

The Great American Novel? What's That?
By David L. Ulin Los Angeles Times Book Critic February 18, 2014

Can we finally get beyond the [Great American Novel](#)? It's the fantasy of an earlier America, like Manifest Destiny. And yet, to read Harvard professor Lawrence Buell's "[American Literature's Holy Grail: Franzen, DFW and the Hunt for the Great American Novel](#)" in Salon over the weekend was to experience a cognitive dissonance, as if the shaggy monster he portrays were somehow real.

Buell's essay is excerpted from his book "The Dream of the Great American Novel" (Harvard University Press: 584 pp., \$39.95), and it's unwieldy for a variety of reasons, not least its essential lack of inquiry. He seems to take it as a given that the Great American Novel (or GAN, as he abbreviates it) is an article of faith among most readers, whether that means "[Moby-Dick](#)" or "[The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#)," or something more contemporary, such as "[Gravity's Rainbow](#)" or "[Infinite Jest](#)."

Yes, these are all great American novels -- but as to the single, mythic Great American Novel? It doesn't exist. How could it, when our essential sense of American-ness, of the interplay between national and personal identity, is, and ever has been, in a state of flux?

What the Great American Novel relies on *as a concept* is the notion that there is some unifying experience, some core or set of values, that we as Americans all share. But as our political life daily reminds us, this is not the case. Not only that, but it misreads the fundamental function of literature, which is less about the grand defining statement than it is about empathy.

Think about it: What makes novels such as "Huckleberry Finn" or "Gravity's Rainbow" compelling are not their generalities but their specificity -- the tracing of particular events and interactions, the development of Huck or Jim or Tyrone Slothrop as characters, not archetypes. Certainly, these books deal with larger issues in our collective history (slavery, World War II), but at heart, they are expressions of individual consciousness. The same is true of many of the writers Buell cites as potential Great American Novel contenders: Don DeLillo, Joseph Heller, Richard Powers, William Vollmann. That this is largely a male list (not to mention Anglo) is one problem, but it also misapprehends much of these authors' work.

Take "[Underworld](#)," for instance: DeLillo's epic-size novel of Cold War America, which begins with a brilliant novella-length prologue about the 1951 Dodgers-Giants playoff game that ended with Bobby Thomson's pennant-winning home run. It's a key moment in 20th century American popular history, and DeLillo populates his narrative with recognizable figures (J. Edgar Hoover, Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason). In the end, though, such personalities are little more than window dressing on the surface of the book.

Rather, what interests DeLillo is "underhistory," which he describes as a sense of "ordinary life trying to reassert itself. ... The secret history that never appears in the written accounts of the time." That gives the novel, for all its length and sense of scope, an unexpected intimacy, as it traces the lives of just a couple of characters, with history as

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something of a backdrop, a stage set against which the central action plays.

This, I'd argue, is what fiction does, what it is meant to do -- to show us what E.M. Forster called "the buzz of implication," the way we live in a specific moment, the passage of an individual through his or her days. Without that focus, that sense of character, we have nothing as readers to hold onto, and yet it is this particularity, this sense of the subjective, that makes the ideal of an overarching, summarizing novel an impossibility.

What literature offers is not an overview; it is not a way to understand the broad movements of the world. Such aspects may be represented -- we can learn a lot about what it was like to live in 19th century London by reading Dickens, or St. Petersburg under the czars by reading Gogol -- but they are not the point.

No, literature is a connection-making mechanism: We read about people, individuals, and inhabit their lives, their struggles, their desires. We see that they are not unlike we are. This creates both identity and identification, allowing us to step (for a moment, anyway) outside ourselves.

The Great American Novel is something different; it signifies a belief in literature as all-encompassing, as able to gather the diverse strands of an inexplicable and unruly nation, and make sense of them in a single work. That this is impossible should go without saying; it's more than a little reductive as well.

Consciousness is chaos and life has no meaning, and the stories we tell -- including the big ones: faith, statehood, family, history -- are just a series of dreams we make up to give shape to the shapeless, to build a firewall against the void. That it all falls to pieces is part of the point; we are alone together, after all.

The Great American Novel, then, is (as it has always been) a chimera, a distraction -- a reflection of the wish that literature, that art, may save us, when its real purpose is to reveal our gorgeous temporary beauty, and then to dissipate.

"Are you a skeptic," Buell asks, "who doubts if the GAN has been written, or, if it has or nearly has, whether there's likely to be a rival? Do you believe it's not a mere myth, but it just hasn't happened yet?"

My answer is all, and none, of the above. More to the point, it is a blind alley, a way of thinking about literature in terms of traditional (and outdated) hierarchies when what we need is something more inclusive, more free-flowing -- "an ocean," as Ishmael Reed once put it, "more than a mainstream