Making It Long: Men, Women, and the Great American Novel Now

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He said he would make a long story short. Then he made it long. He entertained the men, why not?[[1]](#endnote-1)

‘There comes a time in the mid-life of every male American writer when he feels compelled to make his big statement about the state of the union.’[[2]](#endnote-2) Thus the conventional wisdom goes. This particular formulation is by Tim Adams, reviewing Ethan Canin’s *America America* in 2008. Adams argues that by choosing such a ‘hubristic’ title for his ‘fat’ novel Canin was announcing a ‘self-conscious’ connection to the long-standing tradition of the Great American Novel (GAN). It was a move that demonstrated ‘undeniable guts’, Adams suggests, for it invited reviewers like him to measure the novel against the canon of ‘big ones’; and some of those reviewers inevitably concluded that it didn’t ‘quite earn its grand double-barrelled title’.[[3]](#endnote-3) That verdict – not *quite* a GAN but ‘a Very Good American Novel’ – was, of course, also conventional.[[4]](#endnote-4) Since its initial formulation in the 1860s, the GAN idea has always been more about inspiration than achievement; the very fact that it has been attempted but remains ‘unwritten’ providing a spur to future engagement with both nation and national literature.[[5]](#endnote-5) The partial failure of a novel like *America America* was therefore nothing to be ashamed of, but rather a testimony to its author’s effort, ambition, and assumption of authority. It is those qualities, pointed out Katha Pollitt, that are usually ‘coded male’ and that glean rewards, both financial and in the ‘economy of prestige’.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Pollitt was contributing to the ‘Franzenfreude’ debate that briefly dominated the literary press in 2010 after the publication of Jonathan Franzen’s fourth novel, *Freedom*. The widespread press coverage given to *Freedom* spurred two other bestselling novelists, Jodi Picoult and Jennifer Weiner, to comment on the paucity of book reviews, particularly in the *New York Times*, afforded to fiction by women and to commercial fiction (the two categories were often conflated).[[7]](#endnote-7) The ‘fracas’ had wide ramifications, drawing attention to data on gender disparity in the US literary press.[[8]](#endnote-8) But Weiner also made another, rather different, point: ‘when a man writes about family and feelings, it’s literature with a capital L, but when a woman considers the same topics, it’s romance or a beach book’.[[9]](#endnote-9) ‘Novels about suburban families,’ echoed Pankaj Mishra, ‘are more likely to be greeted as microcosmic explorations of the human condition if they are by male writers; their female counterparts are rarely allowed to transcend the category of domestic fiction.’[[10]](#endnote-10) When Franzen’s *The Corrections* appeared in 2001 the *New York Times* entitled its review ‘A Family Portrait as Metaphor for the ’90s’.[[11]](#endnote-11)

By focusing on ‘topics’, however, Weiner ignores the conscious signalling that works like *Freedom* do to indicate capital L, or capital GAN, status. The most obvious paratextual ‘password’ comes in the form of a title such as *America America* or *American Pastoral* or, more circumspectly or emblematically, *Independence Day* or *Freedom*.[[12]](#endnote-12) Would Franzen really have been showcased on the cover of *Time* magazine as ‘Great American Novelist’ if he’d entitled his 550-page ‘bromance’ of Walter and Richard *Not Best Friends Forever*?[[13]](#endnote-13) Although he initially disavowed the GAN tag – ‘I always hated the expression’ – he then qualified that dissociation: ‘mostly because I encountered it in stupid or sneering contexts.’[[14]](#endnote-14) Franzen knew exactly what he was doing.

Titles are not the only means by which novelists seek to ‘transcend the category of domestic fiction’. Carefully chosen allusions also allow an author to choose ‘his [or her] peers and thus his [or her] place in the pantheon.’[[15]](#endnote-15) After dissecting the recent plethora of books with titles of ‘faintly nationalistic simplicity’ – ‘American anything, really’ – Chad Harbach modestly called his own first novel, *The Art of Fielding*.[[16]](#endnote-16) But Harbach had other means to signal his ambition. As a ‘topic’, baseball offered an easily recognisable ‘American’ link to Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), as well as to Philip Roth’s *The Great American Novel* (1973). Moreover, like *Freedom* itself, *The Art of Fielding* makes much of its allusions to the masterpieces of the ‘American Renaissance’. Reviewers dutifully acknowledged, and praised, its ‘echoes of the 19th-century greats’ and concluded that they ‘lend’ the novel an ‘unexpected richness’ which raises it ‘high in the standings’.[[17]](#endnote-17) While Harbach went to great lengths to avoid using the phrase ‘Great American Novel’, preferring to talk in institutional terms of the ‘New York “canon”’, journalists reviewing, or interviewing, him were less coy.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Moi Aussi, Perhaps

‘A whale-ship was my Yale college and my Harvard’, says Ishmael at one point in *Moby-Dick*, but Harbach’s Harvard actually was Harvard.[[19]](#endnote-19) The same college introduced the same novel to Norman Mailer half a century earlier, albeit through a different critical lens. Both writers rework Melville’s story of men together, ‘federated along one keel’, but while *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) interprets this in the light of F. O. Matthiessen’s emphasis on ‘the defects of individualism’, *The Art of Fielding* looks to early-1990s queer theory.[[20]](#endnote-20) Allusion is always critically filtered, even its purpose seems to remain largely the same. Convinced that ‘everyone would know’ his ‘biggest influence’, Mailer, like Harbach, wanted educated readers to recognise his own education.[[21]](#endnote-21)

But Mailer was also signalling something that Harbach, in 2012, didn’t really have to worry about: what might be called his right to allusion. Lynne Tillman recently described the ‘gan’ [sic] that emerged after the Second World War as a ‘cultural product of America’s new role as a dominant world power’, akin to Abstract Expressionism in its relentless masculine self-assertion.[[22]](#endnote-22) While there is something to be said for this, Tillman’s argument fails to acknowledge that at the time writers such as Mailer and Saul Bellow and, one she doesn’t mention, Ralph Ellison, were hardly self-evident spokesmen for all-American masculinity. Rather, each assumed that role precisely to avoid an expected ‘minority tone’.[[23]](#endnote-23) In the early 1950s, Ellison and Bellow each published a *Bildungsroman* in which a young man, seemingly on the periphery of America, becomes its spokesman. When Bellow’s *The Adventures of* *Augie March* (1953) came out, reviewers compared him to John Dos Passos and Thomas Wolfe, although one complained that he was ‘aiming too early and too directly at the Great American Novel’.[[24]](#endnote-24) Bellow was certainly forthright about his intention. ‘I am an American,’ announces his protagonist (initials AM) in the novel’s opening line, and its final word is ‘America’.[[25]](#endnote-25) The opening of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, published a year earlier, would seem to undercut this stance: ‘I am an invisible man,’ the protagonist declares. But when, after telling a tale that allegorises black history by riffing on Twain and Melville, the novel concludes with the challenge, ‘Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?’, it transpires that he also means ‘I am an American’.[[26]](#endnote-26) ‘Whatever my role as “race man”,’ Ellison liked to say, ‘I am as a writer … a custodian of the American language’.[[27]](#endnote-27) Bellow was Jewish, from Chicago; Ellison was black, living in New York: each keen to assert directly, and through his allusions, that he spoke not simply as a Jewish writer or a black writer or a New York writer or a Chicago writer. The strategy worked. In 1953 *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award, and 1954 the prize went to *The Adventures of Augie March*.

Since then, allusion’s signal of ‘cultural entitlement’ has seldom faltered in what Jonathan Freedman dubs the ‘assimilation-by-culture’ project.[[28]](#endnote-28) Women writers, of whatever race or ethnicity, have, as we have seen, faced an additional problem – the almost axiomatic understanding of the GAN as a particularly male enterprise. This was largely a twentieth-century invention. In its original formulation, argues Lawrence Buell, ‘the GAN idea was seldom explicitly framed as a gendered concept’; indeed, it was widely accepted that the ‘nearest approach to the desired phenomenon’ was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851–52).[[29]](#endnote-29) After the Civil War, however, as the United States embraced ‘bigness and greatness in all their forms’ – imperial expansionism, corporate consolidation, aesthetic style – a connection was increasingly made between size and masculinity.[[30]](#endnote-30) Increasingly, then, novels claimed national significance by dint of the amount of logistical work they did – their assiduousness in collecting, organising and then representing data in the name of ‘complete and whole articulation’.[[31]](#endnote-31) It was in this particular context that Gertrude Stein temporarily abandoned a long novel called *The Making of Americans*, writing to a friend, ‘I am afraid that I can never write the Great American novel. I dn’t [sic] know how to sell on a margin or to do anything with shorts and longs, so I have to content myself with niggers and servant girls and the foreign population generally’.[[32]](#endnote-32) The suggestion here is that these groups somehow belong to the short story, to local colour, rather than to the national epic, and that Stein, as a woman, a Jew, and a lesbian, also belonged to the modest margins of representation. But Stein, perhaps because she considered herself a ‘masculine type’, soon regained her confidence. In the notebooks for *The Making of Americans*, she wrote of Picasso, Matisse, and the ‘maleness that belongs to genius’, adding ‘moi aussi, perhaps’.[[33]](#endnote-33) What better way to demonstrate that affinity than by writing a 925-page novel? On the one hand, it’s true that *The Making of Americans* offers a ‘satirical view’ of the GAN, but its ‘antidote to patriarchy’, its ‘patricide’, is nonetheless enacted in masculine terms.[[34]](#endnote-34) When Stein said that George Washington ‘began a novel, the novel the great American novel’, she was identifying the first president as ‘a crucial prototype of her own original American genius’.[[35]](#endnote-35)

The evolution of modernism into postmodernism did little to shift the gender, and ethnic, identity of the Great American ‘novelist-as-giant’; in the familiar narrative of Pynchon begetting DeLillo begetting Wallace, masculinity has remained ‘constitutive of the genre’.[[36]](#endnote-36) Since the emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, however, the giants have become rather self-conscious about their big books, worried that by playing the ‘GREAT AMERICAN GAME’ they might simply be indulging in a rarefied form of adolescent ‘showing off’.[[37]](#endnote-37) At first, men published confessions about their youthful GAN delusions, about how they fooled themselves that ‘Thoreau-Emerson’ could be used expose the ‘crucial facts of the age’ (things like ‘Americans are lonely’; ‘Americans are greedy’; ‘the Bomb is bad’) until consciousness-raising revealed that, rather than performing a ‘patriotic duty’, all that they had ‘really wanted’ was ‘literary stallionship.’[[38]](#endnote-38) The next generation, the ‘post-boomers’ born or raised in the 1960s and 1970s, were even more anxiously ambivalent about their desire to present ‘the American Century as Seen Through a Brick’ of a novel.[[39]](#endnote-39) Updike, Mailer, and Roth (‘the Great Male Narcissists who’ve dominated post-war realist fiction’) became whipping boys for many male writers. They found it more difficult, however, to shake off the ‘dangerously attractive’ ‘boy-novel phallicism’ of Gaddis and Pynchon.[[40]](#endnote-40)

But, despite all the embarrassment, there has been no shortage in the twenty-first century of male-authored long novels filled with canonical allusions and titles that hint at state-of-the-nation reflections. Business as usual in the ‘genre of “genius”’ then, except perhaps for the inclusion of a humorous, and self-inoculating, line or two about a writer-character’s ‘searing ambition to write the Great American Novel’ and eventual realisation that he was doing it for ‘all the wrong reasons’, such as a desire to feature on ‘the cover of *Time*’.[[41]](#endnote-41) Appearances to the contrary, these novels insist, the author himself is *not* a misogynist and indeed is well aware of the masculine posturing *usually* involved in the *‘big* book’ – a work whose ‘thickness’ and ‘length’ will translate into ‘muscularity and febrility’, as well as, of course, hard cash.[[42]](#endnote-42) ‘Literature could turn you into an asshole’, but not if you took sufficient care with your ‘arrogance problem’.[[43]](#endnote-43)

The position of post-boomer women writers is rather different from both that of their male peers, and that of the generation of women writers born in the 1930s and 1940s, writers such as Toni Morrison, Marilynne Robinson, Jane Smiley, Joyce Carol Oates, and Lynne Tillman, who freely used American history and ‘classic American literature’, reimagined ‘from a female perspective’, in order to diagnose the ‘national disease’ but who shied away from the GAN cliché.[[44]](#endnote-44) If the narrator of Tillman’s *Motion Sickness* (1991), for example, wonders if her friend might ‘secretly ...be hard at work on the Great American Novel’, she quickly corrects herself, since ‘no woman I’ve ever known has used that phrase, one that’s ridiculous to me.’[[45]](#endnote-45) ‘I don’t think that way at all,’ insists Joyce Carol Oates; ‘I don’t have any friends who think that way.’[[46]](#endnote-46) For both, the ‘gendered’ nature of the Great American Novel is ‘constitutive of the genre’: ‘this means a woman could write it, but then it wouldn’t be the gan’.[[47]](#endnote-47)

The next generation of women writers have been more equivocal. On winning the British Costa Prize in 2013 for *May We Be Forgiven*, A.M. Homes was asked if she thought she had written a GAN. She said that she did, although, she insisted, the word ‘great’ should not be understood as a term of ‘critical judgment’ nor, it seemed, to express quantity; rather she was thinking of ‘great as in expansive, and far reaching, and so in that sense, absolutely, very much, I think of myself, in positive and negative ways, as a very American writer.’[[48]](#endnote-48) There is perhaps something a little disingenuous in Homes’s gloss here, especially since she’d just won a prize for her longest book to date. Did the judges think it ‘great’ in the first sense because it was ‘great’ in the second? Did she win the ‘women’s prize for fiction’ despite, or because, the novel was narrated by a man and, in Homes’s own phrase, a ‘guy book’? [[49]](#endnote-49)

Once more allusion is a vital component in the mix. *May We Be Forgiven* is filled with authorial name-checks and references. *Moby-Dick* gets a passing mention, but Homes’s focus is squarely on those post-war American novels that, as Tillman argued, were ‘part of the cultural ascendancy of America after the war’.[[50]](#endnote-50) Homes identified, as particular ‘literary mentors’, Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) and *Something Happened* (1974), and John Cheever’s *Falconer* (1977).[[51]](#endnote-51) Both were writers who had considered the GAN – Heller had been happy to accept, ‘in modest deference to many people who hold that view’, that *Catch-22* was ‘*a*’ if not ‘THE’ Great American Novel, while Cheever’s appearance on the cover of *Newsweek*, to celebrate the publication of ‘A Great American Novel’ was in many ways the culmination of a life worrying about his place ‘in the big league’.[[52]](#endnote-52) But while Cheever’s ghost makes a brief appearance in ‘an old tan corduroy jacket’, the biggest walk-on part in *May We Be Forgiven* is given to Don DeLillo; like Cheever, and the novel’s protagonists, he is a resident of Westchester, Connecticut.[[53]](#endnote-53) DeLillo is first spotted buying tea and lemon pound cake in Starbucks, and the narrator initially thinks he looks like ‘a cross between a guy who might change your flat and Clint Eastwood’. A little later, he shows up at a hardware store to buy ‘duct tape and dust masks and a flashlight’. The salesman wonders if he ‘putting together [his] disaster kit’, but it’s just ‘spring cleaning’. When he appears a third time, in the mall, ‘coming out of one of the stores’, the narrator thinks it’s a conspiracy, but DeLillo protests. ‘I live here,’ he says.[[54]](#endnote-54)

While Cheever and Heller are rarely discussed by contemporary novelists, Homes is far from alone in paying homage to DeLillo and the ‘paranoid Seventies’ novel.[[55]](#endnote-55) ‘No writer of his era,’ it is often asserted, ‘has had anything close to his influence on American fiction.’[[56]](#endnote-56) What’s more surprising, perhaps, given the ‘crammed maleness’ of his writing, is how many of his ‘heirs’ are women.[[57]](#endnote-57) Dana Spiotta’s first novel, *Lighting Field* (2001) featured a DeLillo blurb on its jacket, while Christian Lorenz described her second, *Eat the Document* (2006), along with Rachel Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers* (2013) and Jennifer Egan’s *Look at Me* (2001)and *Welcome to the Goon Squad* (2010), as written ‘under the spell of *Underworld*’.[[58]](#endnote-58) All three writers have appeared on stage with DeLillo and eagerly acknowledge his importance for their own development. Kushner says he is her ‘favourite living author’ and that he taught her to be ‘worldly’.[[59]](#endnote-59) Egan praises his ‘ambition’ in showing how ‘the pressure within ordinary humans collide with the pressures of politics and history’.[[60]](#endnote-60) This echoes DeLillo’s own formulation of his legacy as ‘taking the novel out of the realm of the domestic and into that of history’.[[61]](#endnote-61) There are, of course, many forms that the political or historical novel can take. What DeLillo offered both male and female writers, I would suggest, was a way of using ‘ordinary humans’ *and* history allegorically in novels of ‘big ideas’ about ‘American consciousness’.[[62]](#endnote-62) Like Ellison, Bellow and the others, DeLillo had written his way ‘out of a certain narrowness’ and into ‘the broader culture’ by doing just this: ‘*Americana* – the title itself says something’, he admitted of his first novel.[[63]](#endnote-63) When an interviewer asked whether he was a post-modern writer, he replied that he’d ‘prefer not to be labelled. I’m a novelist, period. An American novelist’.[[64]](#endnote-64) DeLillo made it acceptable for twenty-first century women writers to identify themselves in the same way.[[65]](#endnote-65)

‘A Very American Writer’

*May We Be Forgiven*, A.M. Homes’s sixth novel, pulls together different stands of her earlier work: the black suburban humour of *The Safety of Objects* (1990) and *Music for Torching* (1999); the exposure of sexual abuse that first appeared in *The End of Alice*(1996); and the middle-aged-reinvention fable of *This Book Will Save Your Life* (2006). Homes has consistently described the concerns of these books as ‘very American’.[[66]](#endnote-66) In *May We Be Forgiven*, she underlines that point with references to Richard Nixon as well as Don DeLillo.

On one level, these are easily ignored. This is a fast-paced cultural comedy of vacations, hospital visits and trips to the mall; it involves googling, sexting and cats having kittens; bugs are killed, dogs walked and, in an explicit nod to DeLillo’s *Underworld*, the ‘magical’ qualities of multi-coloured Jell-O are celebrated.[[67]](#endnote-67) The TV is always on, prompting the narrator to reflect on how ‘television binds us as Americans – we are what we watch’, and to ask such questions as ‘is it still “real” if it’s not documented and delivered back to us in the media?’[[68]](#endnote-68) This sense of ‘myth being born right there in our living room’ is familiar from *White Noise* (1984), but DeLillo’s novel also seems to have taught Homes that, in fiction as well as on screen, ‘an occasional catastrophe’ helps to ‘break up the incessant bombardment of information’ and ‘the other-worldly babble of the American family’.[[69]](#endnote-69)

The novel begins with two brothers, George and Harold Silver, living very different lives.[[70]](#endnote-70) George is a TV executive, with a wife, Jane, two children, Nate and Ashley, a cat, a dog, and a house in the Connecticut suburbs; Harold is an academic historian who lives a semi-detached Manhattan life with his wife Claire. Within forty pages everything changes. George has a car accident, killing a Hispanic couple and orphaning their son, Ricardo; shortly afterwards, on finding Jane in bed with Harold, he clocks her with the bedside lamp; Jane dies, George is incarcerated, and Harold, divorced by Claire, moves to the suburbs to look after the kids. After this, the plot doesn’t slow down – for example, Ashley is sexually abused by her teacher; George gets involved with an Israeli arms dealer; and Harold is briefly abducted by some children, then shadowed by a seventies-style conspiracy theorist – but the novel becomes more interested in pursuing the ‘possibility of repair’.[[71]](#endnote-71) Although he laments his ‘despicable descent into adultery and murderous familial fellowship’, Harold’s occasional reports of an ‘overwhelming sense of dread’ feel more gestural than real.[[72]](#endnote-72)

Homes says she was attracted to the works of Heller and Cheever because of their balance of seriousness and comedy, darkness and light.[[73]](#endnote-73) But *May We Be Forgiven* has little of the profound existential angst that lies behind the jokes in a novel like *Something Happened*. ‘Is this *all* there is for me to do?’ asks Heller’s protagonist, Bill Slocum, ‘Is this really the *most* I can get from the few years left in this one life of mine? And the answer I get, of course, is always…*Yes*!’[[74]](#endnote-74) *May We Be Forgiven*, however, is a book about ‘second chances’. We never think that the children’s lives have been ‘ruined’; on the contrary, we watch their gradual transformation, under Harold’s care, from ‘lumps’ who sit at the table ‘eyes focused on their small screens’, into responsible young citizens. For Heller, the consequences of parenthood are tragically absurd; for Homes, adoptive parenting provokes a ‘better version’ of Harold.[[75]](#endnote-75) A lot rests on structure. Although the novel has no chapters, perhaps to suggest Harold’s sense of ‘free fall’, we never really doubt his ability to ‘get a grip on the runaway world’.[[76]](#endnote-76) Moreover, both Harold and the novel find order in the rituals of Jewish mourning, coming of age – his nephew’s Bar Mitzvah, but also his niece’s first menstruation – and, as the title suggests, atonement. If these signal that this is Homes’s ‘Jewish book’, we should not forget that the novel begins and ends at Thanksgiving, one of the annual civic rituals that connect family to national life.[[77]](#endnote-77) The year has been lurid but rarely dull.

Harold also approaches his job as a historian through the structures of ritual and atonement. Although his students believe that their attention should be ‘perpetually present’, or even ‘future-forward’, he insists that knowledge of the past is needed for ‘growth, progression or forgiveness’.[[78]](#endnote-78) This is a resolutely ‘therapeutic model of history’, interested less in retrieving or dissecting what has happened than in purging oneself of it, seeking ‘redemption from the past for the present’.[[79]](#endnote-79) A similar drive toward reconciliation characterises *Underworld* and *Eat the Document*, but Homes associates this approach with her beliefs as ‘a Jewish Buddhist’: ‘I’m constantly trying to feel like, How do we let go of things? How do we not let our future be completely tainted by the past, but also be cognizant of that past?’[[80]](#endnote-80)In *May We Be Forgiven*, letting go is rendered literally: a physical purge (involving special South African teas) is what Harold needs to expel the ‘foul’ thing, the ‘rusty sense of disgust’ that has accumulated over the many years he’s been working on a book about Richard Nixon. [[81]](#endnote-81)

Coming to terms with Nixon requires Harold to eschew an analysis of his political career and instead focus of his own ‘psychic connection’ to the President - his ‘relationship to stuff’, his ‘love of bowling’ or ‘his favourite candy, Skittles’.[[82]](#endnote-82) The more we hear the more we recognise Nixon’s ‘dark’ and ‘complicated’ personality as an amalgam of Harold, a junk-food-loving depressive with a relationship to China (or at least a Chinese-American woman) who likes ‘to think of himself as decent’, and George, an imaged-obsessed ‘paranoid bully’ who is frightened of being alone.[[83]](#endnote-83) In reconciling the two ‘sides of the coin’ that is Nixon – ‘integrity and deceit [...] moral superiority and arrogance’ – Harold is able to forgive the former President, and, in doing so, to forgive his brother and himself.[[84]](#endnote-84)

But history is not only an allegory of family. Harold also wants his readers to think of Nixon as ‘the bridge between our prewar Depression-era culture [when Nixon was young and ‘just coming into himself’] and the postwar prosperous American-dream America’, which ended with his resignation.[[85]](#endnote-85) The American Dream that Nixon first encountered in the 1930s wasn’t about individual success but encapsulated the belief that ‘life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement regardless of social class or circumstances of birth’.[[86]](#endnote-86) Nixon’s change of perspective – coming to privilege personal over social ambitions – was also, and has remained, America’s. Writing elsewhere, Homes has decried the twenty-first-century’s ‘upsizing of the American Dream’: ‘inflated [...] as if to distract us from an underlying depression – emotional and economic; as though we are consuming, stuffing, and spoiling ourselves to avoid our fear of failing, of falling, of having nothing at all.[[87]](#endnote-87) This analysis, which seems to be the starting point for both *This Book will Save Your Life* and *May We Be Forgiven*, builds on Christopher Lasch’s 1979 diagnosis of ‘the culture of narcissism’. Both novels deal with the ongoing impact of **‘the proliferation of images, therapeutic ideologies, the rationalization of the inner life, the cult of consumption’ and ‘the waning of the sense of historical time’**.[[88]](#endnote-88)

When Harold first arrives in Westchester he finds a ‘big history of Thomas Jefferson’ by George’s bedside, a nod to the post-war suburban version of ‘the Jeffersonian ideal of a house on a private piece of land’.[[89]](#endnote-89) Gradually, Harold transforms the single-family home into something more than a ‘boarding house’ but less than a commune, ‘adopting’ Ricardo, the Hispanic child orphaned by George’s car accident, and later the aged parents of a woman he meets in the mall.[[90]](#endnote-90) Repopulating the Dream’s ‘primary symbol’, Harold is refuting popular 1990s jeremiads about the ‘innately introverted’ suburb, as well as more recent calls for a ‘digitized version’ of communitarian life.[[91]](#endnote-91) By the end of the novel, Harold tells us that, for the ‘first time’ in his life, he feels both ‘part of a community’ and mindfully ‘here, in the moment’.[[92]](#endnote-92)

On this reading, the novel ends with the completion of a superior kind of self-help programme, one that rejects Nixon-era ‘inward-turning self-cultivation’ in favour of the millennial ‘self-development’ that comes from ‘attachments beyond the self’.[[93]](#endnote-93) While novelists in the 1970s worried about ‘individualism and sexual liberation’, David Foster Wallace said, his contemporaries feared ‘the prospect of dying without even once having loved something more than yourself’.[[94]](#endnote-94) These ideas, which are also at the heart of *This Book Will Save Your Life*, are given a more overt political resonance in *May We Be Forgiven*. The community that Harold creates within his home exists within a nexus of other communal spaces, including a prison, cemetery, boarding school, mall, psychiatric hospital, and nursing home, all of which experiment with different ways of living. Together they suggest the recovery of some approximation of the 1930s Dream that had ‘gone underground’.[[95]](#endnote-95) It was not unreasonable, Barack Obama declared in 2006, to think about ‘Reclaiming the American Dream’.[[96]](#endnote-96)

While few cultural theorists used this kind of language, it can be connected to an early twenty-first-century revival in what was variously described as ‘anti-anti-Utopianism’, ‘iconoclastic utopianism’, ‘post-utopian utopianism, or utopian post-utopianism’.[[97]](#endnote-97) The last two are Marianne DeKoven’s formulations, and she connects the mood to the ‘current postmodern ...moment’. What makes post-utopia postmodern, she argues, is its awareness of its limitations: what it offers is necessarily ‘muted, partial, local, diffuse, multiple, sceptical’ and always aware of its own, unavoidable ‘complicity’.[[98]](#endnote-98) Post-utopian thinking, she insists, reminds us that ‘we are always within the given of global, multinational, corporate consumer capitalism’ and the best that can be done is to ‘ironize, distance, critique, subvert, resist those configurations from within them.’[[99]](#endnote-99)

The repurposed suburban home and family (the ‘little country’ that stands for the big one) offers a good example of a utopianism ‘from within’, and Homes goes some way to ironize its practices. Whenever anyone seems to be ‘thinking all too well’ of himself and his beneficence, someone else appears to pull him up short. For example, Harold thinks of his trip with Ricardo to the Plaza’s Oak Room as ‘the most fun he’s had in years’, until Ricardo tells him about the hard life of his cousin who worked at the hotel. And when he finds himself ‘almost crying’ alongside Ricardo’s aunt, she challenges his claim to empathy: ‘What do you have to cry about? You’re a big white guy with a big house’. Self-consciousness about philanthropy only increases when Harold and the kids raise money for the South African village of Nateville (the narcissism of the name alerts us to the problem). When Nate criticizes the South African beneficiaries for not using the money wisely, Harold reminds him that ‘they live in the same world as we do’.[[100]](#endnote-100)

And yet, in a novel about atonement and ‘reparations’, this kind of inoculating irony is sporadic at best. Like self-help, gifts are good only if they are the right kind. At the start of the novel, Harold is married to someone who ‘asked very little’ of him but who also ‘gave very little back’. His initial response to any kind of trouble is to look for a ‘gift shop’ while preserving a ‘life of [his] own’. While this is immediately an improvement on George (who believes himself ‘a gift of the gods’), shopping is not enough. Harold needs to learn to treat his own ‘life as currency’, and then to work out where to ‘spend it’: ‘What’s the best value?’ These thoughts lead to further reflections on the need for ‘some larger idea, some sense of enhancing the lives of others’.[[101]](#endnote-101) In some ways Homes seems to be responding directly to the remark in DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* (2003), another novel of information, catastrophe, and atonement, that ‘money has lost its narrative quality’, and ‘is talking to itself’.[[102]](#endnote-102) While the trajectory of DeLillo’s novel is toward self-punishment and self-destruction, *May We Be Forgiven* is about rich people giving money back its narrative power. When Harold becomes a ‘human cash machine’, keeping track of what comes in and what goes out of the family coffers, he begins to value the way that money can inscribe history as well as shape the future.[[103]](#endnote-103)

In formulating these ideas, Homes seems to be drawing on Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift*, a book begun in the late 1970s, published in 1983 and, following its gradual rise to cult status, reissued in 2006.[[104]](#endnote-104) Building on earlier anthropological work on gift economies, Hyde emphasises their social and spiritual functions. Gifts, he argues, are ‘agents of transformation’ which ‘bespeak relationships’, connecting people to each other and also ‘to the gods’. He discusses atonement (‘to atone is to reunite’) and emphasises that ‘human life is a gift’.[[105]](#endnote-105) In *May We Be Forgiven*, we are meant to see a corollary between the organ donation that has enabled Jane to continue to ‘save the lives of others’ and Harold’s own ‘gift of life’.[[106]](#endnote-106)

The Gift of the GAN

Homes has always confronted assumptions about what women are ‘supposed’ to write. In *The End of Alice*, for example, she adopted the perspective of a 53-year-old paedophile in jail, rather than that of either of the young female protagonists, because ‘women are not supposed to do things that are not very, very nice’.[[107]](#endnote-107) *May We Be Forgiven* marks another stage in her challenge to the premise that only ‘male writers ... write broad social novels. The great American novels’.[[108]](#endnote-108) And yet Homes is not ‘passing’ as a writer of ‘guy books’, nor even attempting (as Franzen thinks he is) to overcome ‘the sexual division of labor in American fiction’.[[109]](#endnote-109) Rather, just as *The End of Alice* challenged us to reread works like *Lolita*, *May We Be Forgiven* brings the whole ‘Great Literary American Novel Syndrome’ into sharp relief.[[110]](#endnote-110)

On the face of it, Harold is a familiar figure from GAN mythology. He has spent fifteen years working on his book, dragging around a canvas bag containing a ‘thirteen-hundred page manuscript, covered with an elaborate system of Post-its and flags that seem entirely undecipherable’.[[111]](#endnote-111) We can think of many similar figures. Recent examples include: a schoolteacher who keeps his novel in two large manuscript boxes in the boot of his car (the 2004 movie *Sideways*); a baker who refuses to be separated from his ‘collection of worn notebooks, legal pads, typing papers, all of it scribbled on and marked up, bound into a single passage with elastic bike cords’ (Tracy Letts’s 2010 play *Superior Donuts*); or, closest to Harold, a historian with a ‘beige metal file cabinet’ containing ‘the makings of his multivolumed history of Rockford, Illinois, a work that would be unprecedented in scale and ambition (he hoped, on good days)’ (Jennifer Egan’s *Look at Me*).[[112]](#endnote-112) These hopeful if shambolic authors are themselves descendants of DeLillo’s ubiquitous men in small rooms: Jack Gladney, from *White Noise*, a ‘harmless, ageing, indistinct’ guy who finds Hitler a ‘fine, solid, dependable’ object of study; Nicholas Branch, from *Libra*, a retired CIA analyst, who, at the novel’s start, is ‘in his fifteenth year’ in a ‘room of documents’ – ‘legal pads and cassette tapes are everywhere...a massive file cabinet stuffed with documents so old and densely packed they may be ready to ignite spontaneously’; and the novelist Bill Gray, from *Mao II*, who wants ‘to live like other people’ but instead spends ‘twenty–three years’ sitting amid ‘drifts of paper’ and ‘charts ... covered with scrawled words, boxes, lines connecting words’, ‘making changes’, ‘whiting out and typing in’.[[113]](#endnote-113) Branch’s struggle to complete his ‘secret history’ of Kennedy’s assassination is perhaps most relevant, for, like Harold, his problem is when ‘to stop assembling data’ and how to turned that ‘data-spew’, ‘notes in three-foot drifts’, into ‘actual finished prose’.[[114]](#endnote-114) The important point is that, unlike all these other writers, Harold does finish his book and, although he strips to Maileresque shorts and feels as he’s in a ‘boxing gym’, he does so without much fuss. ‘There is no more need for perfection’, he concludes; writing is simply a chore to be completed before ‘the children come home’. And once the book is ‘cooked’, he can get back to looking after the family.[[115]](#endnote-115)

But Homes is not only interested in what it means to take novel out of the realm of history and reassert into the domestic sphere, nor simply in subverting what Reno, the artist-protagonist of Rachel Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers*, calls the ‘long-winded narcissism’ and ‘burning need for others to *listen*’ characteristic of an ‘old American novelist’.[[116]](#endnote-116) Rather she is trying to imagine how the GAN fits into what Hyde would call the ‘female commerce’ of ‘gift aesthetics’.[[117]](#endnote-117) On the one hand, this means abandoning the oedipal displacements needed to reach the top of Cheever’s ‘big league’ and thinking instead of allusion as a kind of acknowledgement of the ways in which another author’s gift ‘leaves us altered’.[[118]](#endnote-118) While *May We Be Forgiven* makes its fair share of jokes at the expense of heavyweight ‘champs’, it also makes ‘eye contact’ with numerous friends and colleagues, including Lynne Tillman, Grace Paley, Rick Moody, and David Remnick.[[119]](#endnote-119) But if Homes enjoys building a community, inviting everyone into her suburban novel, she also knows what is needed to write herself into ‘the broader culture’ of bestseller lists and book awards. By exploring the nation’s key concerns with a framework that stretches from Jefferson to Nixon, Homes fulfils the Great American brief of effort, ambition and the assumption of authority. Like Harold Silver, and all the other compromised post-postmodernists and post-utopians, she has allowed her gifts to make ‘peace with the market’.[[120]](#endnote-120)

1. Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1997), p. 192. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Tim Adams, ‘How America Sold Its Soul to the Devil’, *The Observer*, July 13, 2008: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jul/13/fiction.reviews3. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John Updike, ‘An Upstate Saga’, *The New Yorker*, June 23, 2008: http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/06/23/an-upstate-saga. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Robert Epstein, ‘*The Art of Fielding*, by Chad Harbach’, *The Independent*, January 15, 2012: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-art-of-fielding-by-chad-harbach-6289666.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. T. S. Perry, ‘American Novels’, *North American Review*, October 1872, pp. 366–78 (p. 378). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Katha Pollitt, ‘Franzenfreude, Continued’, *The Nation*, Sept 15, 2010: https://www.thenation.com/article/franzenfreude-continued/; James English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Franzen’s quarrel with women’s popular fiction dated back to 2001 when he withdrew *The Corrections* from the Oprah Book Club becayse he had ‘some hope of actually reaching a male audience’. Terry Gross, ‘Novelist Jonathan Franzen’, *NPR*, Oct 15, 2001: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1131456. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ruth Franklin, ‘The READ: Franzen Fallout’, *The New Republic*, Sept 7, 2010: https://newrepublic.com/article/77506/the-read-franzen-fallout-ruth-franklin-sexism. On gender data, see Double X Blog, ‘Fact-Checking the Franzenfreude: Is the *New York Times*’ book section really a boys’ club?’, *Slate*, Sept 2, 2010:

   http://www.slate.com/articles/double\_x/doublex/2010/09/factchecking\_the\_franzenfreude.html?from=rss. On the annual ‘Count’ undertaken since 2010 by VIDA: Women in the Literary Arts, see http://www.vidaweb.org/the-count/. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jason Pinter, ‘Jodi Picoult and Jennifer Weiner Speak Out on Franzen Feud’, *The Huffington Post*, August 28, 2010: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jason-pinter/jodi-picoult-jennifer-weiner-franzen\_b\_693143.html. Franzen responded with remarks about the ‘Jennifer Weinerish self-promotion’ demanded by contemporary literary culture and, in his 2015 novel *Purity*, with a jibe about the *NYTBR*’s belief that ‘Jonathan’ was ‘synonymous with talent, greatness. Ambition, vitality’. Karl Kraus, *The Kraus Project*, translated and annotated by Jonathan Franzen (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), p. 274; Jonathan Frazen, *Purity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), p. 207. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Cheryl Strayed and Pankaj Mishra, ‘Is There a Double Standard for Judging Domestic Fiction? *New York Times*,May 17, 2015: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/books/review/is-there-a-double-standard-for-judging-domestic-themes-in-fiction.html?\_r=0. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Michiko Kakutani, ‘A Family Portrait as Metaphor for the ’90s’, *New York Times*, September 4, 2001: http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/04/books/books-of-the-times-a-family-portrait-as-metaphor-for-the-90-s.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 160. The novel by a woman that Weiner felt did fulfil the paratextual brief is Anne Tyler’s *Digging to America* (2006). Twitter, Aug 23, 2010: https://twitter.com/jenniferweiner/status/21930482445. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Best* *Friends Forever*, Weiner’s sixth novel, was published in 2009 and spent eighteen weeks on the bestseller list. The Oprah Book Club asked whether ‘Richard and Walter [were] having a “bromance”’. ‘*Freedom* Book Club Discussion: Producer Jill’s 3rd Post’, http://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/oprahs-book-club-producer-jills-freedom-discussion-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Lev Grossman, ‘Jonathan Frazen: Great American Novelist’, *Time*, August 12, 2010: http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2010185,00.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 160. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Chad Harbach, ‘MFA vs NYC’, in Harbach (ed.), *MFA vs NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction* (New York: n+1/ Faber, 2014), pp. 9–28 (p. 25). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Dennis Drabelle, ‘Review of Chad Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*’*,* *Washington Post*, September 5, 2011: http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/book-world-chad-harbachs-the-art-of-fielding-reviewed-by-dennis-drabelle/2011/07/18/gIQAN3C14J\_story.html]. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Harbach, ‘MFA vs NYC’, p. 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988 [1850]), p. 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 122; F.O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 37. ‘Gay studies had really taken off’ when Harbach took a Melville seminar at Harvard. Frederick McKindra, ‘The Strategies of Baseball, Friendship and Love’, *LAMBDA Literary*, February 8, 2012: http://www.lambdaliterary.org/features/02/06/chad-harbach-the-strategies-of-baseball-friendship-and-love/*.* On Mailer’s reading of Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941), see J. Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), p. 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Harvey Breit, ‘Talk with Norman Mailer’ (1951) in J. Michael Lennon (ed.), *Conversations with Norman Mailer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), pp.15–17 (p. 15). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The acronym is usually capitalised, but Tillman prefers a deflating lower case. Lynne Tillman, ‘A Fictional Past: The myth of the “Great American Novel”’, *Frieze*, 163 (May 2014): https://frieze.com/article/fictional-past. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Saul Bellow, ‘Man Underground’ (1952), in John Hersey (ed.), *Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), pp. 28–29 (p. 29). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. James Atlas, *Bellow: A Biography* (London: Faber, 2000),pp. 193, 198, 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March* (New York: Viking, 1960), pp. 3, 536. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995), pp. 3, 581. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Ralph Ellison, ‘The World and the Jug’, in John F. Callahan (ed.), *The Collected Essays* (New York: Modern Library), p. 172. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 121; Jonathan Freedman, *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 31; [John W. De Forest], ‘The Great American Novel’, *Nation*, January 9, 1868, pp. 27–29 (p. 28). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. William James, Letter to Mrs. Henry Whitman, 7 June 1899, in Henry James (ed.), *The Letters of William James* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press,1926), vol. 2, p. 90. On ‘the culture of size in America, 1865–1930’, see Michael Tavel Clarke, *These Days of Large Things* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Thomas Wolfe, *The Story of a Novel* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936), p. 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Patricia Wald, *Constituting Americans* (Durham,: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 239–40. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Lisa Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, p. 39; Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Language* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), p. xvii; Ruddick, *Reading Gertude Stein*, Ch. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Gertude Stein, *Four in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), p. 169; Barbara Will, *Unlikely Collaboration: Gertrude Stein, Bernard Faÿ, and the Vichy Dilemma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Norman Mailer, *Cannibals and Christians* (London: Sphere, 1969), p. 122; Lynne Tillman ‘A Fictional Past’. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Charles McGrath, ‘The Souped-Up, Knock-Out Total Fiction Experience’, *New York Times*¸April 17, 2005: http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/17/weekinreview/the-soupedup-knockout-total-fiction-experience.html?\_r=0; Robert Coover, *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968) (New York: Plume, 1971), p. 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Bill Henderson, ‘My Great American Novel’, *Chicago Review*, 26.1 (1974), pp. 52–64 (pp. 52–3). Although GAN debunking began almost as soon as the phrase was coined, it was only in the 1970s that machismo became its main component. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996), p. 989. For a more recent portrait of a male writer who prefers books by dead, white men but worries ‘whether he was a bit misogynistic’, see Adelle Waldman, *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.* (London: William Heinemann, 2013), p. 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. David Foster Wallace, ‘Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One Would Sort of Think’, in *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), pp. 51–59 (p. 51). Franzen has written about his youthful ambition to ‘save the American novel’, his anxiety about *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and his eventual coming round to Roth and Updike. *The Kraus Project*, pp. 229, 181, 120–21. See Michael Kalisch, ‘Correcting Philip: Reading Franzen Reading Roth’, *Philip Roth Studies* (Fall 2017), 21–38. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Amy Hungerford discusses the ‘masculine cultural shape’ of that genre in *Making Literature Now* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 153; Garth Risk Hallberg, *City on Fire* (London: Vintage, 2016), pp. 5, 867. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Frazen, *Purity*, pp. 186–187. This is another joke about the *New York Times Book Review*. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, p. 328; David Foster Wallace quoted in D.T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story* (New York: Viking, 2012), p. 199. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Elaine Showalter, *A Jury of Her Peers* (London: Virago, 2010), p. 578; Roth, ‘On *The Great American Novel*’, in *Reading Myself and Others* (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 75–92 (p. 92). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Lynne Tillman, *Motion Sickness* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1991), p. 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Katy Guest, ‘Joyce Carol Oates’, *The Independent*, August 23, 2007: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/joyce-carol-oates-a-teacher-academic-and-one-of-the-most-prodigious-novelists-of-all-time-462721.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Tillman was born in 1947, Homes in 1961. Tillman, ‘A Fictional Past’; Jane Ciabattari, ‘A.M. Homes on Her New Novel *May We Be Forgiven*’, *Daily Beast,* Sept 29, 2012: http://www.thedailybeast.com/am-homes-on-her-new-novel-may-we-be-forgiven. I discuss Tillman’s engagement with the ‘genre’, focusing on *American Genius: A Comedy* (2006), in ‘Lynne Tillman and the Great American Novel’, *electronic book review* (July 2011): http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/fictionspresent/american. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Kira Cochrane, ‘A.M. Homes Interview’, *The Guardian* June 7, 2013: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/07/am-homes-interview-womens-prize-fiction. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Richard Wolinsky, ‘Out of the Darkness: Interview with A.M. Homes’, *Guernica*, November 15, 2012: https://www.guernicamag.com/out-of-the-darkness/. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Tillman, ‘A Fictional Past’. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. A.M. Homes and Yuka Igarashi, ‘A.M. Homes Interview’, *Granta*, 124, Online Edition, June 6, 2013: https://granta.com/interview-am-homes/. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. George Mandel, ‘Literary Dialogue with Joseph Heller’ (1970), in Adam J. Sorkin (ed.), *Conversations with Joseph Heller* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), pp. 61–77 (pp. 67–68). As young man, Cheever had been ‘impressed’ particularly by the ‘size’ of *The Naked and the Dead* and had got the ‘heaves’ reading reviews of *The Adventures of Augie March*. He fantasised about writing a book so ‘massive’ that ‘you’ll be able to lift it to the sound of outboard motors’. John Cheever, *The Journals* (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 13, 33; Robert Cromie, ‘Book Beat’, in Scott Donaldson (ed.), *Conversations with John Cheever* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987),pp. 44-57(p. 52). Homes has said that *Falconer*‘may, in fact, be The Great American Novel – or at least the greatest American novel of the last 30 years.’ ‘Introduction’ to John Cheever, *Falconer* (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. vii–x (p. vii). [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven* (London: Granta, 2012), p. 471. ‘The train ride from midtown Manhattan to the picture-book Westchester suburb where DeLillo lives,’ wrote Anthony De Curtis, ‘offers a capsule view of virtually the entire spectrum of American life.’ ‘“An Outsider in This Society”: An Interview with Don DeLillo’, in Thomas DePietro (ed.), *Conversations with Don DeLillo* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), pp.52–74 (p. 54). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, pp. 62, 298, 339. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Nicholas Dames, ‘Seventies Throwback Fiction’, *n+1*, 21 (Winter 2015): https://nplusonemag.com/issue-21/reviews/seventies-throwback-fiction/. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Charles Finch, ‘Buying a Way Past Death: *Zero K* by Don DeLillo’, *Chicago Tribune*, April 28, 2016: <http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/books/ct-prj-zero-k-don-delillo-20160428-story.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. DeLillo, *Underworld*, p. 34; Christian Lorentz, ‘The Genius of Don DeLillo’s Post-*Underworld* Work’, *Vulture*, May 2, 2016: http://www.vulture.com/2016/04/genius-of-don-delillos-post-underworld-work.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Lorentz, ‘The Genius of Don DeLillo’s Post-*Underworld* Work’. Consistently praised for the ‘ambition’ of *Look at Me*, particularly when compared to her ‘circumscribed’ first novel, Jennifer Egan mentioned *Underworld* (‘Not that I'm saying my book’s as good as that, but they’re similar in that they’re both complicated books with multiple plotlines’). ‘Briefly Noted’, *New Yorker*, October 29, 2001: http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/10/29/look-at-me-3; Ron Hogan, ‘Interview with Jennifer Egan’, *IndieBound*: http://www.indiebound.org/author-interviews/eganjennifer. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. ‘Rachel Kushner: By the Book’, *New York Times Book Review*, February 6, 2014: https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/books/review/rachel-kushner-by-the-book.html?\_r=0; Sophie De Rosee, ‘The World of Rachel Kushner’, *The Telegraph* January 14, 2014: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/10589332/The-world-of-author-Rachel-Kushner.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Jennifer Egan, Introducing DeLillo, NBA Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, 2015: https://youtu.be/1XiSC3ozVBQ. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Maria Nadotti, ‘An Interview with Don DeLillo’, in DePietro (ed.), *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, pp.109–118 (p. 115). [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. ‘A.M. Homes, winner of the women’s prize for fiction, talks to Jeanette Winterson’, *The Guardian*, June 10, 2013: https://youtu.be/SEIIv6cyHx0; Kevin Connolly, ‘An Interview with Don DeLillo’, in DePietro (ed.), *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, pp. 25–39 (p. 28). [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Kim Echlin, ‘Baseball and the Cold War’, in DePietro (ed.), *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, pp.145–51 (p. 148). [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Nadotti, ‘An Interview’, p. 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Of course not every woman writer has followed this pattern. While the title of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) might suggest a homage to *Americana*, its heroine, a Nigerian immigrant who ‘hungered to understand everything about America’, remains unconvinced by the books recommended by her Princeton boyfriend, ‘novels written by young and youngish men and packed with *things*, a fascinating, confounding accumulation of brands and music and comic books and icons, with emotions skimmed over, and each sentence stylishly aware of its own stylishness.’ *Americanah* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), pp. 135, 11–12. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Kasia Boddy, Unpublished Interview with A.M. Homes, 1999. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, p. 444; DeLillo, *Underworld*, pp. 513–14. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, pp. 257, 213. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 1986), pp. 51, 66, 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Homes locates the inspiration for this in Cheever’s ‘Goodbye, My Brother’ as well as *Falconer*. Ciabattari, ‘A.M. Homes on Her New Novel *May We Be Forgiven*’. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, p. 230. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Ibid., pp. 298, 468. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. ‘What I did not understand,’ reflects one of Cheever’s narrators, ‘was how a world that had seemed so dark could, in a few minutes, become so sweet.’ ‘The Housebreaker of Shady Hill’. *The Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 1982), pp. 253–69 (p. 268). [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Joseph Heller, *Something Happened* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, pp. 293, 49, 2, 414. Homes shares DeLillo’s belief in the resilience of children, in their ability to ‘find a way.’ *Underworld*, p. 673. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, p. 261; Don DeLillo, *Libra* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Wolinsky, ‘Out of the Darkness’. Richard Ford also uses Thanksgiving to connect the personal, the suburban and the national, although more pessimistically, in *The Lay of the Land* (2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, pp. 97, 277. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Christopher Colvin, ‘“Brothers and sisters, do not be afraid of me”: trauma, history and the therapeutic imagination in the new South Africa’, in *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts*, eds. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 153–68 (p. 158). [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Wolinsky, ‘Out of the Darkness’. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, pp. 447, 418. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Ibid., pp. 182, 76, 169. This again follows DeLillo’s mandate for fiction which ‘slips into the skin of historical figures. It gives them sweaty palms and head colds and urine-stained underwear and lines to speak in private and the terror of restless nights.’ ‘The Power of History’, *New York Times*, September 7, 1997: http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/090797article3.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. Wolinsky, ‘Out of the Darkness’; Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, p. 448. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, pp. 188, 446. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. Ibid., pp. 202, 264. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. Ibid., p. 264, quoting James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1931), p. 405. On Nixon as one of the Dream’s ‘most avid spokespersons’, see Lawrence R. Samuel, *The American Dream: A Cultural History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012), pp. 81, 77­78. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. A.M. Homes, *Los Angeles* (Washington: National Geographic, 2002), p. 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. **Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979),** pp. 32, 3. Early twenty-first century reworkings of these themes include David G. Myers’s *American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, p. 12; Samuel, *The American Dream*, p. 6. Homes has described *Music for Torching* as ‘very much about the American Dream, which I think came out of World War 2 and into the development of suburbia and the notion of prosperity, and kind of fell apart in the sixties and seventies.’ Boddy, Unpublished Interview, 1999. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, p. 477. ‘To be adopted,’ Homes wrote of her own experience, ‘is to be adapted, to be amputated and sewn back together again.’ *The Mistress’s Daughter* (London: Granta, 2007), p. 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, p. 294; Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), p. 210. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, pp. 433, 478. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. Marianne De Koven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007), p. 255; Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. Wallace, ‘Certainly the End of *Something*’, p. 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, p. 264. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown/Three Rivers Press, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), p. xvi; Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 85; De Koven, *Utopia, Limited*, p. 269. [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. De Koven, *Utopia, Limited.*, pp. 272, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
99. Ibid., pp. 15–16. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
100. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, pp. 463, 387, 337, 462. [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
101. Ibid., pp. 31, 11, 25, 1, 463, 435-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
102. Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 77 [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
103. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, p. 463. [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
104. Hyde’s fans include Zadie Smith, David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Lethem. See Lee Konstaninou, ‘Lewis Hyde’s Double Economy’, *ASAP/Journal*, 1.1 (2016), pp. 123–49. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
105. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), p. 139, 71, 60, 69, 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
106. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, pp.49, 454. [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
107. Kasia Boddy, Unpublished Interview with A.M. Homes, 1996. [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
108. Jennifer Gilmore, ‘A.M. Homes’ Novel Addresses ‘70s Childhood’, *Forward*, October 23, 2012: http://forward.com/culture/164618/am-homes-novel-addresses-70s-childhood/ [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
109. Wolinsky, ‘Out of the Darkness’; Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), p. 103. [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
110. Laura Miller, ‘Why Can’t a Woman Write the Great American Novel?’, *Salon*: http://www.salon.com/2009/02/24/elaine\_showalter/ [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
111. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, p. 59 [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
112. Tracy Letts, *Superior Donuts* (New York: Theatre Communications Groups, 2010), p. 31; Jennifer Egan, *Look at Me* (London: Corsair, 2011), p. 133. [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
113. DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp.83, 89; *Libra*, p.14; Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), pp.55, 51, 36, 35, 53, 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
114. DeLillo, *Libra*, pp. 59, 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
115. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, pp. 453, 446. [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
116. Reno also feels ‘a sudden tenderness’ for the heavy-drinking, ping-pong-playing, misogynistic author ‘and the burden he bore’. Rachel Kushner, *The Flamethrowers* (London: Vintage, 2014), pp. 222, 251. [↑](#endnote-ref-116)
117. Hyde, *The Gift*, p. 105, 143. [↑](#endnote-ref-117)
118. Ibid., p. 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-118)
119. Homes, *May We Be Forgiven*, pp. 383, 84, 53, 438.In her acknowledgements, Homes also thanks Yaddo, a writers’ retreat committed to ‘culture as a gift’. Micki McGee, ‘Creative Power and the Making of American Culture’, in McGee (ed.), *Yaddo: Making American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 1–16 (p. 1). [↑](#endnote-ref-119)
120. Hyde, *The Gift*, p. 278. [↑](#endnote-ref-120)