

Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 567 pp.

Reviewed by **Evan Carton**, University of Texas at Austin

A work of prodigious literary historical range and erudition, surveying more than two centuries of novel writing in the US, Lawrence Buell's *The Dream of the Great American Novel* is large and contains multitudes. By my count, it puts 226 novels and 169 different novelists into conceptual relationship with one another, and with the aspirational category of "the Great American Novel" that John W. De Forest named almost 150 years ago. An expansive spirit also animates the book. Buell advocates and models a generous "glass half-full approach" in assessing the politics and poetics of texts of earlier eras, one that yields "due recognition of breakthrough accomplishments against the limits of their horizon of perception" (234). Additionally, he cultivates an accessible prose style that strives to reward the attention of both scholars and general readers.

Four governing yet malleable and multiform GAN "scripts" organize his study. Buell populates each narrative category with a few master texts that he discusses in some detail and dozens of "GAN candidates" that he briefly references while urging that all—frontrunners and dark horses alike—be viewed "within broader contexts of shifting artistic practice and public priorities . . . without which their 'unique' accomplishments wouldn't have been possible and can't be understood" (6). Buell's broad narratological framing of this profusion of novels spanning US literary history offers scholars opportunity and direction for further investigation—especially of the many understudied works that he nominates in passing, yet often intriguingly, as GAN storyline exemplars. (A small sampling might include John Fox Jr.'s *Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*, Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*, Arthur Cohen's *In the Days of Simon Stern*, and Brian Ascalon Roley's *American Son*.) For general readers, Buell's lively taxonomical tour of celebrated monuments and lesser pillars of American literary imagination offers new textual insights while elucidating structural, rhetorical, and thematic connections and cultural historical continuities between novels that might not have been thought to have much to say to one another. But what power or principle governs the selection of these particular GAN scripts and candidates? Exactly whose dream does *The Dream of the American Novel* recount and interpret?

These questions don't exactly haunt Buell's enterprise, but they do wander in and out of his book, specter-like, never quite confronted yet impossible to banish. Typically, when Buell asserts "the persistent desire . . . for defining

fictionalizations of national life" (4) or notes that one work "has been held up as a likelier Great American Novel candidate [than another]" (171), he does not specify a desiring or upholding subject. The most direct explanation of the source and shape of the inquiry that Buell's title announces occurs in a single paragraph of his Introduction: "even though the dream of the GAN has always presumed that such novels would be 'serious' artistic efforts," he writes, the dream's definition "is less in the hands of credentialed critics and scholars . . . than the result of a complex, messy interaction among them, readers at large, the literary entrepreneurialism of the writers themselves, the publishing and education industries, and self-accredited freelance journalists and bloggers" (9). To clarify the dynamics and assess the results of the messy multilateral negotiations of Great American Noveldom referenced here might make for an interesting cultural historical project, but this book is not that project. Neither, in my view, does it bear out the claim that primary, if not exclusive, effective agency for defining this dream (as Buell represents it) lies anywhere other than "in the hands of credentialed critics and scholars."

Early on, Buell situates his book within and against "the prevailing 'field-imaginary' of academic American studies" (15). By his final paragraph, 450 pages later, he reprises this term—coined by Donald Pease to designate the disciplinary unconscious of a particular scholarly community at a particular point in time—so that "field-imaginary" now refers to some national and populist construction, not an academic one. To warrant the inclusion of other possible GAN scripts and novel genres than the ones he treats here, Buell writes, "enough people" would need to be persuaded that "the American 'field-imaginary'" required expansion or reinvention (465). For all its many virtues and dazzling breadth, the scholarly achievement of *The Dream of the Great American Novel* is flawed and constrained by the effects of this slippage between the prevailing field-imaginary of Americanist academics and the imaginative field of the American novel.

Indisputably, the novels anchoring Buell's elaborations of his four GAN scripts are landmark literary accomplishments. *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby* and *An American Tragedy* (discussed in tandem), *U. S. A.*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Invisible Man*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, and *Beloved* all receive between 12 and 31 pages of dedicated exposition. *The Granddissimes*, *The Marrow of Tradition*, *The Custom of the Country*, *Gone With the Wind*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Native Son*, *The Adventures of Augie March*, Updike's *Rabbit* series, *American Pastoral*, and *Infinite Jest* play significant supporting roles. Claims for the greatness of these novels—all of which regularly appear on academic syllabi and are studied in academic journals—on the grounds of

aesthetic virtuosity or cultural significance are available to be made, and in some instances Buell makes them, or allows them to be inferred. But these, or any, criteria of distinction ultimately are peripheral to his principle of selection, which is driven by the demands of his four scripts. And these scripts (*The Scarlet Letter* as serially refashioned master text; the American Dream or “up-from” narrative; the romance of sectional and/or ethno-racial division; and the mega-novel of democratic promise or dysfunction) emerge more immediately from a prevailing disciplinary representation of the drama or crisis of American identity than from the historical expanse of American novel production.

Whether I’m right or wrong in this claim (which I’ll defend presently), one consequence of the governing function of the four proposed GAN narrative templates is to flatten distinctions between such heavyweight candidates as those named above and the host of other novels, adduced to fill out the categories, whose GAN candidacy does not derive from particular virtuosity, cultural impact, sales figures, or even documented or imputable authorial ambition, but rather from the storyline template itself. A corollary consequence, which Buell acknowledges when he remarks several times that a novel he’s discussing is not the one he judges its author’s best, is that potential GAN candidates on substantive aesthetic or cultural grounds are excluded from consideration because they are less easily assimilable to one of the paradigmatic scripts. Hence, *The Portrait of a Lady*, an “up-from” or “American dream” story, and *The Bostonians*, a “romance of the divide” story, qualify for candidacy, but *The Golden Bowl*, say, does not. But do the most powerful or provocative novelistic offers of “some revelation about American life” (5) assume these particular forms, or might others that resist or cut across them—*Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Something Happened*, *Housekeeping*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, and *The Time of Our Singing*, are unmentioned tours de force that come to my mind—prove more, or differently, revelatory?

GAN candidates advanced by “readers at large” lacking approbation by “credentialed critics and scholars” also receive no hearing in *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, even when they exemplify one of its scripts and have achieved significant cultural currency. Such an absence is Ayn Rand’s “up-from” narrative *The Fountainhead*, or *Atlas Shrugged*, which could scarcely be better characterized than by Buell’s scenario for Script Four: a “sprawling [performance] of encyclopedic scope with multiple agendas from the ethnographic to the metaphysical . . . confronting characteristic disparities between the ‘ought’ and the ‘is’ . . . that become more draconian, opaque, insidious, and pervasive as ‘civilization’ becomes more complex” (349). If “the

GAN idea itself is and always has been a more demotic than an academic enthusiasm" (387), then it seems important for a book about that idea to reckon with novels such as Rand's, which regularly top readers' polls of the greatest twentieth-century novels.

The prevailing disciplinary representation of the drama or crisis of American identity to which I think Buell's book, in conception and design, gives voice is grounded in a particular kind and a particular, though shifting, locus of cultural anxiety and privilege. It may begin in response to Sydney Smith's notorious 1820 put-down ("In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?"), but it persists as the province of a succession of simultaneously elite or aspiring, yet affectively marginalized tastemakers who ambivalently seek both representative national status and a platform for national critique. All four of Buell's GAN storylines are yoked to this aspiration, which passes from the antebellum isolatoes and postbellum expatriates of the northeast who confronted a southward- and westward-moving national center of gravity, to the interwar Lost Generation and Lost Cause legatees, to the left-leaning (sometimes gay, often Jewish) midcentury writers and critics who pursued institutional status for the academically suspect study of American literature, to the self-expressively talented tenth of other oppressed but culturally emergent immigrant and minority communities, to the late twentieth-century polymath whiz kids wrestling pyrotechnically with the totalizing power of the incorporated technostate, to us, the disciplinary tenders and keepers of all these creative flames. The power and profusion of these scripts is certain, as Buell's book shows. At the same time, their discovery—or construction—as *the* "defining fictionalizations of national life" functions as an Americanist rather than the American "field-imaginary," one that perpetuates the closed conceptual and ideological circuit of what Winfried Fluck has called "the romance with America" or what Sacvan Bercovitch earlier diagnosed as liberal dissensus and the jeremiad tradition.

To put popular GAN enthusiasms—including those invested in the bestselling or most passionately crowd-sourced authors and works of science fiction, crime fiction, religious fiction, and sentimental romance—in critical conversation with academic ones is a potentially fruitful successor project to Buell's, one that might nudge both constituencies out of their comfort zones and perhaps reroute some imaginative circuits. To consider GAN candidacy for novelistic revelations of American life by non-American writers—Ondaatje, Desai, Murakami, Bolano, Rushdie, Greene, Toibin, Adichie, Selasi—might also bring to the table, as Caroline Levander and Robert Levine put it, in a formulation that Buell endorses,

“new perspectives that allow us to view the nation beyond the terms of its [and, I would add, our] own exceptionalist self-imaginings” (15).