

JOHN DOS PASSOS

THE

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42<sup>nd</sup>

PARALLEL

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Part of the trilogy **U.S.A.**, which also includes **1919** and **The Big Money**. **The 42nd Parallel** is one of the great American novels.



A WASHINGTON SQUARE PRESS BOOK

JOHN DOS PASSOS

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THE  
42nd PARALLEL

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ILLUSTRATED BY REGINALD MARSH

INTRODUCTION BY MAXWELL GEISMAR



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## THE 42ND PARALLEL

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*District of Columbia (A trilogy)*

*Adventures of a Young Man*

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*The Prospect Before Us*

*Three Soldiers*

*U.S.A. (A trilogy)*

*The 42nd Parallel*

*\*Nineteen Nineteen*

*\*The Big Money*

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## Introduction

IN THE 1920's, a galaxy of new stars appeared in the firmament of American letters. Foremost among the writers of the period, John Dos Passos carried on the traditions of social criticism which had marked the origins of our modern realism in the 1900's, and almost alone he felt the perspectives of history and of culture.

For that reason his work seems better today than that of some of his contemporaries when the great figures of the Post-War epoch have run their fiery and narrow course, and when the glow of a brilliant period has turned to embers.

But the U.S.A. trilogy does hold up. *The 42nd Parallel*. *Nineteen Nineteen*. *The Big Money*. These three books are still the most striking example of the panoramic novel that we have. Their purpose is the study of American society—the whole nation—during the first quarter of the twentieth century. First the Newsreels establish the climate of opinion; they are an entertaining record of political and historical events, popular songs, scandals, crimes—the jumbled chronicle of humanity at work. As the new century dawns in the age of empire, a certain General Miles falls off his horse, the city officials know nothing of vice, President McKinley is in his office, the Gaiety Girls are mobbed in New Jersey and

*"There's been many a good man murdered in the Philippines  
Lies sleeping in some lonesome grave."*

Thus the opening of *The 42nd Parallel*. The second of the technical innovations which marked these novels—the Camera Eye—is the subjective study of a literary figure usually identified with the author himself and presenting his views in the reveries of a poetic prose. Between the complete objectivity of the newspaper headlines and this broken, submerged interior monologue are, then, the Biographies. These brief portraits of outstanding figures in our society run from Eugene Debs—

*"While there is a lower class I am of it, while there is a criminal  
class I am of it, while there is a soul in prison I am not free"*

—to Fighting Bob La Follette in *The 42nd Parallel*:

*This was the tenyears war that left Wisconsin the model state where the voters, order-loving Germans and Finns, Scandinavians fond of their own opinion, learned to use the new leverage, direct primaries, referendum and recall."*

And they are among the best achievements in the book.

Lastly, in the whole complex of "separate features"—which are combined and brought together with an admirable virtuosity so that the separate strands in the narrative continually cross and recross each other, meet and part—are the Novels. They are fictional studies, five of them in the first book of the trilogy, of typical American lives which Dos Passos viewed as the product, rather more than the cause, of the cultural framework which he described around them.

One notices that these fictional lives work up from the lower orders of society in the story of Fainy McCreary ("Mac") to the brilliant portrait of J. Ward Moorehouse as the embodiment of the highest form of success in the United States. He is a Public Relations Counsel. In the story of Eleanor Stoddard, who becomes Moorehouse's friend and feminine consort, Dos Passos showed his early gift, too, as a satirist of the upper classes, while the portraits of working-class people—the ostensible protagonists—are usually weaker. But all the fictional characters are perhaps a little more convincing as appearance rather than reality—or as documentaries rather than true human destinies. And one realizes that their human relationships are, as it were, only the accidental contact of drifting and isolated atoms.

That is typical of Dos Passos's work both before and after the U.S.A. trilogy, and perhaps it was an indication of the personal responses in the writer which contributed to his acrid and despairing view of life in America. . . . Yet in the whole trilogy, *The 42nd Parallel* is the opening book: the book of youth, the book of beginnings. It describes both the start of the American century and the opening phases of the fictional characters who will continue to move throughout the entire story.

In this sense, it is the freshest and least desperate of the

three books. Moreover, Dos Passos is always at his most sensitive and lyrical point in episodes of childhood—possibly his characters are betrayed by maturity quite as much as by a corrupt social system.

It is a genuine tribute to *The 42nd Parallel* to say that it is still “good” more than thirty years after it was written, in a decade very different from the one in which it first appeared. For we live in the revolutionary age which Jack London, before Dos Passos himself, had prophesied in *The Iron Heel*: an age of terrorism, disguise, shifting personalities, and anonymous men. In this period of cataclysmic social change, the allies of yesterday have become our mortal enemies of today, and brutal enemies our new friends, while the horrors and atrocities of the 1930’s and 1940’s are forgotten before the prospect of worse things lying before us.

Quite similarly with values and beliefs, we see the spectacle of writers and artists, as well as statesmen, repudiating ideas which they’ve cherished most dearly to this point. And they may be judged fortunate perhaps when they achieve a reversal of opinion through inner conviction rather than through pressure of those inquisitional bodies in all societies today which try to enforce conformity and rigidity of thought in an epoch of flux.

It is an unhappy time, too, for those who need absolutes or seek them desperately through the realization of a universal instability. In my view John Dos Passos has also carried to an extreme degree the rejection of his former principals. The fear of the Communist tyranny has cast its shadow over even the slightest trace of the social reforms which in the U.S.A. trilogy were the only vista of salvation.

But there is a little irony in the durability of art which confronts the eternal—and perhaps grateful—temporality of history. The writer could not, even though he wanted to, obliterate the work that remains the best achievement of his career, and a cornerstone in modern American fiction.

—MAXWELL GEISMAR

Harrison, New York



U.S.A. THE YOUNG MAN walks fast by himself through the crowd that thins into the night streets; feet are tired from hours of walking; eyes greedy for warm curve of faces, answering flicker of eyes, the set of a head, the lift of a shoulder, the way hands spread and clench; blood tingles with wants; mind is a beehive of hopes buzzing and stinging; muscles ache for the knowledge of jobs, for the roadmender's pick and shovel work, the fisherman's knack with a hook when he hauls on the slithery net from the rail of the lurching trawler, the swing of the bridgeman's arm as he slings down the white-hot rivet, the engineer's slow grip wise on the throttle, the dirtfarmer's use of his whole body when, whoaing the mules, he yanks the plow from the furrow. The young man walks by himself searching through the crowd with greedy eyes, greedy ears taut to hear, by himself, alone.

The streets are empty. People have packed into subways, climbed into streetcars and buses; in the stations they've scampered for suburban trains; they've filtered into lodgings and tenements, gone up in elevators into apartmenthouses. In a showwindow two sallow windowdressers in their shirt-sleeves are bringing out a dummy girl in a red evening dress, at a corner welders in masks lean into sheets of blue flame repairing a cartrack, a few drunk bums shamble along, a sad streetwalker fidgets under an arclight. From the river comes the deep rumbling whistle of a steamboat leaving dock. A tug hoots far away.

The young man walks by himself, fast but not fast enough, far but not far enough (faces slide out of sight, talk trails into tattered scraps, footsteps tap fainter in alleys); he must catch the last subway, the streetcar, the bus, run up the gang-planks of all the steamboats, register at all the hotels, work in the cities, answer the wantads, learn the trades, take up the jobs, live in all the boardinghouses, sleep in all the beds. One bed is not enough, one job is not enough, one life is not enough. At night, head swimming with wants, he walks by himself alone. No job, no woman, no house, no city.

Only the ears busy to catch the speech are not alone; the ears are caught tight, linked tight by the tendrils of phrased words, the turn of a joke, the singsong fade of a story, the



gruff fall of a sentence; linking tendrils of speech twine through the city blocks, spread over pavements, grow out along broad parked avenues, speed with the trucks leaving on their long night runs over roaring highways, whisper down sandy byroads past wornout farms, joining up cities and fillingstations, roadhouses, steamboats, planes groping along airways; words call out on mountain pastures, drift slow down rivers widening to the sea and the hushed beaches.

It was not in the long walks through jostling crowds at night that he was less alone, or in the training camp at Allentown, or in the day on the docks at Seattle, or in the empty reek of Washington City hot boyhood summer nights, or in the meal on Market Street, or in the swim off the red rocks at San Diego, or in the bed full of fleas in New Orleans, or in the cold razorwind off the lake, or in the gray faces trembling in the grind of gears in the street under Michigan Avenue, or in the smokers of limited expresstrains, or walking across country, or riding up the dry mountain canyons, or the night without a sleepingbag among frozen beartracks in the Yellowstone, or canoeing Sundays on the Quinipiac;

but in his mother's words telling about longago, in his father's telling about when I was a boy, in the kidding stories of uncles, in the lies the kids told at school, the hired man's yarns, the tall tales the doughboys told after taps;

it was the speech that clung to the ears, the link that tingled in the blood; U.S.A.

U.S.A. is the slice of a continent. U.S.A. is a group of holding companies, some aggregations of trade unions, a set of laws bound in calf, a radio network, a chain of moving picture theatres, a column of stock-quotations rubbed out and written in by a Western Union boy on a blackboard, a public-library full of old newspapers and dogeared historybooks with protests scrawled on the margins in pencil. U.S.A. is the world's greatest rivervalley fringed with mountains and hills. U.S.A. is a set of bigmouthed officials with too many bank-accounts. U.S.A. is a lot of men buried in their uniforms in Arlington Cemetery. U.S.A. is the letters at the end of an address when you are away from home. But mostly U.S.A. is the speech of the people

JOHN DOS PASSOS



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# THE 42<sup>ND</sup>

**PARALLEL** is "a novel that excites and satisfies more thoroughly than almost any other of its time....

*Those who hold for propriety in literature had best beware of it. It transfers life to the page by avoiding nothing true which is also relevant—and in lives like these much ugliness is relevant. By never forgetting that these lives are important to those who live them,*

*Dos Passos follows them ... with an irony and understanding that give them meaning, and with a sense of aliveness that quickens every page."*

—Atlantic Bookshelf

*One of the most racily intelligent and authentic American novels ... marks its author as a steady, sure-handed craftsman ... All round, the metal rings true."*

—New Statesman

**This opening book of John Dos Passos' trilogy U.S.A. describes America from the beginning of the twentieth century to World War I. It has become a modern classic. This edition contains more than 140 drawings by Reginald Marsh and is reprinted by arrangement with the Houghton Mifflin Company.**



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## *Newsreel I*

*It was that emancipated race  
That was chargin' up the hill  
Up to where them insurrectos  
Was afightin' fit to kill*

### CAPITAL CITY'S CENTURY CLOSED

General Miles with his gaudy uniform and spirited charger was the center for all eyes, especially as his steed was extremely restless. Just as the band passed the Commanding General, his horse stood upon his hind legs and was almost erect. General Miles instantly reined in the frightened animal and dug in his spurs in an endeavor to control the horse which, to the horror of the spectators, fell over backwards and landed squarely on the Commanding General. Much to the gratification of the people, General Miles was not injured, but considerable skin was scraped off the flank of the horse. Almost every inch of General Miles's overcoat was covered with the dust of the street and between the shoulders a hole about an inch in diameter was punctured. Without waiting for anyone to brush the dust from his garments, General Miles remounted his horse and reviewed the parade as if it were an everyday occurrence.

The incident naturally attracted the attention of the crowd, and this brought to notice the fact that the Commanding General never permits a flag to be carried past him without uncovering and remaining so until the colors have passed

*And the Captain bold of Company B  
Was a-fightin' in the lead  
Just like a trueborn soldier he  
Of them bullets took no heed*

## OFFICIALS KNOW NOTHING OF VICE

Sanitary trustees turn water of Chicago River into drainage canal LAKE MICHIGAN SHAKES HANDS WITH THE FATHER OF THE WATERS German zuchterverein singing contest for canary-birds opens the fight for bimetallism at the ratio of 16 to 1 has not been lost, says Bryan

## BRITISH BEATEN AT MAFEKING

*For there's many a man been murdered in Luzon*

## CLAIMS ISLANDS FOR ALL TIME

Hamilton Club Listens to Oratory by ex-Congressman Posey of Indiana

## NOISE GREET'S NEW CENTURY

## LABOR GREET'S NEW CENTURY

## CHURCHES GREET NEW CENTURY

Mr. McKinley is hard at work in his office when the new year begins.

## NATION GREET'S CENTURY'S DAWN

Responding to a toast, Hail Columbia! at the Columbia Club banquet in Indianapolis, Indiana, ex-President Benjamin Harrison said in part: I have no argument to make here

or anywhere against territorial expansion; but I do not, as some do, look upon territorial expansion as the safest and most attractive avenue of national development. By the advantages of abundant and cheap coal and iron, of an enormous overproduction of food products and of invention and economy in production, we are now leading by the nose the original and the greatest of the colonizing nations.

Society Girls Shocked: Danced with Detectives

*For there's many a man been murdered in Luzon  
and Mindanao*

GAIETY GIRLS MOBBED IN NEW JERSEY

One of the lithographs of the leading lady represented her in less than Atlantic City bathing costume, sitting on a red-hot stove; in one hand she held a brimming glass of wine, in the other ribbons drawn over a pair of rampant lobsters.

*For there's many a man been murdered in Luzon  
and Mindanao  
and in Samar*

In responding to the toast, "The Twentieth Century," Senator Albert J. Beveridge said in part: *The twentieth century will be American. American thought will dominate it. American progress will give it color and direction. American deeds will make it illustrious.*

*Civilization will never lose its hold on Shanghai. Civilization will never depart from Hongkong. The gates of Peking will never again be closed to the methods of modern man. The regeneration of the world, physical as well as moral, has begun, and revolutions never move backwards.*

*There's been many a good man murdered in the Philip-  
pines  
Lies sleeping in some lonesome grave.*