

Introduction: *First Fictions*

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The concept of first fictions is often itself a fiction.

For some reason, we reserve the designation “first fiction” to a first book, not a first publication. Donald Barthelme was already an influential short-story writer when *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* appeared in 1964. Is it the seeming permanence of hard covers that makes us regard that collection as Barthelme’s debut, even though most of the stories in it had already appeared singly, several in the *New Yorker*, and had already been widely read and discussed?

Moreover, the first book a writer writes isn’t necessarily the first one published. The late John Gardner’s “official” first novel is *The Resurrection* (1966), but his true first fiction, which Gardner began writing as a Washington University undergraduate student, is *Nickel Mountain* (1973), his fifth published novel. *Nickel Mountain* was one of several “unpublishable” manuscripts gathering dust in a trunk when Gardner’s third published novel, *Grendel* (1971), established his literary reputation, turning everything he had written or was thereafter to write into a hot item. Also in that trunk was the thrice-rejected *The Sunlight Dialogues* (1972), which Gardner had completed before writing *Grendel* or *The Wreckage of Agathon* (1970), his second published novel. Fourth in the order of Gardner’s published novels, *Dialogues* became his first popular success. So Gardner’s fifth novel is actually his first, his second actually his fourth, his fourth actually his third, and so on.

Curiouser still is the publication history of *The Floating Opera* (1956), John Barth’s celebrated first fiction. The grim conclusion of Barth’s “nihilistic comedy” discouraged publishers from accepting it. After five rejections, Appleton-Century-Crofts offered to publish the manuscript if Barth would soften its climax. Eager to break into print, the 25-

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year-old aspiring novelist agreed to revise the ending so that protagonist Todd Andrews attempts suicide by asphyxiation rather than by blowing up himself and 699 fellow townspeople (including his possible daughter) while they watch a minstrel show aboard a Chesapeake Bay showboat. Published in 1956, *The Floating Opera* was runner-up for that year’s National Book Award. But Barth regretted having changed the novel’s conclusion, and when Doubleday reissued the book in 1967, he restored the original ending. So the official first edition of Barth’s first fiction is actually the revised edition, the official revised edition actually the first.

To further demystify the fiction of first fictions, consider the cases of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* (1985), both of which made *ABR*’s list of Notable First American Novels (*ABR* 21.4, available at <http://www.litline.org/ABR/Issues/Volume21/Issue4/notablefirsts.pdf>). Not only are these novels not the authors’ first published books—*The Sun Also Rises* followed *Three Stories and Ten Poems* (1923) and the story collection *In Our Time* (1925); *City of Glass* was preceded by several poetry collections, a book-length prose poem, a memoir, and an essay collection—but they’re not even their first published novels.

Hemingway wanted Scribner’s to publish *The Sun Also Rises*, but he was contractually obligated to give it to Boni and Liverwright, who had published *In Our Time*. So Papa quickly wrote a “contract breaker,” *The Torrents of Spring*, a savage parody of Sherwood Anderson, Boni and Liverwright’s star author (and Hemingway’s early mentor). As expected, Boni and Liverwright rejected the novel, freeing Hemingway to commence his

historic association with Scribner's, who successively published the parody and Hemingway's putative first novel in 1926. Auster also produced a shadow first novel, but for entirely different reasons. Before Sun and Moon publisher Douglas Messerli made small press history by accepting *City of Glass*, which had been rejected seventeen times, Auster lived hand to mouth in New York City trying to make it as a writer. Desperate for income, he wrote a combination baseball/detective novel entitled *Squeeze Play* (1978) under the pseudonym "Paul Benjamin." As Auster explains in his wry account of this experience in *Hand to Mouth* (1997), which includes *Squeeze Play* as an appendix, selling out didn't pay, as the novel earned only \$900. Because Hemingway and Auster wrote these novels with their fingers crossed, literary historians have tended to dismiss the books as faux firsts, reserving the aura of literary debut for the authors' second novels.

And, of course, it's the aura surrounding first fictions (or, for that matter, firsts of any kind) that encourages us to continue nurturing a concept whose largely fictitious nature a moment's reflection would expose. But it's a useful fiction, after all, one of those harmless untruths we Bokomonists call *foma*. Sure, we recognize the rarity of truly auspicious literary debuts. Such clumsy beginnings as *Fanshawe*, *Typee*, and *Soldier's Pay* hardly prepare us for the pending greatness of *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* Still, a small handful of stunning firsts (*Invisible Man*, *The Recognitions*, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*) keeps our eyes locked on the horizon for the next significant writer. In an era in which publishing conglomerates, the expanding Entertainment State, cultural studies, the dwindling number of independent bookstores, and other distractions threaten the very survival of literature, the fiction of first fictions helps sustain our commitment to a serious literary culture.

This *ABR* focus introduces five "first" fictions by five "new" writers (let the quotation marks signal our willing suspension of disbe

lief). Whether we're greeting any of these writers at the thresholds of great careers, only time will tell. But one thing is clear. Each "first" fiction reviewed here exemplifies as it affirms the inexhaustibility of the narrative impulse, which is itself a cause for celebration.

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