



The First Great American Novel

By **Randall Fuller**

Soon after the Civil War ended, author John W. De Forest called for a work of fiction that would help reunite the country and at the same time place it at the pinnacle of world literature. He called this hypothetical work “The Great American Novel,” a term that has persisted doggedly ever since, producing expectations that a single novel might one day incorporate the diverse perspectives of the United States in a grand explanatory narrative. “This task of painting the American soul within the framework of a novel has seldom been attempted,” De Forest admitted, then proffered his own nomination for the honor: “The nearest approach to the desired phenomenon is *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.”

De Forest was not alone in this assessment. William Dean Howells, chief theorist of American realism and longtime editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s New Monthly*, described Stowe’s novel in 1895 as “still perhaps our chief fiction.” Charles Dudley Warner, Howells’s colleague and book editor at *Harper’s*, described the novel as “a great work of imaginative fiction.” And, in 1898, the book publisher Appleton appraised the novel’s worth by including it in its series of “The World’s Great Books.”

In “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” and *the Reading Revolution*, Barbara Hochman examines the reception of Stowe’s remarkable novel during the second half of

the nineteenth century, revealing how its meanings changed for U.S. culture as the abolition movement and the Civil War became memories. Along the way, she describes how reading practices shifted during this period, asserting that the scenes of literacy in the novel ultimately made De Forest's call for a Great American Novel possible in the first place.

Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life Among the Lowly was unprecedented as a reading and publishing phenomenon. "From the beginning," Hochman tells us, "Stowe's narrative belonged to a category of its own." Harriet Beecher Stowe was nearly forty years old when she decided to write "three or four" installments about slave life for the abolitionist paper *The National Era*, which began publishing them in 1851. Soon after embarking on this modest exercise, the narrative exploded: Characters took on a life of their own, incident and detail emerged faster than she could write them, plot and narrative blossomed with almost uncontrollable vitality. The book became a sensation, even before she finished it. Stowe wrote forty-one installments that were placed between hard covers the next year, and the work became the second best-selling book in America during the nineteenth century (only the Bible sold more copies). In a statement nearly as famous as the one Lincoln is supposed to have made about the novel—that it started the Civil War—Stowe claimed providential inspiration as the source of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "I did not write it. God wrote it. I merely did His dictation."

Readers throughout the nation, north and south, found themselves engrossed in the book in ways they had never before experienced. Charles William Holbrook, a young tutor in North Carolina, described his reading experience after a visitor brought him a copy, confessing in his journal that "the tears rushed into my eyes" when Little Eva died. "I believe it to be the most interesting book I ever read." Other responses suggest the extent to which antebellum Americans felt guilty about the grip the book exerted on their imaginations. "I have indulged myself," wrote one reader. "I was bound down captive," admitted another. Mary Pierce Poor of Massachusetts feared the novel's unsettling attributes so much that she wrote home "to advise Elizabeth not to attempt [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*]. I am afraid it would kill her. I never read anything so affecting in my life."

If readers felt ashamed of losing themselves so completely in Stowe's tale, it was partly because of the low status of fiction in a bustling young nation more concerned with success and salvation than with artistic accomplishment. As Hochman points out, antebellum readers were deeply anxious about the capacity of narrative prose to absorb readers in flights of fancy and to distract them from domestic chores as well as more uplifting and moral sermons,

tracts, and educative works. It was this anxiety that led Stowe's contemporary, Nathaniel Hawthorne, to imagine his Puritan ancestors' dismissive appraisal of his occupation as a novelist: "A writer of story-books!" he wrote in the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850. "What kind of business in life,— what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!"

Yet it was the uncanny ability of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to ensnare readers in the concerns of its characters that made Stowe's book so powerfully popular. Southern editors decried the novel as "unscrupulous" because it enlisted sympathies on behalf of slaves through imaginative identification—an unfair tactic, it seemed to them, in the polemical war over abolition. For Hochman, one of Stowe's greatest accomplishments was to collapse the distance between readers and slave characters, to encourage empathetic rapport with African Americans in ways seldom before attempted in fiction. From the comfort of their rocking chairs, antebellum readers imaginatively crossed the icy Ohio River with Eliza; they fumed with indignant outrage at Simon Legree's cruelty to his slaves; and their hearts melted at scenes of Eva and Tom discussing passages from the Bible.

It is this last episode that Hochman considers especially important. By staging black characters in the intimate act of reading the Bible, Stowe accomplished something like a minor social revolution. Slave literacy, she implicitly argued, led to pious, ethical beings, not rebellion or escape. More important, Stowe accorded rich interior lives to blacks at a time when many Americans considered slaves little more than beasts of burden. Tom's painstaking reading and his loving familiarity with the Bible not only suggested that slaves would embrace religious sentiment if allowed to read, it also portrayed a complex and vivid inner world, a vibrant emotional life, that resembled that of the readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When Tom and Eva read Scripture together, the distance between white and black, slave and master, is obliterated by the shared act of reading.

Before and after the Civil War, the novel became something of a franchise, appearing in countless permutations and cultural formats, often wrenching characters and episodes from their original context. There were children's books, dolls, and advertisements linked to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as well as countless theatrical and minstrel show versions of the novel. But the scenes of reading so important to antebellum audiences began to disappear. After the Civil War, Hochman writes, "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a different book," its fiery narrative drained of abolitionism, its sentimental piety viewed as

outmoded and defunct within a rapidly industrializing America. As the high hopes of Reconstruction faded—replaced by Jim Crow laws and increasing oppression of blacks in the South—the novel was read increasingly as a nostalgic glimpse at a benign form of slavery. Seen as a historical document that had contributed to the escalating tensions that triggered an internecine war, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the same time was read by postbellum white audiences as a romantic portrait of Southern life in a simpler time. One of the great tragedies surrounding the book's reception is that white readers gradually ceased to identify with Eliza, Tom, George, and Topsy, and instead looked at these characters (Tom especially) as models of docility, loyalty, and patient subservience. Illustrations in later editions of the novel removed scenes of reading and replaced them with images emphasizing the separation of the races. Wholly absent in these depictions was the inner life and initiative of Stowe's slave characters.

By the turn of the century, Stowe's novel was more cultural shorthand than a book to actually be read—at least by white Americans. Black readers saw more in the book than a comforting tale about black docility in a romanticized Southern location that might serve as a precursor to *Gone with the Wind*. For instance, in James Weldon Johnson's fictional *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, published in 1912, the biracial narrator confesses that Stowe's book "opened my eyes as to who and what I was and what my country considered me." Readers familiar with James Baldwin's famous screed against the novel, "Everybody's Protest Novel," published in *Partisan Review* in 1949, will be surprised to learn that as a child he compulsively read and reread the book. Baldwin's essay captured black resentment toward a novel that had become synonymous with passive compliance, but his youthful reading experience suggests the degree to which, in Hochman's words, "many black readers were powerfully drawn to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the first half of the twentieth century." At the height of segregation, the novel helped provide a literary and social history for still recent slave past, enduring as a touchstone reading experience for African Americans well into the twentieth century.

One place the novel did not endure was the academy. For much of the twentieth century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was seen by most literary professionals as a cultural embarrassment. Not surprisingly, as the canon of American literature took shape between the Jazz Age and World War II, Stowe's book was relegated to obscurity. Emphasizing literature that featured the self-reliant individual in revolt against a restrictive society as well as writing that displayed its refined technique, American critics had little use for a book made odious by

ersatz emotion and antiquated piety. “For the literary critic,” wrote J. W. Ward, “the problem [with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*] is how a book so seemingly artless, so lacking in literary talent, was not only an immediate success but has endured” among common readers.

This attitude would not begin to change until the 1980s, when feminist critics recuperated overlooked masterpieces of sentimental fiction to discover an alternative tradition to the male-dominated “American Renaissance.” Discerning in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* a powerful appeal to the emotions that encouraged social change, critics such as Jane Tompkins argued for the centrality of Stowe’s novel in American literary history, insisting that contemporary readers take seriously the effects *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had on millions of readers. Appearing as a regular staple in survey courses, the novel is now read by more Americans than at any time in the past hundred years or so.

Ultimately, Stowe’s novel remains elusive, uncategorizable. Not entirely representative of any particular mode or genre, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was that rarest of literary phenomena: a cultural sensation. Striking a responsive chord in innumerable readers at a flashpoint in history, the novel’s career in the social realm was as unpredictable as it was profound. If Stowe’s remarkable book set unrealistic expectations for subsequent generations about the extent to which fiction might effect social change, it also illustrated the latent, marvelous power of the novel.

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