

How the Novel Made the Modern World

And how the modern world unmade the novel

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The Dream of the Great American Novel by Lawrence Buell
Harvard/Belknap

The Novel: A Biography by Michael Schmidt Harvard/Belknap

Martin Amis once remarked, apropos of the idea of writing a book about America, that you might as well try to write one about people, or life. Or, he might have said, the English novel. Yet here we have the fruits of such an

enterprise in all their cyclopedic, cyclopean glory: Michael Schmidt's *The Novel: A Biography*—1,100 pages spanning nearly 30 dozen authors, starting with the pseudonymous Sir John Mandeville (he of the 14th-century *Travels*) and ending 45 brisk, brilliant, intimate, assured, and almost unflaggingly interesting chapters later with Amis himself.

Such an effort represents the labor of a lifetime, one would think. In fact, it is a kind of sequel to *Lives of the Poets* (1998), a comparably commodious compendium. Schmidt—who was born in Mexico, went to school in part in the United States, and has made his career in Britain—is himself a poet and novelist as well as an editor, publisher, anthologist, translator, and teacher. Given the fluidity with which he ranges across the canon (as well as quite a bit beyond it), one is tempted to say that he carries English literature inside his head as if it were a single poem, except that there are sections in *The Novel* on the major Continental influences, too—the French, the Russians, Cervantes, Kafka—so it isn't only English. If anyone's up for the job, it would seem to be him.

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Still, 1,100 pages (and rather big ones, at that). I wasn't sure I had the patience for it. Then I read this, in the second paragraph. Schmidt is telling us about the figures he's enlisted as our guides along the way, novelist-critics like Henry James, Virginia Woolf, V. S. Pritchett, Gore Vidal, and many others:

They are like members of an eccentric family in an ancestral mansion ... Some are full of respect, some reserved, others bend double with laughter; the rebellious and impatient slash the canvases, twist the cutlery, raise a

toast, and throw the crystal in the grate. Their damage is another chapter in the story.

It wasn't the notion that Schmidt was going to orchestrate the volume as a dialogue with and among these practitioners, though that was promising. It wasn't the metaphor of the eccentric family per se, though that was interesting. It was the writing itself. The language was alive; the book would be alive as well. Take a breath, clear the week, turn off the WiFi, and throw yourself in.

Schmidt's account is chronological, but loosely so. Early chapters flash forward to the present or near-present, so that Aphra Behn shares quarters with Zora Neale Hurston, Daniel Defoe with Capote and Coetzee. Schmidt is weaving threads, picking out lines of descent: the Gothic, the exotic, the vernacular, the journalistic; manners, genres, voices, verisimilitude. Through Mandeville and *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, we see the novel (or rather, its precursors) find a sense of form, coalesce from a sequence of incidents into a coherent structure. Through Defoe and Richardson and Fielding, the 18th-century emergence, we see it becoming the novel.

A Biography: Schmidt's subtitle is cunningly chosen. The novel begins as a bigheaded infant, takes its first uncertain steps, then slowly gathers its capacities. Once they've been invented, they're available to all. "Earlier novelists address the reader directly," Schmidt remarks in reference to Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*, "but not personally." Later, in Austen, "something new and remarkable begins to happen": by perfecting the technique of free indirect discourse, in which the minds of narrator and character merge, she creates protagonists who feel so real "that they can step outside the frame of their particular novel and companion us." By the time of the Brontës in the middle of the 19th century (we're a fourth of the way

through the book), “the form had become versatile and capacious: Scott filled it with history, the Gothic writers with dream.” Chronology is change but also enrichment; fashions and phases will get our understanding only so far. Every novelist is free to reach back into history, pull out an old trick, and make it new.

In *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster famously requests us to imagine the English novelists not as floating down the stream of time, but “seated together in a room, a circular room,” all writing at once. In Schmidt, they get up and mingle. The book, at its heart, is a long conversation about craft. The terms of discourse aren’t the classroom shibboleths of plot, character, and theme, but language, form, and address. Here is where we feel the force of Schmidt’s experience as an editor and a publisher as well as a novelist. He knows how books get written, and not just in technical terms. He tells us that Fielding got £800 for *Amelia*, guides us through the office politics of literary London circa 1900, lets us in on who became a drunk, got divorced, had an outsider’s chip on his shoulder. The book is a biography in that sense, too: the lives of the novelists.

Schmidt understands that novels are written for readers—not “ideal” readers, not readers in the abstract, but actual people out there in the market—and he explains how books and buyers shape each other. Arnold Bennett, who made himself rich in the years before the First World War, played to the audience created by mass literacy. “He knew what the new reader wanted: authority, instruction, a way of feeling safe in the world of books, of not being wrong-footed by a natural liking or an exposed ignorance.” The literary novel—the modernist novel in the wake of Flaubert—arose against the same phenomenon. Its way, Schmidt suggests, had been prepared by Poe, who not only invented a genre, the detective story, “he invented, by extension, the reader of that genre,” who then “impacts upon the future writer with ... techniques of suspicious reading, where every detail is interrogated and

weighed.”

Around the insights of his artist-docents, of Graham Greene and Anthony Burgess and Joyce Carol Oates, Schmidt weaves his own dense tapestry of aperçus. “[Jack] London and Hemingway share a direct style, but London pulls the whole melting mess of the iceberg up on shore for us to see.” Poe’s ability to frighten a reader, “especially late at night,” has in part to do with “the spaces that vowels carve out of the darkness.” Like Jonathan Franzen, Jeffrey Eugenides and other young writers “practice a detachable moralizing and deliver civic asides.” There are pleasures such as this on almost every page. For Jewish writers after the Second World War, Central Europe “provides a living, alternative, polyglot modernism to the cultural hunger Pound and Eliot fed with a deliberated amalgam constructed out of safely dead cultures.” Salman Rushdie, unlike his Indian predecessors, “does not busk to British or American readers but addresses his subject directly, as if to create Indian and Pakistani readers.”

Note the breadth of Schmidt’s attention, the variety of angles from which he’s able to approach a book. He has his favorites (Fielding, Conrad, Naipaul, Amis), as well as those he thinks are overrated (Thomas Pynchon, Ian McEwan, Paul Auster), but he takes each one on his own terms, and in his own times. He doesn’t expect Dos Passos, with his political engagement and documentary style, to look like Nabokov, the avatar of aestheticism. He doesn’t ask the writers of the past (or the present) to affirm his social views. Some get a couple of paragraphs, a few get 10 pages or more, but each is seen as if intensely spotlighted; they are their own story, as well as part of a greater one.

There’s a reason that we call them novels. The genre, Schmidt remarks, “takes in and takes on invention like no other literary form.” Modernity’s preeminent artistic innovation, the novel is perpetually striving to achieve the new. Its very looseness, its lack of rules and notorious difficulty of definition,

is the secret of its strength. What is a novel? Almost anything that writers have attempted to convince us that it might be. Fiction has always been conspicuously porous to other forms, especially those that we refer to by the term that would seem to negate it, *nonfiction*: travel, history, journalism, biography, true crime—in our own day, most obviously, memoir. “Reality hunger,” to borrow the title of David Shields’s 2010 anti-novel manifesto, is hardly something new. The novel has always been a glutton for the real.

For one thing, it simply has more room than other forms (though serial television has emerged as a rival). Unconstrained by conditions of performance, it makes the most rotund Wagnerian opera, let alone the longest movie, play, or symphony, look anorexic by comparison. Schmidt remarks that the novel arose from medieval genres, with little relation to the classical tradition, but as it grew it claimed the epic goal of plenitude, the ambition to incorporate the whole of life. So many landmark novels are not only huge, they seem to seek to swallow the entire world: *Don Quixote*, *Moby-Dick*, *Middlemarch*, *Ulysses*, *War and Peace* (whose title might be glossed as *Iliad Plus Odyssey*, an epic times two), Proust’s *Recherche*, the titanic sociographic cycles of Balzac and Zola, the whole Joycean line of Gaddis, Pynchon, DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace, who wrote a book whose title dares the adjective *infinite*.

The novel is novel, but it is also, typically, news—the tidings of the world around us. It is no coincidence that a number of the genre’s greatest exponents, starting with Defoe himself, were journalists as well. The novel reaches in and out at once. Like no other art, not poetry or music on the one hand, not photography or movies on the other, it joins the self to the world, puts the self *in* the world, does the deep dive of interiority and surveils the social scope. That polarity, that tension—call it Richardson versus Fielding, the novels of the soul and of the road—has proved endlessly generative. You can put yourself at any moment, as a writer, anywhere you want to on the

spectrum, from the most introspective to the most documentary, invent whatever methods you can think of to bring both self and world into focus.

The self in society: the modern question. The novel is coeval with other phenomena that first appeared in full-fledged form in the 18th century—like privacy and sensibility and sentiment and boredom, all of which are closely linked to its development. Novel-reading is indeed unusually private, unusually personal, unusually intimate. It doesn't happen out there, in front of our eyes; it happens in here, in our heads. The form's relationship to time is also unique. The novel isn't static, like painting and sculpture, but though it tells a story, it doesn't unfold in an inexorable progression, like music, dance, theater, or film. The reader, not the clock, controls the pace. The novel allows you the freedom to pause: to savor a phrase, contemplate a meaning, daydream about an image, absorb the impact of a revelation—make the experience uniquely your own.

More than with any other form of art, the relationships we have with novels are apt to approach the kind we have with people. For a long time, novels were typically named after people (*Tom Jones*, *Emma*, *Jane Eyre*), but that is not the crux of it. What makes our experience of novels so personal is not that they have protagonists, but that they have narrators. Paintings and photographs don't, and neither, with rare (and usually unfortunate) exception, do movies or plays. Novels bring another subjectivity before us; they give us the illusion of being addressed by a human being.

They are also exceptionally good at *representing* subjectivity, at making us feel what it's like to inhabit a character's mind. Film and television, for all their glories as narrative and visual media, have still not gotten very far in that respect, nor is it easy to see how they might. The camera proposes, by its nature, an objectivist aesthetic; its techniques are very crude for representing that which can't be seen, the inner life. ("I hate cameras," Schmidt quotes

Steinbeck as having remarked. “They are so much more sure than I am about everything.”) You often hear that this or that new show is like a Dickens novel. There’s a reason that you never hear one likened to a novel by Virginia Woolf or Henry James.

Novels call us out. “In the intensity of our engagement,” Schmidt remarks, “we ourselves are judged.” The statement is made in connection with Richardson, but it applies to his progeny, too—the whole tradition, central to the English novel, of strenuous moral struggle. As the characters are tested, so are we. *What* you read becomes a mark of election, and even more, *how*. (“Books—oh! no,” says Elizabeth Bennet to Mr. Darcy. “I am sure we never read the same, or not with the same feelings.”) The novel was a smithy, perhaps the smithy, in which the modern consciousness was forged.

The modern consciousness, but not the postmodern one. The novel’s days of cultural preeminence have long since gone. The form rose to primacy across the 19th century, achieved a zenith of prestige in modernism, then yielded pride of place to the new visual media. It is no accident, perhaps, that the modernist *anni mirabiles* after the First World War (the years of *Ulysses*, Proust, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Magic Mountain*, *The Great Gatsby*, and others) directly preceded the invention of the talkies—a last, astounding efflorescence.

This is not to say that great novels haven’t continued and won’t continue to be written. It is to start to understand why people have been mooting the “death of the novel” ever since that shift in cultural attention, as well as why the possibility is met, by some, as such a calamity. Privacy, solitude, the slow accumulation of the soul, the extended encounter with others—the modern self may be passing away, but for those who still have one, its loss is not a little thing. Schmidt reminds us what’s at stake, for novels and their intercourse with selves. *The Novel* isn’t just a marvelous account of what the

form can do; it is also a record, in the figure who appears in its pages, of what it can do to us. The book is a biography in that sense, too. Its protagonist is Schmidt himself, a single reader singularly reading.

All of which brings us to another, only slightly less ambitious book, Lawrence Buell's *The Dream of the Great American Novel*. Buell, a professor emeritus at Harvard, is a distinguished figure in the field of American literature. His book, the harvest of a long career, is both less and more than its title suggests. Buell begins by tracing the history of his titular subject: the birth, after the Civil War, of the notion of what Henry James would soon refer to as the GAN, that one grand fiction that encapsulates the national experience; the concept's fall from critical favor in the middle decades of the 20th century; and its persistence, to this day, as a popular and journalistic aspiration, talking point, and parlor game.

But Buell seems less interested in the “dream,” the concept as a cultural phenomenon, than in constructing a taxonomy of GAN contenders—and thus, in large measure, of American fiction as a whole. This is where the ambition comes in, as well as Buell's enormous erudition. He's read everything, it seems, that bears upon the question: all the novels, all the criticism, all the history, all the literary theory. Buell identifies three principal GAN “scripts”: the “up from” story of the self-made individual (*An American Tragedy*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Adventures of Augie March*, *Invisible Man*, *American Pastoral*); the “romance of the divide,” meaning primarily the racial divide (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Beloved*); and the “meganovel” of democratic community (*Moby-Dick*, *U.S.A.*, *Gravity's Rainbow*). A fourth paradigm, which sits uneasily athwart the rest, is represented by a single book, *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel “made classic by retelling”—a GAN contender, in other words, by virtue of sheer iconicity.

Buell's book tells us a great deal about American fiction. What it also tells us, in its every line, is much of what is wrong with academic criticism. We can start with the language, as we did with Schmidt. Here is a fair sample of Buell's prose:

Admittedly any such dyadic comparison risks oversimplifying the menu of eligible strategies, but the risk is lessened when one bears in mind that to envisage novels as potential GANs is necessarily to conceive them as belonging to more extensive domains of narrative practice that draw on repertoires of tropes and recipes for encapsulating nationness of the kinds sketched briefly in the Introduction—such that you can't fully grasp what's at stake in any one possible GAN without imagining the individual work in multiple conversations with many others, and not just U.S. literature either.

That's one sentence. There is an idea in there somewhere, but it can't escape the prose—the Byzantine syntax and Latinate diction, the rhetorical falls and grammatical stumbles. Schmidt's smooth sentences urge us ever onward. Buell's, like boulders, say stop, go back.

The truth is that by academic standards, Buell's writing isn't especially bad—which makes him, as an instance, even worse. By the same token, he isn't noxiously ideological in the current style, isn't an “-ist” with an ax to grind or swing—all the more reason to deplore how thoroughly (it seems, reflexively) his book bespeaks the reigning ideologies. Buell, whose careful terror seems to be the possibility of saying something politically incorrect—the book does so much posturing, you think it's going to throw its back out—appears to have absorbed every piety in the contemporary critical hymnal. You can see him fairly bowing to them in his introduction, as if by way of ritual preparation. There they are, propitiated one by one—Ethnicity, Globalism, Anti-Canonicity, Anti-Essentialism—like idols in the corners of a temple.

The frame of mind controls the readings. Novels aren't stories, for Buell, works of invention with their own disparate purposes and idiosyncratic ends. They're "interventions" into this or that political debate—usually, of course, concerning gender, race, or class, as if everyone in history had the same priorities as the English professors of 2014. Nearly every book is scored against today's approved enlightened norms. *Gone With the Wind* loses points for "containing" Scarlett and embodying an "atavistic conception of human rights" but wins a few back for being "even more transnationally attuned than *Absalom*," exhibiting "maverick tendencies in some respects as pronounced as Faulkner's," and engaging in "an act of feminist exorcism that *Absalom* can't imagine." Go team!

In the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—a book that makes this kind of reading sweat, being heroically progressive by the standards of its day but embarrassing by ours—pages are spent parsing its exact degree of virtue. Witnesses are called:

Here, as critic Lori Merish delicately puts it, Stowe "fails to imagine African Americans as full participant citizens in an American democracy." George Harris's grand design to Christianize Africa looks suspiciously imperialistic to boot, veering Stowe's antislavery critique in the direction of what Amy Kaplan trenchantly calls "manifest domesticity."

I feel as if we're back in Salem. Maybe he should have just thrown the book in the water to see if it would float. Buell is a person, one should say, who uses terms like *cracker*, *redneck*, and *white trash* without self-consciousness or irony, which makes his moral teleology all the more repulsive—his assumption (and it's hardly his alone) that all of history has been leading up to the exalted ethical state of the contemporary liberal class.

The one kind of standard that Buell will not permit himself is an aesthetic

one. Like many academics now, he'd rather cut his tongue out than admit in public that he thinks a book is good or bad. He fidgets for a page before screwing up the courage to suggest that Stowe's *Dred*, a sort of thematic sequel to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "seems destined for less success as an act of fictional outreach." A long paragraph ponders why *The Marrow of Tradition*, by the African American writer Charles Chesnutt, never achieved the popularity of *Huckleberry Finn*—before the next one tells us that even multiculti critics think it's pretty lousy.

This is not about applying some timeless measure of artistic value. It is simply about owning up to his own preferences—to his own pleasures. Just as Buell's prose gives the impression of having been produced by a machine, so does his book as a whole. He never tells us why you'd actually want to read these works. The omission points to an unresolved ambiguity: Is he talking about Great American Novels or just great American novels, and is there a difference? He can't address the question, because he can't acknowledge the existence of the second category. Never mind those "scripts," which dwell upon the kinds of thematic considerations that get novels onto curricula now and turn them, as Schmidt puts it, into "text[s]" to talk about and around." What sorts of qualities have made people—people with no professional stake in the game—champion certain books but not others, and do so decade after decade? Buell likes to cite the various blogs and forums where ordinary readers debate their favorite "greats" (among other things, it gives him a chance to make populist noises), but he isn't really interested in the experience of individual readers, including himself.

And that explains another omission—or rather, a large set of them. There are a lot of great American novels, and great American authors, that he hardly deals with at all. Many pages, in the aggregate, are spent on mediocre or forgotten works that fit his paradigms. Hemingway, meanwhile, believe it or not, is mentioned only incidentally. Henry James is represented, in a brief

consideration, by a second-level work, *The Bostonians*. *Lolita* gets little more than a page, as does *Blood Meridian*. A whole related run of work is essentially absent: *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *On the Road*, *In Cold Blood*, *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. If your first reaction to this list is that all of those are written by white men—if you think that literary criticism is best conducted as a demographic census—then you may just be part of the problem.

But that is not the real point. The real point is that a lot of readers, of whatever race or gender, have loved these books and thought them great. Instead of starting with his scripts and themes, Buell should have started here: with the passions that make people read—and write—in the first place. That is finally what's at issue, when we speak about the state of academic criticism: how it responds, or does not, to the process of reading; how it shapes, or misshapes, the readers of tomorrow—who will in turn, as Schmidt knows, help shape the fiction of tomorrow.

The notion of the Great American Novel, Buell tells us, is largely without parallel in other countries. Essential to its constitution, it would seem, is precisely that dimension of “dream”: of tantalizing elusiveness, as if its fulfillment lay forever in the future, just like America's itself. The quintessentially modern form, for the quintessentially modern country. The novel rose with modern selves because the novel, classically, relates the story of an individual attempting to create herself against existing definitions. That possibility is also under threat, as the bureaucrats of identity, within and without the academy, attempt to keep us in the grids to which they have assigned us. The question of the novel's future is important, but equally important, as Schmidt and Buell so differently reveal, is the question of its past: of how we receive it, of how we will let ourselves use it to make us.

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