

Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. 584 pp.

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For almost 150 years, the idea, or rather the ideal, of the Great American Novel has received a large amount of both popular criticism and academic scholarship. Since its introduction in an 1868 review by John W. De Forest, literary reviewers and scholars have sought to find new candidates deserving of the accolade. In his opening to *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, Lawrence Buell admits that the Great American Novel is somewhat of a ‘media cliché’ (1) and ‘anachronistic pipe dream’ (2). However, throughout his latest monograph, Buell aims to show that the GAN (as nicknamed by Henry James in 1880) is more than an empty or dated term, but one still deserving of sustained investigation.

Moving away from the hunt for a singular great text, Buell considers the GAN to be an entire body of work rather than an individual text, representing the nation. *The Dream of the Great American Novel* is structured around Buell’s identification of four central themes or ‘scripts’ that GAN texts share. Script one (chapter three) posits that the GAN has a ‘master narrative status’ (6) that is retold and reimagined through multiple media after publication. Buell uses *The Scarlet Letter* as an example of a tale reinterpreted and reinvented in twentieth and twenty-first century novels such as Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World*. Script two (chapters four-six) focuses on texts that feature a representative character’s transformative journey through American society. Buell traces the ‘up-from’ narrative from its origins in Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography, concentrating on *An American Tragedy*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Naked Son*, *Invisible Man*, and the *American Pastoral* series. The third

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script (chapters seven-nine) argues that the GAN addresses divides of race and region, often through the vehicle of family saga. Here Buell follows these racial and sectional ‘fault lines’ (217) through *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Absalom! Absalom!*, *Gone with the Wind* and *Beloved*. Finally, script four (chapters eleven-thirteen) addresses the power of the meganovel—in its mass of characters, temporalities and locations—to comment on the possibilities and limitations of democracy. A discussion of *Moby Dick* leads to the U.S.A. trilogy, *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Infinite Jest*.

The Dream of the Great American Novel offers a strong overview of the enduring appeal of the ideal of the GAN and the critical work it has inspired. Chapters two and three efficiently trace the popular debate over the GAN, its heyday from 1860s to 1920s, decline during the mid-century and renewal in the late twentieth century. Across the four scripts Buell demonstrates a thorough understanding of what draws readers and critics to these particular novels from the nineteenth century onwards, bringing together forums of popular readership (Amazon book reviews, newspaper polls) and academic scholarship. Buell’s critical account of the GAN is a work of exceptional breadth that involves an extraordinary amount of ‘connect-the-dots extrapolation’ (5) between numerous canonical and minor texts. However, in largely focusing on the plots of GAN candidates the book is often too descriptive, with long passages of synopsis. This could be due to its position as a work of popular literary criticism directed towards a wide general and academic readership who may not have read many of these novels. As a result of its ambitiousness in both breadth and depth, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* can feel sprawling, similar to the meganovels it analyses. As Buell himself suggests, the work may be more useful if readers are selective and ‘seize on those portions about the novels that interest you most’ (6).

Whilst Buell effectively explores the national themes that make these novels ‘great’ in the eyes of readers and scholars, his sociological approach to the merits of each work often disregards the artistic value of a text. Buell considers *Moby Dick* to be part of the GAN body of work for its position on democracy, community and nation, overlooking the beauty and magnitude of the prose itself that attracts many readers. Furthermore, Buell’s focus on the GAN as a national product speaking to a distinctly American audience renders *The Dream of the Great American Novel* somewhat hermetic. Although acknowledging a European novelistic tradition in his introduction, Buell is hesitant to cross the Atlantic (or the Pacific) to engage with a globalised literary marketplace and readership today.

Engagingly written with ‘technical terminology to a minimum’ (6) for non-specialists, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*’s strength lies in its connections between major and minor works, providing a guide to the ‘DNA of the GAN’ (10) from *The Scarlet Letter* onwards. However such an ambitious work would benefit from sustained interrogation of the GAN as an American dream within a contemporary international reality.