but also invents new kinds of literary history and new approaches to it. Readers may question to what extent we are driven by new critical categories, and to what extent by new facts on the ground – and they may decide for themselves.

Collapsing high and low, periods and isms

The Cambridge History of the American Novel pays more attention to genre fiction than previous histories of American literature, and it accords them the importance they deserve in the shaping of literary fiction and the history of the American novel generally. If all literary histories ask, “What is ‘literature’?” then this volume argues that the study of popular genres alongside more self-consciously literary productions will help us to answer that question.

The rise of genre fiction is a story that begins early. Eclipsed genres like the sea novel helped to shape books that we read today as literature, as Hester Blum demonstrates in her chapter in this volume. And later genres such as the crime novel or science fiction, which flowered in the twentieth century, have cross-pollinated with so-called literary fiction and inspired novelists from Hemingway to Marge Piercy. We have also seen notable entries from within a genre take their places on the high cultural podium.

The critical study of genre fiction begins somewhat later, as it took awhile for scholars to acknowledge the importance of formula-driven fiction as art, or as a source of literary influence and cultural insight. This history devotes chapters to “strong genres” – so called because they register with particular clarity the collectively held beliefs, hopes, and anxieties of the context in which they are produced. David S. Reynolds, one of the first to implicate genre writing with the development of canonical literature, writes of the way that early American genre writing reflected “profound fears and fantasies” during a period of rapid change.¹⁹

We’ve placed chapters on genres at the point in the chronology where they peaked in visibility, readership, and influence: in other words, at the point in time where they matter most to the larger history by affecting developments outside of themselves. The Western, a form which thrived in the dime novels that proliferated after the Civil War and into the twentieth, has always informed conceptions of the frontier, a connection demonstrated in numerous chapters herein,⁸ but most critics agree that its long heyday has now passed, so

g See, most notably, Stephanie Le Menager’s “Imagining the Frontier” (chapter 31), and Shelley Streeby’s “Dime novels and the rise of mass market genres” (chapter 35).