

# book | *news*

from North Carolina

**The University of North Carolina Press**

116 S. Boundary St. | Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514-3808

**A conversation with Gordon Hutner**

Author of *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920-1960*

Published June 1, 2009

\$39.95 hardcover, ISBN 978-0-8078-3227-1

**Q: What types of books from mid-twentieth century America have been forgotten? Are these books justly neglected?**

**A:** My book concentrates on the realist novels about the middle class, books whose explicit interest is the way we live now. Sometimes these books were written in an up-to-the minute consciousness of social reality, and sometimes they were written at a generation or two's remove (the way we once lived in contrast to the way we live now). Sometimes, they were more deeply historical (the way we really lived a long time ago). They're not neglected in the sense that there are some missing masterpieces among them, but there are lots and lots of engaging novels, books that are both edifying and entertaining, books that tell us a great deal about our country's past, especially as it was imagined when it was the contemporary. That also gives us an insight into our present, too.

**Q: How popular were these novels in their day?**

**A:** Many were quite popular, and a few of those interest me because of how much they are like—and perhaps are no better than—many other books published at nearly their very same moment. It's something of a myth that colossal best sellers are some special breed; often they are very similar to a few books from the same publishing season or the ones just past. But it's not the popular ones we're most in danger of forgetting. The ones that have passed out of critical memory that concern me are those that sold respectably and were also critical successes.

**Q: Why have they been forgotten?**

**A:** I argue that the reason that they've been forgotten in the academy is that they concern middle-class experience from a middle-class point of view, which of course runs counter to the dominant critical ideologies of the postwar years. If history is written by the winners, so too is literary history, and the academic victors of the last 60 years were vigorously antibourgeois. Professors of the 20s and 30s were frequently more sympathetic to middle-class writing and sometimes wrote novels from this perspective, to go along with their scholarship and criticism. The key point, however, is that academe, since the 50s and 60s, has not exerted much interest in this kind of fiction. Such novels do not typically lend themselves to the subtleties of rigorous rhetorical analysis, the

**[more]**

Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 962-0581

Fax [919] 966-3829 | E-mail: Gina\_Mahalek@unc.edu

## 2-2-2 What America Read

methodologies of close reading that form a professor's specialty. The disciplinary emphasis on major writers or representative writers militates against professors developing too much curiosity over less familiar names. Scores of books on Faulkner, for example—and not all of them consequential—but not very many on intriguing careers like T. S. Stripling or Hamilton Basso. In fact, a junior scholar would have been discouraged from writing a book like mine, a book without the anchor of three or four or five case-studies, one or two of which should probably be a canonical figure.

Still, there's no conspiracy to keep these books from the public. Why they are forgotten by the mainstream is, simply, that they were written to respond to a particular cultural moment and when that moment passes, they are replaced by new books, written to respond to a new moment. We can't remember everything. That's perhaps one of the jobs of literary historians, one that's been neglected insofar as it extends to the literature of the middle class. Yet literary historians have thought of their job as recovering the literature of oppressed minorities—and no one can say the writers I want to recollect were punished for their radical politics or their ethnicity or their sexuality. Surprisingly perhaps, they wrote about all those things, especially race relations, but they wrote about them from a middle-class, basically liberal (in the sense of tolerant) point of view.

**Q: What is to be gained by rediscovering these works? What do they reveal about American society in the mid-twentieth century as compared to American society today?**

**A:** What we see in these books is the rise of some values, the decline of others, the changes in the way the middle class faces modernity. That's basically what the books are about. What's gained is a clearer appreciation of when and how our society revises its meanings and sense of significance, what I call the dynamics of cultural production.

**Q: Is this exclusively an American trend or did other nations experience a similar phenomenon? What does this say about American culture?**

**A:** I don't think it's exclusively American at all, but it is peculiarly American in the sense that we have had, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at least as much invested in being modern—at least other countries have for a long time understood us as synonymous with what's new. And these books are about how to deal with the new, how to negotiate the changing of everyday lives.

It's also true that the English—the other tradition I know something about—have a tenuous sense of the books that are neither classics nor great commercial successes.

**Q: How did you go about researching these novels?**

**A:** I began by reading reviews. I was interested in another set of questions about literary reception but I kept finding laudatory references to books I never heard of—and to an English professor, that's a red flag! So I kept reading the literary journalism of the era,

[more]

### 3-3-3 What America Read

first in the 20s and then on through the 50s, and it became apparent to me that the history that's descended to us is different from the history that unfolded year by year. So I wanted to see what was left out.

**Q: Are there any books that you particularly feel should be brought back into the spotlight? Did you discover any new favorites along the way?**

**A:** Really there are just too many! I gained a great appreciation for many women writers I had never heard of before, like Margaret Barnes, who won a Pulitzer for a novel about the rise of Chicago. I also liked Josephine Lawrence, who wrote in the 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s! Her novels were smaller affairs, written to be read in an evening, dealing with problems like how to manage a budget or how to deal with the aged in a world before the Social Security Act. (Reviewers sometimes asked why she wasn't more highly esteemed.) Margaret Culkin Banning wrote similar novels about women a rung or two higher on the social ladder. Caroline Slade wrote some interesting books about women in the Depression and the sex trade. Maritta Wolff wrote terrific novels in the 40s, including the very best one about women's experience with returning GIs called *About Lyddy Thomas*; a posthumous novel of hers came out a few years ago. I also liked Margaret Halsey's comic writing: *With Malice Toward Some* is a delight. She wrote a novel and a nonfiction book about black GIs and race relations, drawn on her USO stint, but the nonfiction book is more trenchant.

There were good books by plenty of men too, and I would be remiss if I did not mention Michael Foster's *American Dream*. With such a title, the book better be good, and it is. I really developed a taste for John Marquand too, especially *Point of No Return*. I also "discovered" wonderful novels by African American writers—Waters E. Turpin's migration novels of the 30s may be known to specialists but scarcely make their way onto many syllabi in twentieth-century African American fiction. But this is just my take. I assure you, readers who follow up on the books I talk about will find plenty to enjoy.

**Q: Where can we find these books today? Are they still available from libraries?**

**A:** Occasionally, we can find them at better used bookstores and on the shelves of better-read relatives. You can probably find them at Alibris too. Sadly, these are the books that libraries are throwing out as fast as they can. I've bought a shopping bag's worth for a dollar at university library sales and elsewhere. Or I would be the first one to take them off the shelves in 60 or 70 years. (I guess that's why the libraries were recycling them!)

**Q: What role, if any, has film and other media played in how or if a novel is remembered?**

**A:** Film has played a tremendous role in keeping titles alive, but not necessarily the books themselves. We're much likelier to remember *Drums Along the Mohawk* from the Henry Fonda movie than we are Walter Edmonds' novel (which was second only to *Gone With the Wind* in popularity in 1936 and 37, much likelier to remember *The Snake Pit* from the Olivia de Havilland movie than we are from the Mary Jane Ward novel.

[more]

Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 962-0581

Fax [919] 966-3829 | E-mail: Gina\_Mahalek@unc.edu

#### 4-4-4 What America Read

**Q: In your opinion, what kinds of contemporary books are likely to endure, and which will be less likely to be remembered by future generations?**

**A:** I end my book with a brief look forward to some recent fiction and how it also is very likely to be forgotten in a few years. Perhaps we'll remember lots of the prize-winners, but we'll forget most of what's good about the others. We'll remember the terrific blockbusters, but will forget the midlist (what's left of it) without much worry. On the positive side, we'll remember a great deal more of the fiction written by marginalized writers. So I think my next book will be about the fiction of the last 10 years!

###

This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: A conversation with Gordon Hutner, author of *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920-1960* (University of North Carolina Press, Spring 2009). The text of this interview is available at [www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/hutner/](http://www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/hutner/).

#### PUBLISHING DETAILS

ISBN 978-0-8078-3227-1, \$39.95 hardcover

Publication date: June 1, 2009

456 pp., append., notes, bibl., index

<http://uncpress.unc.edu/books/T-7290.html>

The University of North Carolina Press, [www.uncpress.unc.edu](http://www.uncpress.unc.edu)

116 South Boundary Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27514-3808

919-966-3561 (office) 1-800-848-6224 (orders) 919-966-3829 (fax)

#### CONTACTS

Publicity: Gina Mahalek, 919-962-0581; [gina\\_mahalek@unc.edu](mailto:gina_mahalek@unc.edu)

Sales: Michael Donatelli, 919-962-0475; [michael\\_donatelli@unc.edu](mailto:michael_donatelli@unc.edu)

Rights: Vicky Wells, 919-962-0369; [vicky\\_wells@unc.edu](mailto:vicky_wells@unc.edu)