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# "Making America": On a new literary history of America

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## **“Making America”: On *A New Literary History of America*\***

Werner Sollors (Harvard University)

The number of people who have read a single literary history from cover to cover may be smaller than the number of literary histories that have been published. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such histories became popular, providing information about the lives, works, reception, and influence of single authors, facts that were strung together chronologically in the form of long narratives that employed a limited number of available story lines, such as growth or decline, a golden age, a transitional period or a renaissance, lonely figures and literary movements, avant-garde and epigonal works, major and emergent voices, or currents and eddies coming together to form a main stream. Such reference works have been less often read than consulted by students who wanted to catch a quick glimpse of authors, works, movements, or periods in their historical contexts.

Literary history has also long been embattled. New Critics worried that it could not really be literary in so far as it was history: “Is it *possible*,” René Wellek and Austin Warren famously asked sixty years ago, “to write literary history, that is, to write that which will be both literary and a history?” More recently, under the stresses of critiques of ideology and of postmodern worries about any form of new canon creation, literary history has become highly self-conscious as a genre, throwing in doubt its traditional attempt at providing authoritative coverage. By the end of the twentieth century the genre of literary history had come to seem quite *impossible*, as readers had become suspicious of the creation of hierarchies of major and minor works and the potentially misleading power of national narratives. Furthermore, new electronic tools and internet resources created an easier and more strategic public access to many of the underlying facts of literary history. As the Executive Editor for the Humanities at Harvard University Press, Lindsay Waters put it: “Most people believe that to be a good adherent to the ‘postmodern condition’ one must swear off devising large-scale narratives of just the sort that have given shape and magnitude to literary history in the past.” And: “One of the major problems of the continuous historical narrative is that in its commitment to all-over coverage it introduces masses

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\* Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors, eds. *A New Literary History of America*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, September 2009. 1128 pages. 27 halftones. ISBN 978-0-674-03594-2. [www.newliteraryhistory.com](http://www.newliteraryhistory.com).

of information of minor usefulness and often major irrelevance,” information that Google provides more rapidly, one might add. How could a new American literary history be written in view of these issues? Despite all worries of literary historians, how could an awareness shape a 1000-page book that readers might still wish to get a sense of historical unfolding—though they might be reading *around* in such a book rather than go through it from beginning to end? This was a book Lindsay definitely wanted, and he wanted me to edit it.

In August 2005 Lindsay reported the exciting news that the famous music and cultural critic Greil Marcus sounded “interested” in becoming a coeditor, and we were soon all writing each other back and forth about a possible title under which the project could be proposed to the board: perhaps “The Making of America: A New Literary History” or perhaps “The New History of American Arts”? Lindsay then sketched a possible new American literary history that

presupposes neither a unity of tradition, nor a stable linguistic-national identity, nor a neatly bounded literary subject matter. Our aim is to highlight, through an emphatically interdisciplinary mode of analysis, the renegotiations and transformations, the tensions and conflicts that make our subject matter so variegated and volatile. However, in order to provoke our contributors to work in the service of providing an all-encompassing presentation of American culture we will ask them to consider their particular topic in terms of one frame—*poiesis*, making.

Both Greil and I were receptive to this proposal. Our conversation roamed in many directions—the Frankfurt School’s animosity toward popular culture, Edward Said on music, the Surrealist Encyclopedia, John Dos Passos, Prince Valiant, Dick Tracy, Albert Murray, the South, D. H. Lawrence and Leslie Fiedler, Melville and “Meaner than a Junkyard Dog”—but a whole number of concrete issues were also raised: worries about what would necessarily have to be left out of a book like this, finding a group of people who would be good as “field editors” without insisting on their specialties too much, getting writers and not just academics as contributors, keeping a notion of the whole project alive while two hundred essays would have to be commissioned, read, and edited, wondering who would have the last say in each case, and imagining a possible editorial meeting at a conference center like Bellagio. We viewed the participation of writers as crucial, as it would help create a book that is literary in a double sense: not only secondary literature in that it is about the

American tradition but also primary literature since a good number of well-known American authors were to write for it—and write rather imaginatively.

The three of us decided to follow the format of the two predecessor books—Denis Hollier’s *A New History of French Literature* (1989) and David Wellbery’s and Judith Ryan’s *A New History of German Literature* (2004)—and to settle on “making” in the broadest cultural sense as its overarching idea: works and things that have been made and that may also be making other things. We wanted to keep literature at the center but select works in all genres: not just prose fiction (which has become the preferred genre of contemporary American Studies), but also drama, poetry, essay, autobiography, nonfiction, with some examples of writing in languages other than English. More than that, the notion of “made in America” opened up the possibility to examine examples of a much broader array of subjects than earlier American literary histories, and not merely as backdrop for literature in the high-cultural sense but as central topics in the shaping of American culture: religious tracts and sermons, children’s books, public speeches and private letters, political polemics, addresses and debates, Supreme Court decisions, maps, histories, travel diaries, philosophical writing, literary histories and criticism, folk songs, magazines, dramatic performances, the blues, philosophy, paintings and monuments, prints, jazz, war memorials, museums, the built environment, book clubs, photographs, country music, films, radio, rock and roll, cartoons, technological inventions and innovations, pornography, cultural rituals, sports, and hip-hop. Lindsay argued that, “like a dictionary, the book should be composed of discontinuous articles, but unlike a dictionary these will be listings of a variety of heterogeneous items (an author, a book, a journal, a scandal, a group, an institution), allowing also for various styles of treatment (“textual” for a book, “psychoanalytic” for an author, “ideological” for a movement, and so on). And unlike the dictionary, all these entries will be organized by date, succeeding each other in chronological order.” This early project description also offered an answer to the problem of the limited plotlines in narratives of literary history.

We agreed that we did not want to contribute to canon-bashing or canon-formation, but that we wanted to present strong essays, with an eye to a few once truly canonical and internationally open and famous but currently minor-seeming writers like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow as well as to the heroes of the high modernist canon (Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Eugene

O'Neill, and William Faulkner) and to selected indigenous voices and writers from minority groups that had no place in some histories of the past. We wanted these, but also works that were once relegated to the separate realms of popular culture and middlebrow institutions ("Alexander's Ragtime Band," *Tarzan*, the Book-of-the-month club, *Superman*, or *From Here to Eternity*). Full coverage would, of course, be impossible in a single volume, and the selections had to reflect those topics that all fifteen editors and board members felt most passionate about. In any event, we wanted to produce not a comprehensive encyclopedia but a provocation. Hence we envisioned representative as well as explicitly unrepresentative forays that would be suggestive of many other topics to be imagined by readers of what we hoped would become an unusual non-reference reference book. Thereby we were (and are now) taking the risk of being faulted for omissions of single authors and literary works so as to be able to present a broad spectrum of American culture, in its hemispheric and global dimensions—all in the space of a necessarily incomplete single volume devoted to Americana. In this broadly cultural history of America the word "literary" would have to mean not only what is written but also what is voiced, what is expressed, what is invented, in whatever form. The focus was to be on the whole range of all those things that have been created in America, or for it, or because of it.

We wanted no writing that was easily predictable, but essays that would surprise even the authors of the essays themselves. Our goal was not to give readers a feeling that once they had read an essay about a subject they had acquired a definitive understanding of it. Much rather our aim was to make non-specialists curious to read, or look at, or listen to, works as if for the first time, intrigued by one of the essays. Hence we wanted not only academic specialists to write for us but also authors who had not previously published on a topic at hand but who cared about it and were curious about it. We were especially keen to win writers and artists as our contributors, voices from the United States and from other countries, and authors from all age groups. And we did not want to reprint any previously published work, but include only original, nine-page-long essays that were written expressly for this volume, "a new literary history with the character of a manifesto."

Could such a book realistically come about at all? And if so, what could be and what should *not* be included? Where should it start and where could it possibly end? We were fortunate to receive funding to invite ten critics to a Radcliffe Institute Exploratory Seminar on January 27 and 28, 2006. Lindsay, Greil and I had selected

them in unanimity, and several of them we had already mentioned to each other at our three-way meeting: literary scholars from Departments of English and Comparative Literature, but also historians, interdisciplinary Americanists and African Americanists, an art historian, an historian of science and technology, a film critic, a novelist-critic, and two graduate students. At this meeting we were ready to see the whole project radically questioned, perhaps terminated altogether, by the arguments of others. However, the fifteen of us ultimately came to think that the project of such a literary history was not just feasible but urgently needed, and we were able to begin to imagine a general and somewhat more concrete outline of the book. Most of the seminar participants (nine of the ten scholars and both graduate students) were excited enough by the discussions in this Exploratory Seminar to agree to form the truly interdisciplinary editorial board of *A New Literary History of America*, and another Americanist joined us a little later.<sup>1</sup>

The collective wisdom, imagination, and energy of these twelve immediately propelled the project onward. Each member took on the task to come up with a list of the twenty-five to forty most important American topics (by Ash Wednesday 2006) that each believed would simply *have* to be included (with a brief rationale, outline, or listing of possible subtopics), regardless of individual specialties and disciplines, “trying to imagine the book as a whole, without territory to protect or turf to defend.” And all lived up to that challenge.

A board meeting in the Harvard University Press offices brought all of us together a second time on May 12 to 13, 2006, armed with an elaborate composite listing of several hundred submitted topics that all of us now had to whittle down

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<sup>1</sup> They were Stephen Burt, Associate Professor of English at Harvard University and poetry critic; Gerald Early, Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters and Director of the Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis; Farah Jasmine Griffin, Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University; Kirsten Silva Gruesz, Professor of Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz; Hua Hsu, Assistant Professor of English at Vassar College as well as critic and journalist (and in 2006 a doctoral candidate in the History of American Civilization at Harvard University); Michael Leja, Professor of Art History at the University of Pennsylvania; David Mindell, Professor of History of Engineering and Manufacturing and Director of the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT; Yael Schacher, doctoral candidate in the History of American Civilization at Harvard University; David Thomson, famed London-born film critic and author of more than 20 books, among them *The Whole Equation: A History of Hollywood* and *"Have You Seen...?": A Personal Introduction to 1,000 Films*; David Treuer, Associate Professor of English at the University of Minnesota and author of such novels as *Little* and *The Hiawatha*; Ted Widmer, Director of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University, former Bill Clinton ghost writer, and Americanist; Sean Wilentz, Sidney and Ruth Lapidus Professor of History at Princeton University.

rigorously to about 200, while some new subjects also emerged at that meeting. Throughout, we were looking for points in time and imagination where something changed: “when a new idea or a new form came into being, when new questions were raised, when what before seemed impossible came to seem necessary, or inevitable.” We asked board members before the meeting to trim their own lists somewhat and combine some of the more minute topics into clusters of related subjects. We asked, “which twenty do you REALLY want to see discussed?”—a question which led to spirited debate and quite a painful process of elimination, as all editors had to watch topics they had proposed, and with good arguments, disappear from the project.

Among the many subjects cut were “1492 Columbus believes he finds honey and nightingales in New World; imports word *canoa*, the first American word to reach most European languages” (proposed by me), “1640 Bay Psalm Book” (by Sean Wilentz), “1774 Speech of Logan, Mingo Chief” (Ted Widmer), “18-- A fry cook at a remote lumber camp in Wisconsin overcooks some potatoes. These are the first potato chips” (David Treuer), “1842 Dickens *American Notes*: Possibly a way to start an entry on foreign travelers writing about the US” (Yael Schacher), “1862 Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Chiefly About War Matters by a Peaceable Man” (David Mindell), “1873 Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis put rivets in denim pants, creating blue jeans” (Stephen Burt), “1874 ‘Catch-phrase’: the date of its first use in John C. Calhoun’s *Works*” (David Thomson), “1901 First refrigerated ship enables banana to reign supreme as favorite US breakfast food” (Kirsten Silva Gruesz), “1908 Ernest Fenollosa’s widow meets Ezra Pound” (Hua Hsu), “1930 *I’ll Take My Stand*: The South and the Agrarian Tradition” (Gerald Early), and “1978 Publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*” (Farah Jasmine Griffin). It is easy to imagine another book consisting only of subjects that did not make it into ours.

We also offered each member of the editorial board the opportunity to propose ideal contributors for each topic that remained active. They included the sadly unfulfilled hopes that Bob Dylan would write on Walt Whitman or F. Scott Fitzgerald, Toni Morrison on Lincoln’s Second Inaugural or on Faulkner, Art Spiegelman on comics and graphic novels, Stanley Crouch on Edgar Rice Burroughs, Philip Roth on Hawthorne and Faulkner, Thomas Pynchon on Orson Welles, Don DeLillo on Miles Davis, Supreme Court Justice David Souter on Madison’s *Notes of Debates of the Federal Convention*, and a young rhetorically impressive Senator from Illinois on the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Even though such suggestions remained

unrealized (the Senator from Illinois, for example, was too busy because he was planning a campaign as presidential candidate), this only fired up the imagination of the editors who identified many other major authors and creators who did accept our invitation to write<sup>2</sup> and did come through with essays that help to deepen the understanding of making, of creating, of suggesting amazement at things that have been made in America: empty pages filled with memorable words, canvases on which unforgettable visuals took shape, or notes that turned into patriotic songs, popular tunes, and jazz.

A number of surprising double entries were proposed and ultimately written (for example, Theodore Dreiser and Edith Wharton, T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, or John F. Kennedy's inaugural address and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*). Others combined a historical moment with a specific writer (Jack London and the San Francisco earthquake), a book and a visual artist (*The Grapes of Wrath* as illustrated by Thomas Hart Benton), or a car manufacturer and a muralist (Henry Ford and Diego Rivera). We had already agreed that we would start with an entry on the map on which the name "America" first appeared and now also planned that we would end with hurricane Katrina (as first proposed by Farah Jasmine Griffin). The meeting was exhilarating and exhausting, and by 9 PM on the second day the results were a 40-page working grid of about 220 topics, a schedule for a two-stage essay submission process (a draft and a final version), and a publication date in the fall of 2009. The meeting also yielded a minimal outline and style sheet of what we wanted in the essays: no footnotes but only a brief bibliography/ discography/ filmography of the most important works that were consulted; no scare quotes; no time-bound references ("in the past ten years") and no phrasings like "in this country" or "in our tradition"

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<sup>2</sup> Writers among the contributors include Elizabeth Alexander (on Jean Toomer), Clark Blaise (on Hawthorne and Melville), David Bradley (on Malcolm X), Sarah Shun-lien Bynum (on Edmund White), Norma Cantú (on the siege of the Alamo), Robert Clark (on Edgar Allan Poe), Joshua Clover (on Bob Dylan), Andrei Codrescu (on New Orleans), Steve Erickson (on Stephen Foster), Mark Ford (on Frank O'Hara), Mary Gaitskill (on Norman Mailer), Gish Jen (on *The Catcher in the Rye*), Jonathan Lethem (on Thomas Edison), Beverly Lowry (on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), Douglas McGrath (on Preston Sturges), Maureen McLane (on Adrienne Rich), Walter Mosley (on hard-boiled detective fiction), Bharati Mukherjee (on *The Scarlet Letter*), Paul Muldoon (on Carl Sandburg), Richard Powers (on the Shaw Memorial), Ishmael Reed (on *Huckleberry Finn*), Peter Sacks (on Robert Lowell), Luc Sante (on W. C. Handy), Stephen Schiff (on *Lolita*), Susan Stewart (on Emily Dickinson), Michael Tolkin (on Alcoholics Anonymous), Lan Tran (on *The Great Gatsby*), David Treuer (on Schoolcraft), John Edgar Wideman (on Charles W. Chesnutt), Rob Wilson (on Queen Lili'uokalani), Christian Wiman (on Robert Frost), and Elizabeth Winthrop (on John Winthrop).



that would imply an American location, for writing should be addressed to a general reader anywhere and beyond the present moment. Most importantly, writing was to be rigorously non-boring, shunning highly technical scholarly or academic language (no *sic* unless followed by *-al* and preceded by *whim-*), and instead aiming for truly fresh, lively, and risk-taking approaches that would make a given topic contagiously interesting. Each invited author would contribute only one essay to the book; the editors and board members, however, would be permitted to write two to three essays each, and were also expected to take on other important topics in case some of the authors did not come through with the assignment.

Starting in November 2006, invited contributors received from Harvard University Press a tentative volume rationale that included the explanation that *A New Literary History of America* was envisioned as

neither a narrative depiction nor an encyclopedia of basic information, forms that seemed to us too threadbare to elicit the sort of intellectual engagement our subject matter needs. This means that the success of the volume is entirely dependent on the richness and clarity, the literary light, of the individual contributions. The challenge involved in the writing of these articles is twofold. It is no easy task to formulate an argument that is accessible to a non-expert readership, avoids technical vocabulary, and nevertheless develops a line of interpretation even specialists will find surprising and suggestive. Clarity and density, allusion and explication must be joined in a delicate balance. Each individual contribution must achieve a sort of crystallization that unites textual, historical, and theoretical facets in a compelling essayistic form. We are also asking each writer to work with an historical and conceptual hook. Each essay will be superscribed with a date that marks a particular event: the publication of a text (though with a literary history, that is the most obvious date to choose, and we are trying to avoid it whenever we can), a performance, a biographical occurrence, a scientific discovery, a court case, or whatever. This dated event functions to moor the article's argument to a concrete point of historical reference, and the volume as a whole is constructed serially as an assemblage of such moments.

Choosing the appropriate date “should allow authors the greatest freedom to pursue their own approach to the subject matter while guaranteeing structural consistency for the volume as a whole.”

In the following months, the members of the editorial board, in close consultation with the editors in chief, obtained commitments from writers for almost every one of the entries and began working toward a set of first drafts of all essays by the end of August 2007. Those who agreed to contribute received with their contracts a fuller volume rationale and were reminded that essays were “meant to be stimulating and provocative for both scholarly and expert audiences and for the public at large. An entry on, say, Faulkner or Stephen Foster does not have to rehearse the entire background story of the person in question, but should provide basic contextual information that can locate the reader in the entry. Keep the interested but general reader in mind, but do not ever feel you need to dumb down or oversimplify your arguments or your style.” Contributors were also assured that while they “should take cognizance of secondary literature on the given subject,” there was “no need to get bogged down in critical controversies that will lead you and the reader away from the subject in question.”

Thanks to our receiving funding for a Radcliffe Institute Advanced Seminar we were able to invite the members of the editorial board to a final meeting scheduled for December 7 and 8, 2007, well after the deadline for first drafts of the essays had passed—but, as it turned out, only at about the half-way mark as far as actually submitted drafts and final essays were concerned. At that moment Seo-Young Chu (who has meanwhile become an Assistant Professor of English at Queens College) jumped into the editing fray, provided much editorial help, and also later wrote her own entry on Maxine Hong Kingston and science fiction. The seminar gave us a chance to present as possible models some of the most striking essays that had been submitted so far, to discuss the revising process of some first drafts (each essay was read very carefully by a member of the editorial board as well as by Greil and me), and to review the whole project that had by then taken on quite a recognizable shape. Several editors presented their entries as talks, followed by questions, and then a more general and wide-ranging discussion ensued that both dramatized and helped us scrutinize our project, allowing us to criticize individual entries, with a mind toward pitfalls and strategies--that is, what doesn't work and what does--and to rethink, to the degree necessary, the book as a whole. We realized that a book made up of 219

different essays by 201 writers cannot be edited into a monotone voice, but it must be edited so that, while maintaining their own distinctive voices, the essays and their writers begin to speak to each other.

On the basis of reviewing completed essays we arrived at some further guidelines:

**Techniques that make for effective essays**

- Breezy writing that doesn't condescend.
- Doing a good job of describing a historical event without invoking other historians.
- Vivid descriptions of the visual.
- Surprising starting points.

**Things that can be problematic**

- Endings.
- Quotation. When an essay is about a text or about a subject's writing, it should quote from that text, and the sooner the better.
- Use of neologisms as lazy substitution for more rooted word.
- Taking the hook too seriously. The author needs to understand that the hook is just a starting point.

Although we remained committed to not worrying about coverage, we also did explore some areas in which a few new assignments would make up for essays that had not materialized or would complement and extend existing essays. Yet we also realized--and we were surprised by this--how almost any single essay could have been replaced by one on another topic without changing what was already visible as the essential shape of the whole book. We were also happily surprised by the variety of ways in which 2,500 words could be used to bring a subject to life. Authors were invited to conform to the standard length but they stretched the form of their contributions into any direction they saw fit. The examples of Richard Powers's *Shaw Memorial*, Camille Paglia's *Tennessee Williams*, Michael Tolkin's *Alcoholics Anonymous*, or Mary Gaitskill's *Norman Mailer* show some of the different shapes essays have taken. We learned from the Press that we would be permitted to include a small number of illustrations for those essays in which they were needed, and 27 halftones ultimately accompanied various essays. And we all agreed that we had to work hard to get the remaining essays submitted in time so as to have a fairly complete manuscript in hand by June 2008 when Greil and I would jointly review it and write the introduction to the book.

And indeed, by the summer of 2008 the book was essentially finished in manuscript and ready to go through a rolling copyediting and typesetting process.<sup>3</sup> Late that year, Kara Walker agreed to produce a series of images on the topic of Barack Obama’s election for us, and it became the last entry in the book. The copyediting and typesetting process lasted until July 2009 and was not without its own tense moments. For example, since we had chosen many dates preceding the tag lines that were *not* dates of a first publication, first performance, or first screening, the dates that appeared in the table of contents did not always match those of the works at hand. The Editor for Reference and Special Projects at Harvard University Press, Jennifer Snodgrass, found the elegant solution of entering different headings in the table of contents in some cases. Thus, while the table of contents only says, “1925, August 16 Dorothy Parker,” the essay itself opens as follows:

1925, August 16  
The *New York World* runs Dorothy Parker’s two-line poem  
“News Item”: “Men seldom make passes at . . .”

#### GIRLS WHO WEAR GLASSES

Readers of only the table of contents will generally miss tag lines in the text of the book like the following:

“It is one of the tragedies of this life that the men who are most in need  
of beating up are always enormous.” — Preston Sturges.

Another issue was whether YouTube, mentioned in one of the essays, could be cited in bibliographies (it could not). Such crises and their happy resolutions did not delay the set publication date, and one may ascribe that to the enthusiasm of board members and authors. In the course of the editing process, Greil and I became close friends even though our primary form of communication was by e-mail, with only very few

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<sup>3</sup> The many people who have helped in the making of this book—publisher, editors, readers, proofreaders, research assistants, and supporters—have been acknowledged at the end of the introduction to the book. They include Drew Faust and Phyllis Strimling at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study who generously supported the project with an Exploratory Seminar and an Advanced Seminar that first brought people together many of whom would become members of the board. William Sisler, the director of the Press, supported the venture from its inception and made possible another editorial board meeting at the Press offices. Phoebe Kosman, whose probing and energetic editorial oversight kept the endeavor on its course, also contributed an essay; Seo-Young Chu jumped into the editing fray at the halfway mark, provided much editorial help, and also contributed her own entry; Thomas Dichter and Kelsey LeBuffe served as research assistants; Jack Hamilton helped with the proofreading; Julie Hagen copyedited the manuscript from first to last; and Jennifer Snodgrass brought the ship into port.

intermittent phone calls. A face-to-face meeting with the complete manuscript in front of us--we had once envisioned that it would take place in a beautiful setting somewhere--never came about.

Now (and I am writing these words just about a year after the book's official publication date and five years after the first meeting of Lindsay, Greil, and me) readers have a chance to read the finished book leisurely. Many of the expected and familiar figures do appear in it, but they are approached in new ways and in new contexts: Benjamin Franklin writing in a woman's voice, Henry James yearning for a country in a state of revolution and for the guillotine, Gertrude Stein entering here after the color line, the blues, and literature of immigration, Arthur Miller auditioning to be a radio singer, Longfellow, Ernest Hemingway, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison each appearing in multiple and quite heterogeneous contexts. Almost every essay holds its surprises, be it the meaning of the Great Awakening or of Billie Holiday's voice, the origin of the keyboard's "upper case" and "lower case" or the first use of the word "multicultural," daring women getting arrested for voting, Carl Schurz writing his autobiography in two languages, or the contingency of all creativity in the face of adversity, of immense social obstacles, or of illness and depression.

Many essays zoom in on a moment when something emerged, be it the phrases "City on a Hill," "All Men Are Created Equal," or "Nobody's Perfect," be it an Ojibwe children's rhyme about a firefly, a slave narrative, or a drip painting, be it the detective story, the art of telephony, or *Birth of the Cool*. Read in pairs, various essays bridge what were once considered unbridgeable cultural gulfs (T. S. Eliot and Mickey Mouse, or *Connecticut Yankee* and Linda Lovelace's *Ordeal*) and present contrary aesthetic, political, and religious options in peaceful coexistence (William F. Buckley and Seymour Hersh, or Harry S Truman and Vladimir Nabokov). *A New Literary History of America* is multi-voiced and does not offer one single story line. The reader will find Jefferson the political thinker and the Jefferson of the slavery issue; Emerson as "a self-defrocked minister turned freelance man of letters" and as the philosopher about whom Nietzsche said, "he simply does not know yet how old he is and how young he will yet be"; Truman employing the atom bomb, and Truman integrating the military; Elia Kazan turning Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* into an unforgettable film and Kazan testifying on Communists in Hollywood.

The brevity of each entry makes for easy readability, and, as envisioned from its

inception, the book can be read in many different ways. One could, for example, browse around until a particularly inviting topic suggests itself or an especially intriguing tag line captures attention. Greil put this random method of reading the book in a nutshell when, answering an interviewer's question how a reader should go about reading this book he suggested, "Pick a card, any card!"--and the website that Emily Arkin at Harvard University Press created for the book ([www.newliteraryhistory.com](http://www.newliteraryhistory.com)) literally arranges a dozen sample essays as if they were a deck of cards. Thus, while each essay presents its own narrative, it is up to the reader to create larger story lines by choosing one or another hand of cards, by following one or another sequence of reading essays.

Even though there is no party line in this book, and different, at times truly contradictory perspectives emerge, reading more and more essays will generate a new and fresh sense of America. Together these essays illuminate the religious and heretical impulses in the culture, its Gothic and paranoid scenarios, its democratic promise, its slave narrative and persistent, though ever-changing issue of race, its Indian, Western and captivity narratives, its children's literature, the power of its sentimentalism, its love for the success story and its faith in self-improvement, its hard-boiled speech and sophisticated witty dialogs, its immigrant autobiography, its science fiction, its investigative reporting, its anthems, blues, and country music, and its tension between bursts of freewheeling creativity and repression, between experimentation and orthodoxy, between censorship and the broad laughter at any restraint. Gun culture and reform movements, hopes for regeneration and doomsday fears, loud exaggeration and quiet inwardness have been equally at home in America.

The reception of the book in its first year since publication has not only been encouraging, it quickly surpassed our wildest hopes, for *A New Literary History of America* received extensive, and overwhelmingly positive, national and international coverage in such publications as *The New York Times*, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, *l'Unità*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Times Literary Supplement*, and *Times Higher Education*. It received mention in *Fortune*, *New York Magazine*, and *Entertainment Weekly*, was recommended in *The Daily Beast*, discussed on National Public Radio and C-Span, and was reviewed at great detail by Wes Davis in *The Wall Street Journal*, by Larry McMurtry in *The New York Review of Books*, by Laura Miller at salon.com, by Scott Timberg in *The Los Angeles Times*, by Mircea Mihaies in *Romania literara*, and by Matthew

Jacobson in *American Quarterly*. Many reviews can be accessed directly from the book's website at <http://www.newliteraryhistory.com/about.html>. Now that an idea, a conversation, that brainstorming and debate have turned into *A New Literary History of America*, have become a hardbound book that one can actually hold in one's hands and that reviewers have had time to examine, I can only hope that readers anywhere, whether they go through it from cover to cover or browse in it more randomly, will find this literary history in snapshots as thrilling as it has been for us to put it together.