

Leonard Cassuto

on toughs in American literature

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McTeague

By Frank Norris (1899)



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1. In the world Frank Norris creates in "McTeague," money is the supreme master. The title character, memorably drawn, is a hulking, slow-witted dentist driven by his physical appetites and content only when they're satisfied. He lives simply on San Francisco's Polk Street until a \$5,000 lottery win by his bride sets in motion a cascade of events that lead him to violent disaster. McTeague's wife, Trina, one of the most depraved misers in American literature, sleeps with her gold pieces, stroking them and on occasion fondling them in her mouth. The novel is at once a comic portrait and a dark musing on the twisted workings of irrational forces. When it somehow occurs to Trina that she should be more generous, the thought is immediately negated:

"I can't do it." The chase after money in "McTeague" concludes in stark and rugged Death Valley, an appropriate terminus. The classic film adaptation of the novel—a 1924 silent movie by Erich Von Stroheim—is simply titled "Greed."

The Rise of David Levinsky

By Abraham Cahan (1917)

2. Abraham Cahan's fictional autobiography of David Levinsky is a quintessentially American upward-mobility tale, an iconic entry in a tradition that runs from Benjamin Franklin to "The Wolf of Wall Street." Levinsky washes up on the shores of New York City a pious and bookish Jewish orphan, as destitute as the neediest character in Dickens. His experiences not surprisingly parallel some of those of the author, himself a Russian immigrant who rose to become a prominent editor of the Jewish Daily Forward and a community leader of the teeming Lower East Side a century ago. His character, Levinsky—a man of a wholly different sort—transforms himself into an unscrupulous capitalist. He makes his fortune as a clothing manufacturer by pretending to abide by a cloakmakers' strike while secretly scooping up his competitors' lost business. Cahan traces Levinsky's rise—and the hardening of spirit that accompanies it—with a gimlet eye for detail. "You don't know who you're working for," a colleague says to him. "You need a mother." Or, he adds, a wife. But Levinsky never marries. He calls it "good sport" to calculate his ever-rising fortune as a man alone. This is a story enclosed in the armored loneliness of its teller.

Edgar Huntly

By Charles Brockden Brown (1799)

3. 'Edgar Huntly' is the first American frontier novel. You could call it a western, but the hero is no cowboy, and his psychological landscape turns out to be as important as the physical wilderness he explores. Edgar (who narrates) is a self-styled detective, investigating the recent murder of a friend. He follows a suspect into the wilderness, into a cave in which he must kill a panther with his bare hands. From this "banquet so detestable" he gains the strength, between abrupt sleepings and wakings, to kill countless Indians with gun and tomahawk. Edgar's fervid and homicidal search leads only to a psychological discovery—that he has been literally sleepwalking through the fields and forests. It becomes clear that, vexed by his own financial troubles and responsibilities, he has been pursuing his own fears. "Such is the capricious constitution of the human mind," Edgar observes. Charles Brockden Brown's story is remarkably forward-looking—conveying repression and conflicted emotion in a way

that anticipates Freud by a century. Not the easiest reading, the novel was powerful enough to have influenced the likes of Poe, Hawthorne and Melville—and it remains disturbingly relevant today.

The Long Goodbye

By Raymond Chandler (1953)

4. Philip Marlowe, the protagonist of all of Raymond Chandler's novels, is perhaps the most richly complicated creation in American detective fiction. Witty and world-weary, educated but defiantly proletarian, Marlowe suffers and endures—and somehow manages to maintain a stubborn idealism in the face of his own cynicism. In "The Long Goodbye," he helps a drinking buddy, Terry Lennox, disappear and then sees the man charged *in absentia* with murder. He suffers a police beating to protect Lennox and then works to clear Lennox's name as "a personal matter." All for little. Like many of Chandler's novels, "The Long Goodbye" is driven by Marlowe's persistence in the chase after truths that only he values. Among the characters destroyed by the novel's "sordid dirty crooked" postwar Los Angeles is an unhappy alcoholic novelist who "tried pretty hard" to learn the truth and live with it—a character who bears a more than a passing resemblance to Chandler himself.

The Glass Key

By Dashiell Hammett (1931)

5. Dashiell Hammett didn't invent hard-boiled writing, but he is the first to give it emotional depth. "The Glass Key" represents a search for the meaning of loyalty. A glass key, it is said, works only once, to open a door. The key then breaks, and the door stays open, and you have to see whatever lies behind it—even if you wish you couldn't. The hero of the novel, Ned Beaumont, figuratively uses such a key, and it upends all the relationships that matter to him. Beaumont is a gangster, but he is a gangster with a commitment to his friend and boss, a corrupt local politician whose mother Beaumont calls "Mom." Seeking the murderer of a senator's son, Beaumont comes to suspect that his boss was involved—but his refusal to give up his friend leads to a series beatings so savage that they drive him to attempt suicide. He finds redemption not in retribution but in endurance—which is, for Hammett, the ultimate measure of toughness.