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# Reprinted Excerpt from *Writing Backwards: Historical Fiction and the Reshaping of the American Canon* (2023), by Alexander Manshel, and an Interview with the Author

ALEXANDER MANSHEL

## Q&A with Alexander Manshel, conducted by Caterina Domeneghini and Claire Barnes (October 2024)

**Caterina Domeneghini and Claire Barnes:** Could you tell us a little more about the initial impetus behind this book project, and your choice of title—what are the layers of meaning inherent in *Writing Backwards*?

**Alexander Manshel:** The book argues that over the last forty years the American literary field has transformed to celebrate narratives of the historical past over all other literary genres. In this period, key literary institutions—from the National Endowment for the Arts to major literary prizes and university English departments—have worked to promote the idea that historical fiction is singular in its artistic seriousness, its pedagogical utility, and its political potency. This shift in literary value has gone hand in hand with the increasing recognition and canonization of Black, Asian American, Latinx, and Indigenous writers in the United States: that is, the vast majority of minoritized writers who have been consecrated by these institutions over the last four decades have been celebrated for writing about the historical past.

The book began as an article project about trends in *when*, in time, twenty-first-century historical fiction is set. I hypothesized that literary fiction's historical attention was becoming more recent, that the novel's historical distance was shrinking, and I wanted to test that supposition on a small subset: finalists for major American literary prizes. What I found was not only


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that that hypothesis proved true—the novel of recent history was becoming a recognizable genre in contemporary fiction—but also that it was part of a much larger phenomenon that included other historical genres, such as the WWII novel (analyzed in the excerpt reprinted here), the meta-slave narrative, the multigenerational family saga, and narratives of immigration. *Writing Backwards* looks closely at each of these genres, examining the institutional environment that has elevated them as well as how that environment has shaped their form and aesthetics.

The title of the book points to the backwards-facing gaze of contemporary literary fiction, as well as to how writers of color have used their fiction to write back to the historical record with stories of the past that have been overlooked or even actively disregarded. That said, the title also alludes to the irony, the counterintuitive nature, of a school of thought that views writing about the past as the best way to address the politics of the present.

**CD & CB:** At the end of your introduction, you say that one of your aims in the book is to inspire "a new periodization that recognizes just how historical the contemporary has become." Can you expand on this interesting point?

**AM:** Scholars of "contemporary fiction" have long pointed out just how vague and amorphous that term really is. Unlike "Elizabethan drama," "Romantic poetry," or "the postwar novel," the phrase denotes neither a specific historical context nor a coherent aesthetic program. Theodore Martin writes particularly well about this in his book *Contemporary Drift*. "The contemporary has its problems," he observes. "It is a periodizing term that doesn't exactly periodize; a measure of history that fails to designate a specific literary or historical period." Caught between a historicism that's too close to properly historicize, and a formalism that can't trust the staying power of its object, the contemporary and those who study it, Martin argues, are "the literature department's *bad conscience*: an expression of the vexed disciplinary relationship between literature and history by way of a literary period in which the status of history becomes a newly open question."

Part of what I am trying to do in this book is to identify the central contexts and chief aesthetics of contemporary American literature. I'd argue that the best way to periodize the last forty years of literary fiction is—somewhat ironically—by way of its fascination with the historical past. In many ways, the relentless canonization of historical fiction solves contemporary literature's two biggest problems: on the one hand, the problem of "too close" historicism is alleviated by the historical distance of its narrative settings; on the other, the timelessness of the work is shored up by the historical significance of the periods or figures it fictionalizes.

In the decades following the 1980s, as university English departments sought to diversify their syllabi (what Jodi Melamed calls the period of "liberal multiculturalism") while also situating literature more firmly in history (what Joseph North calls "the historicist/contextualist paradigm"), those same departments fixated on the work of minoritized historical novelists, from Toni Morrison and Leslie Marmon Silko to Viet Thanh Nguyen, Jesmyn Ward, and Colson Whitehead.

**CD & CB:** You also quote Henry James's condemnation of the genre as being hampered by a "fatal *cheapness*," redolent of romanticism and nostalgia. It is clear from the numerous statistics and case studies you provide that, a century later, historical fiction occupies a different role in the American literary consciousness and now operates at "the very center of the American literary canon." In today's socio-political climate, however, nationalist narratives of false nostalgia and idealized imagined pasts do still hold significant sway over the popular imagination. How do you understand historical fiction to fit into these discussions?

**AM:** Henry James wasn't alone in trying to defend literary fiction from the "cheapness" of historical fiction as a genre. Even great theorists of the form—from Lukács to Jameson and Hutcheon—work hard to separate *the historical novel* (much vaunted) from the better part of *historical fiction* (much derided). In my book, I prefer the latter term over the former, in part because the latter term seems to denote a broad spectrum of fictional narratives of the historical past, while the former denotes just one specific sector of that spectrum. As I argue, narrow critical definitions of what counts


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as the historical novel—in terms of its historical distance, subject matter, or politics—have prevented us from properly recognizing the great wealth of historical fiction that has been written, celebrated, and studied over the last half century.

Of course, you're right that this boom in historical fiction overlaps with a period of nationalist nostalgia: what do we make of novelists "writing backwards" as demagogues strive to "make America great again"? In the *Antinomies of Realism*, Jameson argues that historical fiction can easily be accused of "harbor[ing] conservative sympathies," given that it "has so often been marshaled to serve political ends, of which nationalism is only the most obvious." While this may be true for some more popular iterations of the genre, my sense of literary fiction's penchant for the past is somewhat different. I argue that canonical novelists—and the critics and scholars who consecrate them—are not looking to the past to idealize, but rather to use it as a staging ground for contemporary political discourse. Narratives of the Antebellum South analogize contemporary mass incarceration, just as novels fictionalizing Japanese American incarceration during World War II speak, again analogically, to xenophobia in the present.

This may not be conservative or nationalist in nature, but it is certainly another form of historical fantasy. As I argue in the book's coda, the retrospective gaze that drives a great deal of contemporary literary fiction has also come to frame contemporary political discourse, on the left as much as the right (albeit less obviously). The increasingly common refrain that such-and-such conservative politician or policy "will be judged harshly by history" only emphasizes how historical narratives have become a chief means—at least discursively—of addressing inequality and injustice in the present. I'd argue that literary fiction has done a great deal to contribute to this.

**CD & CB:** Another way of looking at this perceived "cheapness," perhaps, is to consider the impact of wide circulation and mass appeal. How do you see the role of publishing in making these narratives more accessible to the "general reader"?

**AM:** Publishers have done a great deal to contribute to the canonization of historical fiction, but I don't see them as the "prime movers" of this shift in literary value. In *Under the Cover*, Clayton Childress argues that the fields of creation, production, and reception are all "interdependent"—and I agree. Yes, publishers work to winnow the vast field of what *could* circulate publicly into the select few novels that *will*. But as they do this, those same publishers also have an eye on the kinds of books that win major prizes, garner sustained scholarly attention, and get taught in high school and university classrooms. In this way, contemporary canon formation is not a linear process but a kind of dynamic circulatory system of cultural value.

**CD & CB:** On a similar note, you identify that historical fiction accounts for around three quarters of novels shortlisted for recent literary prizes. In the chapter portion enclosed here we can also see what happens when those novels represent a very specific period of historical interest as recounted by a very specific demographic—with those not fitting into this comfortable niche at risk of being "snubbed" by awarding bodies. Can you talk more about the role of literary awards in cultivating prestige and shaping cultural and historical memory?

**AM:** I have been studying literary prizes, their place in cultural discourse, and their role in the formation of literary canons, for the better part of the last decade. When I started this work in graduate school, I often encountered the arguments—from encouraging advisors and hostile conference question-askers alike—that prizewinning fiction is not the same as literary fiction, that prizes are middlebrow institutions that critics and scholars ignore, and that when it comes to predicting literary timelessness the awards get it wrong just as often as they get it right. In brief: "Who cares about literary prizes?"

So when Laura B. McGrath, J.D. Porter, and I tried to investigate those claims on an empirical basis for a piece in *Public Books*, that's exactly what we called it. What we ultimately found is that, in fact, a great many people, from your average reader to literary critics and university instructors, care quite deeply about literary prizes and the works that they consecrate. Just reach-

ing the shortlist of a major literary award—let alone actually winning the thing—makes a book significantly more likely to be read, taught, and studied.

For these reasons, trends in literary prize shortlists are one metric that I use in *Writing Backwards* to document the growing celebration of historical fiction, the increasing recognition of writers of color, and the significant overlap between the two. But if, as I've just argued, everyone from publishers to academics has at least one eye on the prize, the consistent consecration of one particular genre may work to effectively disincentivize the composition, publication, and canonization of others, such as novels by writers of color set squarely in the present. From 1980 to 2019, historical fiction made up more than 70% of the novels by Black writers to be shortlisted for a major American literary award; for novels by Asian American and Indigenous writers, those figures are even higher—80% and 92%, respectively. In other words, historical fiction may be the single most diverse genre in contemporary American letters, but the corollary is also true: prizewinning novels about the way we live now are largely written by white writers. Therefore, as I argue in the book, the turn to the historical past "may now work to circumscribe minoritized writers, even as it consecrates them."

**CD & CB:** Your last point brings to mind one of the arguments that Filipino-American writer Elaine Castillo also makes in her compelling 2022 book, *How to Read Now*. Castillo writes: "white American readers expect books by writers of color to 'teach' them specific lessons—about historical trauma, far-flung wars, their own sins…." Meanwhile, the task of turning to "universal" values that can bind us all together rests on the shoulders of Western, often male and often dead authors only. Again, in Castillo's words: "we largely end up going to writers of color to learn the specific, and go to white writers to feel the universal." Isn't this a way to turn the challenge of "opening up" the canon on its head?

**AM:** Absolutely! And scholars have been interrogating those expectations for decades. I am particularly indebted to the work of Mark Chiang, Roderick Ferguson, John Guillory, Lisa Lowe, Elena Machado Saez, Jodi Melamed, and David Palumbo-Liu, who have all written about the fraught politics of canonizing and institutionalizing writers of color in the United States. I see my

book as building on these scholars' claims by focusing not just on the demographics of who is being elevated by central literary institutions, but also on the form and aesthetics of *what* is being consecrated. As I argue in the book, the charge that literary studies has contributed to a displacement of "material forces" onto "aesthetic culture"—and here I'm citing Melamed in particular—"is actually a doubled one: political representation has been transmuted into literary representation, but the politics of the present have likewise been displaced onto narratives of the historical past."

On your point about the ethnicized particular versus the white universal, I am reminded of Nam Le's outstanding short story "Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice." It's about an MFA student at Iowa who is caught between the (implicitly white) Faulknerian imperative to "write about the old verities" and the expectation that, as a Vietnamese writer, he should ventriloquize his father's traumatic experience of the war. When I teach the story, as I do often, we discuss not only how the young writer in the story evades and obeys these conflicting commands, but also how Le himself does so. Part of what I document in the book, however, is that the pressure to look backward toward the horrors of the past is one that has intensified for Black, Asian American, Latinx, and Indigenous novelists, but it's a pressure that is being exerted on white writers as well. Literary fiction has become so synonymous with historical fiction that today the pursuit of the "old verities" is as much about the universalizing gesture of the second term as it is the historicizing gesture of the first.

**CD & CB:** How do you understand maintaining a critical standpoint on historical events as fitting into the larger scope of writing marginalized voices "back" into literary history? For instance, in the enclosed passage you mention the misplaced optimism of indigenous soldiers putting on U.S. army uniforms in WWII and assuming this "uniformity" represented their successful acceptance or integration into white America. How might authors avoid this same trap when reintegrating indigenous voices "back into" such loaded narratives?

**AM:** My sense is that the minoritized novelists that I study in the book are tremendously clear-eyed about what writing about the past can and cannot accomplish. In more than a few cases, their view is far more nuanced, and indeed more cynical, than the view of some of their critics and readers. You're citing Leslie Marmon Silko here, and the way her World War II novel *Ceremony* critiques nationalist cultural narratives even (or perhaps especially) as they seek to enlist Indigenous communities. It's a novel that is not just working to *include* Native peoples in the historical record of the war, but one that argues that such inclusion requires a necessary revision of that record.

I devote an entire chapter of the book to the fascinating historical novels of Colson Whitehead, whose view of history seems to have shifted considerably over the last two decades of his career. One way to read his first novel, *The Intuitionist*, is as a kind of narrativization of Toni Morrison's claims in *Playing in the Dark*. Much of the novel's plot is devoted to unearthing the obscured Black presence in American intellectual history and the institutions that perpetuate it. Fast forward fifteen or twenty years and Whitehead's claims about "incorporation" seem far more jaundiced. In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead's protagonist Cora—a woman who escapes enslavement in the Antebellum South—reaches a putatively free state to find that the only employment she can get is as a historical reenactor performing a white curator's narrative of enslavement.

All this is to say that, if we're looking carefully at the work that novelists have been producing over the last several decades, "maintaining a critical standpoint" is unavoidable. The primary demystification I'm pursuing as a scholar is of the institutional logics that have sprung up around these narratives of the past—logics, I should add, that novelists have long been wary of.

**CD & CB:** Your chapter "Reading the Family Tree" shows how the genre of multigenerational historical fiction greatly appeals to the seminar room, where the "*reading teaches us empathy*" mantra has become widespread across American universities in particular. Yet many critics have turned against this pedagogical approach: Castillo calls it a "fiction," replacing the "logic of empathy" with the "logic of inheritance" (that is, we are all entan-

gled in these stories, as victims, oppressors, or both); C. Namwali Serpell calls it "banal," even "selfish," and asks for more representation and more activism, a more engaged understanding of art as "a combustion engine." How do you overcome these problems in your teaching practice? And do you have your own more effective alternative to empathy?

**AM:** I find Serpell's rejection of the "reading for empathy" program persuasive, especially her claim that that interpretive strategy has become a mode of "distraction" or deferral for readers, divorced from any clear "imperative to take action." As Serpell puts it in her 2019 essay for the *New York Review of Books*, "The Banality of Empathy," "the idea that [readers] can and ought to use art to inhabit others, especially the marginalized" can easily tip into the "relishing of suffering by those who are safe from it," becoming "an emotional palliative that distracts us from real inequities." But despite these powerful arguments, my sense is that "empathetic reading" is still a large part of how literature is taught—and, politically, how it is defended—by a great many people, including secondary and university educators.

In my own teaching, I find that the best way to avoid the assumptions of this program is to make my students' aesthetic and political expectations part of our discussion. To what extent do they expect or even desire narratives of trauma, violence, recovery, catharsis, etc. and what is motivating those desires? To what extent do the writers we're encountering satisfy or disappoint those expectations? Just last week we were reading Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* and comparing it to Morrison's *Beloved*. One student remarked (rather brilliantly) that, if part of the power of the latter novel is how it explores the complex interiority of each of its characters, part of what makes the former so interesting is how it holds the reader at arm's length, teasing and ultimately rejecting their desire for interiority, intimacy, and access.

**CD & CB:** You write: "Longevity produces a certain kind of literary-historical knowledge, as does ephemerality." Can you tell us a bit more?

**AM:** That's an argument I make about the study of literary awards in particular. As critics like to tell us, literary prizes get things wrong just as often as they get them right when it comes to predicting what will last. Consider the list of great writers who were snubbed in their lifetimes, or the canonical works that were overlooked in their immediate moment. *Beloved* lost the 1987 National Book Award, after all, and to Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*. Likewise, you might take a look at the shortlist for the Pulitzer or the Booker from a decade ago and be shocked at just how quickly these celebrated novels have been forgotten. For the scholar of literary history, however, this is one of the prize's greatest strengths as a measure of aesthetic value. It does not point to what can be confirmed, only in retrospect, by the literary canon as it has developed, but rather to what was consecrated, if only by some, if only for a moment, as that canon was in the process of developing. In this way, cultural valuations that have proved to be ephemeral show us alternate possibilities for what shape literary history might have taken. And, when viewed in the aggregate—that is, when we look at decades of shortlists rather than just a single year's finalists—these synchronic aesthetic judgments point to larger transformations in the literary field.

**CD & CB:** To counterpose longevity with ephemerality: our special issue focuses on constructed notions of the "classic/al" text. One frequent claim is that a text becomes a "classic" when it transcends time and place. What happens when the narratives that we call "classics" are so tied to a specific event, as in the case of historical fiction?

**AM:** I argue that part of what has nudged so many works of historical fiction toward the status of the "classic" is precisely this relation to periods or events that we might consider historiographically "canonical." That is, the significance of a novel set during World War II or the civil rights era or September 2001 is, to some extent, self-evident. There is a certain amount of symbolic capital that a historical novel borrows from its setting. At the same time, when novels take up events of the very recent past—as I discuss in the last chapter of the book—this relation becomes more reciprocal. The novel gains a measure of relevance by fictionalizing the signal catastrophes of recent history, just as the events themselves gain historiographical cur-

rency by virtue of their being fictionalized. If journalism is the first rough draft of history, then fiction acts as an important second draft that testifies to this or that moment being pivotal or significant (perhaps even more than it seemed at the time). If a work of historical fiction is successful enough in this regard, it can actually be eclipsed by the period or events it is focalizing. For example, I suspect that many historians who write about the "gilded age" in American history have spent little time with Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner's *The Gilded Age*, which first coined the phrase to describe a period just a few years in the rearview. Likewise, if literary scholars don't pay attention to the subtle gradations between the present and the recent past—a 2005 novel set in 2001, say, or a 2014 novel about the fallout from 2008—then we end up with a kind of broad-brush historicism that (ironically) erases those historical gradations entirely.

**CD & CB:** Do you think that historical fiction, which you say has now become synonymous with literary fiction, also demands the same ethical response as the "classic" American novel (whatever that means), or are the stakes higher somehow?

**AM:** I don't think that historical fiction demands an encounter with literature that is somehow more ethical or more important, but I'm fascinated by the assumption that it does. Indeed, one way of describing my book is as an investigation of how that line of thinking has consolidated over the last forty years.

**CD & CB:** Urrea describes his *Good Night, Irene* as a "WWII epic"—a common turn of phrase when describing projects of scale and significance. How do you understand interplays between the "epic" and the "canonical"? In the context of this issue, classic(al) epic is also a looming presence—the *Iliad*, for instance, could be considered an early instance of "historical fiction," as some Homeric critics indeed contended. Do you think that a classical epic poem such as this can be inscribed in the same literary repository to which the American imagination returns when constructing, say, ideals of heroism?

**AM:** This is a fascinating and important question, and one that I'm not sure I can answer in brief. I agree that the epic form is helpful in understanding this turn toward the historical past, both in how the turn converges with and diverges from epic. Bakhtin writes that the "epic past" is "valorized…absolute and complete…as closed as a circle" inside which "everything is finished, already over." Crucially, the past narrativized in the epic is "walled off from all subsequent times by an impenetrable boundary," and "preserved and revealed only in the form of national tradition." I think that some contemporary historical fiction—and a number of World War II novels, in particular—move in the direction of what Bakhtin describes as the "epic past." They view national history and, more specifically, lionized narratives of the war and wartime heroism, as the basis for a more contemporary version of an American national mythos.

In this way, World War II provides a kind of cosmology for the contemporary, an origin story for the world order as it exists now, even as it is also "walled off" (to use Bakhtin's term) from the present. Bakhtin writes that what makes the "novelistic spirit" distinct from epic is that it works to pierce that boundary, considering the past "without any distance, on the level of contemporary reality, in a zone of direct and even crude contact. Even where the past or myth serves as the subject of representation in these genres there is no epic distance." And he adds that comedy and laughter do much to dismantle that distance and its valorization of the past. In the chapter you've excerpted here, I argue that especially in the 1960s and 1970s the World War II novel was imbued with the comic and "novelistic" spirit that Bakhtin describes. In the decades since, that mode has largely been replaced by a more reverential, more sincere, and — yes — more epic mode of valorization. After all, what is the so-called "Greatest Generation" other than the construction of an epic past?

**CD & CB:** Discussing *Time's Arrow* in the chapter "Contemporary Fiction in Reverse," you identify that "while late twentieth-century literary fiction inherited postmodernism's fascinations with history and formal experimentation, it also outgrew and even actively rejected literary postmodernism's "second move," using fiction as a means of connecting with history rather

than calling that very connection into question." In "The Making of the Greatest Generation," you identify a shift towards "the deep interiority of high modernism" in novels such as *Ceremony*, which decenter the traditionally white narratives of WWII. Modernist thought can be understood as emerging from the fragmentation brought about by global conflict; to what extent do you see historical fiction as implicated in this?

**AM:** The historical narratives that have been most celebrated over the last forty years represent, in large part, a return to modernist aesthetics and a move away from the irony, comedy, and fabulation of the postmodern period. That said, while this may describe the better part of what has been most consecrated during this period, it does not describe the entirety. In *Writing Backwards*, I try to spend as much time on the writers who have in one way or another resisted these dominant aesthetics as I do on those who have developed and maintained them: Martin Amis, yes, but also David Bradley, Julie Otsuka, Colson Whitehead, Ruth Ozeki, and Viet Thanh Nguyen, to name just a few.

**CD & CB:** A final question: In *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996), Terry Eagleton uses the phrase "from Plato to NATO" in his critique of how classic texts accompany so-called grand historical narratives, which tend to advance conservative, "western"-centric ideologies. The position of the United States is particularly important in this regard, given its self-perceived exceptionalism in international politics and guardianship of an age-old tradition that allegedly began with ancient Greece. This aligns well with the argument in your introduction that "American imperialism—previously a military affair carried out by soldiers and protested in the streets—is now a primarily cultural mission, executed via syllabi and contested in university classrooms." Is it possible for syllabi to teach "the best of what was thought and said…to explain America to the world" without falling into parochialism or jingoism?

**AM:** That is certainly the question, especially as we look to the near future—of the nation and the discipline both! In fact, it's a question that runs to the heart of what I'm working on now: a history of high school English curricula in the United States. I won't scoop myself, but I will say that

the secondary school literature classroom is the place where these questions about the relation between the literary canon and national identity, not to mention questions about the future of literary studies as a discipline, are more live—and fraught—than anywhere else. I write at length about the culture and canon wars of the 1980s and 1990s in *Writing Backwards*, and about how that period in the history of the university English department has shaped American literature and the national historical imagination that it shapes in turn. But as the culture wars of the early 2020s have made abundantly clear, it is now the high school English department where those battles are fiercest. In *Cultural Capital*, Guillory describes the university "as a space of deliberate and strategic withdrawal, as the withdrawal of literary culture from 'the world.'" For better or for worse, the secondary school neither desires nor enjoys such asylum. As the recent string of books banned by local school boards and state legislatures grimly testifies, there are few incarnations of the so-called "public humanities" more public than the teaching of high school English. So that's where I'm headed next, moving in reverse from the university literary canon to the high school canon, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

*The interview has been edited for clarity and length.*

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## THE MAKING OF THE GREATEST GENERATION

*All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.*

—Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*

## WAR MEDALS

**IN A** 2018 interview with the *Dallas Morning News*, Luis Alberto Urrea was asked how he came to write *The House of Broken Angels*, his much-lauded novel about an extended Mexican American family. "I never intended to write this book," Urrea responded, explaining that he had actually been "working on a World War II epic for a while." An ambitious choice for a prominent American novelist, given that in the first two decades of the twenty-first century alone, more than two dozen finalists and winners for the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the National Book Critics Circle Award were set partly or entirely during the war, including novels by Michael Chabon, Jeffrey Eugenides, Joyce Carol Oates, Philip Roth, and William T. Vollman.[1] Despite the abiding sense of artistic seriousness attached to the period, Urrea found that his own war novel in progress was, among his closest confidants, something of an object of comedy. "The joke amongst my loved ones is that the readers are going to get that book when it comes out, and say, 'Where are the Mexicans?'"[2] Though half a million Latinx service members served in the U.S. Armed Forces during the war, for Urrea, there was something about the genre of the "World War II epic" that could not quite accommodate them.[3] At least for the time being, Urrea explained, "I put the World War II epic aside."[4]

In the seventy years between 1950 and 2020, the shortlists for the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Pulitzer Prize included 140 novels set to some extent in the 1940s and more than eighty that take place during the war itself.[5] Given that even an appearance on the shortlist of a major literary prize means that a work of fiction is more likely to be read, taught in university classrooms, and studied by scholars, the fact that nearly a third of all historical novels to be honored by these awards in the last seven decades are novels of the 1940s represents a truly remarkable concentration of literary prestige.[6] Indeed, from the mid-twentieth century to the present, World War II stands as the single most prized, most consecrated, and most canonized historical setting in American literature.[7] While the enduring cultural cachet of the war is remarkable in its own right, it


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also sheds light on who, in particular, is most celebrated for memorializing it, and what types of narratives are most prized or overlooked. As the list of authors just mentioned makes abundantly clear, the consecrating force of the 1940s has not been distributed equally: fifty-seven of the eighty-one prize finalists set during World War II (70 percent) were written by men, and seventy-two of them (89 percent) were by white writers. Given how lauded fiction of the war has been, and given how much the canonization of minoritized writers has revolved around historical fiction, it is remarkable just how rarely writers of color have been prized for fictionalizing World War II. Even the exceptions to this are telling. In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award, the war is never narrated directly, though one character protests before a roomful of Black veterans that "you can join the 332nd [airborne] if you want to and shoot down a thousand German planes all by yourself and land in Hitler's backyard and whip him with your own hands, but you never going to have four stars on your shirt front, or even three."[8] In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, the war is mentioned only in the final chapters, when the protagonist, Celie, speculates as to where the Army will send her enlisted sons.[9] Though over 900,000 Black soldiers served in the U.S. Army during World War II, comprising 11 percent of all Army inductions, in both novels the war is waged outside the narrative, with Black soldiers and civilians described merely as figures of disregard or disappearance.[10] Later, when Celie tries to find out whether a ship her sister was aboard has been sunk by a German mine, she laments that she has heard "nothing [from] the department of defense. It's a big war. So much going on. One ship lost feel like nothing, I guess. Plus, colored don't count to those people."[11] There is a sense in which these two passages, about overlooking Black men for medals and not counting Black women at all, reflect not only the whiteness of the war's public memory but also the canon of literary fiction that preserves it.

This chapter is about that memory and that canon, and how they have sustained one another over the last seven decades. In that time, narratives of the 1940s, and of the war in particular, have pervaded nearly every genre, medium, and echelon of American culture, from bestselling novels, block-

buster films, and popular nonfiction to TV miniseries and videogame franchises. All of this is to say that the literary field has never existed in a vacuum, insulated from other cultural forms, nor has literary fiction—the small subset within that vast field of writing for which awards like the Pulitzer matter most—ever been cloistered completely from the stories that sell. Yet, though prize winning fiction has no special purchase on World War II, World War II does exert a powerful force on literary prizes and, by extension, the literary canon that they help to draft. If award shortlists inscribe the aesthetic and thematic preoccupations of the writers, critics, and scholars who comprise their juries, they also signal *which* writers, and *which groups* of writers, those judges deem best suited to tell a particular story and, in this case, enlist in a particular history.

The pages that follow chronicle the evolving aesthetics of World War II historical fiction, reading white writers elevated by major literary prizes alongside writers of color who were overlooked by those same awards but nonetheless challenged the dominant aesthetics of their moment as well as the cultural memory of the war that they propped up. Rejecting both the ironic tone and the obsession with bureaucracy that defined prizewinning war novels of the 1960s and 1970s—such as those by Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, and Thomas Pynchon—Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) works to *localize* both the war and its memory, grounding them in the culture, landscape, and traditions of the Laguna Pueblo people. Drawing on modernist aesthetics to memorialize the Indigenous soldiers who fought and died in "the white people's war," Silko's novel offers a counterpoint to postmodernism's manipulation and mistrust of the historical record.[12] In the 1980s and 1990s, as the cultural primacy of World War II was contested by writers who located the ethos of the nation not in the so-called *good war* but in the Civil War and Vietnam, literary fiction contributed to the manufacturing of the "greatest generation" mythology, which viewed the war with newfound reverence. While many racialized writers avoided the war as a fictional setting altogether—evoking the atrocities of the 1940s only as a cultural touchstone for representing the atrocities of, say, the 1860s—Ronyoung Kim challenged the lionizing of World War II in public memory with her historical debut, *Clay Walls* (1987). Chronicling two generations of Korean immigrants

in Los Angeles, the novel recognizes Korean American participation in the war effort as well as the prejudice that thwarted it. Kim not only critiques nostalgic narratives of wartime unity but dramatizes those critiques by preventing both her characters *and the novel itself* from going to war.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the 1940s became essentially uncontested as the chief setting of literary prestige. Jewish American writers such as Michael Chabon and Jonathan Safran Foer narrated the war and the Holocaust with a new aesthetic that was ultimately adopted by other white writers of World War II fiction, such as Anthony Doerr and Jennifer Egan. Each of these novelists garnered considerable acclaim for combining the formal play of high postmodernism with the traumatic structure favored in the late twentieth century. Yet their novels also reveal a certain self-consciousness about the proliferation of historical fiction about the 1940s, as well as its abiding whiteness. In an effort to draw particularity out of a period that had become both narratively familiar and racially homogeneous in American fiction, these writers transformed their novels into cabinets of curiosity where collection, eccentricity, and detail lead the charge. By contrast, Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002)—so egregiously overlooked by major awards that it later won a prize for being passed over—evacuates both its setting and its sentences to narrate an unnamed Japanese American family's experience of the war, not in Paris or Odessa or at the edge of Antarctica but in the deserts surrounding American incarceration camps. Taken together, Silko, Kim, and Otsuka rewrite the public memory of World War II, emphasizing the racialized divides in narratives of American heroism and highlighting the conflicts that took place not on faraway battlefields, but on the American home front. By way of conclusion, this chapter considers the literary prize itself as both a measure of literary value and as a force in shaping literariness itself. Studying the literary history of World War II through the lens of these awards reveals not only the enduring prestige of the war, but also the enduring divisions at the heart of the newly inclusive literary field.

## BRINGING THE BATTLE HOME

Though novelists were writing and winning prizes for fiction about the war throughout the 1940s and 1950s, literature about the period first coalesced into a kind of canon in the 1960s and 1970s with the publication and recognition of now-iconic works such as Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973).[13] Far from the nationalist mythologizing that preceded them, these novels decry the war's indiscriminate violence, incoherent logic, and bureaucratic convolution in tones more parodic than patriotic, with a style marked by irony rather than idealism. Shortlisted for the National Book Award, *Catch-22* lampoons what Heller (himself a veteran of the U.S. Air Force) calls the war's "immoral logic."[14] The targets of the book's ballistic satire include, as one early review notes, "militarism, red tape, bureaucracy, nationalism, patriotism, discipline, ambition, loyalty, medicine, psychiatry, money, big business, high finance, sex, religion, mankind and God."[15] Many of these objects of ridicule are shared by Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which, at the end of the decade, was likewise shortlisted for the National Book Award. For Vonnegut, who fought in the Battle of the Bulge and witnessed the Allied bombing of Dresden, the very idea of heroism is compromised. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, American soldiers die for nothing, bomb civilians, and shoot survivors. Billy Pilgrim, the novel's protagonist, is perhaps the most pathetic of all.

Like Heller, however, Vonnegut saves his fiercest criticism and most acerbic wit for the bureaucracies that administer the war. In fact, three decades after the publication of *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the two authors appeared together on a panel *called* "Bureaucracy and War," where Vonnegut explained that the bombing of Dresden—which killed at least 25,000 people, most of whom were civilians—was the result of "purely bureaucratic momentum[:] 'What are we going to do tonight?'"[16] If such systems work, in *Catch-22*, to cast the war as alienating, dehumanizing, and distant, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, these critiques are hyperbolized through the Tralfamadorians, the deterministic race of extraterrestrials who imprison Billy on a planet

"446,120,000,000,000,000 miles" from home.[17] While both novels focus in key scenes on how mass atrocity is visited upon the individual—Snowden in *Catch-22*, Edgar Derby in *Slaughterhouse Five*—these poignant moments are the affecting exceptions that prove the rule of their authors' fixation on larger forces.

Published just four years after *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* spins out both Heller's and Vonnegut's claims into a kind of existential shaggy-dog story, hitting many of the same beats but emphasizing them still further by way of its distended, encyclopedic, and convoluted form.[18] Like *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Catch-22*, the novel is filled with bawdy comedy and bitter irony, from the protagonist's rocket-propelled tumescence to the mess hall limericks transcribed on the page. Like Heller and Vonnegut, Pynchon derides American jingoism ("the fanaticism, the reliance not just on flat force but on the *rightness* of what they planned to do" [259]); the war's incomprehensible size and distance ("who can presume to say *what* the War wants, so vast and aloof is it . . . so *absentee*" [133]); and, finally, even the idea of history, or "a Theory of History," which Pynchon counts among "pathetic cold comforts" (718). For this, *Gravity's Rainbow* was awarded the 1974 National Book Award and, in a scandal that only cemented the novel's cachet, selected for though not awarded the 1974 Pulitzer Prize.[19] As the accolades amassed by these three authors make clear, in the 1960s and 1970s historical fiction of the war was considered prestigious—and all the more so, the more ironic it was. Unlike the narratives of virtue, heroism, and glory propagated by writers and filmmakers in the 1940s and 1950s, in these novels, World War II is a period more worthy of parody than veneration, a topic crying out for satire far more than moral seriousness.

This is the context in which Leslie Marmon Silko's debut novel, *Ceremony*, emerged, and the dominant aesthetic of World War II historical fiction that her novel worked to challenge. Whereas *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* are fixated on the global systems that made the war "so vast and aloof [and] *absentee*," *Ceremony* brings the World War home, particularizing and regionalizing collective memory by grounding it in Laguna Pueblo tradition and the landscape of the American Southwest. Where the

former novels are playful, comic, and ironic, the latter is reflective, deeply serious, and utterly sincere. This shift in tone has much to do with these works' divergent attitudes toward history writ large. While postmodern historical fiction highlights historiographical uncertainty—e.g., Vonnegut's "All this happened, *more or less*" (1)—Silko's novel does not endeavor to undermine the idea of a coherent "Theory of History" so much as she attempts to revise that theory, inscribing Indigenous Americans into the most significant—and the most literary-canonical—period of the twentieth century.

Indigenous characters appear throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, and in *Catch-22*, "Chief White Halfoat," the "glowering, vengeful, disillusioned Indian," is not only present in the very tent where the eponymous "catch" is explained, he even gives his name to the chapter (43). That said, in both novels, Indigenous soldiers are minor, peripheral to the plot, and cast as comic foils. By placing a Laguna Pueblo veteran at the very center of her novel, Silko reincarnates the wartime sacrifices of the more than 45,000 Indigenous people who served, and revises the history of contemporary literature's most prestigious setting.[20] In this way, *Ceremony* creates what George Lipsitz has called a "counter-memory," a literary-historical rejoinder that elevates "localized experience . . . to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience."[21]

Not unlike *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Ceremony* begins with a protagonist who is "unstuck" in both time and space.[22] Just back from combat in the Philippines and recovering in a veteran's hospital in Los Angeles, Tayo is consumed with the "fever voices" that

> would drift and whirl and emerge again—Japanese soldiers shouting orders to him, suffocating damp voices that drifted out in the jungle steam, and he heard the women's voices then; they faded in and out until he was frantic because he thought the Laguna words were his mother's, but when he was about to make out the meaning of the words, the voice suddenly broke into a language he could not understand; and it was then that all the voices were drowned by the music—loud, loud music from a big juke box, its flashing red and blue lights pulling the darkness closer. (5)

Silko's convoluted syntax in this passage, her piling on of grammatical clauses and narrative voices, emphasizes Tayo's "snagged and tangled" relationship to both time and geography (6). His mind moves fluidly between his wartime experience on the Bataan Death March, his former life on the Laguna Pueblo reservation, and his present captivity in the hospital. Silko writes that "he cried at how the world had come undone, how thousands of miles, high ocean waves and green jungles could not hold people in their place. Years and months had become weak, and people could push against them and wander back and forth in time" (17). Both physically and grammatically unstructured, Tayo vomits constantly, refers to himself in the third person, and feels like "white smoke [with] no consciousness of itself" (13). The first two thirds of *Ceremony* move rapidly and unpredictably, even violently, across time and space, reflecting in their very structure Tayo's posttraumatic disorientation. Unlike postmodern fiction of the war, laden with anachronism and characters flattened almost into allegory, Silko's historical novel is more akin to the "spatial form" and deep interiority of high modernism.[23]

As Silko narrates Tayo's recovery—a project that depends entirely on his many *relocations*—she juxtaposes her protagonist with several foils who embody the tension between local and national narratives of the war. Nowhere is this tension more acute than when an Army recruitment officer visits the reservation and speaks with Tayo and his cousin Rocky. Throughout the scene, Silko demonstrates Rocky's desire to enfold himself in the nationalist narratives of the war, while at the same time undermining those narratives' relevance in the American Southwest. The recruiter himself is clad in an abundance of patriotic signifiers, from his "Government car . . . parked next to the post office under the flagpole," to his patriotic "posters" and "pamphlets" (59–60). These match his equally jingoistic rhetoric, as he proclaims to Rocky and Tayo: "I know you boys love America as much as we do . . . this is your big chance to *show* it!" (59). Silko stresses the officer's distinction between the voice of the culturally dominant "we" and the culturally marginalized "you boys," literalizing the ethnicized subject-object relationship at the heart of the scene. As if to amplify this, Silko goes to great pains to show how foreign and ill equipped the recruiter and his message are in the context of the New Mexican landscape. She describes his struggle to

"find shelter from the wind" behind his government car, and how his "posters were flapping and twisting around, and the brittle edges of the paper were beginning to split and tear." When the wind picks up, the pamphlets "swirled off the card table" and "scattered like dry leaves across the ground." The message here is clear: in this context, nationalism grows "brittle," propaganda arid, and figures like the recruiter, running about "with his arms out in front of him as if he were chasing turkeys," become little more than a joke (59).

Nevertheless, Rocky assures his cousin: "We can do real good, Tayo. Go all over the world. See different places and different people. Look at that guy, the recruiter. He's got his own Government car to drive" (66–67). For Rocky—an "A-student" and "all-state" athlete, cautioned by his teachers and coaches not to "let the people at home hold [him] back" (47)—the car represents his longing for mobility and integration. When the two finally arrive at the war, Rocky refuses to abandon his investment in this nationalist narrative, insisting: "Tayo, we're *supposed* to be here. This is what we're supposed to do" (7). It is this belief that leads to Rocky's death and Tayo's nearly fatal shellshock. However hard Rocky and the recruiter try to shake the New Mexican "sand out of the brochures and [fold] them up again," Silko emphasizes that this brand of broad nationalism will continually fail in and for the Indigenous communities of the American Southwest (60).

This failure only compounds as Tayo makes his uneasy return home after the war. Like Rocky, Tayo's fellow veterans Harley, Pinky, and Emo rely on the unifying identity of soldiership as a point of entry into white America. Silko writes that for them, "belonging was drinking and laughing with the platoon, dancing with blond women, buying drinks for buddies born in Cleveland, Ohio. . . . They repeated the stories about good times in Oakland and San Diego; they repeated them like long medicine chants, the beer bottles pounding on the counter tops like drums" (39). Not only has their sense of "belonging" been nationalized by the war, but their cultural forms have been distorted into "stories about . . . Oakland and San Diego." Moreover, like Rocky's fascination with the recruiter's government car, Harley and the others focus their identification with the national on a single symbolic image:

the uniform. Nearly everyone of their war stories makes reference to the uniform's ability to grant interregional, intercultural, or sexual access. As Silko's pun on uniform/uniformity makes plain, however, these encounters are not multicultural meeting points but moments of being subsumed by the homogeneity of national identity. As Tayo puts it, "these Indians [were] the same as anyone" (38). Distressed by the illusion that "they belonged to America the way they [did] during the war," Tayo openly mocks his fellow veterans' sense of identification (39). He criticizes the "dumb Indians" that "thought these good times would last" just because "they had the uniform and they didn't look different no more," proclaiming that "the war was over" and "the uniform"—with its ability to grant access and obscure difference—"was gone" (38–39). In these scenes, as in those with Rocky, Silko continually subverts the universalizing discourse of the war's collective memory.

Ultimately, Silko's protagonist can only recover by returning to regional and cultural specificity. With the help of Betonie, a Navajo healer who performs the healing ceremony that gives the novel its title, Tayo is finally able to resolve the many voices of the war into one. Silko renders this process on the page in lyric poetry: "walk home / following my footprints / come home, happily / return belonging to your home" (133). As Betonie recounts the "invention of white people," he revises Tayo's memory of the war, transforming it from a dislocating encounter with imperialist warmongering and foreign enmity, into a culturally specific narrative grounded in Laguna Pueblo tradition (122). This reformulation of history culminates in Tayo's epiphany that the "Trinity Site, where they exploded the first atomic bomb, was only three hundred miles to the southeast, at White Sands" (228). His paired historical and geographical understanding—reflected in his awareness both of White Sands' role in the war and its exact coordinates relative to him—demonstrate, once again, a revision of the World War II narrative as something originating in, and belonging to, the Southwestern landscape of the Laguna Pueblo. As *Ceremony* proceeds from this critical moment of reframing, both its structure and its protagonist resolve into a kind of unity. Whereas Silko's novel begins temporally and geographically "unstuck," imitating Tayo's own psychological crisis, from this point on, the novel is largely linear and takes place wholly within the borders of New Mex-

ico. Tayo finds comfort in the “totality” of the “enclosing” desert landscape, which is “like the mind holding all thoughts together in a single moment” (220). In this way, Silko reformulates nationalist mythologizing of the war into a localized “counter-memory” that provides psychological relief for Tayo, structural clarity for *Ceremony*, and an alternative narrative of World War II.

In a fitting conclusion to this process, *Ceremony* ends with Harley and Leroy’s funeral and the image of the honor guard lowering their coffins into the ground. Silko writes that “two big flags covered the coffins completely,” suggesting that, even in death, Harley and Leroy are still draped in the symbols of the nation, not to mention the narrative of the so-called good war, that Silko works throughout the novel to expose. Yet she quickly adds that “it looked as if the people from the village had gathered only to bury the flags” (240). In this image, Silko conjures not the death of the mythos surrounding the war, but rather its relocation in the desert soil. If the “sand in the pamphlets” of the Army recruiter is an image of just how poorly generalized narratives of the war map onto the Laguna Pueblo community, this scene of memorial may not disrupt those narratives entirely, but it does succeed in returning them to the land, to a kind of home, and to cultural specificity.

Despite all this, *Ceremony* did not win a single major literary award—it was not even shortlisted.[24] Of course, the vast majority of novels are not either, and being snubbed by the Pulitzer and the National Book Award did not preclude the novel’s canonization. By the end of the twentieth century, Silko’s novel was listed in multiple surveys of university professors as the most frequently taught novel by an Indigenous author and one of the contemporary American novels “considered most important.”[25] According to Open Syllabus, *Ceremony* has appeared on more than two thousand university syllabi, in an array of disciplines that extends beyond English to history, religion, anthropology, and education, among others.[26] In his analysis of the key events and factors that led to *Ceremony*’s canonization, Kenneth M. Roemer argues that prominent early reviews and the fortuitous timing of a 1977 NEH– and Modern Language Association–sponsored “summer seminar on American Indian

literatures" contributed to the book's long-term success, and the impression that the novel was both "'safe' and 'essential.'"[27]

Yet one cannot help but wonder if these two phenomena—*Ceremony*'s lack of recognition by major American prizes and its overwhelming uptake by scholars and instructors—are somehow related, obverse outcomes of a single set of implicit assumptions. Despite the prestige attached to historical fiction of the war in the 1960s and 1970s, 93 percent of the shortlisted World War II novels in these decades were by white authors.[28] Though N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), about another Indigenous soldier returning home to New Mexico after the war, was the first novel by an Indigenous author to win the Pulitzer Prize (and the first to be short-listed for any major literary award), Momaday's win appears as a notable exception to the abiding whiteness of the literary history of the war—in this period and since. At the same time, though *Ceremony* has been embraced by literary scholars and professors, its status as a war novel, and its contributions to the collective memory of World War II in particular, have been merely of peripheral interest. Of the more than three hundred scholarly examinations of *Ceremony* listed in the Modern Language Association's international bibliography, only sixteen list the war as a central subject of analysis, whereas "identity" is listed more than fifty times and "Native Americans" or "Native American Novelists" appear in the majority.[29] Roemer claims that American fiction's "'familiar enough' . . . focus on the alienated returning veteran . . . helped to make Tayo's story recognizable to literary critics and teachers," yet these figures suggest that neither prize juries nor literary scholars have fully recognized Silko's contributions to the canon of World War II fiction and to the public memory of the war itself.[30]

## Notes

1. In that same period, the National Book Critics Circle, an American organization that nonetheless honors works of fiction from other countries and in other languages, shortlisted or selected World War II novels by Laurent Binet, Andrea Levy, Ian McEwan, and W. G. Sebald, among others.

2. Jenny Shank, "Dallas-Bound Luis Alberto Urrea Says 'House of Broken Angels' Is Like a Mexican Take on 'The Godfather,'" *Dallas Morning News*, March 6, 2018.

3. U.S. Congress, House, *Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism* (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001, HR 3162, 107th Cong., 1st sess., introduced in House October 23, 2001.

4. Shank, "Dallas-Bound." Urrea ultimately returned to the novel, published as *Good Night, Irene* in 2023.

5. Of the 107 works of historical fiction to win one of these three prizes from 1950 to 2019, more than a third take place, to some extent, in the 1940s.

6. Alexander Manshel, Laura B. McGrath, and J. D. Porter, "Who Cares About Literary Prizes?" *Public Books*, September 3, 2019, https://www.publicbooks.org/who-cares-about-literary-prizes/. For a comprehensive history and detailed analysis of literary awards, see James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

7. This helps in part to explain why "post-45" has been such a prominent and *institutionalized* literary-critical term. Perhaps this period marker has less to do with changes in literary history during the mid-twentieth century than with the historical fiction of that period at century's end.

8. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 60.

9. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983), 231.

10. "Minority Groups in World War II," U.S. Army Center of Military History, October 3, 2003, https://history.army.mil/documents/WWII/minst.html.

11. Walker, *The Color Purple*, 245.

12. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 33; hereafter cited parenthetically.

13. Fiction of the 1940s—including novels about the war's multiple fronts and home fronts, the Holocaust, and Japanese American incarceration—is simply too vast to cover adequately in a single scholarly monograph, let alone a single chapter of one. For a broader history of World War II fiction, including more on early prizewinning novels by James Jones, Herman Wouk, and John Hersey, as well as war fiction by Norman Mailer, Chester Himes, and Ann Petry, see Elizabeth D. Samet, *Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021); Roy Scranton, *Total Mobilization: World War II and American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Vaughn Rasberry, *Race and the Totalitarian Century: Geopolitics in the Black Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Joseph Darda, "Universality at War: Race, Nation, and Communism in Chester Himes's 'If He Hollers Let Him Go,'" *African American Review* 48, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 2015): 157–73; Marina Mackay, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, ed. Marina Mackay (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–10; James Dawes, "The American War Novel," in Mackay, *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, 56–66; John Limon, *Writing After War: American War Fiction from Realism to Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

14. Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 387; hereafter cited parenthetically.

15. Orville Prescott, "Books of the Times," *New York Times*, October 23, 1961.

16. "Bureaucracy and War," panel at Florida State University, March 21, 1997, C-SPAN, c-span.org/video/?79870-1/bureaucracy-war#.

17. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 80–81; hereafter cited parenthetically.

18. Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Penguin, 2006); hereafter cited parenthetically.

19. The Pulitzer's three-member fiction jury—Benjamin DeMott, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Alfred Kazin—unanimously recommended Pynchon's novel for the prize, but the organization's board ultimately rejected their recommendation, calling the book "unreadable," "turgid," "overwritten," and "obscene." Peter Kihss, "Pulitzer Jurors Dismayed on Pynchon," *New York Times*, May 8, 1974.

20. During World War II, Indigenous American communities had the "highest rate of voluntary enlistment in the military," with "70 percent of men" enlisting in some tribes. "1941–45: American Indian War Effort in World War II Is Remarkable," *Native Voices*, https://www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/timeline/461.html.

21. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 231.

22. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 17.

23. Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Two Parts," *Sewanee Review* 53, no. 2 (Spring 1945): 221–40.

24. Three years after the publication of *Ceremony*, the novel was awarded the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award, a nonhierarchical literary prize meant to honor the "multicultural, multiethnic, and multiracial diversity" of American letters. Quoted in Robert A. Lee, "Afro-America, The Before Columbus Foundation and The Literary Multiculturalization of America," *Journal of American Studies* 28, no. 3 (1994): 446.

25. Kenneth M. Roemer, "Silko's Arroyos as Mainstream: Processes and Implications of Canonical Identity," in *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony: A Casebook*, ed. Allan Chavkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 223.

26. "Open Syllabus Explorer," Open Syllabus Project.

27. Roemer, "Silko's Arroyos," 227–229.

28. Twenty-eight of the thirty World War II novels shortlisted for the NBA, NBCC, and Pulitzer Prize between 1960 and 1979 were by white authors.

29. For a survey of criticism on the novel, see Chavkin, *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony*. On the depictions of war and its aftermath in Silko's novel, see John Getz, "Healing the Soldier in White: *Ceremony* as War Novel," WLA: *War, Literature and the Arts* 9, no. 1 (1997): 123–40; Carrie Johnston, "Postwar Reentry Narratives in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*," *Studies in the Novel* 49, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 400–418; Ben Railton, *History and Hope in American Literature: Models of Critical Patriotism* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), ch. 2; and Alyssa A. Hunziker, "At the Intersections of Empire: Ceremony, Transnationalism, and American Indian–Filipino Exchange," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 116–34.

30. Roemer, "Silko's Arroyos," 226.

## About the author

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