



## Promised Land: Thirteen Books That Changed America

*Jay Parini*

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"Americans need periodic reminding that they are, to a great extent, people of the book -- or, rather, books. In Promised Land, Jay Parini repossesses that vibrant intellectual heritage by examining the life and times of 'thirteen books that changed America.' Each of the books has been a watershed, gathering intellectual currents already in motion and marking a turn in American life and thought. Their influence remains pervasive, however hidden, and in his essays Parini demonstrates how these books entered American life and altered how we think and act in the world."

-- from the book's front flap

## Promised Land: Thirteen Books That Changed America Details

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## From Reader Review Promised Land: Thirteen Books That Changed America for online ebook

### Bookmarks Magazine says

While critics agreed that the 13 works offered by Parini are seminal, they all thought that his short list was, well, too short. Some critics thought that, fundamentally, Parini set far too ambitious a goal and therefore found the book disappointing; others were happy to quibble with the works he selected. Second-guessing the author's choices is part of the fun, of course. Parini also included a bonus list of 100 additional influential books for readers to consider. However, a few critics cited some of the analysis as dull; the parts where Parini personalizes his selection (as in Carnegie's *How to Win Friends*) fared much better. In sum, *Promised Land* perhaps promises more than it delivers, but it is nonetheless a good starting point for understanding America's influential literary heritage.

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

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### Melinda says

I waffled between three and four stars on this book. Some of the essays I really enjoyed, including the ones on Franklin, Bradford, Twain, and Thoreau. Reading the essay on Stowe's novel reminded me that I needed to read the book. I liked the general overview of each work and the way Parini was able to connect them with common themes and commentary about the American idea and character evidenced in literature. The essay on the immigrant novel was a weak note, I think; then, again, I've never heard of the novel and wonder how it can be listed with alongside Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Liked the essay on the Kerouac novel simply because I'd forgotten how wild and perverse it was. The chapter on The Feminine Mystique seemed too long. Overall, I enjoyed this collection of essays, a book about books. The tone is scholarly, so if you've read some of these or can tolerate academic prose, you're more likely to find this worthwhile reading.

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### John Senner says

This will take me years to finish. I read the first chapter on the History of Plymouth Plantation in conjunction with reading the History of Plymouth Plantation (free download from Amazon). William Bradford may have started with a bunch of religious refugees, but he built a secular society.

The second chapter covers the Federalist Papers and another free download from Amazon. This is a bunch of newspaper columns that give some insight into the concerns of the day. But it isn't the Constitution.

The third chapter covers the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (another free download from Amazon). Parini discusses the fact that an autobiography can be just as fictional as a novel. I don't think Ben would rate a place on the \$100 bill by today's standards.

The fourth chapter discusses the History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Vols 1 and 2. Volume 1 was another free download from Amazon, but I spent \$9.99 for Vol 2. They were some courageous explorers who suffered through bad weather, starvation, fleas, mosquitoes, etc. but their attitude to the "red children" spoils the heroics.

The fifth chapter goes over Thoreau's Walden, a description of living a simple life close to nature in a self-built cabin near Walden Pond. The author puts the text into the context of the transcendentalism of Thoreau's friend and mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Alas, I am not into philosophy and just saw this as a gripe about civilization and a love of nature.

Chapter six covers Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. This is a compilation of good and bad slave stories with overly sentimental and stereotypical characters, but conveys the message that slaves are people and not things and are to be treated as people. Not that different than reading Dickens.

In chapter seven, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn continues Stowe's attempt to humanize negroes. I also see many similarities to Dickens' gibes at the pomposity of the cultured and the religious.

Chapter eight covers the The Souls of Black Folk by W.E.B. Du Bois. He has collected 14 essays covering his accounts of life in the south, the role of education, and his response to Booker T Washington's "Uncle Tom" stance (see chapter six). From my perspective, he writes at a high literary level, with quotes in German and references to Greek mythology. I am guessing that he is writing over the heads of his audience because of a need to impress them with his education.

Chapter nine was a surprise: I had never heard of this book and I enjoyed reading it. Mary Antin wrote a book, The Promised Land, relating her first 20 or so years starting with her beginnings in a repressive Jewish "Pale" in Belarus, her emigration to America, and her "Americanization" in the slums of Boston. She was a smart girl, eager to learn, and bold enough to join in with aristocrats, newspaper editors, and scientists. She attributes much of her success to the freedoms her parents gave her, despite extreme poverty, and the free public schools and libraries,

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## **Eric Woodard says**

I originally picked this book up to hear what Mr. Parini had to say about Ben Franklin's autobiography. I teach it in my high school AP classes, so I wanted to see if I could get fresh insight on the book.

Of course, I am writing this review because I found much more than an insightful discussion of Franklin's autobiography.

Like all great books, this one builds on itself chapter by chapter, drawing lines of force between all of the books, painting American Literature as a centuries-long conversation.

By the time Parini writes about Kerouac's On the Road, he is drawing parallels between most of the books that he has discussed before, including Walden, The Promised Land, and Huck Finn, and he is doing so in a strong, formal prose that also invites the casual reader. Parini is, after all, a poet.

Some may quibble with the 13 books he chooses, but these particular books, put in chronological order, allow Parini (to paraphrase a line from Parini himself in the book) to do more than tell a picaresque story; it

allows him to deliver a narrative, a plot, with one book necessarily issuing as a new voice in a long conversation.

I have read most of the 13 books included here, and what makes this book so powerful is Parini's ability to capture the tone and the impact of the books he discusses, even the ones that aren't "classics" in a literary sense. In fact, he does not simply choose books he likes; he displays condescension for "How to Win Friends and Influence People," while noting its powerful impact on him as a young man.

I originally planned on having my students read the Franklin chapter, but I'm pretty sure now they'll be reading the whole thing. "The Promised Land" is intelligent, insightful, powerful, and, above all, engaging.

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## Timothy says

In Promised Land, Jay Parini takes on an interesting endeavor: to identify books that described and/or shaped American cultural identity. Parini's selections are: (1) Of Plymouth Plantation, (2) The Federalist Papers, (3) The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, (4) The Journals of Lewis and Clark, (5) Walden, (6) Uncle Tom's Cabin, (7) Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, (8) The Souls of Black Folk, (9) The Promised Land, (10) How to Win Friends and Influence People, (11) The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care, (12) On the Road, and (13) The Feminine Mystique.

In Parini's view, each of these books conveys one or more well-wrought American tropes. We can choose various labels for these ideas: "myths", "values", "ideologies", "beliefs", "themes." Terminological issues aside, these tropes are familiar to Americans. If we assume that, at some general level, there exists a shared American psyche then, to Parini, these books reflect important aspects of that psyche.

Some of Parini's arguments are compelling. Parini effectively convinces readers (or me, at least) that William Bradford's description of the Pilgrim story in Of Plymouth Plantation captures themes of "America as Promised Land", "the immigrant experience", and "cultural acceptance" (in this case, acceptance of Native Americans, as Bradford describes the first Thanksgiving). Benjamin Franklin's autobiography captures themes of "American industriousness", and "rugged individualism", with their possibilities for "going from rags to riches."

While there is no over-arching theme that binds all thirteen books, Parini does a good job of describing connections where they exist. Some themes cut across multiple works. For example, The Journals of Lewis and Clark, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and On The Road each, in their way, capture the romance of travel and the beckoning of the road to "find oneself." Walden and On The Road both touch on counter-cultural themes. Uncle Tom's Cabin, The Souls of Black Folk, and The Feminine Mystique each address prominent civil rights issues.

Parini attempts to convince readers that each of the books was widely influential. He cites statistics on book sales and distributions. He notes prominent persons who were influenced by one of his selections. Of course, no book is written in a vacuum. The influence of Parini's selections may, in some instances, been partly predicated on their authors' ability to effectively articulate pre-existing sentiments.

Parini's choices show clear liberal predilections in language, tone, and, most obviously, his thirteen selections. Consistent with this, Parini seems drawn to books that fostered equality and civil rights (Uncle Tom's Cabin, The Souls of Black Folk, The Feminine Mystique).

Parini writes his book in a very personal, conversational tone. He interjects personal experiences with several of the books. This style makes for a comfortable, casual read. Yet, it also placed Parini in a position where he could not assume knowledge on the part of his readers. If I have a critique of Promised Land, it is that Parini devotes a great deal of the book to recapitulative summaries of the thirteen books. This was a necessary shortcoming. Yet, I would have found the book more interesting if Parini had devoted less content to Cliff Notes style summarization, and more to expansion of his ideas.

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## F.C. Etier says

[Published first at Blogcritics.org:]

"You know more than you think you do." So says an Olympic gold medal winner, and so begins a book that over sixty years later still influences the baby boomer generation. A book that espouses a kinder gentler approach to the journey from birth to adolescence. One of the founding myths/stories of our American heritage is the road trip. The story of two characters on a journey to freedom, either real or dreamed, the epitome of which, according to Hemingway, was penned by Mark Twain.

Since the Mayflower arrived in the New World, Americans have been on road trips. Whether it was the great unknown wilderness of Lewis and Clark or the quest for "it" as recounted by Kerouac, we've been searching. We learn from the journey and sometimes feel that when we have reached our destination, it stretches further out before us on the horizon. And we continue on. As individuals we continue the journey begun by our ancestors while seeking goals of our own along the way. Inspiration comes from our accomplishments and is driven by the efforts, desires, and dreams of previous generations passed along to us by oral family histories, diaries, journals, and books (both fiction and non-fiction).

A special collection of those books is celebrated in Promised Land: Thirteen Books That Changed America by Jay Parini. The author teaches college in Vermont and has a long list of credits that add up to "literary scholar". He sees "..poetry as the most important form of writing," and has several collections of poetry, novels and biographies to his credit.

His selection criteria in his own words, "I was looking for books that played a role in shaping the nation's idea of itself or that consolidated and defined a major trend." It is clear that this is not a collection of America's "greatest books". Choosing could only be made less difficult by narrowing the focus; he includes a list of one hundred works that also changed the country with a confession that another hundred could have easily been added.

Parini has chosen his baker's dozen well. Included are significant works from politics, religion, adventure, exploration and philosophy. These books are filled with stories--memorable legends of both fact and fiction that describe our many interconnected journeys and the diverse experiences that make us Americans. He suggests questions to help us ponder the trip. His analysis inspires us to come up with our own questions. How could a country founded on the notion that all men are created equal allow slavery? (The Souls of Black Folk) How can we not be thought to be crazy or depraved when we push the boundaries of acceptable behavior? How can we change someone else's attitude without giving offense or arousing resentment? How could women not be allowed to vote? How much individual freedom are we willing to give up to be able to say we live in a free country?

A chapter is devoted to each book and treats each with the same format. He offers a brief summary of how the book changed the country. Next is a biography of the writer and historical context of the book. If you

have not read the book, you will enjoy the third portion, a detailed description of the book. In some cases he details individual chapters. Despite this occasional level of detail, he manages to keep each chapter to approximately twenty pages. A discussion of the books that followed in the wake of the subject work concludes each section. In some cases, books that came before or inspired this particular work are mentioned.

Prior to reading this book I had never considered the importance of "the road trip". It was enlightening to see the diversity in the types of trips, the parallel motives and lessons learned along the way. The most memorable benefit of this book for me was the connections that came to mind while reading. Many of the stories reminded me of other books I've read on my own journey. I can ride on the raft with Huck and Tom, stand on the shore with Eliza, enjoy Thanksgiving with the Pilgrims or ride a chopper with Dennis Hopper. I can participate in my country's grand experiment in self-governing and I can speak with confidence in front of a group. Somehow it's easier to bear my own cross down the road to the promised land because of the journeys of my ancestors and mentors. The books chosen by Parini helped me to see that they, along with many other books I've enjoyed, have not only changed America, they have changed my generation, shaped my thoughts and made me who I am. I read not only to learn, I read to survive.

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### **Balloon Bruce says**

Couldn't get into it.

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### **Carolyn Fitzpatrick says**

This was a very useful text, providing details on thirteen pivotal American books. The organization within each book's section was a little odd, but the author's writing style made the importance of each book very clear. He excelled at putting each book into the context of its own time period while also bringing in modern day views. I especially liked the section on the Lewis and Clark journals. I really feel that we need an "Adventures of Lewis and Clark" TV series now. Thoreau came off as a bit shallow, celebrating self-sufficiency when he had no job and up until then was sponging off his friends and family. The final section on The Feminine Mystique provided a clear explanation of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd wave feminism. At the very end of the book is an appendix of 100 more important US publications, listed chronologically with explanations of what made them important.

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### **Jen says**

I'm feeling a little indifferent about this book having finished it. I was really interested to see what books Parini included in his list, and I would say that for the most part I agree with him, that these 13 books are influential and inform us about ourselves. Now, whether they helped change or shape America, of that I'm not so sure.

Parini says right off the bat that other people will have other lists, and that's really true of all 'best of' lists. The biggest problem that I have with his contention that these books helped change America is that at least the first of the books weren't even known about to contemporaries. For example, the first book is Of

Plymouth Plantation which I highly doubt was widely read at the time. In my mind, if one wants to influence, shape, or change America with a book, it needs to have been read.

It seems to me that the events happening in the books now speak to a feeling about America then. Lewis and Clark's journals are included in Parini's list and while they seem to evoke feelings of Manifest Destiny and conquering of the Western Frontier by American's, I am not entirely convinced that people reading Lewis and Clark's journals at the time of publication were moved to further feelings of frontier.

I really enjoyed the organization of the book. Each of the 13 books was dealt with in four parts. The first part briefly introduces the book and it's importance. The second part gives some biographical information about the author. The third part gives a more in-depth discussion of the book specifically, and the fourth part wraps it all up and re-states it's importance.

I must admit that I haven't read all the books on this list. As a political science student in college I read the Federalist Papers and as a child of the Western US I have read versions of Lewis and Clark's journeys. That being said, I worry about Parini's criticism. Specifically, his discussion of Lewis and Clark's journals and the benevolent spirit of the Corps of Discovery and how they only came in the spirit of peace, yadda yadda. I know from growing up along Lewis and Clark's trail that the Corps was not that benevolent and kind to all the Native people they came in contact with.

Overall, I would recommend the book because it's a good thinking piece. It would be great for a book group, because there is certainly a lot of opportunities for discussion. It's very well organized and therefore readable, just not so sure that as social/historical commentary it's all that accurate and useful.

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### **Lynne Tull says**

I have finally made it through all thirteen chapters. I loved that I found this book and love how Mr. Parini organized it. He has a formula that makes it easy to read. First, he tells you why he chose the particular book and something about its history as a public document. Second, he summarizes the book as it relates to his choice to include it in the 'Promised Land'. Third, he talks about the book and how it has been incorporated in our present society. A friend rattled off a list of books..."Well, did it include ?????" No, it didn't include ??. I am not what Mr. Parini used as criteria as he went about an onerous task of selecting these thirteen books. I wondered at the beginning what other books were in the running. I found my answer. He has included an Appendix with 'One Hundred More Books That Changed America'. I guess if I wanted a reading list this is where I would start. My journey to the 'Promised Land' lasted from June through September. Now I am ready to find my next journey into the world of non-fiction. I read a lot, and I mean a lot of fiction, but I always have one non-fiction that I savor over a period of time.

#1 June 12, 2012 "Plymouth Plantation",

William Bradford, the second governor of the Colony. To summarize: "Establishing a beachhead for Puritans in New England, the Plymouth Colony ...acquired legendary status mainly because of the first Thanksgiving, as described by Bradford and, later translated into a national myth holiday that celebrates reconciliation and survival." p.27." noted by me: The Puritans came to Plymouth on the Mayflower in 1620. However, it was not the first, only, or oldest colony established by Europeans. (Other Puritans were in Massachusetts and Connecticut.) The English arrived in Virginia, at Jamestown, in 1607, but were not successful. The oldest settlement is St. Augustine established by the Spanish in 1565. The Spanish had also settled in Santa Fe by 1608.

#2 June 19, 2012 "The Federalist Papers",

by Publius (Pseudonym for the three authors, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay) It consists of 85 essays (52 by Hamilton, 28 by Madison, and 5 by Jay) in defense of the proposed U.S. Constitution recently drafted in Philadelphia. It was designed to persuade New Yorkers and people of other states to look favorably on the controversial documents and vote for its ratification. There were many against it. All states except New York had their own constitutions. In 1825, Jefferson recommended these essays as the best guide to what was in the minds of the framers, perhaps even better than the actual document itself. Hamilton lays out the general idea of the papers in one paragraph. By and large he and his co-authors stick pretty closely to this outline: "I propose, in a series of papers, to discuss the following interesting particulars: The utility of the UNION to your political prosperity-The insufficiency of the present Confederation to preserve that Union-The necessity of a government at least equally energetic with the one proposed, to the attainment of this object-The conformity of the proposed Constitution to the true principles of republican government-Its analogy to your own State constitution-and lastly, The additional security which its adoption will afford to the preservation of the species of government, to liberty, and to property."

#3 June 21, 2012 "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin"

Four things stand out to me. One-With this book Benjamin Franklin invented the category in our libraries labeled, Autobiography. There were memoirs in the past and they were mostly spiritual or intellectual, not one that tracks the creation of an individual self. Two-"It remains a foundational book for Americans, in that it offers a template for self-invention-in other words, 'The American Dream'. Three-In addition, he was a scientist of note. Not only did he fly a kite and prove that electricity is a single fluid and invented the lightning rod. The Franklin stove still exists. He was also a Statesman, playing an instrumental role in the creation of the American republic. Also, did I mention that he was a printer by occupation; established the first subscription library in America that led to our current library system; thought of the idea of fire insurance; started an academy that evolved into the University of Pennsylvania; devised the capital-raising vehicle of matching funds; and many more to mention.

#4 July 4, 2012 The Journals of Lewis and Clark...

...documenting for President Thomas Jefferson the recent Louisiana Purchase and looking for a water passage to the Pacific Ocean. They started out on the Missouri River hoping for a water passage to the West Coast. Along the way Sacajawea and her husband joined the Corps of Discovery. Their journals are still used today for researchers.

#5 July 13, 2012 Walden...

...is the major work of Henry D. Thoreau. Walden was selected because in the opinion of the author "it has inspired generations of young people to go off by themselves, to separate from the pack, listening instead of talking, reading, making note, marching to the beat of a different drummer. He was inspired and mentored by Ralph Waldo Emerson. The author in defense of his adding Walden to this list stressed Emerson's work, 'Nature', as an important influence on Thoreau. I wonder why he didn't select 'Nature' instead of Walden. The only conclusion that I could come to was that Emerson only wrote about living with nature. Whereas, Thoreau actually put action to his words and went to Walden Pond to live as he wrote.

#6 July 17, 2012 Uncle Tom's Cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe

It goes without saying that this book was a major influence on how the people thought about race in the 19th Century. It sold more copies of any book in the 19th Century except for the Bible. From Jay Parini in this book: "It fueled the abolitionist movement in obvious ways, drawing attention to the horrors of slavery and putting African American Characters before a mass (largely white) audience in vivid ways."

#7 July 22, 2012 Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain

"In writing this novel, Twain forged a fresh medium for the American language, creating a salty, amusing vernacular, a flexible medium that could range from the highest to the lowest levels of thought and feeling in colorful, even 'coarse' diction.(157) Twain showed us how to talk and handed us one of our founding myths, which involves lighting out 'for the Territory,' heading off into unknown regions in search of the fable promised land.(158)" "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain call Huckleberry Finn."...Ernest Hemingway

#### #8 August 1, 2012 The Souls of Black Folk by W. E. Burghardt Du Bois

The story of the black American evolved to the next step when this book was published. It gave 'white' Americans a sense that Afro-Americans actually had a soul. They had the same feelings, thoughts, and sense of family as a white man. In 1903, when the book was published, he defined the major problem of the 20th Century, "color-line". Although he had positive comments about George Washington Carver, he did not agree with his philosophy published in 'Up From Slavery' in which he argued that "blacks should propel themselves forward by entrepreneurial energy". He argued that to train blacks for a trade, encouraged them "to trade political power and civil rights for the freedom to cultivate a certain kind of education within the black community, accepting the notion of a separate but unequal black community". This book more than any other was an inspiration for the Civil Rights Movement of the 50's and 60's.

#### #9 August 12, 2012 The Promised Land by Mary Antin

Antin's book was a national bestseller, "the most popular immigrant autobiography of its time", and a book that inspired a generation of newly minted Americans, who saw in her story a version of their. "What it changed was American attitudes toward this frightening wave of newcomers. Her memoir also helped to confirm the United States as a land of promise. The immigrant memoir outlines the immigrant experience, its cycles of arrival, optimism, confusion, and assimilation. This genre will be "a staple of our literature"...and Mary Antin is a founding mother of this genre.(quotes are taken directly from the book to describe what I perceive to me to be the salient points...ones that I want to document so I can remember what I got from reading the author's opinion of this important book.

#### #10 August 22, 2012 How To Win Friends and Influence People

by Dale Carnegie

Background: This book appeared in the dark of the Great Depression when breadline formed in the streets. In the U.S. where failure is shameful and success has become something of a religion, there has always been a need for advice about how to get ahead..

No other book has been more successful at the business of success than this one. Published in 1936 is an early prototype and iconic model of the self-help genre. "One can walk into any bookstore in America today and find long shelf of self-help books that owe a huge debt to Carnegie." Although the author admits that this book had a definite effect on his life and at some level still influences him, he is very critical about Carnegie's methods...calling them manipulative at the least. Carnegie's acknowledged forerunner was Benjamin Franklin (see No. 3) and many of his best ideas, are drawn from the world's sacred scriptures. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That is the essential message of this book."

#### #11 August 28, 2012 The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care

By Benjamin Spock, M.D>

First thing that caught my attention: I missed being raised by Dr. Spock by seven years. The book was published in 1946. I cannot recall seeing a copy of Dr. Spock's book in our house. Although I have to say that my Mother and Dad always respected me as an individual. I was shy by nature so a "child should be seen not heard" was not an issue in our house.

The statement by the author says it all: "Dr. Benjamin Spock changed how Americans raised their children, probably forever." It helped shape the Baby Boom generation, who are now ready for retirement. Before

Spock most advice on the raising of children came from the pulpit, "spare the rod, spoil the child". Dr. Spock's main message to mothers: you know more than you think you do; follow your instincts. He wanted children to grow in ways that suited their individual personalities, and to make the most of their innate abilities. It is interesting that Dr. Spock for most of his life was a well-known and loved pediatrician, speaker, and author. However, somewhere in the 1960's he became an antiwar activist advocating nuclear disarmament. He took part in protest marches and was actually charged with conspiring "to sponsor and support a nation-wide program of resistance" to the draft. (Note: In 1973, after the Vietnam War Congress abolished the military draft in favor of an all volunteer Army.)

All I have heard about Dr. Spock was that his theories were responsible for a permissive age of self-centered/indulgent children who grew into self-centered/indulgent adults. However, Garry Wills, the writer who spent time in jail with him remembers: "Spock was the father not of a permissive age, but of an imaginative one. He had a respect for individuality, in babies as in grown citizens....He had come to protest war, not to wage it..."

#### #12 September 6, 2012 On the Road, Jack Kerouac

I really cannot relate in any way to this book. I think it is because I am part of the generation Mr. Kerouac defined as the "Beat Generation". In 1957 my generation had already been established and it wasn't 'beat'. I was part of the establishment and 'beat' wasn't part of it. I am not really sure even why Mr. Parini chose this book as one of the 'Thirteen Books'. His first sentence was the only explanation: "'On The Road' (1957) identified, and helped to define, the notion of an American counterculture." He compared it as he some of the other books he has chosen as a rite of passage mainly for the male of the species. Also, Mr. Parini summarized the goal of this book as the search for IT. IT's the "search for enlightenment, for heightened consciousness, for God," which never ends. And finally, I think, most importantly, his last sentence says it all: "the going may well be more important than actually getting there." As a recent TV commercial trying to sell us cars says: The destination is the journey.

#### # 13 The Feminine Mystique, Betty Friedan

Mr. Parini chose to include this book not because it was the only book that played a role in the women's movement, but because of the shock effect it had..."which almost single-handedly ignited a revolutionary phase that has deeply affected the live of countless American women and men." In my opinion, this movement is still evolving. Women are still trying to find their place in the greater scheme of things. I am not sure I will see it settled in my life time.

and...

You know, I really can't relate to this book any more than I can 'On the Road'. I never had a 'stay at home' mom. My Mom and Dad owned a small cafe before the time of franchise fast food drive-ins. They both worked from 4am to 9pm every day, except Sunday. They didn't close on Sunday until all of the church crowd was served. I didn't find out until I was in my 20's that job opportunities were limited for women. Actually, maybe the fact that I didn't have a 'stay at home' mom...I call it a 'Life with Father' mom...made me dream to be one. I always wanted my Mom to be there when I got home from school. I can remember laying a guilt trip on my Mom..."why can't you be at home with cookies and milk when I get home from school like the other moms"? ...I didn't even like milk:

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## **John says**

Within the constraints of a close look at a dozen books that had an impact, this is an excellent read. I liked the way he examined the books through set mini-chapters within the chapter on each book, with the final mini-chapter examining the legacy.

You will find some of the standard impact books: *Walden* and *Huckleberry Finn*, to name two. (Although I like *Walden*, it must be the most unread impact book there is today. It's an impact book, even if no one can get through it).

But you will also find interesting choices: *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*, and *Dr. Spock's Baby Book*, to name two.

Of the books I have read about books, I would put this one in the top five.

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## **BookSweetie says**

I have a bit of a soft-spot and curiosity for books about books and/or authors, and that is just what *PROMISED LAND* promises in its subtitle: Thirteen Books That Changed America.

**THIRTEEN?** Well, I stumbled a bit on the baker's dozen number, but List-Lovers take note: while in the main body of this book the author expounds extensively on thirteen books, in the appendix readers are treated with a list of ONE HUNDRED more influential books -- each with brief commentary!

Clearly, this 2008 book is scholarly and academic in both content and style -- hardly for everyone--- but it's well-organized and educational-- and it's NOT necessary to read every word to benefit from author Jay Parini's thought-provoking effort to identify and acquaint us with books that changed America.

Before identifying the specific titles that serve as separate chapters, here's a word about the four part chapter organization:

Part 1 introduces the book and its cultural importance.

Part 2 refers to the writer and gives biographical and historical context -- the backstory, sometimes with the personal impact on the author.

Part 3 describes in considerable detail the actual book.

Part 4 ends with the legacy/impact of the work, with some mention of books that followed.

So, what books do you think were chosen that "helped to create the intellectual and emotional contours" of America and that "played a pivotal role in developing a complex value system"?

.....  
Here are Parini's choices:

\*\*\*\*quotation marks indicate quotes from Parini's book

1. Of Plymouth Plantation:

William Bradford's journal written between 1620 and 1647 that offered a "founding myth" when the complete, handwritten work was discovered by chance in 1855 in England and published a year later in the US.

## 2. The Federalist Papers by Publius (means "friend of the people")

85 argumentative essays that "form the bedrock of American government" originally appearing in NY newspapers in 1787-88, in defense of the proposed U.S. Constitution (from the Philadelphia convention) that needed at least nine states for ratification.

52 essays by Alexander Hamilton, 28 by James Madison, and 5 by John Jay... 3 men of the ENLIGHTENMENT steeped in writings of Montesquieu, John Locke, and David Hume who believed in "rational, balanced government that served the needs of its people." Some essays may have been passed back and forth: hence, when gathered into a volume, the author was designated as Publius.

## 3. The Autobiography of Ben Franklin (1793)

Until Ben Franklin's posthumously published self-written story of his life, "the world had no obvious model for this kind of memoir, one that tracks the creation of an INDIVIDUAL SELF" and offered a "template for self-invention and a good deal of inspiration as well."

## 4. The Journals of Lewis and Clark

"Meriwether Lewis (1774-1809) and William Clark (1770-1838) took daily notes, which they later transferred into bound journals... fluent, vivid, detailed, and descriptive. They conduct the willing reader along the trail, over eight thousand miles, beginning in St. Louis in 1804, then moving along the Missouri River to a winter camp in what is now North Dakota, continuing on through spring over the Continental Divide with marvelous new guides and translators: Toussaint Charbonneau (a Canadian trapper) and his Shoshone bride, Sacagawea."

The group (40 men, one woman), after making it to the mouth of the Columbia River on the Pacific, and "wintering out in what is now Oregon...returned as heroes to St. Louis, arriving in late September 1806." "The JOURNALS found an audience greedy for information about this wilderness wonderland, with its exotic birds and animals, its thrilling landscapes, and its native people."

## 5. Walden by Henry David Thoreau (1854)

WALDEN has a "unique place in American literature as a work of spirituality, autobiographical adventure, and natural description."

"By putting himself at the center of his work, combining... autobiography with nature writing of a profound order, Thoreau created in Walden a book that continues to invite us to live more deliberately, in closer touch with the natural world, questioning the values that we hold and the broad assumptions of society at large... a direct challenge to American materialism"...

## 6. Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852)

"Few books in any generation compare with UNCLE TOM'S CABIN for sheer impact. Not only was it a bestseller of gigantic proportions, breaking all records for the nineteenth century, but it changed the way people thought about race -- perhaps the dominant issue in American culture over the past two centuries. It fueled the abolitionist movement in obvious ways, drawing attention to the horrors of slavery and putting African American characters before a mass (largely white) audience in vivid ways."

## 7. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain (1885)

The novel (published 1885) takes place 25 years or so earlier during the “years when slavery was still in place, though fraying at the edges. In this, Twain treads some of the territory already occupied by Uncle Tom’s Cabin; but he and Harriet Beecher Stowe attack slavery in very different terms. Twain... comes at the subject indirectly, simply by showing us the nobility of Jim.”

“Twain addresses nearly every major theme in American literature and thought, including the subtle power of nature and the mysteries of religion... Twain...asks questions about parentage, family structure, and emotional ties that bind, or fail to bind.” He puts “a black man up against white society...finding him at least equal to the best of them... Most centrally, Twain asks his readers to consider the value of civilization itself.”

## 8. The Souls of Black Folk by W.E. B. Du Bois (1903)

14 separate essays and sketches...on the meaning of race in America ... “ranging from soulful memoir... to straightforward sociology and cultural analysis to lyrical evocations of black ‘soul,’ as manifested in religious writings and poetry, music and speech.”

## 9. The Promised Land by Mary Antin (1912)

Antin’s national bestselling book established the genre of immigrant autobiography /memoir and helped shape attitudes during a “tumultuous era of immigration.” Mary Antin (1881-1949) arrived from her Russian Jewish community in 1894 as part of the “so-called Great Migration, which runs from the last decades of the nineteenth century through the beginnings of World War 1.... These immigrants, often poor and unskilled, were mostly Jews and Catholics from Eastern Europe and Russia, from Italy, Greece, and Ireland.”

The immigrant memoir is a “paradigm of sorts, one that usually begins far away, in the Old Country, where living conditions are hard, even impossible. In the midst of poverty and oppression, the writer learns of a distant place across the sea, a promised land of milk and honey...Untold wealth lies within easy reach, and not only does freedom from oppression exist, but the class system itself has been seriously disrupted if not dismantled. The hopeful pilgrim crosses an ocean... It’s a difficult passage, and many die along the way. Making matters worse, the immigrant lands in the New World only to find out that the wonders and wealth have been exaggerated. A struggle ensues, and it takes many years before difficult odds (poverty, prejudice, ignorance) are overcome. In the end, the memoirist survives, even prospers. Assimilation occurs.”

## 10. How to Win Friends and Influence People by Dale Carnegie (1936)

A model book of the self-help genre that “appeared in the dark of the Great Depression.” It gave readers a way to “reinvent themselves in a country where self-invention itself defines our culture.” The negative way to see the book: “Carnegie taught people how to get ahead by flattering those in power and by ingratiating themselves with those in a position to advance their interests...In a more positive light, he taught people to tap their hidden powers and use parts of themselves previously repressed.”

“Unlike our European counterparts, who derive their sense of self from family connections, Americans are by nature entrepreneurs of selfhood.”

## 11. The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care by Benjamin Spock (1946)

Dr. Spock’s book “changed the way Americans raised their children, probably forever” and its “commercial success remains the stuff of legend.”

## 12. On the Road by Jack Kerouac (1957)

Kerouac's road novel "identified, and helped to define, the notion of an American counterculture."

## 13. The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan (1963)

This book had a "shock effect... and almost single-handedly ignited a revolutionary phase that has deeply affected the lives of countless American women and men." It "paved the way for the contemporary feminist movement..." Social revolutions occur in waves; the first wave began with the suffragettes at the 1848 Seneca Falls convention that culminated in the 19th amendment (women's right to vote) and Friedan's era was thought to be the second wave (focus on middle class housewives) that gathered steam in the 1970s. (A third wave began in the 1980s when writers faulted Friedan for being too narrow and naïve of the class /gender/ethnic issues.)

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One Hundred More Books that Changed America -- chronologically listed beginning with Bartolome de Las Casas 1552 book A Brief Relation of the Destruction of the Indies

Few masterpieces of fiction... not necessarily books that might be the "greatest" books in American history.. "They are works that either defined a period or produced a notable shift or expansion of consciousness" or helped "transform a field of inquiry."

The list is only of authors (mostly)... you'll have to get the book to see the titles... or guess!

De las Casas  
John Smith  
Thomas Morton  
Roger Williams  
Cotton Mather  
Jonathan Edwards  
Thomas Paine  
de Crevecoeur  
T. Jefferson  
Judith Murray  
William Bartram  
Parson Mason Locke Weems  
Washington Irving  
James Fenimore Cooper  
Noah Webster  
Joseph Smith  
Edgar Allan Poe  
Francis Parkman  
Herman Melville  
Walt Whitman  
Horatio Alger  
Mary Baker Eddy  
Joel Chandler Harris  
William James  
Alfred Thayer Mahan  
Booker T Washington

The Sears, Roebuck Catalog

Upton Sinclair

Charles Alexander Eastman

Jane Addams

John Muir

James Weldon Johnson

Charles A Beard

Robert Frost

John Dewey

H.L. Mencken

Frederick Jackson Turner

Sinclair Lewis

Emily Post

Bruce Barton

Alain Locke

Ernest Hemingway

Margaret Sanger

Charles Lindburgh

Robert/Helen Lynd

Irma/Marion Rombauer

Reinhold Niebuhr

Margaret Mitchell

Zora Neal Hurston

John Steinbeck

James Agee

Friedrich von Hayek

Richard Wright

John Hersey

The Kinsey Reports

Thomas Merton

GOre Vidal

Norbert Weiner

Joseph Campbell

J D Salinger

Ralph Ellison

Norman Vincent Peale

B F Skinner

Noam Chomsky

Alan Watts

John Kenneth Galbraith

Strunk and White

Joseph Heller

Helen Gurley Brown

Rachel Carson

Milton Friedman

Michael Harrington

Thomas S Kuhn

Sylvia Plath

James D Watson

Whole Earth Catalog  
The Pentagon Papers  
Dr. Atkins  
Our Bodies, Ourselves  
Bernstein and Woodward  
Annie Dillard  
Alex Haley  
Adrienne Rich  
Smoking & Health  
Jane Fonda  
Peters & Waterman  
Stephen R Covey  
Bill McKibben  
Samuel P Huntington  
Rick Warren  
Al Gore (2006)

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## **Todd Stockslager says**

Review title: And I believe in a promised land

Long before Springsteen, America was a land of belief, for some in a land promised by God, but more than that America was a land of belief in words. Perhaps unique and certainly preeminent among nations, America was founded on a belief in the power and effectiveness of the written word, starting from its Declaration of Independence and solidified in its written Constitution. Parini carries that belief forward by examining thirteen books that built on and sometimes challenged that belief in America's chosen status and unique position.

Mind you, these are not the thirteen best books written in or about America, Parini tells his readers, but the thirteen that most changed the country, starting in chronological order with two books that described colonial foundations (Of Plymouth Plantation) and articulated and argued for the new Constitution (The Federalist Papers). Many of these are books honored but not read by most Americans (although I did study the Federalist Papers in my college coursework on government), but which still permeate the cultural, political, and linguistic atmosphere of the country by virtue of the centrality of their ideas and their influence on the words and actions of writers, politicians, and business and religious leaders.

Only two works of fiction are included among the thirteen, because no matter how widely read, it is difficult for fiction to have the same effectiveness for change, with Uncle Tom's Cabin being the notable exception for its influence in galvanizing the abolitionist movement and helping ignite the American Civil War. Parini includes an appendix with 100 other titles which he considered for this list, amongst which are many other works of fiction. I found it useful to look back at this list as I was reading the main entry to read his thumbnail paragraph about the other books which were

published just before and just after it. In fact, it would have been quite useful if these appendix titles were placed amongst the thirteen in chronological order to more easily set the thirteen in context.

Also in the back are a few footnotes of Parini's references, but there is no index or bibliography of additional reading. Perhaps Parini chose to let these Thirteen stand on their own and serve as their own best references, but an index of authors, titles, and subjects would have been nice.

I started this review by referencing belief, in America's uniqueness and perfectability, which Parini's chosen books bolster with both reinforcement and criticism, particularly in those areas of race relations and gender equality where America's promise remains most distant from perfection. But even in its failures, America retains the promise of perfectability through the power of words and belief that enables me to turn from the worst of today's headlines, to realize that it ain't no sin to be glad I'm alive, and still to believe in a promised land. The Promised Land is in fact the title of one of Parini's chosen books, an immigrant memoir written by a young Russian Jewish woman who came to America in the early 20th century to escape the pogroms of her native land. As she wrote then to extol the virtues of her adopted country, so today millions still come to America to find their promised land based on the power of words and belief. Perhaps the next books that change America for good will come from among them.

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## **L. Schreiber says**

The “Promised Land Thirteen Books that Changed America” is a contemporary review not of America’s greatest fiction or nonfiction works, but a listing and review of books that shaped, changed or “played a role in our nation’s idea of itself or defined a major trend.” A key aspect of Jay Parini’s book is exploring national myths. Each chapter of his book is organized in four parts to help readers see America today in a framework of that particular time.

- Perception about the importance to America / ways it changed or forged our identity
- Information about the author / historical context about the work
- Detailed description of work
- Legacy of the work

In his introduction, Parini reported he chose the topic of his book after attending a similar reading of “Twelve Books that Changed the World” by British author Lord Melvyn Bragg.

Parini tackles what our past means to us now. The book’s dominant themes are relevant today during the 2016 election year:

- Immigration
- Assimilation
- Religion
- Independence from old world constraints /values – American values
- Capacity for self-invention
- Enlightenment that shaped laws
- Vision of nature
- Racial integration
- Conflicts when ideas (cultures) collide
- Continuous revolution through self-transformation

Parini’s history of William Bradford’s diaries adds to and debunks the mythic status Americans have bestowed on the Pilgrims and Thanksgiving. Bradford gives some of the first Americans a heroic status,

while exposing the pettiness, selfishness and greed of the settlers.

Mythical aspects

- Plymouth wasn't the first settlement in the New World (pg. 27)

- o Jamestown 1607

- o St. Augustine 1565 – slavery introduced here first

- Jamestown collapsed into chaos (described by John Smith in 1624 "General History of Virginia")

- Relations with Native Americans not always positive (pg. 27)

- Edmund Morgan attributed the failure to poor work habits "Labor Problems @ Jamestown" (pg. 27)

The author describes William Bradford's "Of Plymouth Plantation" as a "brilliant literary text" and a "tribute to patient diplomacy and restraint."

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## **Edward O'Neill says**

Such a good idea.

Thirteen important American books--but not the ones you thought.

Plymouth Plantation,

The Federalist Papers,

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin,

The Journals of Lewis and Clark,

Walden, Uncle Tom's Cabin,

...Huckleberry Finn,

The Souls of Black Folk,

The Promised Land,

Dale Carnegie (How To Win Friends...),

Dr. Spock's baby book,

On the Road and The Feminine Mystique!

Interesting books.

But this is SO terribly written.

This guy Parini does not love literature, reading, sentences.

He accumulates fragments. (There's something manic about the project. I bet the guy has a collection of great buildings constructed out of toothpicks.)

You can't read three paragraphs in a row. It's one topic, then another, then another. There's no idea, no throughline, no pursuit of anything.

He quotes great writing--and mangles it in the process. E.g., "Most men lead lives of 'quiet desperation'..." (110). That's Parini.

Either quote Thoreau--"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation"--or say 'he thought most people were pretty miserable,' but don't do this!

Awful.

Good idea, terribly executed--like so many things.

Take the list of books, and go to a good encyclopedia and read the articles on these books.

--E. R. O'Neill

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