

This document is a transcript of the library podcast consisting of interview with James Ruwaldt, Senior Technical Services Librarian with the GTCC library, and Amanda Fields, Director of the GTCC Faculty-in-Training Program.

The first interview is a discussion of one of the library's new books, The Dream of the Great American Novel by Laurence Buell, a book held in electronic format by the GTCC libraries. Buell is a professor of American literature at Harvard University.

This book is an in-depth discussion of what exactly constitutes a "great American novel", and some titles that might be considered great American novels.

The idea of the great American novel is a concept that came into being after the United States Civil War, although some of the novels regarded as great American novels were written in the pre-Civil War period. Some titles suggested are The Scarlet Letter, Moby Dick, and Uncle Tom's Cabin. Many of the titles that this book examines are actually from the modern period such as The Great Gatsby, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Eva's Lament, Beloved, and The Grapes of Wrath.

There is not really a single example of what is the great American novel; The Dream of the Great American Novel is more about describing the characteristics of a great American novel.

Some of the criteria for a novel to be a great American novel:

It must be long.

The central character or characters should reflect the American personality.

The book should be about American history and culture, but not propagandistic.

The conclusion is that it is really not possible to declare an authoritative set of guidelines for what makes the great American novel; in the end what it comes down to is individual preference about what makes a novel great, American or otherwise.

The second interview is with Ms. Amanda Fields, where she shares her thoughts about what makes a great American novel.

The great American novel is some ways the Holy Grail of all Americans who aspire to write fiction, lay people or academics. Many of the novels proposed to be the great American novel are written by lay people who aspire to be professional writers, often "average Americans."

One thing that prevents the completion of the great American novel, or any piece of writing for that matter, is the act of writing itself.

Academics may strive to produce a novel, but the most successful writers are not academics. Most of those who produce candidates for the great American novel are not academics.

Some criteria for the great American novel.

Well written.

Emphasize people, places, and culture of the United States.

Captures a moment in the country's history.

Realistic fiction tends to be the type of fiction that is regarded as great American novels.

Good examples that meet these criteria include *The Great Gatsby*, *Moby Dick*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

All of these novels capture the essence of their time and locale.

Sometimes some time must pass before the importance for a book to be realized. Neither *Moby Dick* nor *The Great Gatsby* were well received upon their initial release.

What is the great American novel? For Ms. Fields one distinguishing feature is that the novel has a message. Teaching what the great American novel is is a different thing from what the individual reader experiences as great American novel.

Many of the great American novels have been actually been banned at some point. Whatever the message of the novel it was recognized by someone in a place of power as having an impact, social, religious, or political.

One candidate would be *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, of which Ernest Hemingway said that all American literature since has been derive from *Huckleberry Finn*. This book was banned not long after its initial publication for, among other reasons, the way the characters spoke in the daily English of the time.

Another is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book that President Lincoln credited with starting the Civil War. It was translated in many languages and was banned in some Southern states. Although it is not a very well written novel from a technical writing perspective, and is unabashedly sentimental, the impact made by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* puts it up there among the great American novels.

The great American novel remains a dream, a vision. Many great American novels have been created; future ones undoubtedly exists somewhere out there in the imagination of someone struggling to capture a portrait of the times in which we live.