



John Dos Passos

BY PATRICK SMITH

The extraordinary talent of American novelist John Dos Passos (1896–1970) has been shrouded by time and shifting political currents. A lost member of the Lost Generation, Dos Passos, with a handful of groundbreaking novels to his credit and nearly three dozen works to his name, was overshadowed by the era's more celebrated writers, including Ernest Hemingway, T. S. Eliot, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Yet if historical memory has been unkind to him, Dos Passos nonetheless remains one of the greatest writers of the 20th century for his experimental literary techniques and his vast portraits of an America in transition—from the Gilded Age through World War I and beyond.

Dos Passos was, in fact, one of the most influential writers of his day—Jean-Paul Sartre deemed him “the greatest writer of our time”—a stylistic tour de force whose writing incorporated cinematic and journalistic techniques, montage and collage, and the stream-of-consciousness narrative imported from Europe in difficult, influential works like Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–1927) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). And in Dos Passos's best-known work, the *U.S.A. Trilogy* (1930–1936), there is perhaps no better chronicle of American society in the first three decades of the 20th century.

The out-of-wedlock son of a prominent Chicago lawyer and Lucy Addison Sprigg Madison, Dos Passos was educated at private school on the East Coast, traveled through Europe and the Middle East as an adolescent, and enrolled at age 16 at Harvard, where he was influenced by the Imagist poetry of Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell.

“I never felt I wanted to be a writer,” he admitted in a 1968 *Paris Review* interview, one of the author's last before his death two years later. “I didn't much like the literary world as I knew it. I studied architecture. I've always been a frustrated architect. But there are certain periods of life when you take in an awful lot of impressions. I kept a good diary—very usual sort of thing—and I was consistent about putting down my impressions.”

Those formative experiences all suggest Dos Passos's passion for art, architecture, and, later, literature. The budding artist headed to Spain after graduating from Harvard to immerse himself in its art. When World War I erupted, Dos Passos volunteered, like his fellow countryman Hemingway (the two read the Bible together during lulls in the action) and his good friend E. E. Cummings, for the ambulance corps.

Between the wars, Dos Passos's fiction defined a new era in American letters much as Walt Whitman's poetry did after his own experiences in the Civil War. Both used fresh, innovative styles to envision social progress, and both could be intensely critical of their homeland. In the decades since, Dos Passos's work has influenced many chroniclers of the American experience, among them Norman Mailer, Don DeLillo, E. L. Doctorow, and Tim O'Brien.

“Dos Passos spent his life peering out at the world around him and recording what he saw,” biographer Townsend Ludington writes in his *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey* (1980). “He traveled, wrote, painted; he witnessed much of the literary life of the first half of the twentieth century and knew many of its principal actors. His novels are important for their innovative expressionistic techniques, but he was more than a literary experimentalist.” Here we present a few of his best-known novels.

THE VOICE OF A GENERATION

Three Soldiers (1921)

John Andrews, a talented musician from New York, San Francisco street kid Dan Fuselli, and Chris Chrisfield, an Indiana farm boy, go through training together during World War I and are deployed to France. As they travel from village to village, their innocence—and their hope for the future—is destroyed by the war's grotesque reality. A

thoroughgoing critique of World War I, Dos Passos's second book and first novel (*One Man's Initiation*—1917, a little-remembered war memoir, appeared in 1920), favorably compared to Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, was one of the most realistic war novels and disruptive documents to come out of the war. "This is the kind of book that anyone would have been arrested for writing while the war was yet in progress," wrote Coningsby Dawson.

"Much of [the war] I don't remember, really because I wrote about it; when you write about something you often never think of it again. I do remember little snatches of experience," Dos Passos said, recalling the war half a century later. "The smells. They seem to linger on in the memory—the gas smells, the almond smell of high explosive, latrine and body odors. A terrible time, there has never been such a series of massacres, but all of us were glad to have seen it and survived it." That experience and the author's irrepressible stylistic energy only hint at the literary force he later unleashed.

Manhattan Transfer (1925)

After the critical success of *Three Soldiers*, Dos Passos honed the populist voice that resonated with readers in his most influential stand-alone novel. While still in his 20s, Dos Passos brought a cynical eye and complex narrative and stylistic techniques to bear on *Manhattan Transfer*, which details the overlapping lives of Manhattanites in the creative, energetic period between the Gilded Age and the Jazz Age with great clarity. Dos Passos's sympathy for the common laborer (he identified with the socialist movement in the early part of his life) forms a sharp counterpoint to his later novels, as the author's sensibilities shifted from one end of the political spectrum to the other. The novel also criticizes Manhattan's burgeoning consumerism and marked social inequalities through characters that include wealthy businessmen and poor immigrants, all of them attempting to navigate a modern city. *Manhattan Transfer* established Dos Passos as a passionate commentator, tenacious and mercurial, and a voice to be reckoned with in American letters.

One critic deemed the author's grand experiment "an explosion in a sewer;" and the novel is at least as important for illuminating Dos Passos's process and style as for the loose plot driving it. Critics have unerringly referred to the work as a pastiche of James Joyce's stream-of-consciousness in *Ulysses* and Sergei Eisenstein's use of collage in film—elements Dos Passos expanded upon in later novels.



THE U.S.A. TRILOGY

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The profound upheaval brought on by World War I and a slow (by today's standards) but sure shift toward globalization only whetted Dos Passos's literary talent and artistic sensibility. Those events, the keystones of modern art and literature, produced some of the most influential work of the century. "I was trying to develop what I had started, possibly somewhat unconsciously, in *Manhattan Transfer*. By that time I was really taken with the idea of montage," Dos Passos recalls about the genesis of his most ambitious and enduring work, the *U.S.A.* trilogy, which serves as a sweeping portrait of America between the 1890s and the late 1920s.

The 42nd Parallel (1930)

"One bed is not enough, one job is not enough, one life is not enough," Dos Passos writes in a brief overview to the opening novel, a sort of literary Rosetta Stone to the coming narrative onslaught. "At night, head swimming with wants, he walks by himself alone. ... U.S.A. is the slice of a continent. ... U.S.A. is a set of bigmouthed officials with too many bank accounts. ... But mostly U.S.A. is the speech of the people."

Delving even deeper into the High Modern style employed in *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos combines his groundbreaking Camera Eye (stream-of-consciousness autobiographical snippets) and Newsreel sections (brief inserts from contemporaneous press reports and song lyrics) with fictional narrative sections and brief biographies to create the first of three volumes in what became a 1,200-page behemoth when completed just six years later.

"By the time it evolved into such compartments as the camera eye of the *U.S.A.* trilogy it served a useful function—which in that case was to distill my subjective feelings about the incidents and people described," Dos Passos wrote. "In the biographies, in the newsreels, and even the narrative, I aimed at total objectivity by giving conflicting views—using the camera eye as a safety valve for my own subjective feelings. It made objectivity in the rest of the book much easier."

The 42nd Parallel focuses on a handful of characters between the 1890s and World War I, whose narratives intertwine (or not)—most notably J. Ward Moorehouse, a public relations man who marries well and figures, at least tangentially, in most of the book's newsreels; Eleanor Stoddard, an interior designer who carries on a relationship (of sorts) with Moorehouse before volunteering as a nurse in the war; and Fenian "Mac" McCreary, a poor, leftist, Irish American printer who wanders the country before joining the revolution in Mexico. The novel's "plot," fragmented as



it is, mirrors the author's fascination with social complexity and examines the alienation and disintegration of a society hurtling headlong into an uncertain future.

1919 (1932)

A decade after his raw antiwar statement in *Three Soldiers*, Dos Passos penned one of the most vitriolic critiques of World War I in American letters. Settling its gaze on Europe, *1919* meshes nine biographies of characters of various repute—Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, J. P. Morgan, and the Unknown Soldier among them—and introduces five fictional characters, including a young poet and a radical Jew, who hold together a plot as simultaneously nebulous and experimental as that in the previous volume. War violence is juxtaposed against the plight of America's working class, and Richard Ellsworth Savage, an ambulance volunteer who has more than a few characteristics in common with Dos Passos himself, appears throughout, acting as a touchstone for the author's views on pacifism and venality.

Not as widely read as the trilogy's bookend volumes (though given the highest praise in literary circles by the likes of Malcolm Cowley and Henry Hazlitt as the work of an important writer who could challenge Hemingway for the mantle of greatness), *1919* holds its own as a mature, penetrating vision of an America in flux.



The Big Money (1936)

The capstone volume of the *U.S.A.* trilogy arrived with predictable fanfare. Structured like the first two novels, *The Big Money* introduces readers to Charley Anderson, a flying ace in the war who returns to St. Paul for a time before landing in New York; Mary French, a young woman at loose ends after the death of her father in the influenza pandemic; and Margo Dowling, a down-on-her-luck performer and model who meets Charley in Florida and returns with him to New York. "In *The Big Money* ... [Dos Passos] meant to be showing characters who in the best tradition of satire scurry around and have no control of their world," biographer Townsend Ludington writes. "Throughout the trilogy, a large number of characters ... rush on and off the scene in a succession of incidents which lead nowhere in particular while demonstrating the effects of an environment of monopoly capitalism on the individual."

Indeed, characters from the previous two novels dart in and out of this volume; Dos Passos also includes nine new biographies of public figures such as Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, and Orville and Wilbur Wright. But much of the nov-



el's real action takes place away from the words on the page, in a roiling and seething undercurrent of America where its inhabitants attempt to divine their financial and social future in the rise—and ultimate crash—of the industrial age.

TRANSITIONS District of Columbia (1952)

Dos Passos's social and political thought underwent a sea change after an unsettling experience with Hemingway during the Spanish Civil War, a shift defined in the novels comprising the *District of Columbia* trilogy—*Adventures of a Young Man* (1939), *Number One* (1943), and *The Grand Design* (1949). Turning away from the idealism and radicalism of the labor movement and New Deal politics, Dos Passos wrote *Adventures of a Young Man*, which features fervent American Glenn Spotswood (the author himself, in many ways), as a direct response to the kidnapping and death of academic and friend José Robles at the hands of Communist forces in Spain. Similarly, in the novel, Spotswood signs on to the Second Spanish Republic in the civil war and dies after comrades betray him. Robles's death severed the author's long friendship with Hemingway, who shrugged off the murder as the unfortunate, but inevitable, collateral damage of war. Before the novel's publication, prescient of how the general public might receive this novel, Dos Passos wrote in a letter to a friend, "I'm very afraid [the publishers] are going to muffle this novel, because it won't please the orthodox leftists who will try to quietly stifle it, and it probably won't please any other group of reviewers."

In the trilogy's middle volume, *Number One*, Dos Passos portrays a thinly veiled Huey Long, Louisiana's despotic governor. Two years after the tragic death of his wife, Katy, in a 1947 car accident (during which he was blinded in one eye), Dos Passos published the final volume, *The Grand Design*, a takedown of FDR's New Deal. Detailing his experiences with Washington government and his changing views while traveling the country researching the essays he published in various political journals of the time and a well-received collection, *State of the Union* (1944), the novel fictionalizes his transition from radical to conservative over the previous two decades.

Despite being prolific to the end of his life, Dos Passos's later work never attracted the attention of his earlier novels. With the publication of *District of Columbia*, Dos Passos's reputation with the popular press took a hit from which it never recovered. As early as the publication of *Adventures of a Young Man*, critics repudiated Dos Passos en masse, some even rescinding their earlier praise for the *U.S.A.* trilogy in light of subsequent work and questioning the author's motives in having written the trilogy in the first place. ■