The Widow Douglas, she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me.

Huck Finn

High and fine literature is wine, and mine is only water; but everybody likes water.

Mark Twain

William Faulkner spent parts of two decades of his career working on an elaborate short story, “The Bear.” Set in the late nineteenth century, deep in the woods of Faulkner’s fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, “The Bear” is about young Ike McCaslin’s coming of age on a hunt with Sam Fathers, Boon Hogganbeck, and Sam’s dog, Lion. They seek Old Ben, a fierce, huge black bear with a mutilated paw who has eluded Sam and Boon for decades. Faulkner’s story first appeared as “Lion” in the December 1935 Harper’s Magazine, but he continued to hone the tale and published it as “The Bear” in the May 1942 Saturday Evening Post. It simultaneously appeared under the same title as a pivotal chapter of Faulkner’s collection of intertwined Yoknapatawpha County short stories, Go Down, Moses (1942). Widely anthologized, “The Bear” appeared in a final, revised

version in Faulkner’s story collection *Big Woods* (1955). One of William Faulkner’s greatest works, “The Bear” is a dramatic, violent story mirroring themes of wilderness, civilization, tradition, modernity, family, masculinity, southernness, and race.²

In his 2001 book *The Bear*, Michael Pastoreau analyzes the role of bears as cultural icons and argues that, by the 1300s, bears had ceased to be powerful and awe-inspiring images in western folk tradition. He contends that as humans became more knowledgeable and resourceful, they devalued the animal world.³ This Euro-centric analysis, with its fourteenth-century cut-off date, is highly debatable. In the Mississippi Valley of North America, bears have always been and remain powerful symbols. William Faulkner’s story “The Bear” is a polished rendition of American hunting tales that descend from Mississippian Mound Builder and Indian lore, the stories of Daniel Boone, Mike Fink, and Davy Crockett, the Leatherstocking novels of James Fenimore Cooper, and the short stories of Thomas Bangs Thorpe and southwestern humorists.

Black bear hunting was important to trans-Appalachian westerners for both economic and folkloric reasons. Mississippian Mound Builders and their Indian descendants traded in bearskins, feasted on bear steaks, and made ceremonial masks and other objects celebrating the bears’ size and strength. Euro-American settlers also hunted bears, ate bear meat, and traded bearskins. They told bear hunting stories that sometimes found their way into print. The nineteenth-century author William Post Hawes called the black bear “Sir Bruin” and wrote that bears walk at a “thoughtful and philosophical” pace. One of the most noted Mississippi Valley bear hunts was a failure that was ironically judged to be a success. Touring the Mississippi River Delta in 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt refused to shoot a black bear that locals had corralled in the mistaken

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assumption the great sportsman would kill the defenseless animal. This famous incident gave birth to the moniker “Teddy Bear.”

Daniel Boone’s long hunts in the Appalachian wilderness fostered a number of stories. North Carolina was teeming with black bears, and bear bacon became a staple in the hunter’s diet. The bearskins were also highly marketable. North Carolina’s Bear Creek supposedly got its name from the season Daniel Boone killed ninety-eight bears there. An important part of the Boone bear hunting legend was a tree carving found along a tributary of the Watauga River: “D. Boon Cilled A. Bar on tree in the YEAR 1760.” While historians question the authenticity of this and a score of other Boone graffiti, the recurrence of the carvings and interest in them underscore the mythic power of Boone’s bear hunting in the American imagination.

The most famous bear hunt stories have an epic quality. Both the bear and the hunter are the stories’ heroes, because they are wild characters who represent the old, vanishing Mississippi Valley wilderness. In the wake of the Boone legend, early national Americans heard tales and read printed stories about the hunting exploits of David Crockett. The Tennessean Crockett recalled in his Narrative of the Life of David Crockett that it was around 1810 in “Lincoln County, on the Mulberry fork of the Elk river … that I began to distinguish myself as a hunter.” Crockett bagged many deer “and smaller game” (wildcats, raccoons, etc.) but complained the black bears “were not so plenty as I could have wished.” He continued to move west, eventually settling in the Obion River country of west Tennessee. Following service in the War of 1812 and a stint in the Tennessee state legislature, he returned to his hunting full time.


In the Obion River Valley in the winter of 1823–24, Crockett found “bear very plenty and, indeed, all sorts of game and wild varments, except buffalo.” There Crockett killed a huge bear in a hunt to which he devoted a significant portion of his *Narrative*. This story contains elements that later appear in classic bear hunting stories from Thorpe to Faulkner. The hunt begins with a premonition. Crockett had a dream that provided “a sign I was to have a battle with a bear; for in a bear country, I never know’d such a dream to fail.” Soon afterward, he hiked up a branch of the Obion and his dogs caught bear scent and led him to where “I saw in and about the biggest bear that was ever seen in America.” A long chase ensued during which Crockett shot the bear twice to no effect. Although holding “my tomahawk in one hand and my big butcher knife in the other … I know’d if he got ahold of me, he would hug me altogether too close for comfort,” and so Crockett “shot him the third time, which killed him good.” Soon thereafter, with the help of two men and four horses, he butchered and hauled the “six hundred pound” bear out of the woods and “continued through the winter to supply my family abundantly with bear-meat and venison from the woods.”

The best published nineteenth-century bear hunting story is the southwestern humorist Thomas Bangs Thorpe’s “Big Bear of Arkansaw.” In this 1841 tale, we first hear the voice of an educated steamboat passenger who tells of an old hunter he meets onboard, a regular rip-snorting Alligator Horse from the wilds of “Arkansaw.” Then the hunter takes over the story, and Thorpe’s prose transitions from formal English to folk vernacular. Interestingly, the unnamed hunter calls himself the “Big Bar of Arkansaw” because he so identifies with his life’s quarry. Like Crockett (and Sam Fathers), he has pursued “the greatest bar … that ever lived, none excepted.” “I determined to catch that bar, go to Texas, or die,” he states. However, as the story progresses, the hunter expresses mixed emotions about the bear. While he likens the chase to “hunting the devil himself,” he also recalls, “I loved him like a brother.” The hunter’s final

success is an accident—while in a thicket moving his bowels ("from habit") the bear stumbles in and the hunter shoots him dead. Yet this comic context and final success only sadden the hunter, and the story ends with a strong ironic tone. The old hunter concludes the bear “was in fact a creation bear, and if it had lived in Samson’s time, and had met him in a fair fight, it would have licked him in the twinkling of a dice box.” The bear hunt has made the old hunter introspective. “My private opinion is, that that bar was an unhuntable bar, and died when his time come.”

While William Faulkner likely would have read all of the above tales, he needed no instruction in the art of telling bear hunting stories. Faulkner grew up in a northwestern Mississippi hunting culture, and “The Bear” reflects an intimate connection to wilderness through young Ike McCaslin’s “unforgettable sense of the big woods ... tremendous, primeval, looming, musing downward on the puny evanescent clutter of human sojourn.” Like his mentor Sam Fathers, the son of a Chickasaw Indian and African American slave, Ike becomes a hunter. After his first kill, Sam “marked his face with the hot blood which he had spilled and he ceased to be a child and became a hunter and a man.” Old Ben the black bear, of course, symbolizes the Mississippi wilderness, “that doomed land where the old bear had earned a name.” Like the deep, dark woods, “the old bear, solitary, indomitable, and alone,” is also doomed to extinction.

For two weeks each November, Ike, Sam, Sam’s dog Lion, and Boon Hogganbeck (also of Indian ancestry) “depart for the Big Bottom, the big woods” of the Tallahatchie River Valley, to Major DeSpain’s hunting camp. There they “keep yearly rendezvous with the bear ... [the] pageant-rite of the old bear’s furious


immortality.” The bear carefully watches the men, and on occasion they cross one another’s paths. In telling of the hunts, Faulkner follows Crockett’s and Thorpe’s narrative trajectory, but in a much more elaborate and extended form. Over the seasons, the men and the dog Lion track the bear, but the bear is too smart for them. They ruminate over this, and the bear hunt becomes more and more important in each of their lives. The final hunt is described in great detail and, like Crockett’s bear, Old Ben goes down in a terrible, glorious fight. During the chase, Sam Fathers collapses from a seizure; the bear tries to retreat, but Lion clamps his throat in a death grip. Then Boon jumps the bear with knife in hand:

It fell just once. For an instant they almost resembled a piece of statuary: the clinging dog, the bear, the man stride its back, working and probing the buried blade. Then they went down … then the bear surged erect, raising with it the man and the dog too, and turned, and still carrying the man and the dog it took two or three steps toward the woods on its hind feet as a man would have walked and crashed down. It didn’t collapse, crumple. It fell all of a piece, as a tree falls, so that all three of them, man, dog, and bear, seemed to bounce once.

Old Ben is dead, and Lion dies soon from horrible wounds sustained in the fight; Sam Fathers also succumbs. Only Ike and Boon survive. At story’s end, Ike McCaslin, now grown into manhood, returns to the final scene of the hunt. “He went back one more time before the lumber company moved in and began to cut the timber.” Surveying his beloved wilderness—the deep Mississippi forest where Old Ben lived his long life—Ike feels great sadness. He knows the woods will “retreat year by year before the onslaught of axe and saw and log-lines and then dynamite and tractor plows.”

AMUSEMENTS IN ATHENS

William Faulkner’s writings constitute a pinnacle of artistic
achievement in a region that fostered a lively culture for common folk. The early Mississippi Valley’s entertainments show wide breadth and shallow depth, as reflected in accounts of antebellum boatmen. After landing in port and unloading their cargoes, these men often sought out amusements other than the taverns, casinos, and houses of ill repute that brought them infamy. Some patronized museums, theaters, circuses, and musical performances. One crew of upper Ohio raftsmen “went to see the great European Magician Herr Alexander [Alexander Hermann] perform at the National Theatre” in Cincinnati. One flatboatman saw Edwin Forest, “the greatest tragedian in the world,” perform Shakespeare’s Richard III. Ashore in Memphis, the flatboatman Miles Stacy “went to see Joseph Jefferson play ‘Rip van Winkle.’” A few boatmen were actors of sorts, more than willing to take liberties with the classics. A troupe of actors performed Shakespeare onboard a traveling flatboat fitted out as a theater. However, when “Macbeth was performed, Duncan [was] got rid of by throwing him into the river instead of stabbing him”!

This flatboat show was a rough version of the emergent showboat theaters traversing the western rivers before and after the Civil War. It took some time for entertainers to acquire the capital and expertise to construct dedicated theater-boats. The itinerant showmen Joseph Jefferson and Solomon Smith sailed the western rivers, but they staged their performances in rented city halls and theater venues. In 1815, Samuel Drake, Sr., left New York for the Ohio Valley with a theater troupe later named the American Theatrical Commonwealth Company. When Noah Ludlow took charge, he bought a keelboat dubbed Noah’s Ark to carry the actors and their accoutrements. Although Ludlow’s company also initially performed only in shore venues, in

December 1817 they probably used their keelboat to stage *Catherine and Petruccio* for an audience at Natchez Under-the-Hill, making *Noah’s Ark* the first Mississippi River showboat.\(^{12}\)

Fourteen years later, the English dramatist William Chapman, Sr., and his family sailed the *Floating Theatre*, an elaborately fitted barge (a large flatboat), down the Ohio and Mississippi in the first of their troupe’s annual seasonal tours. Because it was extremely difficult to move barges upstream, at each tour’s end Chapman would sell the craft for scrap timber, returning with his troupe to the Ohio headwaters to build another *Floating Theatre* to sail south. The actor Tyrone Power recalled Chapman “takes his departure early in the fall, with scenery, dresses, and decorations… At each village or large plantation he hoists banner and blows trumpet and few who love a play suffer his ark to pass the door, since they know it is to return no more until the next year.” While the newly developed steamboats did not allow as much room for a theater and seating as barges, the steamboats’ upstream mobility was highly desirable, and by the 1840s and ’50s a half-dozen steam-powered showboats worked the western rivers. The *Huron* and the *Banjo* seated only two hundred, but the *Floating Circus Palace* seated an amazing three thousand paying customers. Showboats continued to work the western rivers well into the twentieth century, and the historian Philip Graham has cataloged nearly fifty dedicated showboat craft. These include the famed *Cotton Blossom*, featured in the popular 1920s Broadway musical *Showboat*.\(^{13}\)

Friedrich Gerstaeker, a young German touring America in the late 1830s, attended an Ohio River wharf showboat production that ran amok. The players had commenced their performance of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* when the dock lines broke, and the theater, actors, and audience were all swept downstream. Yet the show


went on. “The Ghost was at the point of vanishing through the middle door,” Gerstaeker recalled, “when the boat got such a terrible bump from something that the specter lost his equilibrium” and “toppled backwards onto the body of the unfortunate Polonius who, scared to death, forgot he had been murdered and jumped up swearing.” Soon, Ophelia chimed in, “Well, if we ain’t going down to New Orleans!” This kind of provincial improvisation (like the murder of Duncan in *Macbeth* above) may well have fueled Mark Twain’s depiction of the Duke and the King’s outrageous performances of Shakespeare in *Huckleberry Finn*. Although classical and modern plays were a showboat mainstay, troupes immediately branched out into circus acts, variety and magic shows, “museum” exhibits, educational (Chautauqua-type) lectures, and, of course minstrel shows.14

Minstrelsy was born in the 1820s Mississippi Valley and enjoyed great popularity throughout the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The white actor Thomas Dartmouth Rice became the first known professional performer of African American Crow dance steps (imitating the rapid walking motion of a crow) during a Louisville, Kentucky, performance of the play *The Rifle*. Rice’s Jim Crow act fostered a host of imitators who smeared burnt cork or soot on their faces in “blackface minstrel” style to sing and “jump Jim Crow.” The minstrel stage character that developed was a fun-loving, braggadocio, profane, and self-deprecating trickster rooted in both African-American and southwestern Alligator Horse folktales (Rice’s character bragged he was part “snapping turtle” and could “eat an Alligator”). As minstrel shows developed, Tom Rice’s lone Jim Crow act evolved into large, blackface minstrel troupes performing full evening shows of singing, dancing, acting, and banjo playing. Originally patronized by working-class Americans, middle-class audiences soon flocked to see the minstrel shows of J. H. Haverly, Ned Davis, Edwin P. Christy, and many others.15

Minstrels stereotyped Black Americans in demeaning, racist ways, creating the caricature of the shuffling, happy-go-lucky but slow-witted “dacky.” Yet minstrelsy also showcased racial irony and contradictions. As we have seen, the Black trickster character is a fellow who pretends to be stupid while he simultaneously outfoxes and makes fools of white folks. Reconstruction-era minstrelsy opened the door to all-Black troupes of “blackface” entertainers (e.g., Haverly’s Colored Minstrels) whose performances often poked subtle fun at their white audiences. The famed blues musician W. C. Handy began his career as a minstrel, and he recalled minstrelsy as an economic and professional opportunity for aspiring Black entertainers. Handy said minstrel shows were “one of the greatest outlets for talented musicians and artists. All the best [Black] talent of that generation … composers, the singers, the musicians, the speakers, the stage performers—the minstrel show got them all.” Minstrelsy thus endured into the twentieth century in a variety of biracial entertainment forms that stretch from Al Jolson’s Jazz Singer, Hollywood movies, and musicals, to the Harlem Globetrotters, to Amos and Andy and Sanford and Son, to film and pop music portrayals of braggart, fast-talking ghetto youth and hustlers “playing the dozens.”

Minstrels were joined by nonblackface entertainers on showboats and shore, singing tunes about the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Some sang folksongs with anonymous authorship, but minstrelsy combined with the rise of songwriters like Stephen Foster, who composed a number of popular river tunes. The most famous, “De Boatmen’s Dance” (or “The Boatmen’s Dance”), written by the American minstrel Dan

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16. Ashby, With Amusement for All, 88–90 (Handy qtn., 88). See Black tricksters in chapters 2 and 7, this work. “Playing the dozens” is a verbal game in which adversaries “trash talk” (insult) one another until one of them backs down. See Roger D. Abrahams, “Playing the Dozens,” Journal of American Folklore 75 (July–September 1962), 209–20.

17. Michael Allen, “Row! Boatmen Row! Songs of the Early Ohio and Mississippi Rivermen,”
Emmett, became so popular that it migrated offstage and was sung by working rivermen who circulated it in varying renditions. Emmett wrote “De Boatmen’s Dance” in 1843, a year that also saw the rise of the Mike Fink tales, southwestern humor newspaper stories, and George Caleb Bingham’s *Jolly Flatboatmen* paintings. The song’s lyrics reflect the popular image of the Alligator Horse riverman as an adventurous and boisterous frontier folk hero. The boatman “blows his [fog] horn” to announce his arrival in port, and townspeople had best be wary, “For dey whole hoss, and dey a bully crew / Wid a hoosier mate an’ a captin too.” In a recurrent verse, the singer declares:

High row, de boatmen row, floatin’ down de river de Ohio.
De boatmen dance, de boatmen sing; de boatmen up to eb ry ting.
An when de boatmen gets on shore, he spends his cash and works for more.
Den dance de boatmen dance, O dance de boatmen dance.
O dance all night till broad daylight, an go home wid de gals in de morning.\(^18\)

The popular Mississippi Valley lumber raftsmen’s song “Jolly Raftsmen’s Life for Me” (1844) is also a composed minstrel tune. “My raft is by de shore, she’s light and free / To be a jolly raftsmen’s the life for me,” the minstrels proclaimed. “And as I pole along our song shall be / O darlin’ Dinah, I love but thee.” In “Down the River,” minstrels borrow the refrain of “De Boatmen’s Dance,” adding, “Oh, the master is proud of the old Broadhorn [flatboat] / For it brings him plenty of tin / Oh, the crew they are darkies, the cargo is corn / And the money comes tumbling in.” And in “The Moon Is Up—Row, Boatmen, Row!” E. P. Christy’s Minstrels sang, “The moon is up, the hour is late / And down the stream, the black girls wait / Our tardy coming, to prolong / The dance, the revel, and the song / Row, boatmen, row!” Like “Down

\(^{18}\) “De Boatmen’s Dance, an Original Banjo Melody by Old Dan D. Emmett” (Boston, Mass., 1843), sheet music, box 1, Bessie Stanchfield Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul; Bessie Stanchfield, “De Boatmen’s Dance,” unpublished essay, ibid., 41–43, 90n6. For rivermen folk heroes, see chapter 2, this work.
the River,” “The Moon Is Up—Row, Boatmen, Row!” borrows lines from “De Boatmen’s Dance” and is an excellent example of the image of fun-loving, mischievous, romantic rivermen in nineteenth-century American popular culture.¹⁹

The Ohio River lumber raftsman Henry Baxter, a patron of the arts as it were, sought cultural uplift in each of the port cities he visited. He struck gold one night when he saw Edwin Forrest performing Shakespeare’s Richard III. “As he commenced ‘Now is the Winter of our discontent,’” Baxter reminisced, “it seemed as if his whole soul worked up in revolt at the proceedings which had taken place.” Not all western theatrical performances matched Forrest’s performance. In Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain’s outrageous rendering of the Duke and the King performing “the swordfight scene in Richard III, and the balcony scene in Romeo and Juliet” (with chunks of Hamlet and “The Royal Nonesuch” thrown in), is likely drawn from Twain’s youthful attendance of coarse Mississippi Valley theatricals. Even Big Mike Fink became grist for the dramatists’ mill. The first known use of the Mike Fink character was in Alphonso Wetmore’s early Saint Louis play The Pedlar (1821), staged before the death of the historic King of the Keelboatmen. One of the most well-known frontier plays, The Lion of the West (1830), featured a rip-snorting hero who puts a European dandy in his place via a duel fought not with formal dueling pistols, but with Kentucky rifles instead.²⁰

Although The Lion of the West was not written or first performed in the West, its roots lay deeply planted in southwestern soil. In 1830, the actor and producer James H. Hackett advertised a contest for an original American comedy.


James Kirke Paulding, a Virginia attorney and newspaperman (and Jeffersonian Republican) with an artistic bent, won the three hundred dollar prize with *The Lion of the West*. The play debuted at New York City’s Park Theater on April 25, 1831, and one year later the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* advertised Mr. Hackett’s upcoming performance as “The Kentuckian”; the play was subsequently revised and retitled *The Kentuckian; or, A Trip to New York*.21

Paulding’s play ranks alongside the Mike Fink and Davy Crockett stories and James Fenimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* (1827) in establishing the American western genre. The Kentuckian Nimrod Wildfire (a very thinly disguised Davy Crockett) visits New York City, and a riotous comedy of low and high culture—wild versus tame and frontier versus civilization—ensues in a style that has continued in American popular culture through *Tarzan’s New York Adventure* (1942), *Coogan’s Bluff* (1969), *Crocodile Dundee* (1986), *City Slickers* (1991), and today’s reality TV survivor shows. Wildfire’s nemesis is Mrs. Amelia Wollope, an even more thinly disguised Mrs. Frances Trollope, the snooty English travel writer Americans loved to hate. Wollope’s dastardly and debauched brother Lord Grandby is, of course, trying to swindle money from the honest Freeman family (while Caesar, a free Black waiter, does an early version of dancing Jim Crow). Wildfire intervenes to save the day. Interwoven are references to revivalist camp meetings, Wildfire’s (Crockett’s) enmity towards Andrew Jackson and the Democrats, and Wildfire’s telling of one of the first of a long line of Mississippi River catfish stories:

Well, what do you think if a varmint as big as an alligator didn’t lay hold [of the fish hook] and jerk me plump head foremost into the river—I wish I may be stuck into a split log for a wedge! There was I twisted about like a chip in a whirlpool! Well, … all of a sudden I grabbed him by the gills and we had a fight—he pulled and flounced—I held fast and swore at him! Aha, says I, you may be a

screamer but perhaps I am a horse! The catfish roll’d his eyes clean round till he squinted—when snap went to line, crack went his gills, and off he bounced like a wild Ingen.\textsuperscript{22}

Cincinnati, Ohio, was a logical place for James Hackett to market his theatrical talents. Acknowledged as an economic leader in the trans-Appalachian West, Cincinnati also aspired to be a center of artistic life. Boosters pointed proudly to their theater, museum, art exhibits, concerts, circulating libraries, reading rooms, schools and academies, and college. “First in art, first in knowledge, first in civilization,” James Hall bragged of Jacksonian-era Cincinnati. “It requires no prophet’s eye to see … the future seat of literature and learning; the Athens of Western America.” The \textit{Cincinnati Chronicle} agreed: “The refinements of society, both of a social and a moral kind,” an editor gushed, “exist in a degree that would justify comparison with the larger and older cities in the East.”\textsuperscript{23}

The professional dramatists Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Drake established Cincinnati’s first theater in 1825, featuring a fifty-foot-by-hundred-foot stage, orchestra pit, “punch room,” and seats for eight hundred, including two tiers of box seats. The Drakes produced \textit{Hamlet}, \textit{Othello}, and \textit{The Hunchback} to reportedly sparse crowds. Edwin Forrest appeared there in 1829, and by 1835 competitors had launched a second theater. Lobby posters reminded patrons “to avoid the uncourteous habit of throwing nutshells, apples, etc. into the pit.”\textsuperscript{24}

Although Eckstein’s Academy of Fine Arts folded in six months for lack of students, the Cincinnati portrait painter James Beard built a studio and gallery and was commissioned to paint John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay. A June 28, 1828,

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22. Paulding, \textit{The Lion of the West}, passim (qtn., 25). Trollope is discussed in chapter 3, this work.
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advertisement in the *Cincinnati National Republican* informed readers that “an exhibition of splendid paintings is now ready for their reception, at the corner of Main and upper Market streets.” For twenty-five cents, art lovers could view a 336-square-foot rendering of “Napoleon Crossing the Alps” and a 252-square-foot canvas of “General Bolivar Hunting Bisons.” Quantity also outweighed quality in John Banvard’s “Panorama,” a traveling show that featured a twelve-foot-high and half-mile-long canvas slowly unrolled to reveal a representation of the entire Mississippi River. Mr. Dorfeuille’s Western Museum boasted a miniature version of “Hell,” including fierce wax animals in a murky swamp and Satan himself! Mrs. Trollope aimed to stage “Musical Fantasies” for a dollar admission, but after one month she abandoned “this species of amusement, so popular of late years, both in Paris and London.” Cincinnatians preferred attending circuses, one of which advertised wire-walkers, tumbling, sleight of hand, riding, singing, dancing, “Mme. Roberta who balances a musket with fixed bayonet point down on her tooth,” and a “Grand Menagerie” of “Elephants, Lions, a Giraffe, and a Rhinoceros.”

Meanwhile, a few hundred miles south, in Lexington, Kentucky, boosters took sharp exception to any upstart Ohio town claiming to be the Athens of the West. Alluding to the divide between commerce and the arts among the ancient Greece city-states, one newspaperman noted, “Cincinnati may be the Tyre, but Lexington is unquestionably the Athens of the West.” Another agreed Lexington was “the headquarters of *Science and Letters* in the Western country.” While the debate between these infant communities over Athenian qualities is humorous, there is evidence that supports Lexington’s claims to superiority, relatively speaking. In 1815, Lexington’s lending library boasted

two thousand volumes covering all fields and supplemented by school libraries, private collections, a number of bookshops, and at least one coffeehouse whose members’ dues maintained more than three dozen current newspaper subscriptions. The Lexington Musical Society presented amateur vocal and instrumental music, and touring theater troupes made Lexington a regular stop on their circuits. The New Theatre, constructed on the second floor of a brewery prior to the War of 1812, hosted the traveling companies as well as amateur players from the local Roscian Society and Military Society fraternal clubs.²⁶

Transylvania University was the jewel in Lexington’s crown. Created as a seminary at the end of the American Revolution, Transylvania (which meant only “across the mountains” to pre-Frankenstein America) was chartered a university in 1799 and remained trans-Appalachia’s only institution of higher learning until Cincinnati’s medical college opened a decade later. It was gift books from Transylvania University that seeded Lexington’s public library, and Transylvania thespians who staged the city’s first dramatic productions, The Busy Body and Love a la Mode, on a stage built in the city courthouse. Transylvania lured promising youth from other Ohio Valley cities and, according to one critic, turned them into profligates and radicals: “If you wish [your son] to become a Robespierre or a Murat, send him to learn the rudiments of Jacobinism and disorganization,” one cynic wrote. Perhaps this is what happened to Transylvania’s most famous alumnus, Jefferson Davis.²⁷

Davis was just a child when another Transylvania graduate, William O. Butler, published his poem “The Boatman’s Horn” in the July 1821 number of Lexington’s Western Review and in a collection of his verse, The Boatman’s Horn and Other Poems (1821). “The Boatman’s Horn” is the best-known poem written in the antebellum Mississippi Valley. In its romanticism, aspiration, and evocation of regional pride, the poem reflects some of the first tender shoots of an aesthetic sensibility growing in native soil.

The Boatman’s Horn

O, boatman! Wind that horn again,
For never did the listening air,
Upon its lambent bosom bear
So wild, so soft, so sweet a strain!

What, though thy notes are sad and few,
By every simple boatman blown,
Yet is each pulse to nature true,
And melody in every tone.

How oft in boyhood’s joyous days,
Unmindful of the lapsing hours,
I’ve loitered on my homeward way
By wild Ohio’s bank of flowers;
While some lone boatman from the deck
Poured his soft numbers to the tide,
As if to charm from storm and wreck
The boat where all his fortunes ride!

Delighted Nature drank the sound,
Enchanted echo bore it round
In whispers soft and softer still,
From hill to plain and plain to hill,
Till e’en the thoughtless, frolic boy,
Elate with hope and wild with joy,
Who gamboled by the river side,
And sported with the fretting tide,
Feels something new pervade his breast,
Change his light step, repress his jest,
Bends o’er the flood his eager ear
To catch the sounds far off, yet dear—
Drinks the sweet draft, but knows not why
The tear of rapture fills his eye.28

THE BEST DAMNED ARTISTS IN MISSOURI

President Harry S. Truman once called Thomas Hart Benton

“the best damned painter in America,” an apt way to describe an artist like Benton, whose work was so strongly connected to folk idiom. Perhaps this compliment had some small connection to the fact that Benton, like Truman, was a proud native of western Missouri, but Truman was no doubt sincere. In addition to Benton, the high artistic achievement of the Show Me State is evidenced in the careers of Mark Twain, George Caleb Bingham, Kate Chopin, Sara Teasdale, Eugene Field, John Henton Carter, and others. Missouri has produced its fair share of the best damned folk-based artists in America.²⁹

American painting came of age very slowly during the colonial and revolutionary eras. The paucity, in an emerging democracy, of enlightened patrons and a market for art proved to be a huge barrier to artists, and indeed continues to this day. Early American painters had to scratch out a living painting portraits of wealthy families or hustling commissions to do large “patriot paintings” of revolutionary heroes. Although this patriot genre focused on America, it nevertheless drew from European and classical forms, substituting a Washington for a Julius Caesar and sometimes dressing the founding father in roman toga and sandals.³⁰

However, as the nineteenth century began, American painters discovered there was a market for paintings of America’s natural beauties—landscapes—and the Hudson River School of art was born. Soon, Hudson River style painters turned their eyes westward to the Mississippi River Valley. Incorporating methods later characterized as local color and genre painting, they began to repopulate their canvases with frontier figures, not members of the upper or ruling classes. Their paintings of western folk in natural settings could be both engaging and marketable. Some of the most popular subjects for the canvases were Mississippi Valley landscapes with western boatmen, and mid-nineteenth-

century artists produced hundreds of sketches, drawings, illustrations, and paintings of flatboatmen, raftsmen, keelboatmen, and steamboatmen. Karl Bodmer was joined by his contemporaries Charles Wimar, George Catlin, Thomas Doney, Henry Lewis, Currier and Ives lithograph artists (of the 1860s), and more. They often painted western boatmen in a characteristic pose, lounging aboard a southbound flat or raft, lazily enjoying the spring weather and the fiddling and dancing of their fellow rivermen. Many of their paintings borrow from a contemporary, George Caleb Bingham of Missouri.31

George Caleb Bingham (1811–79) rose from obscurity to become one of the greatest American genre painters. Born in 1811 in Augusta County, in Virginia’s Piedmont region, Bingham’s life changed dramatically when his family moved to Franklin, Missouri, in 1819. With the sudden death of his father in 1823, Bingham and his family made a living at farming. Teenaged George was drawn to the Missouri countryside, and especially the Arrow Rock bluff, where he could view the Missouri River Valley and passing flatboats, rafts, and steamers. Apprenticed at age sixteen to a Columbia, Missouri, cabinetmaker, he followed that occupation into sign painting and, eventually, portraiture. By age twenty-two, and despite his lack of professional training, George Caleb Bingham had taught himself enough to make a living as a portrait painter. Acquiring a solid reputation in the lower Missouri Valley, Bingham opened a Saint Louis studio in 1835, but soon realized that without further education and exposure he had hit an artistic wall. He studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1837, traversing the Northeast at the same time the Hudson River School was gaining popularity. In 1840, Bingham moved to Washington, D.C., to

resume portrait painting; in 1844 he returned to Missouri ready to put his growing talents to profitable use.\(^\text{32}\)

From 1845 to 1855, George Caleb Bingham painted Mississippi River Valley canvases that are still viewed and admired. Bingham’s childhood remembrances of Franklin and Arrow Rock on the lower Missouri River provided a wealth of material. He painted landscapes peopled by fur trappers, Indians, soldiers, common folk, and politicians (a staunch Whig, Bingham was elected Missouri state legislator, treasurer, and adjutant general). In a classic European technique he learned in his studies, Bingham pyramided his characters. However, he did so on vibrantly colorful—luministic is an applicable modern term—canvases modeled after the Hudson River school. These paintings emphasize direct or reflected light on water, the sky, and human characters. Bingham thus combined western settings and folkloric characters with sophisticated European and northeastern painting styles. And while earning a reputation as “the Missouri artist,” he simultaneously cultivated a market and following among more urbane easterners hungry for rural color and scenes from the Wild West.\(^\text{33}\)

George Caleb Bingham’s most famous and beloved paintings are his rivers series and depictions of “Jolly Flatboatmen.” Bingham painted over a dozen significant paintings of boatmen and riverboating. The first of these, Western Boatmen Ashore (1838), has been lost, but Fur Trappers Descending the Missouri (1845) and Boatmen on the Missouri (1846) attest to Bingham’s artistry. The Jolly Flatboatmen appeared in 1846 and proved so successful that Bingham eventually painted three other versions in 1848, 1857, and 1878. In between, he explored numerous facets of the boatmen’s lives in Raftsmen Playing Cards (1847), The Wood Boat (1850), and Mississippi Boatman (1850). These paintings, combined with the later works In a Quandary (1851), The Trapper’s Return (1851), Woodboatmen on a River (1854), and

\(^{32}\) John Francis McDermott, *George Caleb Bingham, River Portraitist* (Norman, Okla., 1959), 3–48; Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham*, 8–48. See also Helen Fern Rusk, *George Caleb Bingham, the Missouri Artist* (Jefferson City, Mo., 1917).

Raftsmen by Night (1854), demonstrate Bingham’s strong technique while simultaneously offering clues about the boatmen’s actual lifestyle.\(^{34}\)

Historians can use works of art as evidence to learn about the past. Paintings, drawings, and sketches sometimes contain historically accurate details about the subjects they portray.\(^{35}\) George Caleb Bingham’s three Jolly Flatboatmen paintings (the fourth, finished in 1878, has never resurfaced) are all similar in content and depict members of a flatboat crew during a relaxed moment on a clear, beautiful day, making music with a fiddle and a frying pan, one of them dancing a merry jig atop their flatboat’s deck. The Jolly Flatboatmen in Port adds a supporting cast of landsmen to admire the jaunty Alligator Horse, and a bustling urban wharf scene (perhaps Saint Louis) to complement the mighty Mississippi. The effect is striking, the colors are bold, and the flatboatmen emerge from these paintings as working-class folk heroes.\(^{36}\)

Are they realistic? One common criticism of Bingham’s depiction of flatboatmen is that his river men are too clean and never at work. This critique is telling, but not quite fair. In fact, real boatmen spent a great deal of their time (certainly over half) in idleness and at their leisure. While the clothes of the Jolly Flatboatmen are indeed too clean, the cotton breeches, suspenders, square-toed boots, and felt and straw hats do typify workingmen’s apparel of the Jacksonian era. And the paintings abound in other details: the cargo hold and its contents, boat construction, navigation tools and oars, the steersman’s technique, boat lines (hawsers), a whiskey jug and tobacco, wood shavings left by a whittler, a shirt hung out to dry, a raccoon pelt

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34. The paintings are discussed at length in McDermott, George Caleb Bingham, River Portraitist, and Bloch, George Caleb Bingham: Evolution of an Artist. Some of the best reproductions of the river series appear in Albert Christ-Janer, George Caleb Bingham: Frontier Painter of Missouri (New York, 1975). See also, Luarca-Shoaf et al., Navigating the West.


36. For The Jolly Flatboater, see McDermott, George Caleb Bingham, 55–57, 124–25; Bloch, George Caleb Bingham, 86–88, 92; Christ-Janer, George Caleb Bingham, plates 20, 43, 69.
nailed to the bulkhead, cooking utensils, buckets, baskets, and flour sacks.\textsuperscript{37} Similarly, viewers of two other Bingham canvases, \textit{Boatmen on the Missouri} and \textit{Mississippi Boatman}, can also learn a good deal about material culture—boat structure, equipment, clothing, etc. This world the boatmen knew was also the world George Caleb Bingham knew.

One of the most striking aspects of these paintings is the depiction of the rivermen themselves. In \textit{Boatmen on the Missouri}, two hands are teenaged Missourians, while the steersman is an older riverman. All three sport long, dark, unkempt hair. The boys’ faces appear dreamy, but in them one detects a sense of longing and a slight boredom. The \textit{Boatmen on the Missouri} are not swashbuckling rivermen, nor is the \textit{Mississippi Boatman}. Indeed, the latter appears as a grizzled old boatman in his forties, bearded, shabbily dressed, smoking tobacco in a long-stemmed pipe. He has just completed the arduous task of unloading barrels from the hold of a nearby flatboat, and he is obviously tired. In the background, storm clouds approach. This boatman’s pensive expression, his wrinkled, weathered face, and his greying hair show that river life has taken its toll.\textsuperscript{38}

Less austere is \textit{Raftsmen Playing Cards}, one of Bingham’s finest depictions of the western boatmen. The painting is detailed, with a scaled representation of lumber raft construction, a sand-filled cooking box, tools, and clothing, and, once again, a striking portrayal of the boat hands themselves. These raftsmen are not mythic red-shirted, ring-tailed roarsers shooting whiskey cups off one another’s heads. While the steersman pulls hard at the oar, four raftsmen are involved in a game of cards. Two men play, two watch, and a fifth raftsman, barefooted, sits by their side lost in his own thoughts. The effect is realistic because it is unspectacular. These are common workingmen at their leisure, a little bored but content with their situation. They play at cards until a meal, some work, town, or a passing steamboat breaks the monotony. Meanwhile, the current carries them southward, past

\textsuperscript{37} Christ-Janer, \textit{George Caleb Bingham}, plates 20, 43, 69.
the bluffs and forests astride the lower Missouri or Mississippi River.  

George Caleb Bingham’s eye for detail thus made the boatmen paintings a valuable source of historical information. This kind of realism is bolstered by Bingham’s tendency to focus on the commonplace and more mundane aspects of the western boatmen’s lifestyle. With the notable exception of the dancing rivermen featured in *The Jolly Flatboatmen* series, Bingham’s boatmen always appear as rather ordinary fellows. As a writer in the *Missouri Republican* explained in 1847,

[Bingham] has not sought out those incidents or occasions which might be supposed to give the best opportunity for display, and a flashy, highly colored picture; but he has taken the simplest, most frequent and common occurrences on our rivers—such as every boatman will encounter in a season—such as would seem, even to the casual and careless observer, of very ordinary moment, but which are precisely those in which the full and undisguised character of the boatmen is best displayed.  

On the other hand, while George Caleb Bingham’s scenes are believable, they are never unpleasant. Bingham’s boatmen never have to push their flat off a sandbar or get soaking wet in a Mississippi Valley thunderstorm. These very real aspects of their lifestyle are not portrayed while other more palatable aspects are. Though Bingham grew up on the frontier, his was a vanishing frontier, and he could never avoid waxing a bit romantic about the world of his youth on the Missouri River. Thus, as John Francis McDermott has observed, “a nostalgic glow of boyhood remembered is diffused over all [Bingham’s] marvelously accurate delineations of western life. He has not merely recorded


magnificently his place and his people, but he has evoked life itself. He is not merely a reporter: he is a poet.”

In the volatile, industrializing America of the 1840s and 1850s, Jacksonian artists abandoned portraiture and classical motifs and began to experiment in genre painting and local vernacular. Like their literary contemporaries—James Fenimore Cooper, the southwestern humorists, and purveyors of the Davy Crockett and Mike Fink stories—genre painters’ works were folk-based. They relied on local color and settings as they painted rural landscapes and common folk—including western rivermen—at work and play. George Caleb Bingham’s paintings depicted a vanishing way of life that appeared simple and good, and by picking and choosing his realities he struck a responsive chord in the American public. Bingham’s paintings thus say as much about antebellum Americans that embraced his depiction of *The Jolly Flatboatmen* as they say about the boatmen themselves.

John Henton Carter (1832–1910) of Saint Louis was a popular Mississippi Valley writer who, under the nom de plume Commodore Rollingpin, published nine volumes of prose and poetry and hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles. Born in 1832 in Marietta, Ohio, Carter took his first flatboat trip to New Orleans in 1846 and retained close ties to the river and rivermen for the remainder of his life. Unlike the three-year pilot stint of his contemporary Mark Twain (who, he claimed, “wasn’t much of a pilot anyhow”), Carter shipped on western river steamboats off and on for nearly three decades. He mainly worked the Saint Louis to New Orleans trade in various capacities, including waiter, purser, steward, and galley cook and baker. Despite an informal education, Carter became a skilled prose stylist who aspired to write about life on the western rivers.

John Henton Carter turned to journalism in the 1870s, writing for Saint Louis and New York City newspapers, including Joseph Pulitzer’s *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *New York World*. From 1873 to 1880, he held the important post of river editor at the *St. Louis Times*. In addition to his columns, he wrote and published novels, essay collections, poems, and a popular almanac that included agricultural advice and astronomical observations. Mark Twain cites John Henton Carter’s statistics on steamboat racing in *Life on the Mississippi*, and, like Twain, Carter became a popular, witty, and edifying public lecturer. Carter and his brother self-published some of his books in Saint Louis, and New York commercial houses also published several titles. All of John Henton Carter’s books pertain to river life in particular or Mississippi Valley folk life in general, and they appear under both his given name and Commodore Rollingpin. The latter is a play on his cooking career in steamboat galleys and was accompanied by an illustrated coat of arms featuring crossed rolling pins.

Carter wrote much of his work in phonetically spelled vernacular American English. *Out Here in Old Missoury*, Carter’s 1900 poetry collection, begins, “Out here in ol’ Missoury, we have ev’rything at’s good / We’re bankin, too, on Providence ’ats alus understood / We see Him in the fertile fields, the fruits and flowers, too— / An’ thank Him fur each blessin’ ez our fathers ust to do—”. *Duck Creek Ballads* (1894) and *Log Cabin Poems* (1897) are also collections of verse, on topics ranging from river life and frontier history to religion and farming to a tribute to the deceased Saint Louis writer and lecturer Eugene Field. *The Log of Commodore Rollingpin: His Adventures Afloat and Ashore* (1874) is divided between creative nonfiction essays and poems focusing on steamboating. *Thomas Rutherton* (1890) is an autobiographical novel of Carter’s first flatboat trip to New Orleans, while *The Man at the Wheel* (1899) is a collection of creative semi-fictional river essays. *Ozark Post Office* (1899), *The Impression Club* (1899), and *Mississippi Argonauts: A Tale of the South* (1903) are all novels set in the Mississippi Valley.

44. John Henton Carter, *The Log of Commodore Rollingpin: His Adventures Afloat and Ashore* (New
Like the paintings of his fellow Missourian George Caleb Bingham, John Henton Carter’s writings teach us something of the social history of western rivermen. *Thomas Rutherton* is a fictionalized autobiography combining dramatic plot elements that mirror the lives of historic antebellum Ohio and Mississippi flatboatmen. *Thomas Rutherton* recounts the adventures of an orphan boy trying to get a start in life. There are mortgage foreclosures, dark secrets in the heroine’s past, tall tales of a steamboat race, an alligator hunt, and the dramatic death of a mulatto flatboat gambler. In a chapter titled “The Wonderful Cave,” Carter contributes to the Cave-in Rock legend, telling a story of the capture of a band of desperate river pirates by a wily boatman named Archie Fame.45

Carter’s firsthand experiences enabled him to accurately write about the boatmen. He vividly describes “the impenetrable black forest” of the lower Mississippi Valley, and the great force of the Mississippi River current, “always present and rushing ceaselessly.” River craft are described in minute detail, as are navigation techniques, methods of landing, and the boatmen’s watch system. Because the hero of *Thomas Rutherton* ships aboard the flatboat as a cook, the reader learns a good deal about the galley, the cooking outfit, utensils, and menu, from beans and coffee to “Fried crackers.” This firsthand view of the boatmen’s lifestyle is sometimes surprising. For instance, Carter’s flatboatmen spend as much time reading as they do hunting and spinning yarns, and two of the boatmen in *Thomas Rutherton* are teetotalers, products of the Jacksonian temperance movement.46

*Thomas Rutherton*, like Bingham’s paintings, accurately portrays the kinds of men who worked aboard flatboats. The owner of Thomas’s boat is described as a young entrepreneur

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45. Carter, *Thomas Rutherton*, 57, 70, 122–29, 131–32, 140, 142. Carter was not an orphan. For the river pirates of Cave-in Rock, see chapters 2 and 3, this work.

who “had acquired a small fortune” in flatboating. Captain Rider, “a person of vigorous mind and body,” is in his forties, but his assistant pilot is a young man of twenty-five. The deck crew consists of young, “experienced boatmen ... who had been with Capt. Rider on former trips,” except for Thomas and a hand named Jonas, both teenaged farm boys. While the owner, captain, and pilot are married men, nearly all of the hands are bachelors. All except Thomas have homes and families to whom they plan to return.  

John Henton Carter’s use of dialect provides *Thomas Rutherton*’s readers some notion of how these rivermen might have talked and sounded. Captain Rider’s commands of “Stand by your lines,” “Throw her stern in,” and “Turn out, boys” are always answered with a nautical “Aye, Sir!” The men speak in the rural voice one would expect of Ohio Valley farmers and rivermen. Although it is difficult to conjure up the sounds of a mid-nineteenth-century accent, Carter’s characters’ voices seem true to their antebellum Ohio River origins. Listen to Captain Rider’s voice as he tells his pilot,

> I guess we’ll run tonight Jack. We’re purty well on top of the rise, an’ it’s easier to keep ’er in the river, so we’d better let her go through, ‘thout stoppin’ from this on, as long’s we’ve the ’light to light moon’ anyhow, an’ stand dog watch. Me an’ Wilke’ll take her till twelve an’ you an’ Roseberry come on them.  

While *Thomas Rutherton* is a lively and dramatic story, Carter does not overdraw the boatmen as romantic, swashbuckling characters, and their adventures seem realistic. The crew experiences disaster when their boat wrecks and sinks, and yet they escape without harm and soon catch a ride to New Orleans aboard a southbound steamer. There, Captain Rider immediately files an insurance claim on his lost cargo and is reimbursed in full. When Thomas contracts typhoid fever, he is cared for in a modern hospital facility and soon recovers. It is true Carter depicts Thomas’s trip as a grand adventure down “the most

wonderful valley in the world,” and that his “old playmates” view Thomas’s new job as a flatboatman with awe and envy. Yet the picture of flatboating that emerges from *Thomas Rutherton* is one of the workaday world. Captain Rider and his crew are not Alligator Horses—they are skilled workingmen employed in a demanding yet common occupation. In making his art, John Henton Carter, aka Commodore Rollingpin, teaches us something about the nation’s past.49

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Missouri painter Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) took the democratic arts to a new plane, and he did so amid much critical kicking and yelling along the way. Benton painted large storytelling murals that combined elements of high and low art to an end that was unmistakably American. The fact that his (many) critics sprang from both elitist and socially conservative camps attests to Benton’s uniqueness and, arguably, his greatness. Whatever one’s opinion of Tom Benton, it is indisputable that his work is a striking reflection of his Mississippi Valley roots.50

Thomas Hart Benton was born in Neosho, Missouri, in 1889, to a legendary Missouri family. Benton was named after his great-uncle, the venerable Jacksonian Democratic Senator; his father, “Colonel” Maecenas Benton, served four terms (1897–1905) as southwest Missouri’s populist Democrat Congressman. Standing five feet, five inches tall, with dark hair and sparkling brown eyes, young Tom Benton grew into a talented and precocious young man. When not at home sketching on his tablets, cocky Tom found his way into the Neosho newspaper police blotter for fistfights and assorted misdemeanors almost always connected to his whisky drinking. Supported by his artistic mother, Elizabeth, he devoted much of his youth to disobeying and angering his father; Colonel Benton grew so tired of Tom’s egotistical bantering of “I this, and I that” that he dubbed him “the Big I” and eventually sent him off to military school. Tom promptly flunked out and, in conspiracy

with his mother, succeeded in talking his father into enrolling him at the Art Institute of Chicago for the period 1907–1908.\textsuperscript{51}

For a decade and a half, Benton followed the path of many aspiring American artists, rejecting his provincial midwestern origins and embracing a cosmopolitan European aestheticism. In 1910, he moved from Chicago to France, set up a studio on Paris’s Left Bank, acquired a mistress, and studied and executed abstract modernist and cubist painting styles. When his mother refused to further subsidize these endeavors, Benton landed in New York City, where he continued his avant-garde pose. As the Jazz Age dawned, Tom Benton was barely supporting himself as a stage set painter, cartoonist, and art teacher for the Chelsea Neighborhood Association. He continued to experiment in abstract art forms and dabbled in Marxism and radical politics. Then, he met Rita Piacenza, the daughter of Italian immigrants. Against the wishes of both sets of parents, Tom and Rita married in 1922 and set up housekeeping in New York City, where Rita Benton began her lifelong work of managing Benton’s business affairs and providing a stable home and family life for the temperamental artist. Rita proved indispensable to Benton’s future success.\textsuperscript{52}

From 1917 to 1929, Benton made the slow transition from abstract modernist to American storyteller. The change began with his World War I enlistment in the U.S. Navy, where he served as a draftsman and pored over the author and typographer J. A. Spencer’s four-volume, illustrated \textit{History of the United States} (1851). Honorably discharged in 1919, Benton returned to New York with both an emerging patriotism and a draftsman’s eye for realistic artistic form. His paintings steadily veered away from the abstraction of his Parisian and early New York work. Called to his father’s Springfield, Missouri, deathbed in 1924, the prodigal son at last buried the hatchet with the Old Colonel. Benton returned to New York with a growing

\textsuperscript{51} “Early Days” file, Thomas Hart Benton Collection, Newton County Historical Park, Neosho, Missouri; Thomas Hart Benton, \textit{An Artist in America} (1938; rev ed., New York, 1951), 1–2.

\textsuperscript{52} Burns, \textit{Thomas Hart Benton}; Benton, \textit{An Artist in America}, 23–49 (Rita described, 48–49); Adams, \textit{Thomas Hart Benton}, 81, 88.
appreciation for his family’s and neighbors’ values and Mississippi Valley folkways. Although he continued into the 1930s to associate with radicals and Communists (Benton never joined the Communist Party but recalled voting Communist as a “protest”), he slowly became disillusioned with both the artistic and political left. He was naturally drawn back to his family’s Democratic populism, but shed of its segregationist (and isolationist) beliefs.\(^5^3\)

During the 1930s, Thomas Hart Benton became the most famous, acclaimed, and despised painter in America. He had developed a technique of painting large murals by referencing small three-dimensional clay models he shaped to guide the pieces’ spatial composition. In his murals, he wove together numerous painted images, telling stories about America’s regional folk cultures. This kind of work was the antithesis of the modernism and Euro-centrism of the northeastern urban art scene that surrounded Benton. “I proclaimed heresies around New York,” he recalled. “I wanted more than anything else to make pictures, the imagery of which would carry unmistakable American meanings for Americans.” The immediate results were four stunning murals—\textit{America Today} (1931), \textit{The Arts of Life in America} (1932), \textit{A Social History of Indiana} (1933), and \textit{A Social History of the State of Missouri} (1936). These four were later joined by \textit{Independence and the Opening of the West} (1962), \textit{The Sources of Country Music} (1975), and myriad smaller murals and individual paintings to constitute the heart of Tom Benton’s lifelong work.\(^5^4\)

\textit{America Today} adorned the walls of the New School for Social Research, and its bold colors focused on technology and the diverse working folk of modern America. Although classified as realistic, Benton was no George Caleb Bingham (or Norman Rockwell). In fact, he brought a touch of abstraction to his work, with the dreamlike arrangement of different stories on the same wall and images of the natural world and human characters


whose features appear larger than life, perfectly muscled, forceful, tragic, and heroic. There are towering urban paintings of industrial welders, railroad men and their engines, surveyors, coal miners, and steel workers; he portrays women and men at their leisure in jazz clubs, diners, sporting events, and at home. There are also rural folk in America Today—Black sharecroppers and steamboat deckhands down south, and farmers, cowboys, loggers, and Indians out west. The Arts of Life in America concentrated more on social and cultural life than work, and featured fiddlers, card players, jazz musicians, radio performers, beauty contestants, and joyous whites and Blacks dancing hoedowns and breakdowns. Benton portrays each section of the nation in a style that was to be dubbed regionalism. Although criticized by leftists as overly patriotic and upbeat, these murals also reflect Depression-era poverty and labor strife. Meanwhile, conservatives criticized Benton’s Social History of Indiana, a mammoth block-long mural painted for the state of Indiana’s Chicago World’s Fair exhibit, for its alleged celebration of labor radicalism, the inclusion of the Ku Klux Klan, and for focusing too much on America’s struggles. 55

Given a choice between living and working amid hostile leftist or conservative critics, Tom Benton evidently preferred the latter. In 1935, he denounced the New York City artistic community, its “European manners,” “limp wristed” Harvard-trained museum curators, and communist pedants and artistes. “Mr. Benton Will Leave Us Flat,” the New York Times trumpeted in a feature article explaining Benton was “Sick of New York” because the “place has gone insipid.” Tom Benton’s surprising announcement that he would relocate his home and studio to Kansas City, Missouri, marked his artistic, intellectual, and personal return to America’s Mississippi Valley heartland. 56

At forty-five years of age, Thomas Hart Benton returned to the


56. Adams, Thomas Hart Benton, 240–43; Benton, American in Art, 70–71; Benton, Artist in America, 259–69.
state he had fled for Chicago and Paris two and a half decades prior. He, Rita, and their children, Thomas and Jessie, took up residence in a fine, unostentatious, two-story Victorian home built of native limestone in a leafy Kansas City neighborhood just a few blocks from the Missouri-Kansas state line. Nearby, downtown Kansas City was alive with jazz clubs, Negro League baseball, and barbeque joints, all presided over by the political boss Tom Pendergast. Benton soon converted the adjacent carriage house to a studio with an eight-foot-by-twelve-foot paned window. Appointed chair of the painting department of the Kansas City Arts Institute, Benton nevertheless commuted regularly to the Missouri state capitol in Jefferson City to paint his most elaborate mural, *A Social History of the State of Missouri.*

Using now well-honed techniques, he produced gorgeous statehouse walls replete with a “multiplicity of subjects” telling the histories and stories of Huck Finn and Jim, a Jesse James bank robbery, the tragic Black lovers Frank and Johnny, Indian whisky traders, slavery and lynching, the politicking of Tom Pendergast, and even the Old Colonel, Congressman Maecenas Benton. Woven throughout are images of honest and hard-working common Missourians, male and female, Black, white, and Indian. Painting *A Social History of the State of Missouri,* Benton recalled, was “like living my boyhood over again.”

Tom Benton was also an excellent writer. His popular autobiography *An Artist in America* (dubbed by one reviewer “all Missouri, no compromise”) and *An American in Art* (1969) are engaging, clear, forceful, and free of critical jargon. “I set out painting American histories in defiance of all the conventions of our art world,” Benton recalled. For this he was maligned by the modernists for provincialism and naïveté, and by the leftists for being overly patriotic; conservatives in turn accused him of leftism and lewdness. Yet, as noted, Benton’s realism in fact contains abstract components, and his nostalgia is replete with images of racism and life’s tragedies. If he was a fellow traveler, this was news to the fellow who threw a chair at him at a 1930s

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John Reed Club meeting! If Tom Benton’s sin was that his art expressed a love for America, with all its blemishes and greatness, then he was guilty. In this he was joined, and informed by, the fellow midwestern painters Grant Wood (Iowa) and John Steuart Curry (Kansas), cofounders of the so-called Prairie School of American regionalist art; in a broader context, this group also includes the members of the Arts and Crafts movement and the famed “prairie architect” Frank Lloyd Wright (Wisconsin). Its spirit and form endure today in the documentary art of Ken Burns, whose films lovingly portray the regionalists and their art.58

The 1930s marked the peak of Tom Benton’s creativity, though he did not by any means fade away. Thereafter, Benton aimed to continue teaching at the Kansas City Arts Institute as an irascible instructor who forbade “bughouse art” and yet, ironically, also trained the famed abstract impressionist Jackson Pollock. In May of 1941, however, Benton’s lifelong intolerance of homosexuals finally took its toll. Quoted in local newspapers saying, “The average museum is a graveyard, run by a pretty boy with a curving wrist,” the institute’s board of governors met, deliberated, and fired him.59

The subsequent bombing of Pearl Harbor hurled Benton into a flurry of gratis patriotic World War II work, but the postwar New York City abstract impressionist craze (and the rise of Benton’s protégé Jackson Pollock) seemed to sound the death knell of regionalism. “The only way an artist can personally fail is to quit,” Benton insisted, and he took work wherever he could find it, painting murals for a Kansas City department store and a country club. He traveled across the nation painting unpeopled


landscapes, recognizable for the touch of abstraction he wove into realistic portrayals of the mountains, clouds, rivers, forests, and deserts of America’s natural world. Rita, as always, worked to market these paintings and keep Benton’s career afloat. Benton composed and transcribed musical scores for the harmonica (an instrument he played expertly), and he even recorded a harmonica album. Meanwhile, he and Rita raised their youngest child, Jessie, in their Kansas City neighborhood, with summers at Martha’s Vineyard.60

“Old age is a wonderful thing,” Tom Benton observed. “You outlive your enemies.” In 1959, the former president Harry S. Truman contacted Benton. The two had a strong bond through their shared western Missouri heritage, Democratic populism, and civil rights advocacy, and Truman also thought modern art looked like “scrambled eggs.” Then, too, Truman and Benton shared an affinity for whisky and the art of profanity. Their friendship resulted in Independence and the Opening of the West, the mural that greets visitors in the entry hall of the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum in Independence, Missouri. One might say its composition is predictable, because Benton had become formulaic in the way he designed and created his historic murals. Yet an entire generation of Americans had grown up with no firsthand knowledge of these striking murals, and another generation has followed; today, most tourists enter the Truman library doors and stand in awe.61

Meanwhile, and quite unexpectedly, reaction against 1960s political and cultural excesses seeded a renewed interest in artistic realism and regionalism, developments that prompted a bemused Benton to remark, “The human form is coming back into fashion. What are all these sons of bitches going to do? They never learned how to draw.” Approached by a friend with news that the Kansas City Arts Institute sought a rapprochement to forgive and forget his firing, Benton relented in typical fashion, telling the friend to “bring the sons of bitches over here” to talk.

60. Burns, Thomas Hart Benton.
When he was at last elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in the mid-1960s, Tom Benton traveled to New York City to accept the honor in person. But when the academy’s president used the occasion to condemn American warfare in Vietnam, Benton angrily walked out of the ceremony, resigning his election to the academy after holding it for only a few minutes.62

In 1973, the country music star Tex Ritter contacted 83-year-old Thomas Hart Benton about creating a mural for the Country Music Association. The two sipped Jack Daniels bourbon together and agreed the painting should tell the story of country music’s origins. This project, of course, was of great interest to the harmonica-playing Benton, who immediately began to research a storyline highlighting the British and African American, gospel-singing, fiddling, square-dancing, and cowboy folk whose images constitute *The Sources of Country Music* (1975). Benton completed the mural and, after dinner on January 19, 1975, he walked out to his studio to sign it. When he did not return, Rita went looking and found him lying on the studio floor, dead of a massive heart attack at age 85. He had fallen on, and broken, his pocket watch, recording his time of death at 7:05 p.m. *The Sources of Country Music* stands unsigned in the Country Music Hall of Fame. Benton’s birthday was celebrated for years after his death by friends and admirers who staged an art show and dance at Kelly’s Bar in Kansas City. Thomas Hart Benton’s sister, Mildred Benton Small, provides the best epitaph for the beloved Missouri artist and his regionalist colleagues: “There’s a great deal of force in the Middle West. It is the United States. The shores are the borders. Things go on in very lively fashion in San Francisco or New York City, but they aren’t the United States.”63

HOW TO MAKE A BOOK

In both the first and last chapters of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the narrator Huck refers to the process by which writers create literature, but he does so in a very casual, American fashion. Huck begins with a chapter I reference to *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, a book that “was made by Mr. Mark Twain,” and he ends by reusing the verb “to make” in the final paragraph of “Chapter the Last.” Huck expresses great relief that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has finally come to an end, stating, “So there ain’t nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I’d a knowed what trouble it was to make a book I wouldn’t a tackled it and ain’t going to no more.” As the down-to-earth voice of America’s great democratic author, Huck Finn is not interested in analyzing art, or discussing how writers create artistic prose. Americans simply *make* things, and as Huck tells us, one of the many things Americans *make* is novels.64

Noah Webster saw Mark Twain coming, and so too did Alexis de Tocqueville. Webster understood that in the new American republic, the arts would of necessity become democratized and brought down to the level of the common man. He composed a dictionary of *American* English because he saw that, in the New World, the English language had come down to earth and that Americans wrote words like they sounded—*color*, not *colour*, *recognize*, not *recognise*, *theater*, not *theatre*. There was no longer an aristocracy to set the cultural bar; there were no kings and queens to patronize painters, musicians, and writers in their courts. Writing four years before Sam Clemens was born, Alexis de Tocqueville observed, “The inhabitants of the United States have then, at present, properly speaking, no literature. The only authors whom I acknowledge as American are the journalists. They indeed are not great writers, but they speak the language of their counymen, and make themselves heard by them.”65

Given Mark Twain’s early career as a print shop typesetter

64. Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 229.
turned newspaper and magazine author, Tocqueville’s observation is striking. So too are his forecasts about the future of American literature: Prose “will frequently be fantastic, incorrect, overburdened, and loose” and “bear the marks of an untutored and rude vigor of thought,” Tocqueville predicted. In order to make money from a mass American market, “Authors will aim at rapidity of execution, more than at perfection of detail.” Mark Twain certainly aimed at “rapidity of execution,” and his desire to make art was always coupled with a need to keep the bill collectors at bay. There was, however, one book he could not seem to finish. For seven years—from 1876 through 1883—Mark Twain labored in “fits and starts” on *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. During the same period, his “rapidity of execution” enabled him to finish numerous magazine articles and several other books, including *Life on the Mississippi*. What happened? A brief examination of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Life on the Mississippi* provides answers to the question through the prism provided by Webster, Tocqueville, Bernard DeVoto, and Richard Bissell.

Bernard DeVoto, the great Salt Lake City writer and critic, was the first to systematically tie Mark Twain’s prose to the southwestern oral traditions and the printed folk humor that surrounded him as a young Missourian. DeVoto showed how in his most famous writings, Mark Twain used Mississippi Valley settings and vernacular American English (spelled phonetically to replicate folk speech) woven into an anecdotal, tale-telling style. This technique was perfect for magazine articles and short stories and was the key to Mark Twain’s genius, but it had a drawback. As a storyteller, DeVoto explained, Twain experienced great difficulty writing novels and longer works of nonfiction: “He was incapable of sustained and disciplined imagination.” A less delicate way of putting it is to say that whenever Mark Twain needed a paycheck, he started telling short stories, and the stories were often, but not always, brilliant.

Although the ties with *Tom Sawyer* (1876) are apparent, the history of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* really begins with some magazine articles Mark Twain hoped to turn into a book. While Twain was laboring on *Huck Finn* in “fits and starts” during the 1870s and early 1880s, he was simultaneously enjoying accolades for “Old Times on the Mississippi,” seven articles drawn from his three-year stint as a steamboat pilot and published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1875. As noted in this book’s introduction, Twain was never one to miss an opportunity to sell his words twice or more, so in 1882 he took a steamboat voyage the entire length of the Mississippi River with the aim of padding the *Atlantic* articles with some contemporary observations and selling it all as *Life on the Mississippi*.  

*Life on the Mississippi* presented the problem of creating a sustained narrative, yet Mark Twain began, methodically, to “make a book.” Because the “Old Times” articles covered only Twain’s years on the Mississippi immediately prior to the Civil War (1857–61), he wrote brief chapters I and II covering the three hundred years prior. Next, he needed a chapter on lumber rafts and flatboats, so he cut and pasted an unpublished section from *Huckleberry Finn* wherein Huck secretly climbs aboard a lumber raft. Although the shortcut later forced Twain to excise this crucial, prepublished section from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (causing several plot and artistic complications), it cleared the way for him to paste the “Old Times” articles, beginning with chapter 4 and filling in to chapter 20. He was thus one-third of the way toward making the weight demanded by the subscription book industry, in which publishers presold books to folks who expected lengthy and attractive editions. To these buyers, quantity was as important as quality.

Next, two very short transitional chapters 21 and 22 (“A Section in My Biography” and “I Return to My Muttons”) place

Mark Twain back on the river twenty years later to complete *Life on the Mississippi* with forty brief new chapters. Roughly organized around the geography and the experiences of his 1882 return voyage, these chapters are a hodge-podge of (mostly) river-related stories, travelogue, and river city chamber-of-commerce boosterism ranging from the engaging (“Vicksburg During the Trouble” [chapter 35]) to the ridiculous (“Speculations and Conclusions” [chapter 60]). Dick Bissell described the material in chapter 24 as “stuffing … a real pile of sawdust.” Even at chapter 60’s “Conclusions,” the book was unfinished. Having not yet met the publisher’s page requirements, Twain tacked on four appendices, one of which was a long, transcribed newspaper article by another author. He had at last made *Life on the Mississippi*. Although the result was not quite art, much of the book is actually pretty good.70

Mark Twain’s 1882 return to the Mississippi River produced a great deal more than *Life on the Mississippi*, for it got him thinking again about finishing *Huck Finn*. Hal Holbrook and others have observed that Twain was profoundly moved by his return to the scenes of his childhood and young adulthood. He was probably also moved by the slowly fading dream of Black equality he witnessed along the Mississippi seventeen years after the end of the Civil War. Although Twain had originally conceived *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, he had immediately turned away from the young reader’s format toward a highly ambitious, artistic, folk-based portrayal of the evil of slavery in the antebellum South. No American author, not even Harriet Beecher Stowe, had succeeded in rendering slavery in artistic form. Twain’s initial bursts of energy in 1876 and 1879 produced striking results. However, he had become stymied after having moved Jim and Huck downriver toward Cairo and freedom only to see their beloved raft chewed up in a monstrous steamboat collision. Following the 1882 Mississippi River trip, Twain realized how he could make the book. Although the resulting *Huckleberry Finn* was much more artistically significant

than *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain’s method for completing it was not altogether different.\(^{71}\)

The steamboat collision was a bottleneck because, in a real sense, Mark Twain had completed nearly all of his artistic goals. Through wondrous adventures gliding their raft down the Mississippi River, Huck and Jim had become close friends. Huck had come to realize that Jim was a human being, not a piece of property, and that he must somehow help him escape north from slavery. But Twain had accomplished all this in only about one third of a novel (chapters 1–16). How was Jim to be freed? And what would happen in the interim to enhance and solidify the plot? Twain needed to finish making the book, and he did so in bits and pieces, brick by brick, telling stories all the way.\(^{72}\)

The first story takes place immediately after the steamboat wreck (chapter 17), as Huck finds himself unwittingly embroiled in the Shepherdson-Grangerford family feud. Next arrive the Duke and the King, two of Twain’s greatest creations. These “aristocratic” scoundrels keep the adventure moving through a series of loosely related stories as they perform Shakespeare in country towns, con the local folk, sell Jim back into slavery, and nearly succeed in cheating the three orphaned Wilks sisters out of a sizable inheritance. Along the way, Huck witnesses Colonel Sherburn turn back a cowardly mob of Arkansas vigilantes, a powerful story by itself. Mark Twain stitches all of these stories together using the river trip southward and the pursuit of Jim’s goal of freedom, but how was he to end it?\(^{73}\)

Ultimately, Mark Twain takes the easy way out. In the last fifth of the novel (chapters 33–42), he brings back Tom Sawyer who, by an amazing coincidence, finds Huck and Jim at his Uncle Silas and Aunt Sally’s Arkansas farm. Tom then concocts an outlandish scheme to free Jim in the style of his favorite European adventure romance, Alexander Dumas’s *Count of Monte Cristo*. After much overdrawn nonsense, Twain at last


\(^{72}\) Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1–78.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 79–177; DeVoto, *Mark Twain’s America*, 313–14.
allows Jim to escape. However, he is immediately recaptured while helping Tom, who has been shot and wounded during the escape. Then, Tom informs everyone that the deceased Miss Watson has in fact already freed Jim in her will. Thus, all the stories come to an end and Huck, after complaining about how hard it was to “make a book,” announces he will “light out for the territory ahead of the rest” to escape Aunt Sally’s attempts to “sivilize” him. 74

Though legions of readers love Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, some rightly dislike the ending. They see that forcing Jim to engage in Tom’s romantic farce contradicts the sensitive portrait of Huck’s and Jim’s friendship that Mark Twain has so carefully drawn in the beginning. There are other problems. Twain often, and caustically, satirized unbelievable aspects of the novels of Sir Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper, yet what about the huge holes in the plot of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn? Huck and Jim escape Missouri slavery by sailing south to Cairo, but, in fact, to enter a free state Jim need only sail (or swim) about a half mile across the Mississippi to Illinois! Nonetheless, the two proceed southward and, even after discovering they have passed Cairo, they inexplicably keep on sailing south, deeper into slave territory. Moreover—and Dick Bissell actually calculated this—if one factors the number of days Huck and Jim were afloat with the speed of an average downstream current, “by the end of the trip they must have been about fifty miles beyond the [Mississippi River mouth] Passes and out in the Gulf of Mexico.” Mark Twain should have shown a bit more humility in his criticism of the “literary offenses” of Cooper and Scott. 75

In Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain needs, and somehow manages to gain, his readers’ collective suspension of disbelief. Twain’s art requires an idyll. Twain needs Huck and Jim to float downstream for as long as possible amid the quiet

74. Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, 177–229 (qtn., 229).
75. Bissell, My Life on the Mississippi, 191–94 (qtn., 193); Leo Marx, “Mr. Elliot, Mr. Trilling, and Huckleberry Finn,” American Scholar 22 (Autumn 1953), 423–39; Mark Twain, “Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offenses,” Great Short Works of Mark Twain, 169–81. Typically, Twain published several reworked versions of his Cooper piece.
beauty of the Mississippi River wilderness. Readers require time to fully absorb and envision the promise of freedom offered by the Mississippi River. By sailing Huck and Jim to Cairo and southward, Twain gives his readers that time. “It was kind of solemn, drifting down the big still river,” Huck recalls. He and Jim “caught fish, and talked, and we took a swim now and then,” and Huck “slipped into cornfields and borrowed” vegetables and fruit for their rustic meals. “Take it all around, we lived pretty high”:

Two or three days and nights went by; I reckon I might say they swum by, they slid along so quiet and smooth and lovely. Here is the way we put in the time. It was a monstrous big river down there—sometimes a mile and a half wide; we run nights, and laid up and hid day-times... It’s lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky, up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made, or only just happened—Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened; I judged it would have took too long to make so many. Jim said the moon could a laid them; well, that looked kind of reasonable, so I didn’t say nothing against it, because I’ve seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done. We used to watch the stars that fell, too, and see them streak down. Jim allowed they’d got spoiled and was hove out of the nest.76

In stark contrast to Huck’s and Jim’s idyllic river life, Mark Twain presents the reader with the drudgeries of life on shore and the evils of “sivilization.” Pap, the Shepherdsons and Grangerfords, and the mob that menaces Colonel Sherburn are all on the shore. The steamboat—a product of the shore’s industrial civilization—chews Huck and Jim’s raft to pieces. When the Duke and the King leave the shore and come onboard, they defile Huck and Jim’s new raft until they return to land (and their just deserts). The slave-catchers are also shore people who defile the river idyll until Huck outfoxes them. Tom Sawyer is ashore when he is shot. And when Jim is at last freed, Huck cannot bear to stay on the Arkansas shore to live with Aunt Sally.

76. Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, 55–56, 95–97.
Although he does not continue to sail the river southward, he departs for “the territory,” another wilderness where he aims to continue his idyll. 

This weaving of an artful depiction of the Mississippi Valley wilderness and the fight against slavery into the wild versus tame (frontier versus civilization) tensions of the classic American western is one of Twain’s great accomplishments. So too is Huckleberry Finn’s voice—plainspoken, down-to-earth American English rendered into literary art. True, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has many failings, yet for many Americans, it is eternal. “Whatever else this frontier humorist did,” DeVoto wrote, “whatever he failed to do, this much he did. He wrote books that have in them something eternally true to the core of his nation’s life. They are at the center; all other books whatsoever are farther away.”

Mark Twain’s modern critics—including those crusaders who seek to ban Huckleberry Finn from the public schools because of its racist language—ought to spend a few hours with another one of Mark Twain’s books. Though seldom read, this book is pithy, impeccably drawn, authentic, and somehow manages to present an even harsher indictment of racism and slavery than Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

Pudd’nhead Wilson (1894) is ostensibly a detective novel set in the antebellum Mississippi Valley, but its stark portrayal of slavery and race lift it from the emergent mystery genre. In Pudd’nhead Wilson, Twain reprises and Americanizes a European folktale—“The Prince and the Pauper”—to tell a story of two southern babies purposely switched at birth by Roxy, a mulatto slave. The rub is that one of the changelings is Roxy’s master Percy Driscoll’s white son and the other is her own son who, although only 1/32 Black, is “by a fiction of law and custom”

77. This is of course based on the work of the mid-twentieth-century American Studies myth/symbol school. See Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York, 1964).
78. DeVoto, Mark Twain’s America, 321; DeVoto, “Mark Twain’s Books Reflect Real America,” Milwaukee Journal, May 15, 1933.
considered a Black person. Thus Roxy raises Percy’s white son Chambers as her own while ensuring her mulatto son Tom is raised (under her watchful eye) amid the wealth and advantages of the Missouri slaveholder’s household.  

As Tom and Chambers grow to maturity, the plot turns sharply. Percy dies, Percy’s brother, Judge York Driscoll, adopts Tom, and Roxy and Chambers accompany him to live at the judge’s house. Despite all of his advantages, Tom grows into a dissolute gambler and spendthrift. He murders the judge to inherit his money and frames an innocent man (a young Italian aristocrat) as the apparent killer. However, as the case goes to trial, the local attorney David “Pudd’nhead” Wilson steps in to solve the mystery. In a dramatic courtroom finale, Pudd’nhead uses newly invented fingerprinting techniques to identify Tom as the true murderer while simultaneously exposing Roxy’s switch of the white and Black babies. 

At the very outset of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, the reader might incorrectly surmise Mark Twain has changed his *Huck Finn* viewpoint that the shores of the Mississippi are the home of a dark and dangerous civilization. In an evocative two-page introduction setting the scene, Twain paints a deceptively idyllic picture of the shore:

> The scene of this chronicle is the town of Dawson’s Landing, on the Missouri side of the Mississippi, half a day’s journey, per steamboat, below St. Louis.

> In 1830 it was a snug little collection of modest one and two-story frame dwellings whose whitewashed exteriors were almost concealed from sight by climbing tangles of rose-vines, honeysuckles, and morning-glories. Each of these pretty homes had a garden in front fenced with white palings and opulently stocked with hollyhocks, marigolds, touch-me-nots, prince’s feathers, and

80. Mark Twain, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894; repr. New York, 1959), 9 (qtn.). Typically, Twain first published *Pudd’nhead Wilson* as serialized articles, in 1893–94 issues of *Century Magazine*, and then recycled them in novel form. This was more than a decade after his novel *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881) served up the European folktale in what was, for Twain, unusually formal prose.

81. Ibid., passim.
other old-fashioned flowers; while on the window-sills of the houses stood wooden boxes containing moss-rose plants and terracotta pots in which grew a breed of geranium whose spread of intensely red blossoms accented the prevailing pink tint of the rose-clad house-front like an explosion of flame. When there was room on the ledge outside of the pots and boxes for a cat, the cat was there—in sunny weather—stretched at full length, asleep and blissful, with her furry belly to the sun and a paw curved over her nose. Then that house was complete, and its contentment and peace were made manifest to the world by this symbol, whose testimony is infallible. A home without a cat—and a well-fed, well-petted and properly revered cat—may be a perfect home, perhaps, but how can it prove title? …

The main street, one block back from the river, and running parallel with it, was the sole business street. It was six blocks long, and in each block two or three brick stores, three stories high, towered above interjected bunches of little frame shops…

The hamlet’s front was washed by the clear waters of the great river; its body stretched itself rearward up a gentle incline; its most rearward border fringed itself out and scattered its houses about its base line of the hills; the hills rose high, enclosing the town in a half-moon curve, clothed with forests from foot to summit.82

Then, at the beginning of chapter I’s sixth paragraph, Twain abruptly shifts the mood when he writes:

Dawson’s Landing was a slaveholding town, with a rich, slave-worked grain and pork country back of it.

There will be trouble in Dawson’s Landing.

As slavery again raises its ugly head to spoil an idyll, the story of Roxy, Tom, and Judge Driscoll commences. As noted, one of the few signs of hope on shore is David Wilson, an earnest but failed attorney who, since his arrival in Dawson’s Landing, has become the butt of jokes and been labeled Pudd’nhead by townspeople too dim to understand his dry, ironic wit. It is David Wilson, however, who gets the last laugh.83

82. Twain, Pudd’nhead Wilson, 1–2. I have deleted portions of this beautiful passage.
“Though modern, the format of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is that of an old-fashioned melodrama, as if its structure were borrowed from the plays performed on the riverboat theatres of that period,” writes Langston Hughes in the introduction to the 1957 edition of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. “Perhaps deliberately, Twain selected this popular formula in which to tell a very serious story. Moving from climax to climax, every chapter ends with a teaser that makes the reader wonder what is coming next while, as in Greek tragedy, the fates keep closing in the central protagonists. And here the fates have no regard whatsoever for color lines.”

In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Tom and Chambers stand at opposite ends of a stark racial divide, and yet, amazingly, no one in Dawson’s Landing actually knows their true colors. This high irony has a historic context. Mark Twain published *Pudd’nhead Wilson* in 1894, at the same time *Plessy v. Ferguson* was winding its way from New Orleans to the infamous 1896 Supreme Court decision that constitutionalized racial segregation. The litigant Homer Plessy was so light in color that he easily entered a segregated (“whites only”) train car without detection, but the police later arrested him for doing so. Booker T. Washington told a related story about a segregated train car confrontation in *Up from Slavery* (1901). Another 1890s development paralleling *Pudd’nhead Wilson* was the beginning of the study of behaviorist psychology and the nature versus nurture debate over determination of human character. In switching the babies, Roxy launches a psychosociological experiment of her own, one that mocks both the “one-drop rule” and what Hughes calls “the absurdity of man-made differentials, whether of caste or ‘race.’”

“It is this treatment of race,” Hughes writes, “that makes *Pudd’nhead Wilson* as contemporary as Little Rock, and Mark Twain as modern as Faulkner.”

In the end, and as noted, Dawson’s Landing’s racist house of

83. Ibid., 2, 4–5.
84. Langston Hughes, introduction to Twain, *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, ibid., xii.
cards is sent tumbling down by yet another modern development—criminological fingerprinting technique. Tom is convicted of murdering the judge and Chambers is set free, though he finds precious little happiness in the alien world of the white man. Roxy is utterly despondent, finding consolation only in “her church and its affairs.” The locals finally pay David Wilson the respect he is due and confess that they are the true “pudd’nheads.” Then, in a deliciously cruel twist, Tom’s life is spared. Instead of dying at the gallows, he is sold into slavery downriver to settle one of the Driscoll family’s outstanding debts. Thus, in art as in antebellum life, property law takes precedence over all.86

One year after publishing *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Mark Twain declared bankruptcy. Twain’s literary output—his “rapidity of execution” as Tocqueville would say—could never quite keep up with his expense account. Although he published another half dozen books before his 1910 death, none rivaled the work of his artistic peak, the two and a half decades that culminated in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. Langston Hughes states, “Mark Twain, in his presentation of Negroes as human beings, stands head and shoulders above the other Southern writers of his times.” Bernard DeVoto expands the comparative talent pool to declare Twain foremost among all American authors. While all of this is debatable, one thing is certain: By the time Mark Twain published *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, he had definitely learned how to make a book.87

THE WEST BANK

*Mosquitoes* (1927), William Faulkner’s second novel, resulted from his brief attempt at living the bohemian life in the French Quarter of New Orleans. During six months of residence in 1925, Faulkner had the good fortune to meet the writer Sherwood Anderson, who took the young Mississippian under his wing and helped him publish his first novel, *Soldier’s Pay*

86. Twain, *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, 142–43.
Anderson also introduced Faulkner to his circle of friends, a motley tribe of poets, novelists, painters, and sculptors and their lovers, friends, and admirers. These artist folk became grist for the mill of *Mosquitoes*, a cynical yet humorous portrayal of a waterborne picnic gone bad.\(^8^8\)

Mrs. Maurier is a wealthy Louisianan with a taste for high culture and rubbing elbows with *artistes*. She invites some artist acquaintances to join her and her friends for an overnight cruise on Lake Ponchartrain, dining, dancing, and playing bridge on her yacht *Nausikaa*. By the time *Nausikaa* weighs anchor, the guest list has grown. The affable writer Dawson Fairchild (whom Faulkner models after Anderson) brings along hard-drinking Major Ayers, a “Semitic man,” and a lustful sculptor named Gordon; they join Mrs. Maurier’s niece Patricia (Pat), who invites two working-class strangers she has just met, sultry Jenny and her “brother” (in fact, her lover) Pete. In addition, there is Mr. Talliaferro (Mrs. Maurier’s sycophant and an utter romantic failure), effete, undersexed Miss Jameson, surprisingly lusty Mrs. Wiseman, and other assorted lost souls, including the ship’s steward David, who is unwittingly drawn by Pat into the cruise debacle. Faulkner’s setting and cast thus carry on an old literary tradition of putting a gaggle of diverse characters into a pot, turning up the heat, and watching them boil; *Mosquitoes* precedes Katherine Ann Porter’s *Ship of Fools* by thirty-five years.\(^8^9\)

As the cruise of the *Nausikaa* proceeds, Mrs. Maurier becomes despondent in increments. The boat runs aground (of course), and the guests find themselves stranded for several days. There is too much drinking and precious little card-playing. There is also much sex talk and cavorting—between lustful men and women, impotent men and unwilling women, and between women and other women—though none of this shipboard love is ever consummated. In between, the ship’s fools spend much of their time defining art, artists, and aesthetics, with unsatisfactory and comic results. At one point Jenny tells Pat about a man named Faulkner. “Faulkner?” Pat responds, “Never heard of him.”\(^9^0\)

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The real William Faulkner used the title *Mosquitoes* as a metaphor describing the artists of New Orleans (and perhaps all humankind), “a score of great grey specks hovering.” Yet, in spite of the menacing insects, *Mosquitoes* ends with just a speck of hope. The *Nausikaa* is rescued and all guests arrive safely ashore. Fairchild, Gordon, and “the Semitic man” return to the French Quarter to continue drinking, and Gordon patronizes a brothel. They “walked in the dark city. Above them, the sky: a heavy voluptuous night and huge, hot stars like wilting gardenias. About them, streets: narrow, shallow canyons of shadow rich with decay and laced with delicate ironwork, scarcely seen.” The novel continues, “Spring is in the world somewhere, like a blown keen reed, high and fiery cold—[Fairchild] does not yet see it; a shape which he will know—he does not yet see it.”

New Orleans and their admirers share a belief that the city is America’s Paris, where artists and literati flock in bohemian enclaves resembling the French capital city’s Left Bank. There is some truth to this story, but it is nevertheless a story. During the twentieth century, a score of notable American writers—Anderson, Faulkner, Kate Chopin, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Tennessee Williams, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Truman Capote, Lillian Hellman, Walker Percy, Charles Bukowski, and John Kennedy Toole—all resided in the Crescent City. But with notable exceptions, they did not stay long. Inspired by New Orleans, they went elsewhere to get their work done. A stint in New Orleans became an adornment to their literary résumés.

It was the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that produced New Orleans’ most stable and productive group of resident writers. The poets Julien Poydras and Dominique and Adrien Rouquette, the novelist Dr. Alfred Mercier, the Black poet authors of *Les Cenelles* (1845), and the playwright Victor Sejour, also a free person of color, all wrote in French. English prose ascended in the mid-nineteenth century through the work of the local colorists George Washington Cable, Grace King, Lafcadio

91. Ibid., 140–41 179, 186 (qtn.), 354 (qtn.).
Hearn, and William S. Porter, a New Orleans newspaperman who wrote short stories under the pen name O. Henry. Of course, Mark Twain frequented the antebellum French Quarter as a steamboat pilot, not a writer; he was later befriended by both Cable and Hearn. In addition to poets and prose stylists, the Crescent City’s early artistic community hosted the gifted painter John James Audubon, the symphony composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk, and the photographer John Ernest Joseph Bellocq, whose black-and-white images of Storyville prostitutes have drawn attention and acclaim for over a century.92

Though born and raised Kate O’Flaherty to Irish and Franco American parents in Saint Louis, Missouri, Kate Chopin became one of New Orleans’ most famous and widely read authors. This is largely because of post-1960s feminists’ discovery of The Awakening (1899), Chopin’s novel about her heroine Edna Pontellier’s anguished search for self-value and purpose. Chopin was a product and progenitor of one of America’s great inventions, the cross-ethnic Catholic marriage. Wedded in 1870 to Oscar Chopin, a New Orleans Creole (French Louisianan) cotton broker, she resided in New Orleans for nine years and bore six children before moving to the Louisiana countryside near Natchitoches. Oscar’s financial reverses and untimely death propelled Kate’s 1883 return to Saint Louis, but she arrived home with a mind brimming over with story ideas from her thirteen-year New Orleans and rural Louisiana sojourn.93

Although known today mainly for her sensitive depiction of Edna Pontellier’s path to suicide, Kate Chopin’s stories of the lives of common Creole and Cajun Louisianans are of equal importance. First published as short stories in The Youth’s Companion, Century, Vogue, and Harper’s Young People’s Magazine,


Chopin introduced all of America to Louisiana’s unique characters and folkways. She later collected and published her tales as *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). As we shall see, Kate Chopin and other local colorists set the stage for the ambitious, folk-based work of Zora Neale Hurston.\(^94\)

It is twentieth-century New Orleans that most enjoys the bohemian mystique. In the years 1911 to 1929, the French Quarter furnished the kind of sensually pleasant and socially tolerant atmosphere which artists have sought and found in the Paris of Montparnasse and the New York of Greenwich Village,” remembered James Feibelman, a 1920s poet turned Tulane philosophy professor. The contemporary urban geographer Richard Campanella agrees the city was a magnet for artists who sought cheap rent, good food, and abundant alcohol despite Prohibition. But most of all they found the same European atmosphere, tropical allure, and inspiring sense of place that “local color” writers described a generation earlier. *New Orleans allowed these migrants to expatriate culturally without actually leaving the country.* Moreover, upon finding kindred spirits in the bars and cafes, they formed intellectual and social networks among themselves.\(^95\)

One should make some qualifications before declaring the French Quarter and neighboring Garden District branch offices of Paris’s Left Bank. New Orleans, Campanella states, is a “great literary city … but never has been a particularly literate city.” The number of libraries and bookshops in New Orleans is notably smaller than other cities its size and so too is the number of high school and college graduates per capita. Moreover, the Crescent City’s twentieth-century literati were most often transplants, not native New Orleanians. “Culturally influential transplants” are the norm, according to Campanella. Truman Capote is an

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94. Chopin is further discussed in chapter 7, this work.
exception, but he left his home town as a youth and returned for only a brief time as a writer. Reflecting on the members of the New Orleans' artistic tribe, Capote once reminisced, “I could list hundreds of them.” Like Capote, they came and they went.⁹⁶

Chroniclers of New Orleans often note that F. Scott Fitzgerald, one of the most well-known members of Paris’s Lost Generation, landed in New Orleans in 1920. His interest actually began during his 1917 army service in Alabama, where he met his wife-to-be, Zelda. In late 1919, Fitzgerald used the money he made selling three short stories to buy a train ticket from his hometown, Saint Paul, Minnesota, to New Orleans, on the opposite end of the Mississippi River. He arrived in mid-January of 1920 and checked into a boardinghouse at 2900 Prytania Street; during his stay Fitzgerald twice traveled to Montgomery, Alabama, to visit Zelda and propose marriage. He continued to work on short stories (for the *Saturday Evening Post* and other magazines) and his novel *This Side of Paradise* (1920), but he left Prytania Street for New York after less than a month. In fact, Fitzgerald’s most important connections to the Mississippi Valley are in his upper valley roots. *The Great Gatsby’s* (1925) narrator Nick Carraway is a Minnesotan, Scott Gatsby is a North Dakotan, and Daisy is from Louisville. All three have gone east to escape their stifling midwestern roots. However, Nick feels distanced from New Yorkers, and he returns to the Midwest—to “that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night”—after Scott Gatsby’s demise. Although F. Scott Fitzgerald’s name enters most discussions of New Orleans artists, he in fact did not like the Crescent City. “O. Henry said this was a story town,” Fitzgerald wrote, “but it’s too consciously that.”⁹⁷

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New Orleanians often refer to Ernest Hemingway’s affection for the Hotel Monteleone (whose Carousel Bar he mentions in the short story “The Night before Battle”), yet Hemingway had even less connection to New Orleans than F. Scott Fitzgerald. Like Fitzgerald, Hemingway’s important links to the Mississippi Valley lay north of New Orleans, through his Oak Park, Illinois, upbringing and six-month stint as a reporter for the Kansas City Star. In a vignette intended for *The Nick Adams Stories*, Hemingway wrote of Nick’s first sighting of the Mississippi River:

The Kansas City train stopped at a siding just east of the Mississippi... Nick opened his Saturday Evening Post and commenced reading, occasionally looking out the window to watch for any glimpse of the Mississippi. Crossing the Mississippi would be a big event he thought... He could see out of the window the engine of the train curving out onto a long bridge above a broad, muddy brown stretch of water. Desolate hills were on the far side that Nick could now see and on the near side was a flat mud bank. The river seemed to move solidly downstream, not to flow but to move like a solid, shifting lake, swirling a little where the abutments of the bridge jutted out. Mark Twain, Huck, Tom Sawyer, and LaSalle crowded each other in Nick’s mind as he looked up the flat, brown plain of slow-moving water. Anyhow, I’ve seen the Mississippi, he thought happily to himself.

The above unpublished description provides the only glimpse of the Mississippi River in Hemingway’s imagination.98 Sherwood Anderson, a founder of America’s rural realist school of literature, is perhaps the most important of Campanella’s “culturally influential transplants” to New Orleans. Born to a southern father and immigrant mother in Camden, Ohio, in 1876, Anderson did not become a professional writer until middle age, initially pursuing a career in advertising and business management. Anderson’s decision to leave his wife,

family, and middle-class lifestyle takes the form of an oft-told story. Discontented with his job running an Elyria, Illinois, paint factory, one day he simply walked out the door and out of town and never returned. He moved with a second wife to New Orleans in 1922 and resided there during a period of time roughly paralleling the heyday of Paris’s Lost Generation. Anderson told a friend he was “writing like a man gone mad,” but according to some he was also drinking up a storm and patronizing Aunt Rose’s, a house of ill repute. Anderson helped to found and edit The Double Dealer, a literary magazine that served as a springboard for writers like Hemingway, Thornton Wilder, and William Faulkner. As noted, Faulkner cast Anderson as Dawson Fairchild in Mosquitoes (though at book’s end, he sends Gordon, not Dawson, to the house of prostitution). Indeed, one of Sherwood Anderson’s most important accomplishments in New Orleans was befriending and housing the upstart Faulkner and helping him pursue a literary career.99

William Faulkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi, in 1897; his great-grandfather William was a writer, duelist, and railroad entrepreneur with honorable service as a Confederate colonel at the First Battle of Bull Run. The family moved to Oxford, Mississippi, where young William briefly attended Ole Miss before and after brief and undistinguished World War I service in the British Royal Air Force (he never flew an airplane nor left his Canadian training camp). Already a storyteller, he returned home in full dress uniform with an invented war record, complemented by a cane and affected limp. Faulkner cultivated a drinking habit as he flitted through jobs as a carpenter, house painter, fireman, postmaster (at Ole Miss), and, of course, struggling poet and author. In late 1924, at twenty-seven years of age, Faulkner moved to New Orleans to seek out his hero, Sherwood Anderson, then twenty years his senior. Faulkner resided in the Crescent City for six months.100

William Faulkner quickly became known in New Orleans bars and cafes. He lived in a small room in Anderson’s flat and then in some seedy apartments. Tourists still flock to his Jackson Square abode, a domicile he reportedly accessed by climbing the balustrades, foregoing the staircase (to avoid creditors? for exercise? in drunken fun?). In all this, he was fueled by whisky and water and the praise of Sherwood Anderson, who advised him to turn from poetry (he had just published *The Marble Faun* [1924]) to prose. Unlike most New Orleans literati, Faulkner was well able to keep up both his writing and his drinking. He published sketches in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* while Anderson published his work in *The Double Dealer*. Anderson also helped him land a publisher for his first novel, *Soldier’s Pay*, the tragic story of the Georgia homecoming of a wounded and impotent World War I soldier.101

As *Mosquitoes* attests, Faulkner beheld New Orleans artistes with bemused cynicism. He and his fellow New Orleans interloper William Spratling showcased this in a 1926 book of sardonic cartoon sketches of their circle of friends titled *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles of New Orleans* (Spratling recalled their inspiration was Michael Covarrubias’s contemporary *The Prince of Wales and Other Famous Americans*). “Sherwood said he didn’t think it was very funny,” Spratling recalled, but by the time *Mosquitoes* appeared, he and Faulkner had departed Louisiana for the Mediterranean, Paris, and the real Left Bank. Faulkner returned home to Mississippi in 1929. During the amazing span of years that began in New Orleans and ended back in Oxford, William Faulkner produced six novels and forty short stories, most set in Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, the fictitious locale that would bring him fame and fortune as an author, Hollywood screenwriter, and recipient of both the 1950 Nobel Prize and the 1955 and 1963 Pulitzer Prizes in literature. He died in Oxford in 1962.102

In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), Thomas Lanier “Tennessee” Williams’s character Big Daddy spoke of his beloved lower Mississippi Valley plantation as “the richest land this side of the valley of the Nile.” New Orleans served as the capital city of Tennessee Williams’s beloved valley of the Mississippi, just as Cairo did for the Nile, and Paris the Seine. Though Williams resided in New Orleans longer than most of the transplants, he did not stay long, and he later used his New Orleans apartment more for vacations than work.¹⁰³

Tom Williams (he later adopted the family nickname “Tennessee”) was born in 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi, to Correlius (a shoe salesman) and Edwina Dakin Williams, the daughter of genteel Clarksdale planters. Like the Faulkners, the Williams family fortunes had declined during the new century, and Tom would later base many of his stories on childhood memories of family strife and the struggles of the South’s fallen upper class. These themes combined with memories of his beloved, mentally ill sister Rose to produce the lost gentility and wounded spirits of *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1948). The Williams family followed the shoe business from Mississippi to Saint Louis, where young Tom worked in a shoe factory, studied literature, saw his first musical theater production (*Showboat* in 1929), and began to write and produce his own plays. After earning a degree from the University of Iowa in 1938, twenty-eight-year-old Tennessee Williams moved to New Orleans.¹⁰⁴

In February of 1939, Williams rented an attic room at 722 Rue Toulouse for $10.00 per month. He fell in love with New Orleans and waxed poetic in his letters and journals. “My happiest years

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¹⁰³. Waddington, “You, Me, and Tennessee,” C1. For the movie version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, see chapter 6, this work.

¹⁰⁴. Lyle Leverich’s *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams* (New York, 1995) is an excellent documented, narrative history of Williams’s formative years in the lower Mississippi Valley. For the movie version of *Streetcar Named Desire*, see chapter 6, this work.
were there,” Williams later reminisced. The Vieux Carre was “a place in love with life,” and New Orleans was his “favorite city of America … of all the world, actually.”

I’m crazy about the city. I walk continually, there is so much to see… The Quarter is really quaintier than anything I’ve seen abroad… Food is amazingly cheap… Raw oysters twenty cents a dozen! Shrimp, crab, lobster, and all kinds of fish… The court-yards are full of palms, vines, and flowering poinsettia, many with fountains and wells, and all with grill-work, balconies, and little winding stairs.

Although Williams was broke within weeks (he hocked everything but his typewriter), he managed to attend the Sugar Bowl football game and Mardi Gras celebrations before leaving town. He returned to New Orleans in 1941 and stayed four months in an 1124 St. Charles (Lee Circle) room for $3.50 a week; he next moved to 708 Toulouse in the French Quarter. He worked as a waiter and dishwasher, and wrote “rather badly, or not at all. Washed up? No!” He bought a bicycle. “I am going to dress up and cruise about the old French Quarter,” he wrote in his journal. “Maybe something will happen.” Among New Orleans’ many attractions, Tennessee Williams was especially drawn to the city’s lively homosexual community and social life. Homosexuality would also become a recurrent theme in Williams’s plays, and in later years he and his partner Frank Merlo enjoyed visiting their Crescent City apartment.¹⁰⁵

Truman Capote was also drawn to New Orleans’ homosexual neighborhoods and gay lifestyle. Capote was an actual New Orleans native (born in 1924), but he spent most of his childhood in Monroeville, Alabama, where he was raised by his “aunts” (cousins) and became a close friend of Harper Lee. He returned briefly to New Orleans at age nineteen and lived in a “decrepit roach-heaven apartment” in the French Quarter, where he recalled spending hours sitting on park benches “yawning and

scratching and talking” but not doing very much writing. Like his fellow New Orleans–born author Lillian Hellman, Capote found his muse, and his fortune, in New York City, though his stories often looked southward in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), *The Grass Harp* (1951), *The Muses Are Heard* (1956), *Breakfast at Tiffany’s: A Short Novel and Three Stories* (1958), and *A Tree of Night* (1949), which includes “A Christmas Memory,” poignantly recalling his Monroeville childhood.

The beatnik poets of the 1940s and ’50s were next in line in the New Orleans artistic queue. Charles Bukowski briefly moved there from California while resisting the draft during World War II. Jack Kerouac stayed in New Orleans for only a month in the late 1940s, but served it up in a famed passage in *On the Road.* Actually, Kerouac and Neal Cassady (*On the Road’s* Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty) decamped across the river in the Algiers, Louisiana, home of their fellow beatnik William S. Burroughs (*On the Road’s* Old Bull Lee). Burroughs spent his Crescent City days mostly in talking, writing, and shooting up Benzedrine in attempts to fuel his creativity (a drug bust soon made him another Crescent City short-timer). Kerouac loved his time there, but he departed after writing a description (as romantic as Tennessee Williams’s journal memories) of the “father of waters” rolling by, “bearing Montana logs and Dakota muds and Iowa vales, and things that had drowned in Three Forks, where the secret began in ice.” In fact, Jack Kerouac’s most powerful description of the Mississippi was set far upriver, in the upper Midwest of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. In chapter 3 of *On the Road,* as Sal Paradise is beginning his epic journey across America, he experiences his own Nick Adams moment:

I took over the wheel and, though I’m not much of a driver, drove clear through the rest of Illinois to Davenport, Iowa, via Rock Island. And here, for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River, dry in summer haze, low water, with its big rank

106. Garbarino, “Welcome to New Orleans,” D8; Cowan et al., *New Orleans Yesterday and Today,* 212–13. For Capote, Lee, and *To Kill a Mockingbird,* see chapter 6, this work.
smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up.\textsuperscript{107}

In the 1960s New Orleans saw the return of a long-term, resident artistic community more closely resembling the city’s early eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literati than the Lost Generation and Beat transplants. Walker Percy was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1916, but following his father’s suicide was raised in Greenville, Mississippi, by his uncle Will Percy (author of the 1941 memoir \textit{Lanterns on the Levy: Recollections of a Planter’s Son}). Just as Capote had grown up alongside Harper Lee, Percy met Shelby Foote in Greenville, and they became lifelong friends. The two attended the University of North Carolina together and both became novelists, though Percy’s first career was as a physician. After earning a medical degree from Columbia University, Percy and his family returned to the South in 1946, residing first in New Orleans and finally settling in nearby Covington, Louisiana. At age forty-six, Walker Percy published his first novel. Set in the New Orleans Garden District and the suburb of Elysian Fields, \textit{The Moviegoer} (1962) garnered Percy the National Book Award.\textsuperscript{108}

Over the next two decades, Walker Percy published five more novels and numerous essays, but also worked as a college instructor (apparently even the National Book Award will not feed a family of four), a vocation he had begun as a 1940s medical professor at Columbia. A devout Catholic, he taught English composition and literature at Loyola College, a Jesuit school. In 1976, a woman knocked on Percy’s Loyola office door and presented him with a weathered, food-stained manuscript written by her deceased son, John Kennedy Toole.\textsuperscript{109}


\textsuperscript{109} “Loyola introduces new students to New Orleans culture with iconic novel.”
Toole was born in New Orleans in 1937 and spent most of his thirty-two-year life in the Crescent City. A graduate of Tulane, he earned an MA in English from Columbia University and, before and after a stint in the U.S. Army, worked as a college instructor. He returned to New Orleans in 1963 to teach at Dominican College, an all-girl Catholic high school. Though they never met, Toole and Percy had several things in common—southern backgrounds, Catholicism, graduate degrees from Columbia, a strong taste for movies, literature, and whisky, and one additional link. Percy, whose father (and probably his mother as well) had taken their own lives, was no doubt drawn to an important aspect of the story Thelma Toole told him that day in his Loyola office. The unpublished manuscript she held was written by her son John prior to his 1969 suicide. “Loyola introduces new students to New Orleans culture with iconic novel”; Cowan et al., New Orleans, Yesterday and Today, 209, 214. See Cory MacLauchlin, Butterfly in the Typewriter: The Tragic Life of John Kennedy Toole and the Remarkable Story of A Confederacy of Dunces (Boston, 2011).

As he began to read A Confederacy of Dunces, Toole’s novel, Percy became captivated. Although it was arguably less a finished work than a clean draft manuscript, he persuaded Louisiana State University Press to publish it in 1980. University press novels are by definition doomed to obscurity, but not this book. In 1981, John Kennedy Toole was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize in literature, and A Confederacy of Dunces has been a cash cow for LSU ever since. Ignatius J. Reilly, Toole’s remarkable lead character, has become an unlikely member of America’s literary pantheon, and his misadventures amidst the Crescent City’s movie theaters, hot dog carts, and manufactories have somehow come to symbolize the quest for meaning in a mid-twentieth-century American world gone mad.110

A Confederacy of Dunces has proven to be a tough act to follow. Anne Rice, a native New Orleanian and devout Catholic, is no

doubt the most famous and successful author in New Orleans today. Her *Vampire Chronicles*, however, hardly ranks alongside the works of Kate Chopin, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Lillian Hellman, or Walker Percy. Yet the mystique of New Orleans as North America’s Paris with its own Left Bank is alive and well. Campanella states that New Orleans continues to draw artists in “disproportionate numbers—more than any other American city its size.” Exactly how many of the new millennium’s New Orleans literati are Tulane and Loyola MFA students and their professors, or buskers and sidewalk portraitists in the French Quarter, is impossible to say. There may well be some geniuses among them. Then, too, there are probably several candidates for minor roles in *Mosquitoes.*

REALISTS AND OTHER ROMANTICS

Henry Nash Smith waits until the closing sections of *Virgin Land: The American West in Myth and Legend* to discuss the late-nineteenth-century rural realist writers Hamlin Garland and Edgar Watson Howe. Their depictions of the upper Mississippi Valley in *The Story of a Country Town* (1883) and *Main-Traveled Roads: Stories of the Mississippi Valley* (1891) do not seem to belong alongside Smith’s discussion of mythic portraits of the American West as the Garden of the World; their heroes are not equal to James Fenimore Cooper’s Hawkeye or the dime novels’ Deadeye Dick and Kit Carson. Howe and Garland, native midwesterners, painted scenes of backbreaking labor, harsh weather, economic exploitation, broken personal relationships, and bitter disappointment for those who migrated west searching in vain for the Garden of Eden. In writing unromantic fictional accounts of their Mississippi Valley world, Howe and Garland helped to found a school of rural realism characterized by an early generation of literary critics as the “Revolt of the Village.”


The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a crescendo of rural realist poetry and fiction by Howe, Garland, Willa Cather, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and other upper Mississippi Valley writers. Highly critical, they portrayed the rural folk inhabiting midwestern farms and towns as exploited, impoverished, isolated, backward, narrow-minded, and anti-intellectual. In Main Street, Sinclair Lewis’s character Guy Pollock diagnosed their intellectual malaise as the “Village Virus,” which “infects ambitious people who stay too long in the provinces” and is enforced by “an oligarchy of respectability.” Like their populist and progressive contemporaries, rural realists called for political as well as spiritual reform to improve the bleak lives of Mississippi Valley family farmers and small town residents.113

The preceding generalizations, the standard interpretation of rural realism, do not always withstand scrutiny. Closer examination shows recurrent doses of Henry Nash Smith’s mythic and romantic West in rural realism, because Garland, Cather, Lewis, Anderson et al. felt loyalty and love as well as discontent for their native ground. The parallel with populism is important here. While the political Populists bitterly condemned the plight of American farmers, they simultaneously held a love of the land and idealistic hope that, with reform, they might yet attain an agricultural Eden. Populists were just as nostalgic for paradise lost as they were determined to shake up America’s political, economic, social, and religious structure.114 Thus populism was at once conservative and radical, and one can see the same ambivalence among the rural realists, populism’s cultural wing. They do not utterly condemn the Mississippi Valley, and their art reflects a deep love of the midwestern landscape, the changing seasons, and even the small towns and


townspeople whom they simultaneously chastise. Within their
cynicism and criticism one detects a yearning for a rural world
lost—the imagined agricultural utopia that has somehow eluded
their grasp. It is this frustrated vision that makes the rural realists
at once cynics and romantics.¹¹⁵

Edgar Watson Howe (1853–1937), perhaps the least known of
the rural realists, first tapped the themes others would portray
in more artful prose. An eastern Kansas newspaperman, Howe
returned home from long workdays to write *Story of a Country
Town* at his kitchen table. Ned Westlock, the novel’s boy narrator,
tells the tale based on Howe’s own Missouri and Kansas
childhood memories. It is a grim tale of poverty, marital failure,
and suicide among “the poor, the indigent, the sick—the lower
classes, in short—who come here to grow up with the country
having failed to grow up with the country where they came
from.” However, Howe also peppers his novel with melodrama,
youthful pranks, romantic yearning, and, in the end, the fruition
of Ned’s long-suppressed love in marriage. While the ending to
*Story of a Country Town* is melancholy, it is not bitter.¹¹⁶

Edgar Watson Howe’s disciple Hamlin Garland (1860–1940)
also came of age in the postbellum upper Mississippi Valley
during the waning days of the family farm. The Garland family
failed at homesteading in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and
South Dakota, enduring blizzards, insect infestations, drought,
and economic hardship. In the 1880s, Garland retreated to
Boston to teach school, yet he soon returned to the upper
Midwest where, “in spite of the dust and heat ricks,” he “dreamt
of poems and stories.” The result was an 1891 collection of short
stories, *Main Traveled Roads: Stories of the Mississippi Valley*. In
“The Return of the Private,” a weary Civil War veteran comes

Midwestern ‘Revolt from the Village,’” *MidAmerica* 40 (2013), 39–85; Lauck, “Typecast
home to find his farm in utter disrepair but his loving wife and family loyally waiting. In “Under the Lion’s Paw,” a hard-working farmer faces losing his land to heartless bankers, while “Among the Corn Rows” and “The Creamery Man” tell of romantic love forsaken for hardships and “practical” (economically motivated) marriages. “Up the Coulee” and “A Branch Road” tell the stories of long-departed sons returning to their rural homes from the city and, like Garland, finding bravery and perseverance overwhelmed by hard work and failure. The answer to their problems is populist reform through regulation of the railroads and banks and an end to the gold standard.117

Hamlin Garland’s quest for realism, however, was at odds with his penchant for sense of place. He had a good ear for upper Mississippi Valley dialect, and a fondness for the folkways and landscape. The opening descriptive scenes in “A Branch Road” and “Up the Coulee,” when the prodigal sons return to their homes, show sensitivity and affection for the land of his midwestern youth. Like many populists, Garland loved his native region but hated the human misery, inequality, avarice, corruption, and inaction he blamed on businessmen and politicians. He believed the evil bankers portrayed in “Under the Lion’s Paw” should be punished and leashed by reformers. Garland idealistically believed that populist reform, combined with the inherent strength of common folk and the rich countryside, would produce an agrarian land of milk and honey.118

Willa Cather’s writings reflect the maturation of rural realism in the beginning decades of the twentieth century as political and cultural populism slowly melded into progressivism. Born in 1873 in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley, Cather found her life changed remarkably at age ten when her family migrated west to farm near Red Cloud, Nebraska. Red Cloud is on the far

117. Smith, Virgin Land, 284–85; Garland, Main Traveled Roads, ix, 13, 54, 98, 122, 141, 156; Mark Schorer, afterword to Garland, Main Traveled Roads, 260.
118. Garland, Main Traveled Roads, 140; Schorer, afterword to Garland, Main Traveled Roads, 265. For Garland’s populism and agrarianism, see ibid., 261–69; Smith, Virgin Land, 289; Van Doren, American Novel, 226; and Lucy Hazard, The Frontier in American Literature (New York, 1961), 264.
western fringe of the Mississippi Valley, where the fertile tall-grass prairie becomes the short-grass prairie of the Great Plains. Though profoundly affected by life on the broad prairies, Cather, upon graduating high school, promptly boarded a train east to Lincoln and the University of Nebraska, where she developed the writer’s craft and earned a degree in 1890. Moving next to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, she edited *Home Monthly* magazine and wrote for Pittsburgh’s *Leader*. In 1906, after the marriage of her ten-year friend and companion Isabelle McClung, Willa Cather moved to New York City. As editor of *McClure’s Magazine*, Cather was at the epicenter of progressive muckrakers, the propaganda arm of the movement to regulate capitalism and expand democracy via women’s suffrage. But Cather resigned from *McClure’s* in 1912 to devote herself to writing fiction.\(^{119}\)

Willa Cather initially fashioned and published an unsuccessful novel, *Alexander’s Bridge* (1912), in the urbane style of her hero Henry James; much later, she tried her hand at southern fiction in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), a reflection of her postbellum Virginia upbringing. It was her rediscovery of the Nebraska prairies that set Willa Cather’s imagination afire. At forty years of age, Cather began to write about her native Midwest, a task she later reflected was “like taking a ride through a familiar country on a horse that knew the way.” This resulted in *O! Pioneers!* (1913), titled after a Walt Whitman poem celebrating American westward expansion. Set near the fictional town of Hanover, Nebraska (modeled after Red Cloud), *O! Pioneers!* adds a woman’s voice to rural realism, relating the experiences of Alexandra Bergson as she inherits and works her family’s wheat farm. Cather followed *O! Pioneers!* with *Song of the Lark* (1915) and *My Antonia* (1918) to form her Nebraska trilogy and further refine the rural realists’ ambivalent portrayals of the passing of the agricultural frontier.\(^{120}\)

Nostalgic yearning combines with grim realism in *My Antonia* (1918), Cather’s personal favorite of the Nebraska trilogy. The


120. Ibid., xxii.
story begins on a train “crossing the plains of Iowa,” where the author meets a childhood friend, Jim Burden. The two reminisce about their farming childhoods in Black Hawk, Nebraska, and their mutual friend, the Bohemian immigrant Antonia Shimerda. The two part, pledging to set their memories of Antonia to paper, at which point Jim Burden’s memoir becomes the voice of *My Antonia*. Jim’s portrait of life in Black Hawk reflects many of the rural realist themes—homesickness, hard work, small town pettiness, and, in Antonia’s case, seduction, betrayal, and her father’s suicide. This is balanced by *My Antonia*’s nostalgic, yearning passages describing the intimacies of family and friends amid the seasonal cycles of the Nebraska prairie. The novel’s opening passage evocatively describes the Iowa landscape that Antonia (and Cather) loved:

> While the train flashed through the never-ending miles of ripe wheat by country towns and bright-flowered pastures and oak groves wilting in the sun, we [the author and Jim Burden] sat in the observation car... We were talking about what it was like to spend one’s childhood in little towns like these, buried in wheat and corn under stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the color and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with little snow, when the whole country is stripped bare and gray as sheet-iron. We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. It was a kind of freemasonry.\footnote{Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (1918; repr. New York, 1994), 27, passim; Sharon O’Brien, introduction to ibid., v–xx; Gelfant, introduction to Cather, *O! Pioneers!* xxiv–xxv.}

The greatest rural realist poet was Edgar Lee Masters (1868–1950), whose innovative *Spoon River Anthology* won the attention and acclaim of a sizable readership upon its 1915 publication. Born in Garnett, Kansas, and raised in rural Illinois, Masters gravitated to populism and agrarian reform. He did not become a professional writer until age forty, yet by career’s end had produced more than fifty volumes of poetry and prose. Masters’s concept for the *Spoon River Anthology* was radical. It
consists of 244 fictional, free-verse (nonrhyming) poems, each spoken from the viewpoint of a resident of the small Illinois town of Spoon River. While free-verse poetry was still an experimental genre, the *Spoon River Anthology*’s most striking feature is its voice, for each of the speakers is *dead*. Their voices emanate from Spoon River’s graveyard where, “all, all are sleeping on a hill.”\(^\text{122}\)

Masters’s *Spoon River* themes are the same ones explored by Howe, Garland, and Cather: dissatisfaction with rural farm and small town life, failed love and unhappy families, political and economic corruption, greed, and general discontent and melancholy. The local banker Thomas Rhodes is an arch-villain who appears in several poems alongside disreputable characters like Hod Put, a robber and murderer, and Chase Henry, the town drunk. But not all the characters are “grotesques” (Sherwood Anderson’s disarming description of the citizenry of *Winesburg, Ohio*). There is Fiddler Jones, who “ended up with a broken fiddle / And a broken laugh and a thousand memories / And not a single regret.” Petit the Poet, Daisy Fraser, Russian Sonia, Mrs. Kessler the Laundress, and Yee Bow are all good people, yet powerless to change their unhappy lives. Elsa Wertman, a peasant girl from Germany, is raped by her wealthy employer Thomas Greene, whose long-suffering wife secretly raises the resulting child as her own. From her grave Elsa laments, “At political rallies, when sitters-by thought I was crying / at the eloquence of Hamilton Greene— / That was not it / No! I wanted to say: / That’s my son! That’s my son!” Herbert Marshall, unhappy in marriage, concludes, “This is life’s sorrow: / That one can be happy only where two are; / And that our hearts are drawn to stars / which want us not.” And Harry Williams, a casualty of America’s Spanish-American War, derides the naïve patriotism of his rural youth: “Now there’s a flag over me in Spoon River! A flag! A flag!”\(^\text{123}\)

During its creation, *Spoon River Anthology* became a

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magnificent obsession for Edgar Lee Masters, and there is truth to criticisms of the work as overly long and redundant. On the other hand, Masters carries on the work of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* in his poems’ scope, power, and audacity. One hundred years after the volume’s publication, one is still struck by the intricate detail and diversity of the stories; the skill with which they are interwoven and cross-referenced has spawned literal schools of Spoon River genealogists. Masters influenced many artists who created and people’d their own imaginary midwestern small towns, from Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg* to Garrison Keillor’s *Lake Woebegone*. The great Minnesota playwright Thornton Wilder carried Masters’s zest for artistic experimentation onto the 1930s and ’40s New York stage. *Our Town* (1939), Wilder’s paean to the New England village of Grover’s Corners, perfects the rural realists’ conflicted portrayal of small town life, and *Our Town*’s concluding graveyard scene is reminiscent of Masters’s graveyard in *Spoon River Anthology*.124

A key to understanding the art of Edgar Lee Masters and other rural realists is their attraction to melancholy. Critics have falsely portrayed Masters as a cold cynic who sits in condemnation of the rural Midwest of his youth, yet balancing *Spoon River*’s dark Thomas Rhodes–type characters are those like Fiddler Jones. Few are happy, but who or what is to blame? Their lives were beyond their control, and so they reflect pensively from their graves. As John Cowper Powys observed long ago, Edgar Lee Masters does not condemn these men and women; he empathizes with them:

> With the exception of some half-dozen cold-blooded exploiters of the people, not a ghost among these wraiths but is understood, condoned, allowed for and forgiven. In the rank, mephitic arena of all this squalor, the poet preserves his grand, equal, unmitigated equilibrium.

Masters resists passing judgment on these folks. Nothing can

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be done for them; theirs is the fate of mankind. Masters can sympathize because he is one of them.\textsuperscript{125}

Edgar Lee Masters dreamed of a Jeffersonian agrarian republic\textsuperscript{126} to replace the lost rural world of his childhood. Typically, and ironically, he did much of his dreaming and writing in cities far removed from the Mississippi Valley heartland. Atop the Chelsea Hotel in New York City, with his English professor wife and literary friends, Edgar Lee Masters condemned modern poets because they possessed “no moral code and no roots” while he continued to write of his fellow midwestern townsmen. He published \textit{Lincoln, the Man} in 1931, and, as the years passed, he grew more and more critical of New York and Chicago, and nostalgic about the rural Midwest. He developed an affinity for Jeffersonian political and social decentralization. In 1942, he published \textit{The Sangamon}, a paean to the Land of Lincoln and one of the most evocative volumes in the Rivers of America Series. The Sangamon River folk were “hospitable, warm-hearted and generous beyond any people I have known,” he recalled fondly. Southern Illinois, Masters wrote, holds a “magical appeal to me quite beyond my power to describe. I loved the people there then and I love their memory.” The Mississippi Valley of Masters’s youth had vanished, however, and so too had his many of his midwestern brethren. As he wrote in \textit{Spoon River}, “All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.”\textsuperscript{127}

Edgar Lee Masters and Willa Cather led the way for the new


realism of the post–World War I writers Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis. Anderson and Lewis continued rural realism in a subtle, understated style, one lacking the “hard, fierce tension” of Edgar Watson Howe or the sentimental propagandizing of Hamlin Garland. Their novels, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), and *Main Street* (1920), mark a crescendo in rural realist fiction.

Sherwood Anderson grew up in a twilight era, as Ohio’s sleepy small towns and farms were transformed by the industrial revolution. As noted, Anderson abandoned an unhappy marriage and a business and advertising career, moved to New Orleans, and turned to writing fiction. In *Dark Laughter* (1925), he ruminates on the effect of industry and technology along the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers on human consciousness. *Poor White* (1920) is the story of Hugh McVey, an introspective Missouri drifter who initially finds purpose in engineering and industrial progress. Hugh’s inventions become a catalyst for the transformation of Bidwell, Ohio, into a modern community, but he soon discovers he has created a monster. Bidwell’s economy and population boom, but old craftsmen lose their jobs to machines and new workers who form a violent protest movement. Hugh rejects his belief in progress and retreats to the countryside. At story’s end, he stands alongside wife Clara in their farmyard on Bidwell’s outskirts, listening to the “whistling and screaming” of nearby factories: “The sound ran up the hillside and rang in the ears of Hugh as, with his arm around Clara’s shoulder, he went up the steps and in at the farmhouse door.”

Like many Mississippi Valley authors, Sherwood Anderson was more a storyteller than writer of sustained fiction; he often wrote vignettes, little stories that captured moments reflecting larger themes. At the same time, his fiction was deeply


psychological, and his probing beneath the human surface found both happiness and terror. In *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Anderson’s penchants for storytelling and psychology combine to powerful end. *Winesburg*’s lead character is young George Willard, an aspiring writer reaching maturity in a town of solitary and troubled people. These people have become emotional cripples, or “grotesques,” and *Winesburg, Ohio*, is a collection of their separate, yet interrelated, stories and revelations. As it happens, George Willard is often present to hear these revelations; the unhappy folk are drawn to George and trust him to hear them out and possibly communicate their pain. Readers of *Winesburg, Ohio* see George Willard’s coming of age amid the poignant crises of his fellows as their town approaches the dawn of the twentieth century.

There is Elmer Cowley, the object of constant ridicule, who tells George his family intends to leave Winesburg: “We ain’t going to keep on being queer.” Alice Hindman, jilted by a lover who will never return but for whom she desperately waits, is “trying to face bravely the fact that many people must live and die alone, even in Winesburg.” Seth Richmond is inexplicably unable to take the willing Helen White as his lover: “When it comes to loving someone, it won’t never be me.” And an old drunkard confesses to George, “I am a lover and have not found my thing to love. I have not lost faith [but] I know my faith will not be realized.” Near the conclusion of the book, the troubled lives of Kate Swift and the Reverend Curtis Hartman are thrown together with George’s on a stormy winter evening. Their meeting is electrifying and sets George on edge. His mother (another tortured soul) dies soon thereafter, and in the concluding chapter George leaves town on a train, headed for a new life in the city. Thus Sherwood Anderson fictionalizes his own flight from the Elyria, Ohio, paint factory, which mirrors Willa Cather’s train ride to Lincoln (and then Pittsburgh), and Edgar Lee Masters’s exit to New York City, all of which reflect

the departures of thousands of young turn-of-the-century midwesterners from their small towns and farms to cities.\footnote{Anderson, \textit{Winesburg, Ohio}, 193, 120, 142, 144.}

Like Cather and Masters, Sherwood Anderson cannot condemn the unhappy rural folk; he loves and empathizes with them. At the same time, he shows love for the town of Winesburg and its surrounding countryside:

The town lies in the midst of open fields, but beyond the fields are patches of woodlands. In the wooded places are many little cloistered nooks, quiet places where lovers go and sit on Sunday afternoons. Through the trees they look out across the fields and see farmers at work about the barns or people driving up and down the roads. In the town bells ring and occasionally a train passes, looking like a toy thing in the distance.

Anderson’s character George Willard loves the rural Midwest of his youth, but his prevailing emotion is sadness—sadness at viewing the passing of a region of farmers and small townspeople whose dreams have gone unfulfilled. George Willard must leave Winesburg, for “his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of manhood.”\footnote{Ibid., 116, 247.}

Upon completing high school, Sinclair Lewis (1885–1951) could not run far enough or fast enough from his physician father and hometown of Sauk Centre, on the Minnesota prairie. Soon dropping out of Yale, Lewis became a vagabond in Europe and South America, a social worker, utopian socialist, and newspaper and magazine editor before he turned to writing fiction in his thirties. To gather grist for his artistic mill, however, Lewis relied on memories of his Sauk Centre childhood. The result was the fictional town of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, in \textit{Main Street} (1920), perhaps the best known of all the rural realist novels. Set in the years around World War I, \textit{Main Street} is rich in detail, with descriptions of the natural setting, plants, and animals; ethnic dialect; comedy; satire; and development of the interesting minor characters Dave and Maud Dyer, the Haydocks, Miles Bjornstrom, the Widow Bogart, Erik Valborg,
Guy Pollack, Raymie Witherspoon, and others. The result is a perfect setting for a marital battle of competing worldviews by the lead characters, Dr. Will and Carol Kennicott.  

Will and Carol’s debate pits the values of conservative, rural Gopher Prairie against those of progressive, urban America. Will Kennicott is a country doctor, an aging bachelor who meets and marries a young professional woman from “the cities” and brings her to live in his beloved hometown. His bride Carol has earned a college degree in Saint Paul and worked as a librarian in Chicago, acquiring progressive, feminist beliefs. Carol sees herself as worldly and immediately sets out to “uplift” backward Gopher Prairie. She plans themed parties, organizes a dramatic troupe, lobbies for a new town hall, and voices her progressive political views. In all this she meets much resistance and becomes the object of gossip and derision. Her reaction is at first resolute and even droll (“Isn’t it wonderful how much we all know about one another in a small town like this,” she remarks pleasantly to Will’s busybody Aunt Bessie). Will’s reactions range from bemusement, to embarrassment, and, finally, to anger. Making no progress in her civic improvement campaign, Carol becomes bitter and contemplates (but does not consummate) a love affair with a young Swedish tailor, Erik Valborg. She even leaves Will, taking their young son and living for two years in Washington, D.C. At story’s end, however, Carol returns and makes her peace with Gopher Prairie. She still clings to her old beliefs but now accepts Gopher Prairie on its own terms, conceding to the need to work for incremental change.  

It is very interesting, and important, that Sinclair Lewis portrays Carol in nearly as bad a light as the narrow-minded provincials she (and Lewis) castigate. Carol has high ideals, but she is also scatterbrained, with a penchant for half-baked schemes, elitism, and shallow commitment to her supposed radicalism. If Main Street does have a hero, it is Doc Kennicott,  


135. Lewis, Main Street, 322.
whose good-natured perseverance more than makes up for his provincialism. Doc is a consummate midwesterner, and he shows Carol the beauties of the Minnesota prairie on a fall bird-hunting trip in a horse-drawn carriage; he takes Carol on another trip to the country when he makes a house call on an appreciative Swedish farm family. Doc Kennicott brings a voice of reason to bear on Carol’s erratic behavior. His berating of Carol after having intervened and terminated her “love affair” is pragmatic and final:

I bring babies into the world, and save lives, and make cranky husbands quit being mean to their wives. And then you go and moon over a Swede tailor because he can talk about how to put ruchings on a skirt! Hell of a thing for a man to fuss over!  

Doc Will Kennicott may lack artistic sensibility, but he is a scientist, with a good mind and a stout heart. Lewis actually places Will in equipoise—standing between Gopher Prairie’s most bigoted townspeople and Carol’s high-flown ideals. Indeed, Will’s pragmatic ways are as much a part of Sinclair Lewis’s Midwest as the prairies and wheat fields he lovingly describes. Main Street ends with Carol, back home in Gopher Prairie, insisting to Will, “I do not admit that Gopher Prairie is greater or more generous than Europe! I do not admit that dishwashing is enough to satisfy all women! I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith.” To which Will responds,

Sure. You bet you have. Well, good night. Sort of feels like it might snow tomorrow. Have to be thinking about putting up the storm windows pretty soon. Say, did you notice whether the girl put that screwdriver back?

The reader is left to reflect on the degree to which Sinclair Lewis is drawn to Doc Kennicott’s world view.  

Rural realism continued into the 1920s and ’30s, but with

136. Ibid., 381.
137. Geismar, Last of the Provincials, 72; Kazin, On Native Grounds, 221, 225–26; Lewis, Main Street, 381, 432. See Schorer, afterword to Lewis, Main Street, 439.
publication of *Spoon River Anthology, Winesburg, Ohio,* and *Main Street,* the rural realists had said just about everything they had to say. It was a great deal. They had exposed the illusion of rural innocence and small town virtue. They had portrayed the hard lot of midwestern women and the pragmatism of their marriages. They had pointed to economic and social injustice and called for populist and progressive reforms. They had, in a phrase, called into question the dream of an agrarianism. Yet (there is always a “yet” when talking of rural realism) these literary artists were “Jeffersonian hearts plagued by a strangely cold and despotic America.”138 Like their populist political allies, they were simultaneously drawn to historic and modern America. Richard Hofstadter has written,

> The utopia of the Populists was in the past, not the future... The Populists looked backward with longing to the lost agrarian Eden .... they would have liked to restore conditions prevailing before the development of industrialism and the commercialization of agriculture.

Hofstadter shows the populists were not true political realists because, paradoxically, they both rejected and embraced the romantic ideal of a farmers’ utopia. For the same reason, the populists’ literary counterparts—Howe, Garland, Cather, Masters, Anderson, Lewis—were not true literary realists. Their vision was too agrarian, and this Jeffersonian agrarianism makes their literature poignant. They were writers in search of a lost world.139

Just as upper Mississippi Valley writers seemed to have exhausted their creative well, lower Mississippi Valley artists stepped up. The Fugitive Poets and Agrarians of Vanderbilt University needed no lessons from upper midwesterners in populist agrarianism. Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren, and other kindred spirits were Vanderbilt professors and students who met at Sidney Hirsch’s

and James Frank’s Nashville, Tennessee, homes for poetry readings and criticism during the years 1910 to 1930. Hearing a poem read while they held a printed version in their hands, the group strove to focus discussion on the poet’s written words, shunning authors’ biographies and other nonprinted context. This rigor catalyzed into a collegial school of southern poets and novelists whose work was somehow both conservative and avant-garde.  

What the Fugitives and Agrarians shared was their method and their southernness. Their poetry and prose often (not always) focused on place, and that place was the American South. Their poems were highly experimental, known for use of free verse (abandoning conventional [e.g., iambic pentameter] forms), and unique punctuation (or lack thereof) and spacing to give their poems an important visual element. Labeling themselves “Fugitives” because of their urge “to flee from the extreme of conventionalism whether old or new,” they founded The Fugitive, a literary magazine that ran for nineteen issues from 1922 to 1925. Many of them went on to successful careers as writers, critics, and professors who taught a generation of English graduate students what was ultimately called the New Criticism, their method of focusing solely on the printed words of a text.

Allen Tate’s poem “Ode to the Confederate Dead” (1928) is a good example of the Fugitives’ blending of old and new. Tate (1899–1963) was born more than three decades after the end of the Civil War, in Clark County, Kentucky, and earned a BA in English from Vanderbilt in 1922. He later taught at Southwestern College (Memphis) and other colleges and authored biographies of Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis. Although his poem is not sentimental or adulatory, it is respectful of those who fought for the Confederacy. Moreover, its cadence and appearance are unique. The author’s somber voice begins by describing a Confederate graveyard in the late fall: “Row after row with strict

impunity / The headstones yield their names to the element,” Tate intones. “The wind whirrs without recollection; / In the riven troughs the splayed leaves... Seeing, seeing only the leaves / Flying, plunge and expire.” He continues, painting a picture of the horrible battles these men had fought, and alluding to their ultimate defeat. Throughout, Tate weaves the reactions of a modern southerner to his region’s tragic past into a poem that has a unique rhyme pattern, shape, and appearance.

Turn your eyes to the immoderate past,
Turn to the inscrutable infantry rising
Demons out of the earth—they will not last.
Stonewall, Stonewall, and the sunken fields of hemp,
Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill, Bull Run.
Lost in that orient of the thick and fast
You will curse the setting sun.

Cursing only the leaves crying
Like an old man in a storm
You hear the shout, the crazy hemlocks point
With troubled fingers to the silence which
Smothers you, a mummy, in time.

...

Leave now
The shut gate and the decomposing wall:
The gentle serpent, green in the mulberry bush,
Riots with his tongue through the hush—
Sentinel of the grave who counts us all!142

Robert Penn Warren (1905–89), the best known of the Fugitive and Agrarian writers, took a poet’s method and sensibilities into the realm of short stories and novels. Warren was a Kentuckian (Guthrie County) who earned his Vanderbilt English degree in 1925, going on to a highly successful career as a professor, critic, poet, and novelist. Along the way, he became the only American writer to earn a Pulitzer Prize in both fiction

(All the King’s Men [1946]) and poetry (Promises [1957]). In 1986, Daniel Boorstin, Librarian of Congress, designated Warren Poet Laureate of the United States. Known as “Red” to his friends, Robert Penn Warren was no romantic or apologist for the South, yet he could not follow the popular intellectual path of dismissing southerners and southernness as failed, backward, and racist. His art reflects a deep respect for the delicate balance of southern contradictions. For example, he begins his short story “The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger” with this poetic description of a southern redneck:

You have seen him a thousand times. You have seen him standing on the street corner on Saturday afternoon, in the little county-seat towns… His face is long and bony, the jawbone long under the drawn-in cheeks. The flesh along the jawbone is nicked in a couple of places where the unaccustomed razor has been drawn over the leather-coarse skin. A tiny bit of blood crusts brown where the nick is. The color of the face is red, a dull red like the red clay mud or clay dust which clings to the bottom of his pants and to the cast-iron brogans on his feet, or a red like the color of a piece of hewed cedar which has been left in the weather. The face does not look alive… But you see the eyes. You see that the eyes are alive. They are pale blue or gray, set back under the deep brows and thorny eyebrows. They are not wide, but are squinched up like eyes accustomed to wind or sun or to measuring the stroke of the ax or to fixing the object over the rifle sights. When you pass, you see that the eyes are alive and are warily and dispassionately estimating you from the ambush of the thorny brows. Then you pass on, and he stands there in that stillness that is his gift. 143

In All the King’s Men, Robert Penn Warren combines poetic descriptions of place, vernacular southern English, and a riveting plot based on the life of Louisiana’s controversial New Deal–era Governor Huey Long. Warren was perhaps drawn to Long’s story because, like most of the Fugitives and Agrarians, he was sympathetic to populism and the Democratic Party. However, unlike rural realist writings that touted populist solutions to

America’s problems, *All the King’s Men* portrays that dream run amok. Warren’s protagonist, a lower Mississippi Valley governor named Willie Stark, begins his career as a sincere reformer seeking justice for the common folk. In the end, like Huey Long, he becomes a corrupt authoritarian and victim of an assassin’s bullet. Along the way, readers meet supporting characters whose stories add heft to the core plot. Willie’s tale is interwoven with that of his loyal wife Lucy and their spoiled son Tom; his hard-boiled secretary (and sometimes lover) Sadie Burke; his loyal driver and bodyguard Sugar Boy; the corrupt political boss Tiny Duffy; the (seemingly) upright Judge Montegue Irwin; Anne and Adam Stanton of Burden’s Landing; and, most important, their lifelong friend, and Willie’s right-hand man, Jack Burden.  

“This has been the story of Willie Stark, but it’s my story, too. For I have a story.” So states the narrator Jack Burden near the end of *All the King’s Men*. Jack is a hard-drinking, cynical journalist and native of Burden’s Landing, a well-to-do Gulf Coast town named after his troubled family. Rejected in love by Anne Stanton, Jack leaves home to lead a dissolute life. He begins to write a history doctoral thesis about Cass Mastern, a gripping story of upper-class sin, adultery, and cruel chattel slavery as practiced in antebellum Kentucky, but fails to complete the manuscript. Jack next marries and works as a newspaperman, but his marriage fails and he lives in hotels. Then, he finds hope in Willie Stark’s campaign reforms and becomes the new governor’s chief researcher. Willie, however, often puts Jack’s skills to use abetting blackmail by uncovering the scandals of political enemies, including Jack’s childhood mentor (and, unbeknownst to Jack, his real father) Judge Irwin. Thus, Jack Burden’s story is ultimately one of his discovery of human sin and corruption, and loss of hope. Jack has been ruined—by his family, his failed loves, and his career. So he drinks, and he sleeps, and he writes. “I’m the joker in the deck. My name is Jack, and I’m the wild Jack and I’m not one-eyed.”

144. Robert Penn Warren, *All the King’s Men* (1946; repr. New York, 1974). I have consulted, but not quoted from, the “restored edition” of *All the King’s Men* (New York, 2001).

145. Ibid., 435, 414, passim.
Willie Stark begins his political career as a faithful family man, teetotaler, and liberal idealist, but the reader watches 1930s southern politics turn him into a philandering, alcoholic demagogue. Willie wants to do what he sees as fair—soak the rich via heavy oil, mineral extraction, and income taxes, and use their money to give the common folk “free” medical care, schools and colleges, retirement pensions, and roads and bridges. Even after Jack begins to see Willie’s failings, he defends him to his wealthy mother and stepfather and Judge Irwin, stating that if the state’s former power brokers had not left the poor in such desperate straits, Willie could have never risen to the governorship.\footnote{Ibid., passim.}

Meanwhile, Willie spins out of control, winning elections and pushing through legislation by crushing anyone who stands in his way. After his upright populist attorney general Hugh Miller resigns in protest, Willie remarks dismissively, “He wanted to make bricks but he just didn’t know somebody has to paddle in the mud to make ’em.” “Sure, there’s some graft,” Willie explains later, “but there’s just enough to make the wheels turn without squeaking... Sure I got a bunch of crooks around here ... I got my eye on ’em. And do I deliver the state something? I damned well do.” Jack sums up Willie’s method cynically, as “moral neutrality... The morally bad agent may perform the deed which is good.”\footnote{Ibid., 256, 393.}

Willie Stark’s power reaches a crescendo when he successfully uses blackmail to squash an impeachment attempt. As Willie’s enemies admit defeat, tens of thousands of common folk gather on the state capitol grounds to hear him speak. “They tried to ruin me but they are ruined,” Willie begins his speech, to the roar of the crowd.

They tried to ruin me because they did not like what I have done. Do you like what I have done? [The crowd roars its approval] I tell you what I am going to do. I am going to build a hospital. The biggest and the finest money can buy. It will belong to you. Any man or woman or child who is sick or in pain can go in those doors...
Free. Not as charity. But as a right. It is your right. Do you hear? It is your right! [Crowd roars]... That the rich man and the great companies that draw wealth from this state shall pay this state a fair share. That you shall not be deprived of hope! [Crowd roars] I will do those things. So help me God. I shall live in your will and your right. And if any man tries to stop me in this fulfilling of that right and that will I will break him. I’ll break him like that! ... I’ll smite him. Hip and thigh, shinbone and neckbone, kidney punch, rabbit punch, upper cut and solar plexus. And I don’t care what I hit him with. Or how! [Crowd roars] ... I’ll hit him with that meat ax! ... Gimme that meat ax!148

Warren ends *All the King’s Men* twice. In the first ending, Willie’s hubris causes catastrophe. Tom Stark is paralyzed in a college football game and dies, leaving behind a pregnant girl he met on a one-night stand. Lucy, distraught over her only son’s death and disgusted with Willie’s drinking and philandering, moves out of the governor’s mansion. After Jack tells Judge Irwin he has uncovered his past crimes and unethical behavior, the judge commits suicide, and only then does Jack learn he is his true father. Meanwhile, Anne has become involved in a love affair with Willie, sending Jack into despair. When Anne’s brother Adam finds out about the love affair, he assassinates Willie in the state capitol building.149

Robert Penn Warren then counters this tragic ending with a more hopeful one, an epilog as it were. As Warren briefly yet evocatively tells the stories of *All the King’s Men*’s surviving characters, the reader learns that life will go on. Willie’s hospital is built and named after Tom Stark; Lucy begins to build a new life by adopting and raising Tom’s love child; Sadie moves away from the capitol; and Sugar Boy spends his days in the reading room of the public library. Jack goes back to work on his Cass Mastern manuscript, marries Anne, and they leave Burden’s Landing. Moreover, Jack tells off Tiny Duffy (now governor) and renews his friendship with Hugh Miller. “It looks as though

148. Ibid., 261–62. Willie’s speech is quoted here without Jack’s and Ann’s interspersed comments.
149. Ibid., 267–401, passim. Huey Long was assassinated in similar fashion.
Hugh will get back into politics,” Jack remarks, “and when he does I’ll be along to hold his coat. I’ve had some valuable experience in that line.” Thus the promise of populist reform somehow survives.150

Only a few years after The Fugitive ceased publication, and a decade and a half before publication of All the King’s Men, Robert Penn Warren and three other members of the Fugitive group moved on to an endeavor that would change the landscape of twentieth-century American thought. Although connections between the Fugitives and Agrarians have been overstated, there are important ties. There were differences of opinion among Agrarians themselves, yet they shared fundamental beliefs. The Agrarians were a group of 1930s interdisciplinary scholars who moved beyond Fugitive literature and poetry to include philosophy, history, economics, and sociology within their creative scope. The Fugitives John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Alan Tate, and Robert Penn Warren were joined by Frank L. Owsley, Herman Nixon, Lyle Lanier, John Gould Fletcher, Stark Young, and others to sound their battle cry in I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition, by Twelve Southerners (1930).151

The Agrarian agenda was ambitious. They opposed and countered what they considered to be the major trends of post–Civil War American society. The “Statement of Principles” of I’ll Take My Stand begins,

The authors contributing to this book are Southerners... they entertain many convictions in common ... all tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all of us as much as agree the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase Agrarian vs. Industrial.

Union victory, the Agrarians argued, imposed northern social and economic systems of urbanism, capitalist industrialism, consumption, and applied science on the South and the nation as

a whole. A values system composed of materialism, conformity, and positivism (an uncritical belief in progress) accompanied this imposition. Agrarians warned that Yankees, in their triumph over the South, had thrown out the baby with the bathwater, as it were. Agrarians pointed to important southern beliefs in individualism over conformity, spirituality over materialism, and localism over a centralized state. They harked back to the ideas of Thomas Jefferson (and Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democrats) who believed agriculture must remain strong to preserve republican virtue; farmsteads and small towns must counter urban manufacturing centers and their slums. The Agrarians’ non-Marxist critique of modern capitalism called for a return to agriculture, the nuclear family and marriage, religion, the arts, and what these southerners saw as “gentility”—manners, good conversation, and hospitality.152

Critics were quick to pounce, labeling the Agrarians romantics, “sufferers from nostalgic vapors,” and “Neo-Confederates.” They pointed to southern backwardness (e.g., no antebellum public schools, poor diet and low standard of living, and racism) and sarcastically noted the hypocrisy of professors and intellectuals calling for a ‘return to the land.’ It is true that, because of their upbringing, men like Owsley and Ransom entertained racist, or at best, apologetic views of slavery and postbellum Jim Crow laws. As southern Democrats, some Agrarians supported and defended racial segregation as the basis of Democrat dominance. Other members of the group held progressive views on race. The Cass Mastern story in All the King’s Men is a scathing indictment of slavery, and Warren became an outspoken advocate of desegregation. Despite failings, there is great value in aspects of the Agrarian philosophy, and Agrarians did important work. For example, Frank L. Owsley’s book Plain Folk of the Old South (1949) is a pioneering social history of inarticulate white freeholders, and novelists and poets like Tate, Ransom, Donald, and Warren have undoubtedly enriched our national literature. The Agrarians were not naïve;

152. John Crowe Ransom et al., I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (New York, 1930), ix–xx (qtn., ix); Conkin, Southern Agrarians, 75–76.
they produced *All the King’s Men* and *Plain Folk of the Old South*, not *Gone with the Wind*. As Stark Young wrote,

If anything is clear it is that we can never go back, and neither this essay nor any intelligent person that I know in the South desires a literal restoration of the old Southern life, even if that were possible; dead days are gone, and if by some chance they should return, we should find them intolerable. But out of any epoch in civilization there may arise things worth while, that are the flowers of it. To abandon these, when another epoch arrives, is only stupid, so long as there is still in them the breath and flux of life.\(^{153}\)

Like rural realists who preceded them, Agrarians saw that industrial progress had brought America problems alongside blessings. They yearned for an agrarian utopia while simultaneously working for modern cultural, economic, and political causes. There was indeed a big, healthy baby in the bathwater. Today’s intellectuals who characterize Agrarian views as anachronistic or, more likely, have never even read or heard of the Agrarians, should take a good look around the country in which they reside. Agrarianism is alive and well in America, at seemingly incompatible ends of the republic’s socio-political fabric. On the one hand, there are so-called conservatives who listen to country music, watch *Outdoor Life Network*, stock their garages with drums of water and flour, cultivate their own gardens (with advice from the *Farmer’s Almanac*), preserve fruit and vegetables, keep firearms and ample ammunition to hunt, and dry (or freeze) their meat. Then there are so-called liberals who listen to folk music, watch *Nature* on PBS, buy organic fruit and vegetables at farmer’s markets or food co-ops, and tend their own urban and suburban backyard gardens (where they also gather eggs from free range chickens), all the while reading modern versions of *Small Is Beautiful* and the Foxfire books. On weekends, the latter folks load their kayaks onto custom racks atop Subaru Outbacks and head for the wilderness (and state

\(^{153}\) Young et al., *The Literature of the South*, 600–607; Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (1949; repr. Baton Rouge, La., 1982); Stark Young, "Not in Memoriam, but in Defense," in Ransom et al., *I’ll Take My Stand*, 328.
and national parks), where they encounter the former folks in Chevrolet Silverados and Jeep Cherokees, four-wheeling up the same dirt roads. These folks may not always get along, but they are cut from the same cloth. We are still Agrarians.154

In 1985, following a midwestern drought and agricultural recession, a group of country rock musicians started a fund-raising concert series called Farm Aid. Willy Nelson, John Mellencamp, Neil Young, and several others allied to “save the family farm” from extinction. Nelson, a Texas songwriter and cofounder of the Outlaw movement in country music, joined Young, a Canadian rocker and 1960s Buffalo Springfield veteran who had fronted the country rock bands Crazy Horse and the International Harvesters. Mellencamp was an upper Mississippi Valley folk rocker who, throughout a long career, has written and sung about the small towns and farms of his southern Indiana youth. Like Nelson and Young, Mellencamp was a modern liberal captivated by images of rural lifestyle and the myth of an agrarian Eden. In “Rain on the Scarecrow,” for example, he sings of bank foreclosures in true populist style: “The crops we grew last summer / weren’t enough to pay the loans / ... When you take away a man’s dignity he can’t work his field and cows.” Yet this lament is balanced by Mellencamp’s paen to rural life, his smash hit “Small Town”:

No, I cannot forget where it is that I come from.
I cannot forget the people who love me.
Yeah, I can be myself in this small town,
and people let me be just what I want to be.
Well, I was born in a small town,
and I can breathe in a small town.

Gonna die in this small town,
and that's probably where they’ll bury me.155

One century before Farm Aid musicians celebrated small midwestern towns and farming, the populists had already fought, and failed, to save the American family farm. Rural realists and Agrarians followed in their wake, but today about one percent of all Americans are farmers or, more accurately, “agri-businessmen.” Since the 1890s, the family farm has gradually become an imaginative construction. Yet this fact is no hindrance to Farm Aid activists and countless Americans today who, like the populists, rural realists, and Agrarians before them, imagine the family farm still exists and are fighting hard to “save” it from destruction.

The agrarian dream dies hard. And it is a blessing that is so, for much that is good can yet be salvaged from American agrarianism. Frederick Jackson Turner once wrote that even though the pre-modern era has passed, modern Americans retain some of the traits and characteristics that helped shape the early frontier folk. Turner was right, and so too was Stark Young, who wrote that out of the agrarian Mississippi Valley arose “things worth while, that are the flowers of it.” Localism, individualism within the context of communities and neighborhoods, spirituality and religion, the nuclear family, folk-based arts, manners, good conversation, and hospitality are essential to sustain any epoch of American civilization.

155. Holly George-Warren, Farm Aid: A Song for America (Emmaus, Pa., 2005) is a celebratory retrospective with photography and sound accoutrement, but the above analysis is my own. Quotes from John Mellencamp, “Rain on the Scarecrow” and “Small Town,” Scarecrow, 1985, Mercury Records, LP. Mellencamp is briefly discussed in chapter 8, this work.