



Contemporary American Fiction and the Confluence of Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, and John Updike: A Roundtable Discussion

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ABSTRACT. At the twenty-first annual American Literature Association Conference in 2010, representatives from the Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, and John Updike Societies participated in a roundtable discussion on the significance of these five authors. The springboard for the roundtable was a survey conducted by the *New York Times Book Review* in 2006, one in which respondents were asked to rank what they considered the best works in American fiction published in the previous twenty-five years. What follows is a transcript of that conversation, where all members of the panel speculated on the importance of the five authors under consideration, the absence of other writers from the *New York Times* rankings, questions surrounding canon formation, and the general state of contemporary American fiction.

At the twenty-first annual American Literature Association Conference in 2010, held at the Hyatt Regency in San Francisco's Embarcadero Center, representatives from the Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, and John Updike Societies participated in a roundtable discussion on the significance of

these five authors. The event took place on Saturday, May 29, and what follows is an edited transcript of that discussion. The springboard for the roundtable was a survey conducted by the New York Times Book Review in 2006. Early in that year, the Review's editor, Sam Tanenhaus, sent out a brief letter to 200 prominent writers, editors, critics, and other literary-minded professionals, asking the respondents to identify "the single best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years." This request obviously was not without its problems and it generated a variety of intriguing questions for the roundtable participants: What do we mean by "American"? How do we define "fiction" or, in today's hybrid-rich culture, how do we even distinguish prose from poetry? What are the political implications of establishing a "best"? And does the original publication of a text have to fall within the past twenty-five years? Nonetheless, 125 of the 200 individuals responded to the Times Book Review survey, and their choices served as grist for the panel discussion.

The top five books receiving the most votes were, in descending order, Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) and Updike's collected *Rabbit Angstrom: The Four Novels* (1995)—both tied for third place—and Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997). In addition, three of these authors had other books ranked in the top 22. The list included five additional novels by Philip Roth—*The Counterlife* (1986), *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993), *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), *The Human Stain* (2000), and *The Plot Against America* (2004)—two other novels by Don DeLillo—*White Noise* (1985) and *Libra* (1988)—and one, or arguably three, others by Cormac McCarthy—the collected *Border Trilogy* (1999). Other important novels and significant authors made up the remainder of the Times Book Review list, but the ALA Conference roundtable was primarily concerned with the five top vote getters, the authors that the survey respondents believe to best define our current literary moment.

Participating in the discussion, and representing the DeLillo, McCarthy, Morrison, Roth, and Updike Societies were Marni Gauthier, associate professor of English at SUNY Cortland and author of *Amnesia and Redress in Contemporary American Fiction: Counterhistory* (2011); Steven Frye, professor of English at California State University, Bakersfield and author of *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* (2009) as well as editor of the upcoming Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy; Yvonne Atkinson, assistant professor of English at Mt. San Jacinto College, past president of the Toni Morrison Society, and co-editor (along with Michelle Pagni) of *Ethnic Literary Traditions in American Children's Literature* (2009); David Brauner, *English Language and Literature* director of research at the University of Reading, and author of *Post-War Jewish Fiction: Ambivalence, Self-Explanation and Transatlantic Connections* (2001), Philip Roth (2007), and *Contemporary American Fiction* (2010); and Marshall Boswell, professor of English at Rhodes College and author of *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy: Mastered Irony in Motion* (2001) and *Understanding David*



FIGURE 1: From left: Derek Parker Royal, David Brauner, and Marshall Boswell

Foster Wallace (2004). *Moderating and organizing the session was Derek Parker Royal, founding executive editor of Philip Roth Studies, co-author (along Patrick Badonnel and Daniel Royot) of Philip Roth: American Pastoral (2011), and editor of the collections Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author (2005) and Unfinalized Moments: Essays in the Development of Contemporary Jewish American Narrative (2012).*

Derek Parker Royal: Good morning, and welcome to our roundtable discussion, “Contemporary American Fiction and the Confluence of Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, and John Updike.” Sitting up here with me are representatives from the five respective author societies. The idea for today’s session stems from a survey conducted by the *New York Times Book Review* in 2006. I’ve asked all the participants to talk freely about certain issues relating to one or more of the five authors, especially to their rankings in this survey. We also would like to get participation from the audience as soon as possible. We have no script here, but I’ll throw out a question or two to start the ball rolling.

To begin, I’d like to ask what may seem an obvious question to the panel: What is it about these five authors that seems to make them so significant to these 125 respondents? Or another way of asking the question is this: Is the *Times Book Review* ranking justified?

David Brauner: Canonicity is kind of a vexed question, obviously. And partly it's to do with if you're going to establish yourself as a major figure, then you just need a certain number of years under your belt, a certain number of novels, so that's a fairly obvious starting point. All these writers are very well established, one of them recently deceased. Also, I was wondering, why these five? It seems to me they all have a distinctive kind of signature, or trademark, or even (dare I say) brand, which I think makes them distinctive, at least identifiable. It's a kind of an imprimatur that has helped to separate them from a huge literary field, really. I mean, contemporary American fiction is a field in which almost weekly new candidates for the Great American Novel, the Great American Novelist, are thrown up. More often than not, these candidates appear, flare very briefly in the firmament, and then disappear into oblivion. Whereas the five top writers in the survey have managed to stand the test of time. I think this has to do with certain kinds of themes, perhaps weighty themes; they all stake out a certain kind of territory. So you've got Morrison with race relations and slavery, you've got Roth with Jewishness and male sexuality, and Updike also with male sexuality. You've got an interest in social history and politics running throughout the work of these authors, but they also have a style, I think, a distinctive kind of style, a voice. I think their prose is very recognizable. I was thinking of other people who might have been on this list who are not. Someone like Doctorow, for example. He's the same generation as most of the writers we're talking about today. What he does, I think, is he's very chameleon-like. He changes his style very much from novel to novel, so that it's kind of unrecognizable. I don't think that's so much the case with the writers we're talking about here. I would suggest that, actually, if you really know these writers' work well, then just being confronted randomly with a short excerpted passage, you'd probably be able to tell straightaway which was which.

Marshall Boswell: I wanted to pick up on that. My task here is to figure out why Updike is significant. I was thinking about that in a kind of telescoping way we may imagine 2040 and everyone is reading iPads. If you're looking at modernism as I did as an undergraduate, then you come up with Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Cather, Steinbeck—those were the five. But these contemporary authors, apparently, are our five, according to the *New York Times*. And I began to think about why Updike, what does he represent here, and I think David's right: sociologically he's supposed to carry the flag for the white middle-class post-war experience. It's not just that he presented it, but that he presented it with a kind of blinding precision, and a deep-rooted concreteness in historical grounding. All of that is significant, but I would suggest the second, and maybe more important, thing is Updike's style. It's not a revolution in style the way Hemingway's was, but it is a distinctive style. It's an adjective now—Updikian is an adjective. We think about it as sort of a fussy

lyrical precision attached to the mundane. But I think Updike's style, for me, is a more interesting kind of confluence of things. It's grounded in Nabokov and Proust and Joyce, whom he cut his teeth on, and he filters it through the kind of '50s irony of Salinger. And then there's the jarring rhythm of American slang that creeps into even the most lyrical sentence. That combination is an imprimatur, as David said. I'll suggest maybe that that's going to be a major factor in Updike's longevity.

Steven Frye: I'm the Cormack McCarthy guy, and one of the peculiar ironies in my experience is that I think I've read most of the other authors before I ever read McCarthy. He's sort of the late-comer in this whole process. My reaction to the *New York Times* poll is an interesting one because on the one hand, I'm glad that he's listed because it's brought McCarthy to a broader prominence that he's had even amongst the critical community. So I like it. On the other hand, I'm a little vexed by it. I wonder, if they took that poll five or ten years from now, if we wouldn't have a completely different set of authors. So I think it's an interesting thing, I'm glad that they did it, and I think it raises a whole host of questions about how we think about canonicity in a contemporary context when we don't have that kind of historical remove. I guess I'd echo a couple of things that were said here about style and how each of the authors that we're talking about are stylistically distinctive. One of the things I could say about McCarthy in that context, just to comment on what makes him distinctive, is that he's often associated with Faulkner, and there are reasons for that. He was heir-apparent to Faulkner in that he had Faulkner's editor for his initial novels. But there is very little that you could point to, if you did a sophisticated stylistic analysis, that is Faulknerian, except for an overt pre-occupation with a fairly ornate, complex style.

One of the things that's distinctive about McCarthy, for those of you who are beginning to read him or are thinking about how to read him, is his use of certain words—archaic vocabulary is what distinguishes his style. There has been some criticism that he just plays around with a thesaurus, and I think he does. But I think he does it for a purpose. If you take a look at a word that you don't know, and you click on it, like a hypertext, you get the definition, and that becomes an interpretive key for a whole host of things. I'll give one very specific example. At the end of *Child of God*, the main character, Lester Ballard, who's a necrophiliac and a murderer, is dead and he's being dissected by medical students. This raises the issue of a sort of philosophical materialism versus some kind of religiosity. Lester's dissected as a material entity, except as a reference to Haruspices, and those are Etruscan soothsayers who read mystic secrets in the entrails of the dead. So you have this duality potential for interpretation. That's a stylistic element that's linked to theme that makes him distinctive, perhaps when compared to some other writers.

Yvonne Atkinson: I'm representing the Toni Morrison Society. Kinda scary to be thought of as representing Morrison, so I'm not going there. Can't do that, wouldn't want to try. I too had issues with the list from the *New York Times* because any list is problematic on a number of levels. One is the notion that in this short span of time, we could make a "best of." As you know, especially for African American and women writers, they make a splash and then they disappear. So we have to wait over time to see if this is going to pan out. A good example is Zora Neale Hurston. In her time she was the bomb, as I would say. She disappeared off the face of the earth and was later resurrected. Now she is back in canon where she should have been all along, but we don't know what will happen in the future. So in this small time capsule of today, we'll go with the idea that Morrison is on this list.

I have to agree with the rest of panelists that one of the things that I think makes her number one is her style. And she is uniquely American. The only style, the only place that this type of novel could be written was in America at that time period. Because she is an African American—and African Americans exist nowhere else in the world, it's a confluence of American and African traditions—and because she was at the right place at the right time. She's in a position where she doesn't have to have a person to tell her how to write, as the Harlem Renaissance writers did. As she said, when she wrote *The Bluest Eye*, she sent it out and it was rejected repeatedly, so she simply sent it out again. She has retrained an audience in how to read, and how to decipher and how to listen and, like Steven was talking about, vocabulary. She has brought out the secretive quiet, the vocabulary of African American culture, into the mainstream. And she has taken an oral and aural language and she has put it in writing, into the written discourse of her possible oppressors. She has co-opted their writing to write her secret stories of her people's oppression. It's almost as if it's guerrilla warfare. It's got underground insider information. An example of this underground insider information is the opening of *Jazz* when the narrator says, "I know that woman." Immediately, as an insider, you know that "I know that woman" refers to a trickster figure. And just in case you missed it, she repeats it throughout, like in the next three lines the narrator says, "Well, I think she went down this street."

If you are versed in African American culture you recognize the trickster immediately. The trickster from African American culture is never the bad guy. The trickster is just the trickster, there to disrupt the norm, to make you look at things in a different way. They're not bad, they're not good, they are the trickster. And if you get tricked by the trickster, it's on you. Now, those people who got pissed off—because the narrator, oh, she didn't know everything—were not reading it from the view of African American culture. So Morrison took the African American culture and set it right in the middle of American discourse and she said, "There it is." I think that's what makes her unique and why she's on this list, powerfully. Which has transformed itself from American literature to universal literature. Her books are translated into

every language on the planet, just about. Last year in Paris they were talking about the Polish translation of *The Bluest Eye* and how every child in elementary school got a copy of it. And I thought, “*The Bluest Eye*? In Poland?” I wanted to see how you translate some of the Black English oral tradition into a language that may not have a discourse for that sound. But it worked, I guess. We’ll find out.

Marni Gauthier: A couple of things occur to me. Something I noticed—both in our email exchanges preparing for the roundtable and even in the discussion here as it’s beginning—is the slippage between the best American authors and the single best works of American fiction over the last twenty-five years. That’s actually what the survey was asking. It’s just something to pay attention to, because as the panelists have pointed out, there’s a suggestion that the other authors don’t count and that these are the best authors. I think it’s also useful to think of the five books that topped the survey.

I’m just going to start with an observation by A.O. Scott from the *New York Times* who wrote the essay about the list. He initially raised some of these questions we’re discussing, what’s significant about these books. My particular focus is historical fiction and history, so one of the salient points of that essay for me was—again it might seem obvious but it’s worth putting out there as a springboard for our discussion—that each of these books takes a sort of assumed burden or sort of implicit importance, a cultural burden of tackling the whole culture. Now I’m slipping into DeLillo’s language. In fact, DeLillo, from 1971’s *Americana* on, put that forth as his stated intention. He says, “It was no accident my first novel was called *Americana*. This is a private declaration of independence, a statement of my intention to use the whole picture, the whole culture. America was and is the immigrant’s dream and as the son of two immigrants I was attracted by the sense of possibility that had drawn my grandparents and parents.” Although he issues that statement in 1971, it’s even more relevant, it seems to me, as we get to something like *Underworld*, which is the entire cultural history of the Cold War from the 1950s to the 1990s, or rather in the case of *Underworld*, from the ’90s to the ’50s, because we’re working backwards. Of course, I think we could talk about each of the books in that sense. Cormac McCarthy’s revision of the West. I’m just going to make a blanket statement, but the big questions are, What do each of these authors do? What are they doing with history? What is that engagement about? It’s not just that they’re taking it on, but they’re doing something I think quite significant, which has to do with a bold use of a neglected archive. Especially in the case of African American history with a largely absent, rife with omissions, archive. So there is revision, of course. Returning to Cormac McCarthy for a second: if the mythic history of the West initially was “cowboys good, Indians bad,” then the revisionist history was “Indians good, all white cowboys bad.” McCarthy just undoes that. Certainly I could say

the same thing about DeLillo. He invokes and engages neglected histories and forces them up against these quintessential American mythologies of innocence primarily. So we have these figures that he deploys in his fiction that have a long literary history: the American Adam, the hero at the start of a new history, free from the burden of history. That's a figure that DeLillo employs in *Americana*, same thing in *Libra*, and in some ways in *Underworld*. Of course, what DeLillo does with that is have his heroes encounter history. DeLillo is always setting up mythologies in American innocence, from the American Adam to the theme of western migration, depicting the West as a utopian agrarian garden, and then he undoes that. The West is a toxic dump where we build and store our nuclear weapons and bomb our own people. DeLillo is very much engaged in this juxtaposition between these quintessential mythologies of American innocence, which still have some currency.

Look at popular culture and the movies. What did Bush say when he set off his dictum on Osama Bin Laden? "I want him dead or alive, as they say in the West." There's still a certain currency to these mythologies, but DeLillo is always revealing that this American dream of possibility and innocence does not exist independently of the violence that's endemic to the American nation. I'm making these big statements about DeLillo, but I'm thinking that probably some of us, primarily of the McCarthy and Morrison Societies, could jump into this conversation. That's a beginning. I feel I have more to say about DeLillo, but I think I should let the conversation ensue.

Royal: All of you have raised a number of intriguing questions. I definitely want to get to two things that seem to rise to the top of what everyone has said. The first is this issue of style, or, as David put it, brand. Also, I want to explore the idea that Marni raised, this historical, cultural coverage of the American landscape, so to speak.

But first, I want to throw something out there. I don't know if we want to do anything with this, but I think it's related to some of these other issues of, let's say, history and the handling of history and style. What about the *idea* of the survey itself, which is something that Steve pointed out. If this survey were taken ten years from now, how different would it be? I think we're all aware that surveys like this are constructed, they're contingent, they're arbitrary in many ways. This actual survey is in many ways an echo of one that was conducted about twenty-five years earlier. In the earlier survey, the top point-getter was Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and other novels that came in at the top were *Herzog*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *Catch-22*. If you look back over this earlier list, it's interesting how these are still the same novels that define American fiction in the twenty-five years immediately following the Second World War. Twenty-five years from now I'm sure someone will come up with another survey and other novels will be there front and center. But this raises the question: Where is Thomas Pynchon? If we're talking about style and the

coverage of history, to me one of the glaring omissions here—and I think this speaks to the arbitrariness of this survey—is the absence of Pynchon. Obviously he deals with issues of American history and culture with a vengeance. You talk about style, you could blindfold someone and they can put hands on a book and tell that its Pynchon. This raises additional problems about the survey issue as well.

Boswell: The last twenty-five years—*Gravity's Rainbow* fell outside.

Royal: Between the last two surveys, it fell through the cracks. A number of other novels fell through the cracks.

Brauner: There's a feeling presumably, rightly or wrongly—maybe slightly qualified by the most recent novel—but there has been a feeling that Pynchon's best work was done many years ago, and that the most recent works have not really lived up to *Gravity's Rainbow* or *The Crying of Lot 49*. Also, there's the problem of what I talked about earlier, just racking up numbers. He leaves such a long time between novels. Roth is now so prolific, it's the yearly novel. Someone might say a bit more quality control might be something to be grateful for. Updike was accused of the same thing, of producing too much. With Pynchon, it's the other way around. Certainly it does hurt your profile, I think, if there are five to ten years between novels, so I think that may partly account for his absence.

Royal: And another observation that complicates things: I remember when I was in graduate school, a professor of mine and former editor of *Modern Fiction Studies* was telling the class that he noticed a dramatic increase in submissions to the journal dealing with Don DeLillo, and along with that, a dramatic decline of submissions concerning Thomas Pynchon. He wondered if maybe the rise in interest in DeLillo was sucking the air out of any kind of interest in Pynchon. That raises the question as well, for instance, in terms of Toni Morrison: Where are the other African Americans on this list? If you look at the entire list of twenty-two, is Morrison supposed to be the stand-in for the other African American or the African American woman...or women in general?

Audience Member: Another measure of the popularity of these five authors has to do with questions of readability and accessibility. I think Pynchon fails that test. He's very difficult to teach to undergraduates. I plowed through

Against the Day with a group of graduate students and at the end we said, “Is that it?” It was a chore to read him, he’s very dense and elusive. If you look at the authors you’ve listed here, Morrison, McCarthy, Updike, and Roth have all been made into movies, which is a testimony to their accessibility and readability with a wide popular audience. Pynchon has not. He’s probably unfilmable.

Boswell: We also have to ask who responded to the survey, because Pynchon would do much better if it were academics. And Updike would’ve come in way lower. There are a lot of institutional reasons for that, but the simple reason is that Updike’s works are just different beasts in the classroom. Pynchon’s books are great in the classroom to the extent that there’s so much to unpack; they need a class to do it. Updike’s novels don’t need a class to access them, although there’s lots there. In terms of longevity, then, I think academics have some say in this, but so do readers, and so do other writers, and I think that’s something we need to think about. A lot of the people who were queried in the survey were not just critics, but novelists themselves. That changes things. Obviously DeLillo and Wallace and others were deeply influenced by Pynchon, but I think a lot of people were also deeply influenced by Roth, Updike, and Morrison because they encountered them in their twenties and they were shaped by them. You can see that particularly in someone like Ian McEwan and Martin Amis and Julian Barnes in England, where Updike’s influence is less problematic and very broad and deep. I think we have to think about who is being asked to come up with this list.

Frye: To echo that, in terms of McCarthy, he was in his sixties before anyone knew he existed, except the Guggenheim Foundation and MacArthur Foundation. But this is a strange thing that I haven’t really sorted out myself—he exerted the most influence on other writers, little influence on readers. None of his novels, until *All the Pretty Horses*, sold over 5,000 copies in hardback. So he had tremendous influence over writers, little influence over readers, and very little reception in the academic community. And that raises a whole host of questions about why we teach what we teach and what significance really is. If you look at the way a tradition constitutes itself, a novelist’s importance—greatness is a vexing question—is going to hinge much more on whether or not they are influencing other writers. Historically that’s going to be significant.

I want to make a quick point about a confluence between a number of these authors. *Blood Meridian* is a historical novel, and that might be a partitioning that is useful to consider between Morrison and McCarthy on the one hand, and the rest of our writers on the other. One of the things that McCarthy does in *Blood Meridian*, it *is* a historical novel insofar that it is set in the past. But

it looks at that past through the refracted and even sort of informed sort of optic of the twentieth century: environmental waste, genocide, devastation. Many of the novels set in a contemporary setting are dealing with that reality in the wake, and in that sense there is a confluence, I think, between the sort of social concerns that the novelists address.

Gauthier: A number of things occur to me, but I wanted to respond to Derek's question concerning Pynchon. *Crying of Lot 49* in 1966, *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1973—he really does fall between the gaps. Another thing is, I'm of the generation where I grew up as an undergraduate reading the *Crying of Lot 49* as a sort of quintessential postmodern text. I did read *White Noise* as a senior at Boston University, and it was obviously seminal to my professional life. What happened was, as I went to graduate school and then became a professor, *White Noise* replaced the *Crying of Lot 49* as the quintessential postmodern text that one teaches in any kind of contemporary literature class or survey of contemporary American literature. I think part of the reason is a question a bit of readability. *The Crying of Lot 49* is much more readable and accessible than *Gravity's Rainbow* for students and for non-academics. At the same time, for me, I love *The Crying of Lot 49*, but part of why I replaced it, honestly, was because that explaining all of the archaic and arcane '60s context and references to my students became a bit burdensome. Whereas *White Noise*, it lives and speaks postmodernism that to me is recognizable—the world of the ATM, the shopping malls, is quite recognizable to my students. I think it speaks to something. Another point I want to make about DeLillo: it's not simply a matter of accessibility and readability, but also a certain kind of prescience. Again, the book that was on the *New York Times* list was *Underworld*, but I think this applies to that novel as well. I think that DeLillo, more than any other contemporary American writer, has always had his finger on the pulse of American culture. *Americana* was written against the backdrop of the Vietnam War and yet engaging quite explicitly the nightmares of a Vietnam vet. Dealing in 1971 with the Bataan Death March during World War II, where no one until recently has paid attention to the Bataan Death March or that specific aspect of World War II. So there's this sense of contemporaneous prescience. And then he moves on to football and nuclear weapons and rock and roll. Eventually in 1977, *Players*, a terrorist plot to bomb the World Trade Center, to the displacement of the writer by the terrorists in *Mao II*, in terms of influence on the world, and then onto environmentalism, toxicity, garbage, nuclear weapons, and the problem of burying nuclear waste in *Underworld*—there is an incredible prescience about it. In a sense, there is an eerie hindsight in looking at *Players* through a post-9/11 eye, but at the same time with *White Noise*, it's published the same month that the most deadly toxic leak in history occurs in Bhopal, India, December 1984, and it's about an airborne toxic event. And so there's that element of immediate relevance

and prescience, it's sort of a seer's eye. I think that's part of why it resonates, not just with students, but with readers at large. It's a sort of exciting way to read. I think Updike, although writing very differently, is involved in this as well. I think there's an element of that, where there is an immediate, recognizable engagement that when we put down the book, there's a conversation in the world.

Atkinson: On the other hand, Morrison is almost oppositional to that.

Gauthier: Yes.

Atkinson: There were a number of books that came out about the same time as *Beloved*, and they are all neo-slave narratives. So what was going on in the culture at the time that made people willing and ready to read about enslavement in America? We're still not having that conversation in America. I was very surprised when this book was number one in the survey because when you bring up race or slavery in America, people shut down, both black, white, green, purple...it doesn't matter. It's an embarrassment, it's a scar on the American soul that keeps festering up, and then we put a Band-Aid on it because we don't want to talk about it, clean the thing out and start again. *Beloved* is the beginning of us trying to examine the wound. What's she's done is what we've been discussing, she has mined a historical landscape that we have ignored for years. The story of *Beloved* is based on an actual historical moment, of Margaret Garner taking her children out of enslavement, across the river into Ohio and freedom. Then when the slave catchers come to get her, taking her children into a shed and killing them rather than allowing them to be re-enslaved. When she's captured, they allow her to keep her baby, and she's sold down the river—where, in the cane fields, your life expectancy is under a year. She's taken to trial and tried not for murder, but for taking her master's property. They let her keep her child because she is nursing that child. While she's on the ship going down river, she's in shackles, holding her baby, and she jumps over the side. She is so intent on saving this child, she loves this child so much, that she's going to kill this child rather than let it be enslaved. When the boat stops and they realize that she has jumped overboard, and they go to rescue her, she lets go of the baby so it'll drown.

Morrison read this story in a newspaper article, but the story was all about this horrible woman. What kind of mother would kill her child? And Morrison started to think about what makes her love so thick that the mother *could* do this? So she wrote the personalized history, and it became a microcosm of the macrocosm. It would start a discussion about things that we've erased, and remembering things we don't want to remember. Also, her books are incred-

ibly difficult to read, both difficult on the page and difficult emotionally, and it makes you cry psychologically. So they are incredibly difficult to read, and for some reason, we're at a place now where students will plow through. Although they'll piss and moan about it.

Audience Member: I wonder if one of the things that makes Morrison really come to the top of this list is story. One of the things I'm interested in is whether the novels that really are going to make it into the future are novels with narrative muscle, novels which tell a story a culture needs to tell and wants to remember. I look back twenty-five years and I think of *Slaughterhouse Five* or *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. They were telling stories which, in some way, are still with us. I wonder if perhaps this emphasis on style is slightly dangerous? Are we saying America's really interested in a style or a brand and not in a deeply meaningful story?

Brauner: The story *Beloved* is told in a very fractured way and, as Yvonne just said, is difficult—certainly for a lay reader—to decipher. Moreover we're told at the end that it's not a story to pass on, which is ambiguous. But for me, it's not the story that stays with me, it is the style, which is problematic, but also it's precisely the challenges that it imposes on the reader that give it the richness, I think, and make it memorable on all sorts of levels—and powerful.

Boswell: But style doesn't preclude that. There's also something I think of as just narrative drive, even if it doesn't derive from a simple plot device, like who killed Colonel Mustard in the library. But the idea of drive is very important. Students will get caught up in it. I think of that massively great sequence in *Beloved* where Sethe midwives the baby. You encounter that and the world disappears for about twenty pages, it's so gripping. I think that's true of *Rabbit's Run*. The *Rabbit* saga runs for 1,500 pages, but students get into it, the vividness of it. The sense of page-turning impulse is there, even if it's not grounded in a kind of artificial plot engine or McGuffin. I think that's true of *White Noise* or *Underworld*, which is not true of Pynchon. Pynchon you have to push, there's nothing sustaining your readerly interest except the erudition on a display, in a way. But *Underworld* I found off-putting because of the backwards narrative structure.

Gauthier: Five parts of that were previously published as stories. They're really lovely stories. In the course of his career, DeLillo really comes to the fullness of his style in the story form. And there's no sort of dissolution in *Underworld*. Its neat, it's clean, it's rich, it's full. I've taught it several times with graduate

students because undergraduates are so easily put off by the sure weight of it, but it's a real pleasure.

Boswell: Roth is the father of narrative drive. We haven't talked about Roth.

Royal: Oh, don't worry, we will, I'm sure. But first we have another question from the audience.

Audience Member: I want to supplement this discussion about history and what a couple of you have said about personalized history. I think we could very nicely connect at least *Beloved* and *Underworld* and *American Pastoral*, all three books that are on the tops five list. I think this interplay of official history and personal histories is very crucial here, speaking of all three books, because when you look at *Beloved*, you have the impact of official history on the personal tragedy of a woman because of her race and gender. And then this personal history, again, challenges the official version, so you have a very interesting interplay. And in the case of *Underworld*, again you have the under history of the Cold War through the personal history of Nick Shay and his search for this baseball owner, which is the search for the lost father as well as the search for his lost childhood. And then in *American Pastoral* we have the same thing, where you have the complacency of the Swede, and this bubble in which he lives is suddenly destroyed by the history that comes in the shape of his own daughter, the person who explodes the post office.

Gauthier: You make a vital point in each of the novels as you described it. These authors really create a microcosm of America in their protagonists. Why is it a microcosm of America? Because it's the American narrative of discovery and search and loss, but with the constant pull of the undertow of history, official and unofficial history.

Brauner: I'd like to pick up on a couple of things that Marni said earlier on. One was talking about DeLillo's prescience. I can see what you're saying, but I wanted to introduce a note of caution there. It seems to me that there is a danger in seeing novelists as prophets and that kind of teleological reading because you're inevitably only struck by the things they got right, as it were, the things they did anticipate. You miss all the things that actually they got wrong. *White Noise* is a novel I teach and I enjoy teaching to students. Yes, it's got this astonishing bit where Babette is reading to her group of old people

from newspapers and in one of the apparently bizarre stories, there is a prediction that someone makes for the coming year, that people are going to hijack planes and fly them into the White House. So, yes, there are moments like that. But equally, there are plenty of moments in that novel which are rather dated—you talk about shopping malls, yes that's familiar—but the generic goods, there's a lot of emphasis on that. That's gone. So I think there's a danger with teleology, the writer as prophet kind of thing.

But the other thing I wanted to pick up on is the point that's just been made about history. History is important, but again, I want to sound a note of caution. Marni talked about the importance of titles. I think that's the importance of titles as authors making an implicit claim on and staking out a certain kind of territory, the American landscape: *Americana*, *American Pastoral*, *The Plot Against America*. The other thing that strikes me about the titles of many of these writers is how male they are. *No Country for Old Men*, *Falling Man*, *Everyman*. And of course the maleness of the survey; there is only one female writer at the top of the list. It seems to me there's a kind of tension here between the tendency of a lot of American male authors to make implicit, or sometimes explicit, claims to be chroniclers of history, on one hand, and another kind of agenda which is a claim to be addressing more universal timeless concerns, concerns to do with the condition of humanity, which nonetheless is constructed by these male authors as quintessentially male. So it's *Everyman*, not *Everywoman*. I think perhaps it's easy to overstate the importance of history because, in a sense, that's what the writers are pushing us to do. But actually, I think it's a bit more complicated than that. It isn't really history in a general sense, it's always a certain kind of tendentious and gendered view of history.

Royal: There's a question in the audience, but first to note that if you look at the *New York Times Book Review* list, I believe the next most vote-getter after the top five was Mary Ann Robinson's *Housekeeping*. I'm just throwing that out there in terms of both gender and issue of historical anchoredness and how that might potentially complicate some of the things we were bringing up.

Audience Member: Adding on to what you just said, I don't think it's a matter of history. I think all these texts, the five novels that were chosen, deal with or respond to important contemporary issues, social and political. None of the authors intentionally wrote an historical novel, that's not the point, and I don't think anybody wanted to prophecy what will happen. But the responses also go along with the particular discourse or style. Morrison's *Beloved* could not have been written in the discourse we used for *The Bluest Eye*. But it is

adequate to the topic she chose, and so is DeLillo's and so is Roth's and others'. I wouldn't try to split a story here and style here. I don't think that's the point. I don't think that's what any of the authors intended.

Royal: Actually, on that point—and I'm trying not to be a Roth person here—Roth has said in interviews that when he set out to write *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*, his American trilogy, he intentionally wrote them with the idea of an individual who becomes a hostage to history. What happens when you have someone who is thrown into a particular historical or cultural moment? What transpires? History was definitely on his mind in the writing of those novels. We're discussing history here in the larger sense, and I understand David's caution as well as some of the other comments about drawing our attention to the historical-cultural moment of these novels.

Something else that struck me about the *New York Times* list is another author...or another that's not on the list at all, and that is Paul Auster. I really like Auster, but perhaps it's understandable that he may not be in this top list. I'm thinking of a text like his most read or most popular *New York Trilogy*. If we're talking about a kind of anchoredness in a historical cultural moment, it's completely absent from the *New York Trilogy*. Might that be one of the reasons why many of these writers, critics, and editors didn't include it in their rankings?

Boswell: I don't want to put a kitschy deflation on this, but I think the other force that may be driving this list is the unspoken myth of the Great American Novel. We're stuck with this idea that that's what you have to produce. I think that in the case of Roth and Updike, there's a deliberate attempt to do that. Updike said, in the introduction to *Rabbit Angstrom*, something like, "Rabbit is my way into America." And somehow he contrives to mention *Huck Finn* and *Moby-Dick* in the same sentence.

Royal: Actually, Roth *did* write *The Great American Novel*...and it's all about baseball.

Boswell: And *Beloved* becomes swept up in that agenda, whether or not she set out to do that. The case can be made that whatever you want to call the Great American Novel, even if you don't believe in it, it has certain contours and features. I think that all five of these *New York Times* books rank.

Brauner: As grand claims go, there are 60 million and more.

Atkinson: Her main comment about *Beloved* was, and she repeats it often, this was the one book she didn't think anyone was going to read.

Brauner: Do you believe that though?

Boswell: I don't believe that.

Atkinson: She put everything she had into it. That's the basis of my scholarship, how she put everything she had into calculating how to get people not to throw the book across the room.

Brauner: I think writers are disingenuous. American novelists are very aware of the Great American Novel myth, and while they might deconstruct it, interrogate it, parody it—which is what Roth does in *The Great American Novel*—nonetheless there remains the temptation, particularly among the male novelists, to write it, to try and nail it, to have critics say, “Yes, you have done it, you have written it.” With something like *Underworld*, think of the first line: “He speaks in your voice, American.” And with *The Adventures of Augie March*: “I am American, Chicago born.” With Roth there's no question about it, he is self-consciously writing historical novels, and he is self-consciously trying to write, he calls it the American Trilogy—no one would have thought to call it a trilogy. He tells people that it's an American Trilogy. It's about important pivotal moments in American history. He is saying implicitly, “I am an important American novelist, perhaps *the* great American novelist, the great American novelist of my time.” He's making an implicit claim for importance, I think. He's thinking about history both backwards, as in important moments in American history, he's thinking about American history forwards, as in how will posterity see me. This may sound very reductive, but writers have huge egos. Have you ever met any writers? Believe me, it's true.

Frye: Let me cheerlead a little bit. I think the concept or the myth of the Great American Novel is fuel for some extremely effective work. I think that's the case with these novels. One thing I want to say: we're talking a lot about history, and certainly what constitutes and what is a historical novel. There

is some debate. One very strict definition is set in a time remote from the author's own. When is that? How do you mark that out? What we can say about these authors and these novels in particular is that they're rich in historical content. Again, I think more about historical density in material. In the case of McCarthy, specifically, what is notable—and this has to do with his explicit participation, Morrison as well, in the romance tradition...

Boswell: Yeah, Hawthorne.

Frye: Exactly...and that is, that the historical material becomes emblematic, and it becomes emblematic of the authors' exploration of universals, specifically anything from natural law, scientific principle, or philosophical issues and questions. One of the things that makes all of these novels rich is the transformation of historical material into broader...“universals” is not an effective descriptive. I would say philosophical, religious, scientific questions and issues and how they are functioning in an age dominated by science. They are pursuing knowledge, sort of the epistemological quest from a different angle using the material of history. At the same time, they are giving us interesting inquiries into particular historical moments. It's that dual direction of historical inquiry and broad philosophical inquiry that makes a lot of these authors quite interesting.

Audience Member: I was wondering why Pynchon isn't considered that great anymore. Roth obviously is postmodern. But with Pynchon you don't have the props anymore, you can't use the usual devices that you would in reading literature, and that was the very reason that Pynchon was very exciting at the beginning. People loved to do that. You had to sort of fall into the novel and live with the novel—you couldn't use your props. And now people aren't as concerned about that anymore. *Gravity's Rainbow* was the rage at one time for undergrads as well as for graduate students. Everyone wanted to figure out different things. They're not interested in that anymore. I don't understand the reason. You've been discussing various explanations here, but what is the reason?

Boswell: The other name you could bring in here is Barth. I think Barth was very much of his time. I teach Barth to students, and the book that gets thrown across the room is *Lost in the Funhouse*. I keep thinking, it's the 1960s, it's *Batman*, what's wrong with it? I try to tell students that he was going to include a tape and that people could store pot in their books, in the little slot where the tape went; it was going to be a '60s thing. But they

don't care, because it's not exciting to them to watch the scaffolding revealed, the narrative mechanisms, to pull back the curtain and there's the Wizard of Oz. I'm going to give David Foster Wallace props for this, because Wallace pointed out that for his generation, that was not radical at all. Television was doing it. We have *The Daily Show*, it's the air we breathe. Maybe that's why *White Noise* replaces *The Crying of Lot 49*. It might be the case that Barth and Coover and Hawkes, that generation, broke the barriers, but beyond that the narrative meat isn't there. The stylistic bravery is there, but the narrative drive, the personal...all of that isn't there, and I think the writers we're celebrating retain what is essential to a novel's lasting.

Royal: Which gets back to that earlier issue that you raised about the muscle of the story.

Gauthier: I wanted to talk about *Beloved* for a moment with respect to a number of these issues that have been raised. *Beloved* is a ghost story, it's gothic. In the first page there's haunting, there's a child's throat cut. There're a lot of elements there to address what we've been talking about. I could make a similar argument for *Underworld*, but I think there is a falling into the novel. What is it that attracts students to be driven to read *Beloved* and not throw it across the room? It's not just students. I'm struck by how many of my neighbors have read *Beloved*. It is perhaps the most read of these five novels. It's not like *Gravity's Rainbow*, which I know was the rage. I love *Gravity's Rainbow*, but I think it also ended up on the shelf for a lot of people who bought that book. There is such a relationship between structure and story that it is a sort of figuring out. So maybe it's difficult because we don't know all the puzzle pieces as we go, we have to sort of give ourselves to it. But it's structured according to the workings of memory, right? And through that Morrison conveys to us a memory and an experience of something we've never known, a psychological legacy of slavery.

In terms of the Great American Novel, I want to continue with the example of *Beloved*. Just thinking about Morrison and each of these artists in terms of their sense of their job as artists. I think that this myth of the Great American Novel clearly fuels many of them. For Morrison, her job is to, as she says, tear asunder the veil that characterizes nineteenth-century slave narratives. Morrison, quite explicitly throughout her career, wants to tear aside that veil. In fact, she said she didn't want to write a novel about slavery, it's just too big and too overwhelming. How do you go there, because it is the original American sin? In that sense it's fundamental to the American story. She finds her way in through this small historical story. Again, I agree with Steve about not using the word "universal," but what compels her about this story is that it's about mother-love, as DeLillo's story is about the search for the lost father.

These sort of human elements are a way into something that becomes a story about history.

Audience Member: I wanted to point out something that Yvonne said, the comment about not wanting to speak for Morrison. It occurs to me that we're all academics here, most of us are tasked with teaching, and that requires us most of the time to be masters. We read a book a million times and tell students our theories about how form matches content and genre considerations. But it seems to me that what's so amazing about these five books, these authors we're talking about, is there's something that we can't master, we can't put our finger on. There's a surprise. It's as if for everything that we've accounted for, there's something else that is accidental that keeps driving us back into to text. I don't know if it can be called inspiration or genius, but I think that there's something there that we can't articulate or theorize about.

Audience Member: Just to add to that, I think Morrison put her finger on all things we are dancing around here when, in an early interview, she was asked, When people read *Beloved*, do they understand what you're trying to do? She laughed. She said that she writes on many layers. That, for me, is the crux that brings everything together. Every time we read the book there's something else. It's not a book that you put aside and say "I read that and it's done." No, we go back to it. It seems to me that the sustainability, the durability, the readability of the novel is going to be that pleasure, that every time we go back to the story—and the style and the narrative, and the history—there's always something new.

Gauthier: It's that psychological weight and experience of it, the things that are outside of our analytical capacity to articulate.

Audience Member: A few years ago I read an article, and I'm not sure what to make of this, but it said that the most-taught book by a living author in American college classrooms was Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. I know that book falls out of our time range, published in 1975, but there's a genre problem here too, because her publisher puts "nonfiction" on the back cover and later changes that. I wonder what you thought, if the scope had been widened, would this book have been a contender?

Boswell: I think that goes back to the question of who is responding to the survey. Also, that's an interesting book because, and I might be wrong, but in

my experience, that is a book that keeps turning up on freshman composition syllabi. I don't know why. At least it was at Washington University. It was one of the four books you could choose from when I was a teaching assistant. Another one was *Speak Memory*. We had *Speak Memory* and *The Woman Warrior*. Eighty percent of my colleagues picked *The Woman Warrior*. And I think it's also a high school book. That's going to drive some numbers.

Royal: *The Woman Warrior* strikes me as a "syllabus book," and it's one you'll see cropping up on syllabi over and over again, which comes back to a question several of you have raised: Who are the respondents? What kind of audience are we talking about here? Are we talking about common readers, are we talking about academics? Academics making a syllabus, or academics writing for publication outside of their classroom? There are different audiences here.

Audience Member: Thinking about readers, I would say one of the main issues about all of these books is that they touch upon emotional, existential quandaries, all linked to give them historical moments, but imaginable in other existential contexts. So our own contexts.

Frye: I want to speak to the topic of the syllabus, what you were just mentioning, Derek. I don't teach *Blood Meridian*. I taught it once, and I'm quite reticent to do it again. I was actually quite gleeful when *The Road* came out because I finally had a teachable McCarthy. So it's the issue of teachability. In one sense, *Blood Meridian* is quite teachable in its density, its complexity. There's a lot to talk about, as long as students don't decide to kill you. That's part of the whole issue when we start talking about syllabus books.

Audience Member: I wanted to come back to this discussion of why Pynchon and Barth are no longer that popular. Why is that? Could it be that people simply grew tired of this? And I hate to say this because I love postmodernism, but could it be that general audiences grew tired of this overly experimentalist, this art for arts sake projects? When you look at the number of episodes and characters in Pynchon and in Barth, I think it just makes people tired. They seem not to identify with the characters and follow them. In *V* we have a theme, we don't know what or who it is. In *Giles Goat-Boy* we have different characters who seem to be almost postmodernist allegories of good and evil or whatever you will. Or *The Sod-Weed Factor*, where we have two-hundred characters and twenty-five plots, if we are to believe somebody who says he or she counted.

Royal: This raises an interesting issue. The thing about what we could maybe call, for argument's sake, high postmodernism in writers like Pynchon and definitely Barth, is that, in a very broad way, postmodernism seems to kind of erase identity in a variety of ways. Whereas when we have texts such as *The Woman Warrior* or *Beloved*, there seems to be an establishment of some kind of identity that runs counter to this. One of the things that both *Beloved* and *The Woman Warrior* have in common is the fact that there is an emphasis on both gender and race/ethnicity here. We haven't really discussed that very much, outside of the slavery issue in *Beloved*. We've talked about gender, but not so much about race and ethnicity in terms of the texts and readership.

Audience Member: I wanted to add something about Pynchon and Barth. The thing is, we are putting on one side students and the general public, and on the other side we have academics. Let's be honest, how much do we ourselves understand it? If you want to understand Pynchon completely, you have to be a specialist. You have to study white dwarves, quantum physics, and chemistry. I think that why he was popular in the '70s and '80s, and now not so much, was because people thought that they could find out what he is all about. And once that they understood that he was unintelligible, really, he is now left to us academics.

Boswell: Quite to the contrary, and we haven't really talked about him, but there's Harry Angstrom. You're going to enjoy reading about Harry Angstrom even if you don't like him, I think, because he's so three-dimensional and real, and that's the magic, the untouchable quality that I think you're talking about. At some point, there's nothing to unpack about Harry except what kind of resonance you have with him emotionally. The other thing to remember about someone like Updike is that everyone can read Updike. My parents read Updike, even though they also read Ken Follett and whatever other junk was in the airport. He appeared on *The Simpsons* once. So did Pynchon, by the way, with a bag over his head. It was a *Playboy* magazine that was sitting in Krusty the Clown's drawer, and on the cover it said "How to Make a Great Martini, by John Updike." But he was that figure for a while in the velvet flares and the tie, representing the adulterous society. I think that worked in his favor ultimately when the survey votes were tallied because he had an audience and that audience is based on identification and readerly pleasure.

Royal: This raises another issue. We were talking about postmodernism and then you bring in the everyman-ness...maybe not every person-ness, so to speak, since we're referencing gender in terms of *Rabbit Run*. To what extent

are these five authors humanists, and how might their novels be considered humanists texts?

Frye: To a large extent. To your point about story. Let's be careful about defining terms. I think that story in this context, especially with the authors we're talking about, in every novel that we're talking about, character is at the forefront. Rich characters, psychologically complex characters, so the story needs to be defined as sort of the conflation of character and plot, probably with character in the front end. In that sense I think they are richly humanist.

Atkinson: Jumping off what everyone else said, in Morrison's texts, she's telling what she calls "unspeakable things unspoken." So a lot of the things that drags us back to the Morrison text repeatedly is that we can read the words on the page, but we cannot assimilate them, incorporate them because they are in some cases so horrific we are not ready to hear them, listen to them, feel them, be in touch with them. So a second, a third, a fourth, a fifth, a sixth reading. Some students have come back to me and told me they've read *Beloved* six times and now they found *this*. And it was there the whole time, but they weren't ready to hear that story yet, it was too much for them to hear. Morrison wrote her books in such a way, she says, that people couldn't take it all in. You can't just sit through a beating, a rape, disenfranchisement, loss of humanity, on the first page and not expect it to shock us. So she gives you a little bit, then she pulls back. It's not there overtly for us to look at. So every time you look at it, you peel a layer off. And when you're in a certain position, you can see the next layer. And if you're not, the story is still there. It's like, have you ever eaten a really good meal and forgot the salt? The meal was good, and then you thought at the last minute, "Oh, if I had put salt on it, it would have been wonderful." So the meal, the original story, is good. Morrison's texts are like that. The layers of the story.

You were talking about characters, Steve and Derek. Morrison does something fascinating with her characters. She makes her narrator a character in her story. And then the narrator changes in *Jazz*. You start off with one narrator and end up with a different narrator, and then at the end of the book, the book is the narrator: "Look where your hands are. Now." The book is talking to you. Do what you want with it. I don't own it, the book tells you. You can change it, mold it, move it. So I think that lets her books become more readable and pushes the story.

Royal: Another connection, because we're encouraging connections here, is between what you were mentioning in terms of the narrator in Morrison and



FIGURE 2: From left: Steven Frye, Yvonne Atkinson, and Marni Gauthier

some of these other texts. In the case of *American Pastoral*, I would argue that Nathan Zuckerman is the protagonist and not Swede Levov. I think that's one of those subtle masking techniques in terms of narratological drive that, at least for me, makes *American Pastoral* resonate, along with *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*.

Brauner: Here again first lines are important. If we're thinking about the old fashion virtues of storytelling, we've got story, we've got style, we've got characterization. We're talking about all these things. All these writers that we're talking about, they can do all these things. Let's not forget that. What does Roth do in *American Pastoral*? The first sentence is not a sentence, it's just two words: "The Swede." Very simple, elliptical, provocative. It raises more questions than it answers, but it kind of gets you in there. Morrison is fantastic at first lines. I can't remember the first line of *Beloved*, but *Paradise* has the first line, "They shoot the white girl first." I mean, how can you not carry on reading from there. "Foreswear fucking others forever or it's over," in *Sabbath's Theater*. So first lines are quite revealing of that old fashion thing, craft. These authors know their craft, they know how to hook a reader, they know how to do this stuff. But also they're not reinventing the wheel. They don't get this from nowhere. What Yvonne was talking about, Morrison's technique of giving you something but withholding, deferring things, she gets

that from Faulkner. You were talking, Steve, about the McCarthy/Faulkner connection being in some ways misleading. But I think less misleading as a more organic relation is that between Faulkner and Morrison. Morrison's narrative structure, certainly in *Beloved*, owes a lot to Faulkner. We all know, of course, that Morrison wrote her thesis on Faulkner. So the craft of these writers is considerable. But again a note of caution: it's not a cult of genius where they've somehow invented these things themselves. They all self-consciously borrowed from previous authors. We've mentioned Hawthorne, Faulkner is important, but there are lots of other precursors who are invoked by these writers and from whom they borrow.

Boswell: One more thing on the Pynchon/Barth controversy here. The other thing about those writers that works in their disfavor is that all of the technique is on full display. It's like looking at the clock without the face—you get to see the gears. I think in the case of the guy I'm supposed to represent, Updike, the craft is almost invisible. The disjunctive narrative in something like *Beloved* is overt, but *Rabbit Run*, which reads almost like documentary film, rewards close reading in a way that any great novel has to if it's going to last. Because it has to bear repeated readings, it has to bear close scrutiny. For those who have read the *Rabbit* tetralogy and liked it and haven't thought about it in a sort of academic attention, it's worth pressing that text to find out how well-made it is. I'll give you one example. The four books that make it up. The opening words are: "Boys," "Men," "Running," "Standing." Those are the first words of the four books. That's one of many such details. So there is something to be said for the invisibility of the craft in working in the book's favor as well.

Royal: I know that there are a number of other issues that are raised by this point, and many of you would like to ask additional questions, but we've run out of time. Perhaps it's appropriate that Marshall and David have referenced the opening sentences of various novels, because we've arrived at the final "lines" of our panel.

I want to thank all of the panelists from the various author societies, as well as the audience, for making this a lively discussion today. I hope we can continue our conversations for the remainder of the conference, in the Q&A at other panels, over meals together, and in the hallways between sessions. Thank you all for coming.