



LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: PICTURING AMERICA

## LAND OF OPPORTUNITY—ESSAY

Essay by Suzanne Ozment

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The United States has survived periods of great turmoil and divisiveness—the Civil War, the suffrage movement, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War era—and periods of great suffering and loss—the Great Depression, 9/11, Hurricane Katrina. From the beginning and even through times of hardship, the American perspective has remained optimistic.

Since the establishment of New World colonies by Europeans, America has been seen as a grand experiment. The very size and geographic diversity of the country reinforce notions of greatness and power and potential.

America has long been marked by a sense of becoming. Through at least the nineteenth century, pilgrims and pioneers were conscious of building a country and shaping a way of life that was characterized by a bold independence of spirit. Robert Penn Warren was fond of quoting Adam Gurowski, a Polish aristocrat who visited Washington in the mid-nineteenth century and concluded that “America is unique among nations because other nations are accidents of geography or race, but America is based on an idea” (*Robert Penn Warren Talking*, Random House, 1980).

America came to be seen as a land where social justice was possible—where the poor and oppressed would find opportunity and freedom, where the ambitious and adventurous could make their fortunes. Americans hold to a persistent belief in individual achievement—a conviction that hard work, talent, resourcefulness, and initiative will be rewarded.

Americans tend to be forward-looking and future-focused. Even as we acknowledge the failings of the past, we remain confident that the principles on which the United States was established will prevail. The very fact that American reality has not yet matched the American ideal makes us more determined to pursue the dream.

The images drawn from the **Picturing America** collection, as well as the books selected for the **Land of Opportunity** series, explore the extent to which the promise of America has been fulfilled.

The **Picturing America** collection includes images of American heroes—Washington, Lincoln, Franklin—as well as renderings of ordinary men and women—the careworn migrant mother in Dorothea Lange’s photograph (18B); the earnest young man in Norman Rockwell’s *Freedom of Speech* (19A); and the man, woman, and child who make up the boating party in the painting by Mary Cassatt (14A). The quest for social justice is represented in Grant Wood’s imaginative depiction of *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* (3A); in Martin Puryear’s powerful sculpture *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (20B); and in the remarkable photograph by James Karales of the Selma-to-Montgomery March for Voting Rights in 1965 (19B). One picture particularly stands out: Thomas Eakins’s watercolor, *John Biglin in a Single Scull* (11A). With his well-defined muscles and concentrated expression, Biglin, a professional rower, typifies the individual achievement possible with skill, perseverance, and hard work.

## E. L. Doctorow *Ragtime*

The series opens with a book that offers a witty, irreverent look at the American way of life. In *Ragtime*, E. L. Doctorow integrates actual historical figures and events from the early twentieth century into a fictional story that revolves around three families: a white upper-middle-class family, an immigrant family, and a black family. The novel covers the period from 1902, when the white family builds a house in a suburb of New York City, until the United States' entry into World War I in 1917.

The white family—Father, who owns a flag and fireworks factory; Mother; their Little Boy; Mother's Younger Brother; and Grandfather—lives in New Rochelle. The narrator's use of relationship titles rather than names indicates their status as representatives of their social class.

The immigrant family, likewise referred to with relationship terms—Mameh, Tateh, and Little Girl—is similarly representative. Tateh struggles to make a living until he abandons socialism for capitalism. With the replication of his artistic creations, first in children's flip books and later in films, Tateh grows wealthy. When he remakes himself, he also renames himself and, ironically, assumes the identity of a European aristocrat.

While the youngest member of the black family is usually referred to as the brown baby (lowercase), we learn that his mother's name is Sarah. His father not only has a full name—Coalhouse Walker—but one that becomes famous when he retaliates against the unprovoked vandalism of his car by racist white firemen. The families begin to interact one afternoon when Mother finds the brown baby in her backyard and takes him, and then his mother, into the New Rochelle household. Soon, Walker is paying visits to Sarah in the hope of persuading her to marry him.

Forming a backdrop to the experiences of the fictional characters are the escapades of the rich and famous of the period. The cast includes J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford, and Harry K. Thaw. The latter, a wealthy railroad and mining magnate, marries Evelyn Nesbit, a woman the narrator describes as "the first sex goddess in America," and attracts international attention in 1906 when he murders her former lover, the prominent architect Stanford White.

In myriad ways, the lives of the fictional characters are interwoven with those of the historical figures. For example, Father goes on an expedition to the North Pole with Admiral Robert Peary; Younger Brother meets the radical activist Emma Goldman and has a brief affair with Evelyn Nesbit; and the prominent escape artist Harry Houdini is invited into the New Rochelle family's home when his car breaks down in the neighborhood.

In this fast-paced, episodic, matter-of-factly narrated novel, Doctorow contrasts the American ideal with American realities. The social prominence, influence, and luxury attained by one segment of the population are contrasted with the hunger, cold, prejudice, and violence suffered by another. Repeatedly, Doctorow highlights the complacency of the middle class and the detachment from everyday realities of the well-to-do, and calls into question some national points of pride. For instance, rather than applauding "the value of the duplicable event" of mass production for making automobiles more affordable, the narrator points out that with Henry Ford's assembly-line approach to manufacturing, the workers are as interchangeable as the parts of the cars they assemble, and as insignificant to the factory owner. Material gain is often associated with qualities of arrogance, corruption, and superficiality: J. P. Morgan is so wealthy, he loans money to the United States government; Harry K. Thaw, imprisoned on Murderer's Row in the Tombs, tosses \$20 tips to the guards and has his meals brought in from Delmonico's; and socialite Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish hires the entire Ringling Brothers sideshow to entertain at a party at her Manhattan mansion. When Sigmund Freud comes to the United States, he is so repulsed by the dirt and noise and throngs of people that he deems America "a gigantic mistake."

By the end of the book, the three families—white, black, and immigrant—have merged. Mother has asserted herself and deservedly found happiness with Tateh.

While readers have painstakingly endeavored to discern fact from fiction in the novel, Doctorow long ago lost interest in the distinction, claiming he no longer remembered which was which. In his words, "If you ask me whether some things in the book 'really' happened, I can only say, 'They have now.'"

Representations of engineering and architectural marvels in **Picturing America** such as the Brooklyn Bridge, which is the subject of both Walker Evans's photograph (13A) and

Joseph Stella's painting (14B), and the Chrysler Building designed by William Van Alen (15B) reflect American ingenuity and the toil of thousands of laborers. And in the image of the Ohio Capitol (7A), a Greek Revival structure designed largely by Thomas Cole, we find a stately monument to democratic government.

Other works of art that resonate with Doctorow's novel are those based on the struggle for equal treatment and opportunity, such as Romare Bearden's collage, *The Dove* (17B); Jacob Lawrence's tempura painting, *The Migration Series, No. 57* (17A); James Karales's photograph of the Selma-to-Montgomery March for Voting Rights in 1965 (19B); and Martin Puryear's sculpture, *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (20B).

## **Robert Penn Warren** ***All the King's Men***

Robert Penn Warren won the 1947 Pulitzer Prize for his tale of the life and times of Willie Stark, whose rise to power as Louisiana governor and U.S. senator in the 1930s closely parallels the career of the notorious politician Huey Long.

Presented in lyrical, hypnotic prose by narrator Jack Burden, a young journalist, *All the King's Men* unrolls as a flashback—actually as a series of flashbacks within flashbacks—focused on the years from 1922, when Jack meets Willie, to 1939.

Willie Stark is the iconic American figure—the self-made man. Although he comes from an impoverished background and is largely self-educated, he is industrious and enterprising. Typecast by Burden as “Cousin Willie from the country,” he begins his career in county government. But Willie is not as meek as he seems. When he is lured into a political campaign only to be manipulated and publicly humiliated by the men he thought were his supporters, Willie fights back and succeeds by applying the same tactics they used to victimize him. He gains the support of the electorate when he abandons his earnest, fact-filled speeches for earthy, conversational, plain speaking to the farmers and tradesmen gathered on courthouse steps and at campaign picnics.

By contrast, Jack descends from wealth and privilege. Disaffected and self-indulgent, he lacks Willie's ambition, focus, and initiative. He accepts a job with Willie conducting “research” that enables Willie to blackmail a succession of lawmakers and businessmen, including Jack's oldest family friend, Judge Irwin. Jack labels himself an idealist, which he defines as someone who believes that “what you don't know don't hurt you, for it ain't real.” Jack tries to persuade himself that he can avoid unpleasant truths, that he is only an observer, that he has no personal responsibility if he is merely following orders. When his attempts to insulate himself fail, Jack's reaction is to withdraw. His retreat takes a variety of forms, from divorce to a road trip across the country to sleeping for days on end.

Disillusionment with others generates cynicism in both Jack and Willie. While cynicism causes Jack to detach himself, it leads Willie to believe that corruption is universal.

Willie Stark, the “king” of the novel's title, proves to be a complex character rather than a one-dimensional villain. Corrupt and egotistical, he nevertheless uses his power to advance a populist agenda and improve the welfare of the ordinary citizen. He is directly responsible for extending the network of state roads and constructing schools and hospitals. One of the central questions in the novel speaks to core American principles and political processes—whether it is ever justifiable to use corrupt means to achieve noble ends, whether one can atone for one's sins by accomplishing great good. This question is explored through multiple characters—Willie himself, Judge Irwin, Cass Mastern.

While the colorful Willie Stark is at the center of much of the action, the central consciousness of the novel is that of Jack Burden. It is his psychological and moral growth that we follow as he tells the story. When he is truthful with himself, Jack acknowledges that “the story of Willie Stark and the story of Jack Burden are, in one sense, one story.” Like Willie, what Jack must come to acknowledge and accept is that events are connected. Behavior has consequences from which one ultimately cannot escape.

From the **Picturing America** collection, Norman Rockwell's rendering of a town hall meeting, *Freedom of Speech* (19A); Dorothea Lange's searing image of Depression-era

poverty, *Migrant Mother* (18B); and George Caleb Bingham's colorful depiction of *The County Election* (7B) resonate with the themes of Warren's novel.

**Laura Hillenbrand**  
***Seabiscuit: An***  
***American Legend***

The story of the championship racehorse Seabiscuit as told by Laura Hillenbrand is the story of the American Dream realized. The central figures—the horse, the trainer, the jockey, and the owner—seemed destined for ordinary lives, for obscurity, if not for failure. Yet they came together in the gloomy years of the Great Depression, and through a combination of determination, perseverance, and previously unrealized talent, they achieved greatness and captured the hearts of people worldwide.

In archetypal fashion, Charles Howard, at age twenty-six, left behind his wife and two sons in 1903 to travel by transcontinental train from New York to San Francisco, with 21 cents in his pocket. Three years later, he had relocated his family to California and gone from mechanic (first a bicycle and then an automobile repairman) to prosperous automobile dealer. A risk taker and a romantic, Charles Howard epitomized the American success story. Never one to let opportunity pass him by, Howard capitalized on advances in technology (the mass manufacture of the automobile) and a natural disaster (the 1906 San Francisco earthquake) to further his career. As he acquired greater wealth, he developed an interest in horse racing and began purchasing thoroughbreds. In the mid 1930s, he was intent on finding an underrated horse with star potential, and was aided in his search by an experienced horse breaker and trainer named Tom Smith.

By the time Smith met Howard in 1934, he had drawn some attention to himself by reclaiming several horses other trainers had given up on. A loner and rugged individualist who adhered steadfastly to his own unorthodox methods, he was a keen judge of ability in horses and riders. But, despite his talents, Smith, at age fifty-five, was living in a horse stall, nearly destitute, when his path crossed that of the rich businessman. Two years later, he and Howard found the horse they had been looking for, and the jockey to ride him.

A descendant of Man O'War and Hard Tack, Seabiscuit had a noble lineage but none of the sleek, impressive lines of his forebears. Instead he was "blunt, coarse, rectangular," with a penchant for sleeping and a reputation for losing more races than he won. Mishandled by a succession of trainers, he was discovered by Howard and Smith in 1936 when he ran his fiftieth race—the Governor's Handicap in Detroit—and beat long odds to come in first with a jockey named Red Pollard on his back.

Pollard had his own hard-luck story. He was from Alberta, Canada, where his father had prospered as the owner of a brickyard until a flash flood destroyed his business. With six other children and a wife to provide for, he made arrangements for Red at age 15 to be trained as a jockey. But the man his father had trusted to care for him instead abandoned Red in Montana, where he scraped together a living by riding in local races and entering prizefights. A convoluted course brought Pollard to the Detroit Fairgrounds in 1936 with his close friend and fellow jockey, George Woolf.

Within months of Seabiscuit's purchase by Charles Howard, the horse was living up to his pedigree. Before capacity crowds at the tracks and thousands more who listened to the races on the radio, Seabiscuit developed an enormous following. When he established himself as the best racehorse on the West Coast, Howard determined to take him East to run on America's most historic racetracks. Seabiscuit traveled across the country by train in his own luxury Pullman car, attracting adoring crowds at every junction.

In 1938, Pollard suffered two serious riding accidents, each of which threatened to end his career. He was still recovering from the first injury when George Woolf rode Seabiscuit to a four-length victory against Triple Crown winner War Admiral in one of the most famous match races in horse-racing history. A few months later, Seabiscuit sustained a strained tendon, and the veterinarian predicted he would never run again. But true to its fairy tale qualities, Seabiscuit's career concluded instead in 1940, with Red Pollard back in the Howard silks riding him into the winner's circle to claim the prize that had previously eluded him, the \$100,000 purse in the Santa Anita Handicap.

At a time in their history when Americans sorely needed hope and inspiration, it came to them in the shape of an unlikely four-legged champion.

Among the images in the **Picturing America** collection is Alexander Gardner's photograph of Abraham Lincoln (9B), another American legend with "coarse, blunt, rectangular" features and undistinguished beginnings.

**Katherine  
Anne Porter  
*Noon Wine***

*Noon Wine* takes place between 1896 and 1905 on a South Texas farm owned by the main character, Royal Earle Thompson, through whose consciousness most of the story is filtered. The novella is divided into nine sections, with the brief, pivotal fifth section serving as a transition between the first four, which tell of the arrival of Swedish immigrant Olaf Helton at the Thompson farm, and the last four, which recount the outcome of the visit by bounty hunter Homer T. Hatch.

Ironically, while Texas landowner Thompson has traditional American aspirations, it is Helton, the immigrant laborer, who shows the industry, initiative, and resourcefulness associated with traditional American values.

Thompson is introduced as a man more inclined to worry about the failure of his farm than to work to improve it. He rationalizes that little can change until his sons are old enough to help him. But from the time Helton is hired, he demonstrates the difference one man can make. He repairs buildings and fences, manages the livestock, and cultivates the garden. Although there are "only a few kinds of work manly enough for Thompson to undertake with his own hands," Helton has no such scruples. He is as ready to churn butter as he is to plow a field, and he becomes "the hope and the prop of the family." The Thompsons prosper because of his frugality and know-how.

While Helton's coming changes the Thompsons' lives in noticeable ways, the arrival of bounty hunter Hatch has an even more profound impact. From the start, Thompson instinctively dislikes and distrusts Hatch. When he learns the purpose of his visit, he recoils from the mercenary motives and deceitful maneuverings that have brought Hatch to his property. Hatch's sordidness is far more incomprehensible to Thompson than Helton's uncommunicative, eccentric ways.

Thompson is careful to protect "his dignity and his reputation." After the accident that leads to Hatch's death, he becomes obsessed with preserving his good name, and never entirely understands how it came to be compromised. He insists on making a circuit of the neighboring homesteads to justify his actions to his neighbors. Ultimately, though, what matters most to Thompson is not appearances but the confidence and respect of his wife and sons. When he realizes he has lost that, he makes one last attempt to demonstrate that he is an honorable man.

Porter creates a certain inevitability to the conclusion. Nevertheless, the question remains whether it is the end that Thompson deserves, whether justice has been served. Unlike Willie Stark in *All the King's Men*, Royal Earle Thompson is not a self-made man. To the extent that his fortune is made, it is attributable to someone else. Can the same be said of the cause of his downfall?

The **Picturing America** images of heroic figures such as Washington (3B), Franklin (4B), and Lincoln (9B), and of individual achievement such as that of John Biglin (11A) stand in marked contrast to the relatively small successes and inconsequential misfortunes of Porter's characters.

**Cristina Garcia  
*Dreaming in Cuban***

In Cristina Garcia's evocatively titled first novel, the opportunities afforded for material gain and freedom of expression in the United States contrast sharply with the poverty and restrictions on civil liberties in Communist Cuba. Still, the characters who immigrate from Cuba to New York City carry with them a lingering attachment to their homeland. *Dreaming in Cuban* tells the interwoven stories of three generations of Cuban women:

Celia del Pino; her two daughters, Lourdes and Felicia; and her granddaughter, Pilar. The action of the story takes place between 1972 and 1980, but the narrative is interspersed with letters Celia wrote to her first lover over a twenty-five year period from 1934 to 1959.

Throughout the book, the point of view shifts, alternating most often among the four principal women characters so that we come to know each of them intimately. Celia is a loyal supporter of Fidel Castro and the revolutionary overthrow of the Batista government in Cuba in the late 1950s. However, her older daughter, Lourdes, bitterly rejects the poverty and brutality in her native country and immigrates to New York, where she opens the Yankee Doodle Bakery, one of many testaments to her acceptance of capitalist values. Felicia remains in Cuba and acts out in her own life the violence that surrounds her. During periods of mental and emotional unbalance, she disfigures her abusive and unfaithful first husband, murders her naïve third husband, and attempts to kill herself and her young son. The youngest of the four heroines, Lourdes's only child, Pilar, longs for the place and people she was taken from as a little girl. Her restlessness and dissatisfaction find expression in her painting and music.

Most of the characters endure abuse or abandonment in one form or another. Family relationships are tempestuous. In some cases, the wounds are too deep to heal. This gloomy summary notwithstanding, Garcia's novel is warm and affecting, and at times comic, in its presentation of human connections, particularly those between parents and children.

In a world in which dreams and visions hold great significance, each of the central female figures attempts to come to terms with her past and her memories. Each seeks purpose and direction. Celia "guards the north coast of Cuba" from her porch swing and becomes a civilian judge; Lourdes is a successful entrepreneur and a volunteer police-woman in New York; Felicia serves a brief stint as an armed guerrilla before enduring complex initiation rituals to become a Santeria priestess; and Pilar paints bold pictures and teaches herself to play the bass.

Garcia, a Cuban native who was brought to the United States by her parents when she was two years old, also explores how the immigrant experience shapes one's sense of self. While Lourdes thrives in the United States, where she welcomes the opportunity to reinvent herself, Pilar romanticizes her homeland and longs to be reunited with her grandmother. She is conscious that "Every day Cuba fades a little more inside me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me. And there's only my imagination where our history should be." It is only when she returns to Cuba that she realizes she belongs in New York—as she says, not "instead of" Cuba, but "more than" Cuba.

A number of images in **Picturing America** focus on the American values that have attracted generations of immigrants to the United States: economic opportunity, social justice, and freedom of expression. Among these are George Caleb Bingham's *The County Election* (7B), Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration Series, No. 57* (17A), Norman Rockwell's *Freedom of Speech* (19A), and Martin Puryear's *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (20B).

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LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: PICTURING AMERICA

## LAND OF OPPORTUNITY— RECOMMENDED READING

The following works are recommended for those who would like to continue reading and discussing books on this theme:

### Drama Series

A collection of twentieth-century plays that explore American values, aspirations, and attitudes.

**Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*.** Despite her resolute optimism and persistent efforts to help her children attain a secure future, Amanda Wingfield finds the American Dream elusive.

**Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*.** Written during the McCarthy era, Miller's story of the 1692 witchcraft trials in Salem, Massachusetts, was intended to suggest parallels between seventeenth-century Puritan extremists and the witch hunt led by Senator Eugene McCarthy more than two-and-a-half centuries later.

**Moisés Kaufman, *The Laramie Project*.** Based on the brutal murder of a young gay man in Laramie, Wyoming, Kaufman's play explores the impact on the community of a vicious crime that forces people to re-examine their values.

**Charles Fuller, *A Soldier's Play*.** Winner of the 1982 Pulitzer Prize, this gripping drama set in 1944 on a segregated Army base in Louisiana follows the investigation into the murder of an unpopular black sergeant.

**Wendy Wasserstein, *The Heidi Chronicles*.** This social satire unfolds as a series of scenes, from the 1960s to the 1980s, in the life of art historian Heidi Holland. The play won the 1989 Pulitzer for Drama and the Tony Award for Best Play.

### War Series

Literature that examines the extent to which American ideals can survive the stresses and horror of wars fought to sustain those ideals.

**Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*.** An intense look at the brutality of the Civil War through the eyes of Henry Fielding, an eighteen-year-old volunteer in the Union Army.

**Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*.** Set in Italy near the end of World War I, this tragic love story of an American ambulance driver and his English nurse presents the toll of war on individual human lives.

**Charles Fuller, *A Soldier's Play*.** Winner of the 1982 Pulitzer Prize, this gripping drama set in 1944 on a segregated Army base in Louisiana follows the investigation into the murder of an unpopular black sergeant.

**Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*.** A clever, darkly funny satire on the insanity of war (in this case, World War II) with an unforgettable cast of eccentric characters, at the center of which is the bewildered bombardier Yossarian.

**Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*.** A collection of linked stories about an American platoon in the Vietnam War.

## For Further Reading

John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*  
John Cheever, *Collected Stories*  
Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*  
Stephen Crane, *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets*  
Don DeLillo, *White Noise*  
Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*  
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*  
Louise Erdrich, *The Bingo Palace*  
William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*  
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*  
Chris Jordan, *Running the Numbers: An American Self-Portrait*  
Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*  
Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*  
Larry McMurtry, *Lonesome Dove*  
Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*  
Flannery O'Connor, "The Displaced Person"  
Richard Powers, *The Echo Maker*  
Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*  
Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*  
Esmeralda Santiago, *When I Was Puerto Rican*  
Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*  
John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*  
Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience"  
Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*  
John Updike, *Rabbit Run*  
Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*  
Richard Wright, *Native Son*



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