

ESCAPE ARTISTS

Notes on an alternate ending



Twain, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck. America has long sought the great individual author who would define - perhaps redeem - the soul of our nation through a towering canonical work. When John William DeForest coined the infamous phrase in his 1868 essay for *The Nation*, our country was sharply divided, shaken to its core by war and desperate for a grand unifying piece of art. DeForest justly defined The Great American Novel as “the picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence.” And certainly, the story-telling of *Moby Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Tom Sawyer*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and notable others vividly evoked the American spirit of their respective eras. As the American Empire swelled in the 20th century, its thirst for a homegrown Odyssey grew. And decade after decade, talented authors dutifully provided zeitgeist-capturing masterpieces for an eager populace.

Then, the traditional pen and paper contenders for the GAN throne began to unravel. *The Bonfire*

of the Vanities - which first appeared as 27 weekly *Rolling Stone* magazine installments - surely nailed a brash slice of the 1980s in both its serialized glossy format and tale of Wall Street comeuppance. Though rightfully considered by many as the greed decade’s quintessential saga, its fragmented arrival also signaled a clear demise for the traditional GAN structure. The taboo-shattering “Angels in America,” the ‘90s most inspired GAN candidate, wasn’t a novel at all, but a Broadway play.

As the post 9/11 American Empire lay shocked and wounded, Americans yearned - perhaps now more than ever - for a towering David amid the rubble of the town square. Many sought redemption in the supernatural. Although Harry Potter’s magical escapism provided young and old a respite from a harsher material world, Potter was ultimately an imported fantasy that made no attempt to describe the actual manners or voices of American existence. With the past still vividly smoldering at Ground Zero, and

folks praying with increasing devotion to the algorithmic deities in their pocket, a cultural chasm grew beyond the reach of mere words on paper. No single American author’s prose would - or could - rise to the occasion. Just when the country needed it most, the once formidable GAN had seemingly reached the end of the road.

In fact, the new millennium’s definitive GAN was about to be written. And not by a single author, but collectively by America itself. A bestseller bound not with paper, needle and thread, but held together by the country’s most treasured medium: the corporation. As for the work itself: vast, alive and teeming with countless interconnecting characters, each with their own compelling stories. *Our Great American Novel*.

Whereas previous claimants to the GAN title were almost exclusively penned by white Christian men, this one featured a plurality of authentic voices and backgrounds, all entangled by a galaxy of plots burst from an audacious dorm room supernova. At last, a truly representative picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence, being simultaneously written and read by Americans themselves. A gripping page turner. Practically impossible to put down. The *definitive* Great American novel.

Its early chapters were carefree and fresh with collegiate promise. Whimsical, clubby, confident. As the protagonists matured, the plot(s) thickened. Years went by, and new groups and generations entered the fray. Beloved characters met their sudden demise, and were replaced by new faces. As plucky mortals battled sly algorithmic gods for control of their Aeneid Americana, petty fights broke out among the people. Subterfuge spread, the

prose coarsened, [crime](#) soared and [pestilence](#) festered. Deep [conflicts](#) brewed, and a familiar antagonist reappeared. With the fear of hostile [invasion](#) looming, once light-hearted characters grew panicked and weary. Many plotted [mutiny](#). Today, as we read and write our way toward the epic's later chapters, a [somber climate](#) foreshadows an unsettling conclusion: we were never promised a happy ending.

AN ALTERNATE ENDING

Alas, there's hope. A little known wrinkle in the bylaws of the book allows the dear reader to seize the reins of their beloved character before the novel spirals out of control. But there's a catch. To break free from the larger narrative and be reborn, one must first ice thyself. Naturally, killing off a character you've been diligently crafting over many years is a daunting prospect. The thought of summarily deleting a trove of introspective labor, with nothing to show for it in return, is perhaps what keeps even the most disillusioned scribes toiling onward for elusive satisfaction. But for those willing to undertake bold and decisive measures, an enticing alternate ending awaits.

When a character in *Our Great American Novel* decides to exit stage left, they're quietly offered a glimpse into the omniscient. A classified report full of deeply personal intel that's been secretly amassed from the moment your character first sets foot in the novel, until their final fated breath. This hidden OGAN file includes some info you may have suspected, and much we never dreamed anybody knew. From a carefully alphabetized list of sweet nothings exchanged with an early paramour in Act One, to the simmering spat with that shiftier coworker who betrays you in Act Four. A meticulous accounting

of your hopes, cravings, fears, urges, regrets and likes. Past and present political beliefs, religious convictions, projected pill prescriptions, forgotten crushes, aesthetic choices and behind-the-scenes activities - all itemized and sorted. From the color of the dress you coveted three summers ago, to the topping of last night's half-eaten slice. Every facet and nuance that made your character a unique and irreplaceable member of the magnum opus, neatly packaged and yours to keep. At last, an inkling into the machinations of those sly algorithmic gods. Your parting gift from an omnipotent, all-knowing publisher.

But what to do with this formidable bequest? A wise woman once remarked that all dead technology becomes art. And while *Our Great American Novel* is still alive and kicking, there's overwhelming evidence that its best days have long passed. As the novel's ominous ending draws closer, it should rightly be celebrated and remembered for its undeniable cultural significance. Yet it's incumbent upon the enlightened to help expedite its fade to blue. Artists, whose essential role is to illuminate the unseen path for others, can play a vital role. Just as society's creative urge engendered this behemoth, it's through the "queen of all sciences" that we can escape its clutches, reclaim our individual toil, and liberate our fellow characters. But to be reborn, we must first crucify our avatars upon the gallery wall.

50 EXTRAORDINARY PICTURES OF AMERICAN EXISTENCE

The exhibition reimagines 50 alternate endings to *Our Great American Novel*, as conceived by a variety of contemporary American artists and thinkers. Pages ripped from the master novel, characters plucked mid tome, then molded

anew into intimate cybertrash artworks ranging from the literal - like the time-honored [Artist Book](#) - to the immaterial, abstract, organic, artificial, digital, performative, conceptual and beyond. A curated collection of compelling status updates, embalmed on a pristine gallery wall - a powerful statement at a time when virtual solitude is considered a luxury affordable only to the very few. Extraordinary pictures of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence, each with established provenance and measurable market value, displayed in a unique fine art gallery ideally suited to these remarkable times. Finally, perhaps, tangible redemption from our nation's oppressive blue period.

DAILY SHOUTS



TONY CONTINUES THERAPY WITH DR. MELFI REMOTELY UNTIL ONE OF THEIR SESSIONS IS HACKED BY A RECKLESS YOUNG UPSTART FROM THE NEW YORK CREW.