

Modern America

BY JESSICA TEISCH



Almost 200 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville, then a 26-year-old French aristocrat and diplomat, crisscrossed Jacksonian America by steamboat, stagecoach, horseback, and canoe. He visited Sing-Sing Prison and the Michigan woods, New Orleans and the White House, the Eastern cities and the Mississippi River. Upon his return, he codified his observations in *Democracy in America* (1835-1840). Writing during the context of the French Revolution of 1830, Tocqueville admired many American qualities: liberty, civic and political associations, and the promise of equality (complicated by slavery, the extermination of American Indians, and the “two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes”). But he also warned of the possibility of a “tyranny of the majority” that could compromise individual rights, long-lasting racial inequality (and war), the rise of an industrial aristocracy, and a democracy that might produce isolated individuals.

Tocqueville got many things wrong about the future we now live in, of course—he never predicted the existence of a permanent underclass, for example, and he wrote that democracy stifled artistic endeavor—but his outsider ob-

servations are widely read today for their insight into how America was, and how it is. Here we explore just a few of the intertwined topics relevant to America today, including perspectives on our culture, the nation’s economic disparities, and issues of race (primarily African American) and gender. We do not discuss other topics such as religion, which, while important, will have to wait for another article.

THOUGHTS ON AMERICAN CULTURE

A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again

Essays and Arguments

By David Foster Wallace (1997)

The author of *Infinite Jest* takes readers on a tour of American cultural diversions, from state fairs to cruise ships, pro-

fessional tennis, David Lynch films, and television and contemporary literature. In the title essay, Wallace, while questioning the fun he should be having on a one-week Caribbean cruise, explores how the trip's indulgences lead to internal despair. "Getting Away From Already Being Pretty Much Away From It All," about a visit to the Illinois State Fair, similarly exposes America's vulgarities. "This collection of 'essays and arguments ... reveals Mr. Wallace in ways that his fiction has of yet managed to dodge: as a writer struggling mightily to understand and capture his times, as a critic who cares deeply about 'serious' art, and as a mensch" (*New York Times*).



I'm a Stranger Here Myself

Notes on Returning to America After Twenty Years

By Bill Bryson (1999)

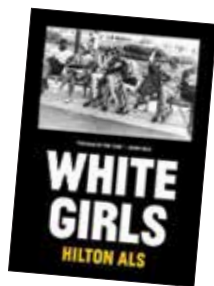
Bryson (*A Walk in the Woods*) relocated to New Hampshire after spending two decades in Britain. These six dozen letters, written for the *British Mail on Sunday* in the late 1990s, chronicles his reentry into American society. Bryson has no trouble identifying distinguishing American characteristics, from biomechanically engineered sneakers to tedious highway driving, drive-in theaters, catalog shopping, the government's obsessive war on drugs, and more. Humorous, insightful, and sometimes off kilter/off the mark, these letters showcase "Bryson's America [as] often wonderful but bewildering in all its vast, commercialized contradictions" (*New York Times*).



White Girls

By Hilton Als (2013)

In this essay collection, Als, a cultural critic for the *New Yorker* and a gay black man, analyzes "otherness" as he weaves together literature, art, music, and film with comments on race, gender, and sexual orientation. Throughout, he reveals that "white girls" is a state of mind, an art of invention often resulting from the drive to create something from a common otherness. He profiles his eponymous girls across history, from Truman Capote to Michael Jackson, Flannery O'Connor, Eminem, silent film star Louise Brooks, and others. "Some of his remarks on race and sexuality—so original and mordant—may offend the mullahs of pious multicultural



liberalism (and will certainly offend conservatives). Als floats outside political and cultural orthodoxies, and this independence, this integrity, gives *White Girls* much of its charm" (*New York Times Book Review*).

Further Reading

AMUSING OURSELVES TO DEATH: PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN THE AGE OF SHOW BUSINESS | NEIL POSTMAN (1985)

ALONE TOGETHER: WHY WE EXPECT MORE FROM TECHNOLOGY AND LESS FROM EACH OTHER | SHERRY TURKLE (2012)

DON'T GET TOO COMFORTABLE: THE INDIGNITIES OF COACH CLASS, THE TORMENTS OF LOW THREAD COUNT, THE NEVER-ENDING QUEST FOR ARTISANAL OLIVE OIL, AND OTHER FIRST WORLD PROBLEMS | DAVID RAKOFF (2006)

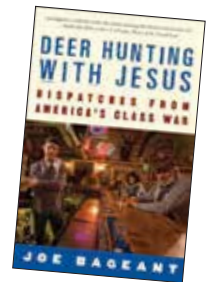
THE HAVE AND THE HAVE NOTS

Deer Hunting with Jesus

Dispatches from America's Class War

By Joe Bageant (2007)

After 30 years, the late, liberal-minded Bageant (1946–2911), a journalist from a blue-collar family, returns to his declining hometown of Winchester, Virginia, and its "Scots-Irish mutt people" to explore why working class folks ("our cheap, ass-busting, anti-union redneck labor force") vote Republican, often in opposition to their own self-interests. While arguing that the GOP widens America's class differences, Bageant also charts the failures of liberals to fight America's wars, engage in its grunt work, and more. "You go into some of these small towns in Pennsylvania, and like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing's replaced them," he writes. "And they fell through the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration, and each successive administration. ... So it's not surprising then that they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations." See also Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter With Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004).

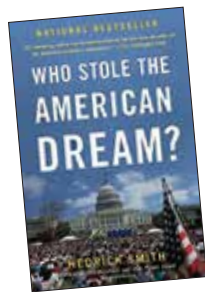


Who Stole the American Dream?

By Hedrick Smith (2012)

Smith, who has worked for the *New York Times* and the PBS show *Frontline*, is perhaps best known for his best-selling book *The Russians* and *The Power Game: How Washington Works*. In this takedown of the American dream, he describes how U.S. business leaders in the 1980s onward,

supported by government officials at various levels, helped consolidate wealth in the United States and undermined the middle class. In the process, they destroyed the concept that has been so crucial (yet so increasingly unattainable) to America: the notion of upward mobility achieved through labor. “The book is an education in recent U.S. history as well as a stunning rebuke of the ‘New Economy,’” writes a *Tampa Bay Times* critic. “We are taken to the closing days of the now-shuttered Rubbermaid plant in Wooster, Ohio, and witness the auctioning off of manufacturing equipment to buyers from China and other countries as heartbroken workers look on.”

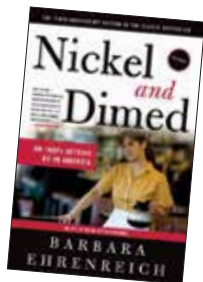


Nickel and Dimed

On (Not) Getting By in America

By Barbara Ehrenreich (2001)

“Veteran muckraker” Ehrenreich went undercover for three months between 1998 and 2000 to attempt to survive, indoors, on minimum wage. Working as a waitress, a hotel maid, a cleaning woman, and a Walmart clerk, she lived in dilapidated motels and trailer parks in Florida, Maine, and Minnesota. *Nickel and Dimed*, which examines the impact of the 1996 welfare reform act on the working poor, exposes her disastrous findings as a low-wage worker—the true philanthropists in our society, who give their back-breaking labor so others can live well. “We have Barbara Ehrenreich to thank for bringing us the news of America’s working poor so clearly and directly, and conveying with it a deep moral outrage and a finely textured sense of lives as lived,” writes the *New York Times*. See also her other related titles: *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2005), *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (1989), and *This Land Is Their Land: Reports From a Divided Nation* (2008). For a rebuttal of *Nickel and Dimed*, see Adam Shepard’s *Scratch Beginnings: Me, \$25, and the Search for the American Dream* (2007).



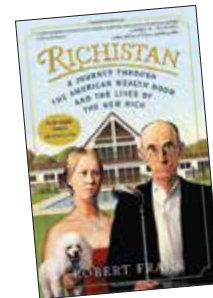
Richistan

A Journey Through the American Wealth Boom and the Lives of the New Rich

By Robert Frank (2007)

In this best seller, Frank, who writes the “Wealth Report” column for the *Wall Street Journal*, explores the rise of Richistan—a new country within the United States populated by millionaires and billionaires, with its own class system. If you’re curious, about \$10 million in assets will get you in the door—barely. Through nonjudgmental

interviews, Frank chronicles the lives of these uber-wealthy, many self-made: ones of conspicuous consumption (alligator-skin toilet seats, McMansions, “concierge doctors,” private island timeshares, and Gulfstream G2s), but also ones marked by high-profile philanthropic ventures and status anxiety. “Like an anthropologist in the Amazon basin, Frank goes native,” comments the *New York Times Book Review*, but he also contrasts the rich’s lifestyles with those of the middle class and poor. “If you experience status anxiety, this book isn’t for you” (*New York Times Book Review*).



Further Reading

THE BETRAYAL OF THE AMERICAN DREAM | DONALD D. BARLETT AND JAMES B. STEELE (2012)

EVICTED: POVERTY AND PROFIT IN THE AMERICAN CITY | MATTHEW DESMOND (★★★★ **SELECTION** May/June 2016)

HILLBILLY ELEGY: A MEMOIR OF A FAMILY AND CULTURE IN CRISIS | J. D. VANCE (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2016)

WHITE TRASH: THE 400-YEAR UNTOLD HISTORY OF CLASS IN AMERICA | NANCY ISENBERG (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2016)

OUR KIDS: THE AMERICAN DREAM IN CRISIS | ROBERT D. PUTNAM (2015)

THE WORKING POOR: INVISIBLE IN AMERICA | DAVID K. SHIPLER (★★★★ May/June 2004)

COMING APART: THE STATE OF WHITE AMERICA, 1960–2010 | CHARLES MURRAY (2012)

BOBOS IN PARADISE: THE NEW UPPER CLASS AND HOW THEY GOT THERE | DAVID BROOKS (2000)

THE UNWINDING: AN INNER HISTORY OF THE NEW AMERICA | GEORGE PACKER (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2013; ♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD)

RANDOM FAMILY: LOVE, DRUGS, TROUBLE, AND COMING OF AGE IN THE BRONX | ADRIAN NICOLE LEBLANC (★★★★ May/June 2003)

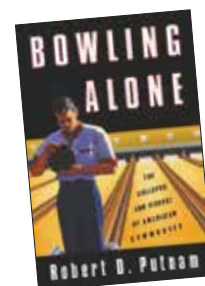
THE STATE OF COMMUNITY AND CIVIC LIFE

Bowling Alone

The Collapse and Revival of American Community

By Robert Putnam (2000)

Putnam, a political scientist at Harvard, argues that Americans—who used to energetically join organizations from the P.T.A. to the League of Women Voters, the Elks, and the church—have, since the 1950s, become more detached from civic life. Community—and the voluntary organizations that Tocqueville cited as a unique feature of American cul-

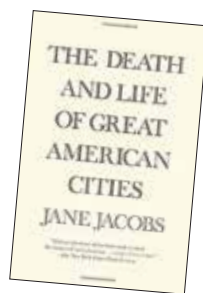


ture—has eroded, and the ensuing decline in social capital impoverishes all of our lives. Yet not all is lost: “[D]espite the changes in, and even the slackening of, associational life, it’s hard not to see America as a nation of joiners still,” rebuts the *New York Times*. “The Internet is awash in fans, hobbyists and ideologues seeking fellowship in cyberspace and often beyond. And, as Putnam himself acknowledges, Americans are still more likely to be involved in voluntary associations ... than the citizens of almost any other industrialized nation.”

The Death and Life of Great American Cities

By Jane Jacobs (1961)

This oldie but goodie critiques 1950s American urban planning, Robert-Moses style, which, Jacobs argues, led to the decline of neighborhoods and communities. A writer and activist, Jacobs saw value in mixed-use neighborhoods, where dense sidewalks filled with strangers and observant residents deter crime, and stores, bars, restaurants, homes, funeral parlors, and other public spaces coexist. This jumble created vibrant, dense neighborhoods conducive to community. As a *New York Times* critic wrote when the book was first published, “For all its weaknesses, Jane Jacobs has written such a [great] book. Readers will vehemently agree and disagree with the views; but few of them will go through the volume without looking at their streets and neighborhoods a little differently, a little more sensitively. After all, it is the widespread lack of such sensitivity, especially among those who matter, which is perhaps what is most wrong with our cities today.”



The Big Sort

Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart
By Bill Bishop (2008)

Bishop, an award-winning journalist, contends that instead of becoming more diverse and tolerant, American society has, since the 1960s, segmented into like-minded “lifestyle” communities (and zip codes). New cultural and political enclaves (the Red and Blue states are often Red states surrounding a blue island)—a “big sort”—reinforce groupthink mentality and political differences that, in turn, make national consensus impossible. “It doesn’t matter if you’re a frat boy, a French high school student, a petty criminal, or a federal appeals court judge,” Bishop writes. “Mixed company moderates; like-minded company polar-



izes. Heterogeneous communities restrain group excesses; homogeneous communities march toward extremes.” In this provocative, if speculative, look at a divided America, Bishop generally succeeds in “identifying a big, worldview-changing social science phenomenon, and interpreting it for a popular audience” (*New York Times Book Review*).

Further Reading

THE WAY WE NEVER WERE: AMERICAN FAMILIES AND THE NOSTALGIA TRAP | STEPHANIE COONTZ (1992)

SUBURBAN NATION: THE RISE OF SPRAWL AND THE DECLINE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM | ANDRÉS DUANY ET. AL. (2000)

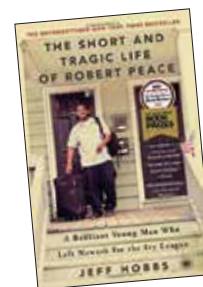
THE GEOGRAPHY OF NOWHERE: THE RISE AND DECLINE OF AMERICA’S MAN-MADE LANDSCAPE | JAMES H. KUNSTLER (1994)

ISSUES OF RACE

The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace

A Brilliant Young Man Who Left Newark for the Ivy League
By Jeff Hobbs (2014)

When the author arrived at Yale University, he quickly befriended his roommate, Robert Peace. Unlike Hobbs, who came from a wealthy white suburb, Peace had grown up in a rough New Jersey neighborhood; his father was in jail and his mother struggled to make ends meet. At Yale, Peace, a brilliant student, straddled two worlds: his old black ghetto and the Ivy-covered world of entitlement.



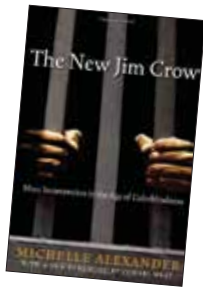
In this portrait of friendship and race, poverty, drugs, imprisonment, and education, Hobbs explores how his friend scored almost perfect SAT scores and majored in molecular biophysics but also used and hustled drugs—which eventually led to his untimely death. In the end, Hobbs ask the million-dollar question: Is it possible to reinvent yourself in America and choose your own destiny? The book “reminds us that there are origins in this country of ours that cannot be escaped, traumas that have no balm, holes that Medicaid and charter schools and better mental health care and prison reform can never fill” (*New York Times*).

The New Jim Crow

Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness
By Michelle Alexander (2010)

More African Americans are incarcerated today than were enslaved in 1850. In this award-winning book, Alexander, a civil-rights litigator and legal scholar, argues that the mass incarceration of young blacks and Latinos for mostly non-

violent drug offenses is “a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow.” Alexander blames, in part, the get-tough approach to crime that started with the Nixon administration and intensified with Reagan’s War on Drugs. Racial caste in America is very much alive and well, concludes Alexander, having merely been designed through the U.S. criminal justice system. Alexander “is a scholar who utilizes historical facts and empirical data to provide convincing evidence of what so many of us have known for a generation: Our government is systematically criminalizing our children and, as a result a great number of them effectively become second class citizens in their native land” (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*).

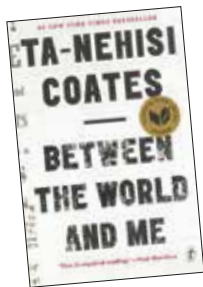


Between the World and Me

By Ta-Nehisi Coates

♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

“You have been cast into a race in which the wind is always at your face and the hounds are always at your heel,” writes Coates, an award-winning journalist and memoirist, in this extended letter to his 15-year-old son. “And to varying degrees this is true of all life. The difference is that you do not have the privilege of living in ignorance of this essential fact.” At a time when institutional racism increasingly threatens the lives of African American men, Coates attempts to teach his son how “to live free in this black body” by sharing details of his childhood in West Baltimore and examining America’s history of bigotry. The concept of race, he argues, was invented to enforce social hierarchy: “Race is the child of racism, not the father.” “*Between the World and Me* feels of-the-moment, but like James Baldwin’s celebrated 1963 treatise *The Fire Next Time*, it stands to become a classic on the subject of race in America” (*Boston Globe*). (★★★★ SELECTION Sept/Oct 2015)



Further Reading

THE OTHER WES MOORE: ONE NAME, TWO FATES | WES MOORE (2010)

NEGROLAND: A MEMOIR | MARGO JEFFERSON (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2015)

THE FIRE THIS TIME: A NEW GENERATION SPEAKS ABOUT RACE | JESMYN WARD (2016)

BLACK MAN IN A WHITE COAT: A DOCTOR'S REFLECTIONS ON RACE AND MEDICINE | DAMON TWEEDY (2015)

GHETTOSIDE: THE TRUE STORY OF MURDER IN AMERICA | JILL LEOVY (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2015)

THE COLOR OF WATER: A BLACK MAN'S TRIBUTE TO HIS WHITE MOTHER | JAMES MCBRIDE (1995)

YOU CAN'T TOUCH MY HAIR: AND OTHER THINGS I STILL HAVE TO EXPLAIN | PHOEBE ROBINSON (2016)

DREAMS FROM MY FATHER: A STORY OF RACE AND INHERITANCE | BARACK OBAMA (1995)

OUR AMERICA: LIFE AND DEATH ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF CHICAGO | LEALAN JONES AND LLOYD NEWMAN (1997)

WHITE RAGE: THE UNSPOKEN TRUTH OF OUR RACIAL DIVIDE | CAROL ANDERSON (2016)

GENDER ROLES AND IDENTITY

The Argonauts

By Maggie Nelson (2015)

Nelson, a MacArthur Fellowship recipient, considers what makes a modern family. At the time of publication, Nelson’s spouse, artist Harry Dodge, was undergoing hormone therapy for a gender transition while Nelson was preparing to give birth to their baby, who would join Dodge’s three-year-old son to complete their unconventional family. *The Argonauts* not only provides an inside look at an LGBT family in the making; it also richly explores shifting notions of identity, motherhood, and romance, which are fluid rather than fixed experiences. Nelson also includes italicized passages from other writers, mainly philosophers and theorists like Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, to consider her issues. “Nelson’s vibrant, probing and, most of all, outstanding book is also a philosophical look at motherhood, transitioning, partnership, parenting and family—an examination of the restrictive way we’ve approached these terms in the past and the ongoing struggle to arrive at more inclusive and expansive definitions for them” (*NPR*). (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2015)

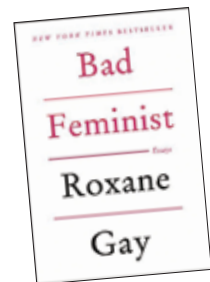


Bad Feminist

Essays

By Roxane Gay (2014)

In these essays, the author of *An Untamed State* (★★★★ SELECTION Sept/Oct 2014) writes from an empathetic, feminist perspective to explore gender and sexuality, pop culture, body awareness, sexual violence, and food. She tackles a broad range of subjects, from a Scrabble tournament where Gay’s success angers her male opponents, to a critique of *The Help*, her growth as a woman of color (*Sweet Valley High*, the color pink, a gang rape she experienced in middle school), and a discussion of the state of feminism today. “She is exploring



imperfection: the power we (we people, and especially we women) wield in spite and because of it,” wrote *Slate*. “... While she shows a refreshing willingness to pose questions, treat them as deadly important, and not resolve them, the true value of her work might lie in illuminating, with startling immediacy and boldness, what it is like to be Roxane Gay, an author who filters every observation through her deep sense of the world as fractured, beautiful, and complex.”

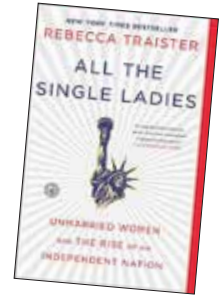
All the Single Ladies

Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation

By Rebecca Traister (2016)

In 2009, the proportion of American women who were married dropped below 50 percent, and the median age of first marriages dramatically increased to age 27. Traister, an award-winning journalist, explores the roots of this seeming phenomenon (which is not new) and the ways in which women who decide to marry later, or not at all, bid for independence and affect political and social change—including, historically speaking, temperance, abolition,

and more. But marriage should not preclude aspirations, she writes. Discussing race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, Traister offers an empowering portrait of contemporary American life through the lens of unmarried women. “As impressively well researched as *All the Single Ladies* is,” notes the *Los Angeles Times*, “... it’s the personal narratives drawn from more than 100 interviews she conducted with all manner of women that make the book not just an informative read but also an entirely engaging one.”



Further Reading

MEN EXPLAIN THINGS TO ME | REBECCA SOLNIT (2014)

SHRILL: NOTES FROM A LOUD WOMAN | LINDY WEST (2016)

SEX OBJECT: A MEMOIR | JESSICA VALENTI (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2016)

WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS | CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE (2014)

BACKLASH: THE UNDECLARED WAR AGAINST AMERICAN WOMEN | SUSAN FALUDI (1991) ■

