

## New Kids on the Block



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According to the cliché, American writers peak early, seldom maintaining the extended careers of their European counterparts. Like most clichés, this one contains an element of truth. Melville, for example, lived 40 years beyond the publication of *Moby-Dick* (1851), never again writing anything approaching its greatness. The quartet of novels for which Faulkner will be remembered—*The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)—resulted from an explosion of creativity during his 30s (Faulkner lived to be 65). Few American novelists have written books at the end of long careers that seem as important as the ones they wrote while young. James, of course. Nabokov. Possibly Edith Wharton.

But if American novelists tend to peak early, few write truly notable first novels. Faulkner cleared his throat with three early novels before finding his voice with *The Sound and the Fury*. *Moby-Dick* was Melville's sixth novel; *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald's third. Indeed, any discerning list of significant American debut novels would be quite short. Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* would be there, but not *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), Faulkner's first, or Melville's *Typee* (1846) or Hawthorne's *Fanshawe* (1828) or James's *Roderick Hudson* (1876).

The notable first novels on my list (page 31) meet two criteria. First, they possess a narrative assurance—call it “maturity”—that ordinarily emerges later in a writer's development. *Typee* doesn't prepare us for *Moby-Dick*; *Soldiers' Pay* hardly predicts *Absalom, Absalom!* But with *Invisible Man* (1952) and *The Recognitions* (1955), “no-brainers” for any list of formidable firsts, Ellison and Gaddis seem to have skipped an apprenticeship period, leaping full-blown into something like a major phase (the name F.O. Matthiessen applied to James's last three novels).

First novels on my list also possess a certain magnitude; they're *consequential*. *Dangling Man* (1944), *Of the Farm* (1965), and *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) aren't there because their impact on the development of the novel is negligible. Middle-class realists, Bellow, Updike, and Roth write as though the major narrative developments of the twentieth century never happened, as though Joyce never happened, or Beckett, or postmodernism. They leave the genre unchanged, pretty much as they found it. By contrast, writers on my list came out of the chute bucking, their first fictions leaving us almost unnerved. Monstrous births, they deform the genre, redirect its course, change the way we think about it forever.

Whether or not the seven debut novels reviewed in this *ABR* focus will turn up on anyone's list of notable firsts, only time will tell. But we've tried to assign novels that are, well, *novel*, that confute expectations. Women wrote five of the novels under review, a good indication of the growing cohort of transgressive women writers. Similarly, the decidedly multicultural cast to these books suggests that the days are gone when only a handful of ethnic minorities wrote anything other than realism. *ABR* is happy to be among the first to welcome these new kids to the block.