

A New Literary History of America (Harvard University Press Reference Library)

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America is a nation making itself up as it goes along?a story of discovery and invention unfolding in speeches and images, letters and poetry, unprecedented feats of scholarship and imagination. In these myriad, multiform, endlessly changing expressions of the American experience, the authors and editors of this volume find a new American history.

In more than two hundred original essays, *A New Literary History of America* brings together the nation's many voices. From the first conception of a New World in the sixteenth century to the latest re-envisioning of that world in cartoons, television, science fiction, and hip hop, the book gives us a new, kaleidoscopic view of what "Made in America" means. Literature, music, film, art, history, science, philosophy, political rhetoric?cultural creations of every kind appear in relation to each other, and to the time and place that give them shape.

The meeting of minds is extraordinary as T. J. Clark writes on Jackson Pollock, Paul Muldoon on Carl Sandburg, Camille Paglia on Tennessee Williams, Sarah Vowell on Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, Walter Mosley on hard-boiled detective fiction, Jonathan Lethem on Thomas Edison, Gerald Early on *Tarzan*, Bharati Mukherjee on *The Scarlet Letter*, Gish Jen on *Catcher in the Rye*, and Ishmael Reed on *Huckleberry Finn*. From Anne Bradstreet and John Winthrop to Philip Roth and Toni Morrison, from Alexander Graham Bell and Stephen Foster to Alcoholics Anonymous, *Life*, Chuck Berry, Alfred Hitchcock, and Ronald Reagan, this is America singing, celebrating itself, and becoming something altogether different, plural, singular, new.

Please visit www.newliteraryhistory.com for more information.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. The full national-literary character of the United States is on display in this mighty history and reference work for our time. Written by a distinguished team, under the sure-handed editorship of musicologist and historian Marcus and Sollors, Harvard professor of English and African-American studies, this volume begins with America's first appearance on a map and concludes with the election of President Obama. Among the more than 200 contributors are Bharati Mukherjee (on *The Scarlet Letter*), Camille Paglia (on Tennessee Williams) and Ishmael Reed (on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*). The book includes entries on not strictly literary themes: the first U.S. natural history collection of painter Charles Willson Peale; the invention of the blues; and the art of Grant Wood. This balancing act is even less sure-footed as we enter present time with entries on *Some Like It Hot* and the National Football League. Although it is impossible to include every important author in one volume, Sylvia Plath barely gets a nod as does James Merrill. Such are the blemishes on exquisite skin. Overall, this is an astounding achievement in multiculturalism and American studies, which in the age of Google and the Internet lights the way toward serious interpretive reference publishing. 27 illus. (Sept.)

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Review

In snapshots of a few thousand words each, the entries in *A New Literary History* put on display the exploring, tinkering and risk-taking that have contributed to the invention of America...*A New Literary History* of America gives us what amounts to a fractal geometry of American culture. You can focus on any one spot and get a sense of the whole or pull back and watch the larger patterns appear. What you see isn't the past so much as the present. (Wes Davis *Wall Street Journal* 2009-09-26)

A New Literary History of America is not your typical Harvard University Press anthology...[It] roams far beyond any standard definition of literature. Aside from compositions that contain the written word, its subjects include war memorials, jazz, museums, comic strips, film, radio, musicals, skyscrapers, cybernetics and photography. (Patricia Cohen *New York Times* 2009-09-22)

This magnificent volume is a vast, inquisitive, richly surprising and consistently enlightening wallow in our national history and culture...Neither reference nor criticism, neither history nor treatise, but a genre-defying, transcendent fusion of them all. It sounds impossible, but the result seems both inevitable and necessary and profoundly welcome, too...This book is not so much a history of our literature as it is a literary version of our history, told through the culture we've created to recount our past and conjure our future...In the age of Wikipedia, a reference book like this needs more than just the facts; it needs to tell us what the facts mean, and *A New Literary History* does just that. (Laura Miller *Salon* 2009-09-22)

Ambitious, thought-provoking, and comprehensive, *A New Literary History of America* edited by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors, features more than 200 essays on poems, letters, novels, memoirs, speeches, movies, and theater, by writers ranging from Bharati Mukherjee to John Edgar Wideman, reinterpreting the American experience from the 1500s forward. (*Elle* 2009-10-01)

The huge, welcoming, exciting, just-published volume *A New Literary History of America* is a book with which to spend entire days and the rest of your life...Where else are you going to read Camille Paglia on Tennessee Williams, Mary Gaitskill on Norman Mailer, and Walter Mosley on the hardboiled detective

novel? Don't you want to do that *right now*?...Talk about an all-American value: You could read this 1,000-plus-page book forever and never use up its revelations and its pleasures. (Ken Tucker *Entertainment Weekly online* 2009-09-23)

[This] represents a rethinking of the awkward genre of literary history, which can fall disappointingly between the cracks of straight criticism and narrative history, devolving into a dull recitation of author bios and conventional literary wisdom. With the help of an editorial board, Marcus and Sollors settled on 216 artworks (film and painting as well as texts), authors, movements, and cultural artifacts that help answer the question, "What is America?" Emerson, Melville, Dickinson, and Faulkner are in there, to be sure, but so are the Winchester rifle, "Steamboat Willie," Chuck Berry's "Roll Over Beethoven," Alcoholics Anonymous, and Linda Lovelace (the star of the pornographic film "Deep Throat," who later said she'd been raped during its filming)...It will be a welcome change if a "literary history," for once, stirs up a little dust. (Christopher Shea *Boston Globe Brainiac blog* 2009-08-26)

[An] essential, eclectic doorstop anthology. (*New York Magazine* 2009-09-13)

The full national-literary character of the United States is on display in this mighty history and reference work for our time. Written by a distinguished team, under the sure-handed editorship of musicologist and historian Marcus and Sollors...this volume begins with America's first appearance on a map and concludes with the election of President Obama. Among the more than 200 contributors are Bharati Mukherjee (on *The Scarlet Letter*), Camille Paglia (on Tennessee Williams) and Ishmael Reed (on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*)...This is an astounding achievement in multiculturalism and American studies, which in the age of Google and the Internet lights the way toward serious interpretive reference publishing. (Starred Review) (*Publishers Weekly*)

Of course it's hefty; it's a "broadly cultural history" of America with a literary bent, an avid and provocative collaboration that tracks the American story not only through works of American literature, classic and forgotten, but also via music, art, pop culture, speeches, letters, religious tracts, photographs, and Supreme Court decisions. Versatile social critic and historian Marcus, Harvard University professor of English and African American studies Sollors, and their illustrious board of editors assembled more than 200 commissioned essays, which meander chronologically from 1507 and the first appearance on a map of the name "America" to Barack Obama's election. In between is a dazzling array of inquiries into *Gone with the Wind* and *Invisible Man*, *The Wizard of Oz* and the blues, hard-boiled detective stories and Mickey Mouse, "Howl" and Miles Davis, nature writing and Zora Neale Hurston. With such contributors as Elizabeth Alexander, Mary Gaitskill, Bharati Mukherjee, Richard Powers, Ishmael Reed, David Thomson, David Treuer, and John Edgar Wideman, this is an adventurous, jazzily choral, and kaleidoscopic book of interpretations, illuminations, and revitalized history. (Donna Seaman *Booklist* 2009-09-01)

Marcus and Sollors trace through literature the dynamism of American society and culture spanning 500 years, from the first time the name America appears on a map (1507) to the election of Barack Obama as president...No single volume can fully capture the range of a nation's literary history, but this book succeeds in highlighting new ideas and providing a starting point for further investigation. Above all, it is a pleasure to read. (Mark Alan Williams *Library Journal* 2009-08-15)

Reading this gorgeous compendium on the written word in America should be required for gaining or maintaining U.S. citizenship. And even at more than 1,000 pages, it's a fun way to learn what we're all about...The list of contributors is a rich, varied array of our best contemporary writers and cultural mavens...The editors were aiming for "a reexamination of the American experience as seen through a literary glass." Marcus and Sollors have succeeded: This book is a literary history in every sense of the phrase. (Ron

Antonucci *Cleveland Plain Dealer* 2009-09-28)

Hundreds of essayists write short, but think expansively on just about everything that makes us who we are--from Elvis to Obama. (*Entertainment Weekly* 2009-10-09)

It's natural to have high expectations of a book with the lofty title *A New Literary History of America*. What isn't natural is for the book to not just live up to, but far exceed those expectations...Edgar Allan Poe's invention of the detective story hobnobs with the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Hank Williams' country music is only a few pages from Zora Neale Hurston. It's as glorious a melting pot as America itself...If you've found yourself envying Britain her Shakespeare, Dickens, and Austen, this book will bring you back to America and make you fall in love with her confidence, her innovation, her sheer pluck, all over again... A treasure for American history AND literature lovers. (Michelle Kerns *Boston Examiner* 2009-09-25)

You could get a hernia lifting *A New Literary History of America*, a 1,095-page tome edited by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors. But you could also get a thorough, original, and occasionally startling education. Some 200 essays on our literary past by writers as disparate as critic/provocateur Camille Paglia (on the sexually electric Broadway opening of *A Streetcar Named Desire*) and sportswriter Michael MacCambridge (on football fiction) make for a book as richly varied as the nation itself. (*Fortune* 2009-10-12)

The book is not your usual bookish chronicle made up of fearless men churning out classics for the edification of the nation...[It's an] eclectic, opinionated vision of the story of American letters. (Bill Marx *Arts Fuse* 2009-10-07)

A wildly informative, hugely entertaining and sometimes even revelatory book. (Jeff Simon *Buffalo News* 2009-09-27)

Tailor-made for fruitful and fun browsing...This is a reference book for anyone with a curiosity about the sweep and scope of not just American literature but the culture itself in art, film, sermon and song. (Robert Pincus *San Diego Union-Tribune* 2009-09-27)

The feel of the whole is epic...By the time I had made my way through about a third of this book I began to feel an emotion that comes but rarely to a reviewer: pride. Not pride in America's politics or policies necessarily, but pride in our speech...In my opinion perhaps the single most impressive achievement in the book is the editors' and writers' ability to pinpoint linkages between one kind of fact and another...All the major writers, whether in poetry or prose, draw thoughtful essays. (Larry McMurtry *New York Review of Books* 2009-11-05)

The editors of this rich exercise in cultural history have taken up Pound's challenge [to "make it new"], producing an eloquent patchwork volume that gathers up more than 200 essays, chronologically arranged by subject, into a beguiling symphony that expresses the bewildering, often intimidating varieties of what we presume to call the American experience...This splendidly tributary to the best that so many of us have thought and said and made embraces classic and watershed literary works and their authors, political acts and events and issues, statements of purpose and conscience, achievements in both the fine arts (music, painting, sculpture, et al) and the raucous venues of popular culture (yes, Virginia, we do get a crash course in the autobiographical writings of 1970s porn queen Linda Lovelace), and major figures ranging from the makers of the Constitution of the United States to contemporary film and television personalities and the giants and giantesses of pop, jazz and rock music...Defiantly unconventional...Surely one of the best books published in this country in a very long time. (Bruce Allen *Washington Times* 2009-10-18)

The mammoth *New Literary History of America* [is] an extraordinary anthology of literary culture brought to you by a seat-of-the-pants polyglot of a country. (Chris Vognar *Dallas Morning News* 2009-11-15)

This new-breed reference book--featuring freshly penned and eccentrically focused essays by a heterogeneous who's who of academics, journalists and authors--ventures to remap the expanse of American history through five centuries of literary and cultural landmarks...Although it shares with its history-book forebears unimpeachable intellect and seriousness of intent, this is not the *Oxford Companion to American Literature*. For one thing, it's a lot more fun. (John McAlley *npr.org* 2009-11-24)

This hefty yet invigorating anthology of 225 new essays about American culture and history is perfect for the hard-to-please smarty-pants. (*Time Out New York* 2009-11-18)

A New Literary History of America is about what's Made in America, and America, made. It's about what the writers who are its subjects have made of America, and, equally, what the contributors, writing about these writers, make of America, too. There's a certain amount of trading on literary celebrity, to be sure. But the claims on our attention, and it is a serious claim, lies within the republic of these writers' imaginations. (Jill Lepore *Times Literary Supplement* 2009-11-27)

In the monumental, absorbing *A New Literary History of America*, editors Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors have assembled a fascinating collection of writings on a range of subject matters: everything from maps, diaries and Supreme Court decisions to religious tracts, public debates, comic strips and rock and roll...In 1,000-odd pages, Marcus and Sollors have compiled a remarkable history of America. Their expanded definition of literary encompasses "not only what is written but also what is voiced, what is expressed, what is invented, in whatever form." Most of all, *A New Literary History of America* is a reminder of just how vibrant and diverse United States history--and culture--really is. (Lacey Galbraith *BookPage* 2009-12-03)

This brick of a book is a browser's delight. Ranging over many high points and exploring interesting crannies of the American experience from 1507 to 2008, *A New Literary History* offers those interested in culture, history, and politics much to savor and more than a little with which to match wits. Among those entries bringing fresh insight to seemingly exhausted subjects are Ted Widmer on Roger Williams and Abraham Lincoln, Greil Marcus on Moby-Dick, Anita Patterson on T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence, Camille Paglia on Tennessee Williams, and Charles Taylor juxtaposing with great verve JFK's inaugural with Catch-22. There are virtuoso explanations: Anthony Grafton on Edmund Wilson's *The American Earthquake*, Dave Hickey on Hank Williams's transformation of the American song in country music, and Monica Miller on the transcendental meaning of Zora Neale Thurston's denunciation of *Brown v. The Board of Education*. Mary Gaitskill on Norman Mailer is a stylistic *tour de force*...This ambitious anthology succeeds beyond reasonable expectations in satisfying what Lionel Trilling...said was "the moral obligation to be intelligent." (Peter Kadzis *Boston Phoenix* 2009-12-08)

[The editors] tell an equally fascinating and moving history of the country, as we have never heard it before--and a story like which, say the editors, would not be possible in any other country...Instead of blending into the background of different shades of gray of a historical order, each of the events here radiates with seemingly contemporary luminosity. (Jörg Häntzschel *Süddeutsche Zeitung*)

A DIY college course unto itself. (Anneli Rufus *East Bay Express* 2009-11-25)

An impressive achievement. (Jim Kiest *San Antonio Express-News* 2009-12-13)

[An] original new history of literature...*A New Literary History of America* recounts the history of the mind

of a continent, and each single subject is approached with stylistic verve and thus knighted as literature by its authors, many of whom are themselves writers...Even though an idiosyncratic sprint across half a millennium of cultural history cannot avoid certain abbreviations, this amusing-to-read anthology teaches us that what appears to get more and more lost in this age of Wikipedia: well-researched, reflective, subjective and stylistically brilliant approaches that transform facts and figures into knowledge that can be passed on. (Andrea Köhler *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 2009-11-10)

This may be called a literary history but it is more broadly a cultural history, a history of language in its many forms--novels, essays, plays, public speeches and private letters, sermons and on and on...The choices made by the editors are smart, and the writers of the essays engage ideas with great passion. (Elizabeth Taylor *Chicago Tribune* 2009-12-22)

[This] may be the most unique attempt yet to tell the story of the United States...It's a feast for anyone who cares about history and national identity, not to mention a showcase for virtuoso writing. (*avclub.com* 2009-11-30)

Brings together a series of disconnected, personal (and often very opinionated) essays that not only offer new angles on the big names of U.S. literature but also consider Alcoholics Anonymous, the Book-of-the-Month Club, *Citizen Kane*, Dr. Seuss, skyscrapers, and *Superman*. (Matthew Reisz *Times Higher Education* 2009-12-31)

It's hard to imagine anyone right up to full professor failing to get excitement from this charged grid of event and interpretation...Hats off, though, to the editors above all, for constructing a volume where each element reinforces every other, often by contradicting it, so that the whole vast book is more exciting than even its most impressive part. (Adam Mars-Jones *The Observer* 2010-01-31)

Who would want to go into this particular new year, with all its uncertainties, without a copy of *A New Literary History of America*? Many hands delight and inform, and "literary history" is time stuffed full of "cultural creations" like this perfect bedside book. The selections are short, written with both precision and passion, and not infrequently deliver insights. (Tom D'Evelyn *Providence Journal* 2009-12-20)

One way to reinvigorate our opinions about the nation's literary life is to encounter new ways to think about it. *A New Literary History of America* edited by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors does just that with a wide-ranging collection of essays. (Bob Hoover *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* 2009-12-28)

It's weirdly inclusive (Is the Winchester Rifle really part of literary history?), but the big book has so many lively entries, on everything from hard-boiled fiction to New Journalism, that you can overlook its faults and enjoy its sweep. (Robert L. Pincus *San Diego Union-Tribune* 2009-12-27)

Never fails to engross and edify. (Rodney Clapp *Christian Century* 2010-01-12)

A New Literary History of America...avoids the temptation to rein in its subject too neatly or ease the strangeness out of American history. Not only does it stretch, appropriately, to America's earliest pre-history--the first essay, by Toby Lester, examines the first appearance of "America" on a map--this enormous anthology stretches the definition of literary...*A New Literary History of America* challenges not only its own structure, but also our traditional view of history's structure in order to emphasize the transmission, conscious or collectively unconscious, of ideas...But the pleasure of the volume, of course, is the massive collection of voices it brings together, subjects and authors both. (Robert Loss *popmatters.com* 2010-02-03)

A collection of great minds writing on other great minds, art and literature, social movements, feats of scholarship and everything in between. (*San Francisco Chronicle* 2010-03-14)

This book came out only last year and has already proved itself indispensable. If I'm writing about anything that has to do with American literature, I look it up here first. The format is a little unwieldy--the book is organized chronologically around idiosyncratically chosen dates--but its capsule essays build into a surprising, inventive narrative of American culture: Ishamel Reed on "Mark Twain's hairball", Luc Sante on the blues, David Thomson on Chaplin, Ruth Wisse on Saul Bellow, Gish Jen on *Catcher in the Rye*, Mary Gaitskill on Norman Mailer....I could quibble with the omissions, or I could just shut up and be grateful that this book exists in any form. (Ruth Franklin *National Book Critics Circle Board of Directors blog* 2010-11-26)

In the monumental, absorbing *A New Literary History of America*, editors Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors have assembled a fascinating collection of writings on a range of subject matters: everything from maps, diaries and Supreme Court decisions to religious tracts, public debates, comic strips and rock and roll...In 1,000-odd pages, Marcus and Sollors have compiled a remarkable history of America...Most of all, *A New Literary History of America* is a reminder of just how vibrant and diverse United States history--and culture--really is. (Lacey Galbraith *Book Page* 2011-04-01)

About the Author

Greil Marcus is the author of *The Doors*, *Mystery Train*, and other books.

Werner Sollors is Henry B. and Anne M. Cabot Professor of English Literature and Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University.

Users Review

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Paul Howard:

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