



# Argall: The True Story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith

*William T. Vollmann*

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**Argall: The True Story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith** William T. Vollmann

**From the National Book Award-winning author of *Europe Central* - a hugely original fictional history of Pocahontas, John Smith, and the Jamestown colony in Virginia**

**Watch for Vollmann's new work of nonfiction, *No Immediate Danger*, coming in April of 2018**

In *Argall*, the third novel in his Seven Dreams series, William T. Vollmann alternates between extravagant Elizabethan language and gritty realism in an attempt to dig beneath the legend surrounding Pocahontas, John Smith, and the founding of the Jamestown colony in Virginia—as well as the betrayals, disappointments, and atrocities behind it. With the same panoramic vision, mythic sensibility, and stylistic daring that he brought to the previous novels in the Seven Dreams series—hailed upon its inception as "the most important literary project of the '90s" (*The Washington Post*)—Vollmann continues his hugely original fictional history of the clash of Native Americans and Europeans in the New World. In reconstructing America's past as tragedy, nightmare, and bloody spectacle, Vollmann does nothing less than reinvent the American novel.

## Argall: The True Story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith Details

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**William T. Vollmann**

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# From Reader Review Argall: The True Story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith for online ebook

## Sean says

What a sad story. Vollmann goes deep into the world and the heads of John Smith, Pocahontas, and many others, writing in some crazy sort-of Elizabethan English he came up with. It is something else, this book. It is certainly not romantic. How could it be? Smith was an opportunistic liar, and by today's standards genocidal. At the time, he was one of many who rightly figured that killing the so-called savages was the best way to keep them at bay. And Pocahontas. Her people routinely slaughtered, and she eventually kidnapped, married off to an Englishman, and taken to England, where she died. Of course the histories were written by the English, who counted her lucky indeed, to be cured of her savage ways and turned into a Christian. Sad, sad, and more sad.

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## Sosen says

It's not surprising that *Argall* is one of William T. Vollmann's most neglected books. The fact that it was my second Vollmann read was a complete fluke, really. After devouring *The Rifles*, I went to Hastings looking for more Vollmann. By all that is proper in this world, I should not have found anything by Vollmann in that store, except perhaps an overstock copy of *Europe Central*. Instead, I found a hardcover first edition of *Argall*. I picked it up without a second thought - not realizing that in countless trips to the V's in countless bookstores, this was the last time I would lay eyes on a copy of *Argall*.

If I'd ventured further into the Vollmann oeuvre, I probably would have neglected *Argall* as so many others have. It's ONE thing to write a book in old-timey English, what so it's hard to read. But to stretch it out to 700-something pages takes a certain self-destructiveness, as if to say to the public, "Only read this book if you want a challenge on top of a challenge." On top of that, it's a story that everybody thinks they know already: John Smith and Pocahontas. It's an interracial love story, with lots of waterfalls in it and stuff, and it probably has a happy ending, since Disney made a cartoon about it. No need to read a book version of a Disney movie, right?

That's how I picture people picturing *Argall* - and possibly even how I picture *me* picturing it if I hadn't read it. Lucky for you that I read the book, so I can tell you how **right** you are to picture it that way!

If this is a book version of a Disney movie, then it's written and narrated by Mufasa, during the years that Simba is away. Naturally, his tale is one of a just and glorious subjugation. But wait, it's also a love story! Perhaps it's Cinderella. (That makes sense; the heroine's relatives are all ingrates.) Or maybe it's Beauty and the Beast, where the heroic Gaston dies trying to save Belle from the jaws of evil. Either way, it ends with Snow White waking up and finding her prince. Never mind that she didn't choose him. Now she wakes up screaming from nightmares in which her new husband kills the Seven Dwarfs. (He didn't, of course; and why should he care who did?)

Now obviously, since this is a book and not another cartoon, Vollmann had to cut out a lot of the songs from "Pocahontas". Still, his descriptions of the Indians' pathetic corruptness is more affirming than Wagner was for Hitler. I suspect those descriptions are meant to be sarcastic; but maybe that's why he's called "William the Blind"!

In all seriousness, if you're on the fence on whether or not to read this, believe me when I tell you that you won't notice the old-timey writing; and rarely (if ever) will you be reminded of a Disney movie. In fact, Terrence Malick's recent riff on Pocahontas, "The New World", looks like Disney material compared to *Argall* - and here I was thinking Malick was so edgy!

If Vollmann could write a book that could commit actual violence, that book wouldn't slap you in the face, or punch you in the stomach. It would starve you, or hang you upside down for weeks. Vollmann can write most beautifully; but if forced to choose, he would much rather write bleakly. He's not a writer who delivers "blows". He's much more talented than that. *Argall* is like a child who's expected to live for hours, but keeps dragging on for days, and then for weeks, never leaving the hospital, sometimes getting better, but only because getting even a *little* bit worse would mean the sweet release of death - and we can't have that!

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## Rock says

One of the most impressive things about the Seven Dreams series is that they are actually fun to read; that is, the imitation of period style doesn't get in the way of the great storytelling. The big problem with the Seven Dreams series is that there is just too much. This is even more of a problem with *Argall* than most as the huge number of pages given to John Smith's back story -- though admittedly likely emphasizing the pathos of his striving in England's strict hierarchy -- weights this book towards the English point of view far more than they deserve. Simple greed motivated the English invasion, and that doesn't take 600 words to explain. The native points of view are far more interesting, and also probably voluminous enough, so with less Smith it would have been a better balanced book, and also just plain better.

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## Alexander Weber says

*Argall*! The third of the seven dreams, and the fourth that I've read. By now I'm fully committed to this series, as every book has been solid, and very different in style. So far *The Rifles* stands as my favourite book of the series, and also my favourite book by Vollmann. It also may just be my most favourite book.

I would rank *Argall* as possibly my least favourite of the four dreams, but note that I still really liked this book. It just so happens that *Fathers & Crows* was incredible, and *The Ice Shirt* was also fantastic. So you know, steep competition.

The first part, and the majority of *Argall*, follows John Smith, often facetiously referred to as Sweet John. The whole tone of this book is sort of facetious, or sarcastic... or something along those lines. This book, more than any of the others, is mostly from the point of view of the Europeans (Sweet John, *Argall*/*Argull*/*Arkill*, John Rolfe, etc.) and as such takes their sides on all matters - but again, this is done in jest.

John wants adventure, and will find it damned, and will possibly lie about it later when he writes of them in his *True Travels*. He reads his Machiavelli in order to guarantee his meeting with Captain Fortune. After a failed romance and then fighting the Turkes and being captured (and another possible failed romance), and a bunch of other happenings, John is off to Virginia! Remember Roanoke.

John is captured and almost killed, but the great Powhatan's daughter Amonute/Pocahontus/(and later) Rebecca saves him - and as imagined in this dream - because she finds him curious and wants him as a

play-thing (but not in a creepy way...)

The colonists are awful at feeding themselves, so they go about getting the Indians to feed them... which understandably grows sour over time.

Eventually John is out of the story as he has an accident with some gun powder and is sent to England.

Our titular character Argall arrives (or did he arrive earlier?) Argall is given an almost mystical persona in this book...and I don't really understand why... but it was fun, so who am I to question? Argall is essentially a dastardly pirate, and eventually kidnaps Pocahontas in order to get the Indians to be obedient to the colonists. I really enjoyed this part of the book, about Pocahontas and the Reverend and John Rolfe. It's sad, obviously. Pocahontas becomes Rebecca and marries Rolfe.

Eventually Argall, Rebecca and Rolfe travel to England, and Rebecca and John have a last meeting, and then Rebecca dies.

Then some further history of Virginia (which was quite good) and so ends the tale.

Was all of that spoiler? Can we have spoilers in historical fiction?

The old-english style that this book was written in was annoying for possibly the first 100 pages, and then my brain just gave over and I didn't even notice it. It helps, I think, in reminding us that, having taken the colonists point of view for the majority of this book, he isn't being sincere when he feels sorry for the starving incompetant Europeans, or when he hails their victories against the Salvages.

Some highlights are: almost any of the many massacres - from both sides - that take place; Powhatan's memories of Amonute when she was a child; every section that Pocahontis is in...; and William the Blinds blind devotion to Captain Argall.

I wish this book had more of Vollmann's incredible prose on the natural landscape or people's thoughts... This book was a lot of "this happened, then this happened", instead of ruminating on it all with dense beautiful lyrical prose, as he does a lot more in *The Ice Shirt* and *The Rifles*.

I also wish this book had more of Vollmann's interruptions from the present to give his 5 cents. I love those 5 cents...

Anyways, great book from a great series. I still can't believe these have been written, and are still being written and published. What an undertaking.

Start from the very beginning, and read in order of publication, is my suggestion if you are wanting to dig in.

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## **Geoff says**

*"In this vain world all must sooner or later sink to ooze, laugh'd Argoll. Pride's the merest weed, like love; Mufkaiuh's a weed; all weeds do wilt, but ne'er mind; upon the slime new weeds will grow."*

## **Come back, come back**

We all know this story, so why tell it again? Happy histories haunt hollow heads. The Disney corporation's

33rd animated movie employs lush swaths of color. Pokahuntiss's complexion is not pockmarked. She is lithe and curvy and one imagines the animators masturbating while dwelling on their creation. Hairless brown thighs curve into hourglass hips. The breasts are large and perky and prominent under a deerskin mantle that is silk-thin and smooth. She radiates health and well-fed youthful vigor. Her hair falls gracefully like the most gentle fleuve; it looks freshly shampooed. At Walt Disney Parks and Resorts the world over a corporeal, three-dimensional Pocahontas makes frequent appearances. Sometimes she is involved in a play within those play-parks called "Pocahontas and her Forest Friends". I believe a raccoon and a bulldog (a gift from John Smith?) are involved. It is very expensive for a family to spend a weekend at Disney World. Some families scrap and save for years to satisfy this dream. It is logical to assume that the woman who interprets Pocahontas in these diverse and worldwide theme parks cannot invariably be of Native American heritage. Someone at sometime is inevitably putting on a minstrel show. The Pocahontas player is no doubt only one of us wage-slave debtors, working through school or to pay down a loan, striving to make rent or feed a screaming brat. A great portion of what become our incarnations are determined for us, not by us- so let's not blame the player. The ooze is indifferent to individuals.

*Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World* is a 1998 sequel to the 1995 original. It went straight to video. Captain John Smith's animated incarnation is voiced by Donal Gibson, the younger brother of Mel Gibson, a famously violent misogynist and anti-semitic. Walt Disney was also famously anti-semitic. (These are lovely historical coincidences). This millennial re-imagining concerns Pocahontas's life and adventures in London-Towne, her marriage to John Rolfe, and her eventual reuniting with John Smith. In this version, John Smith saves Pocahontas from being beheaded (an inversion of the classic Smith/Pocahontas myth). Apparently if Pocahontas can prove to King James that she has been "civilized", he will stay his hand and not send an armada to further loot Virginia (I know, I know, preposterous), but she ends up insulting the King (something about torturing bears?) and is sentenced to death. John Smith conceals his identity and along with her husband John Rolfe commence to break her out of the King's prison. She symbolically washes away the white powder the English have forced her to lighten her face with, and then "Pocahontas, Uttamatomakkin, Smith, and Rolfe then set out to stop the Armada. After they knock most of the sailors overboard and cause the ships to crash together, Smith bests Ratcliffe in a swordfight. Ratcliffe pulls out a pistol, but Rolfe and Pocahontas stop him."\* This is, needless to say, a highly specious recounting of our heroine's time in England. These are the years of the Sedgeford portrait in which our princess appears mute, pale, puffy, stooped, forcing a blood-red half-smile, her arm strangely limp around her half-English child, a string of pearls dangling noose-like around her neck. A great contrast to Disney's lustier interpretation.

### **Butter & eggs, butter & eggs**

We tell the story again so that Disney does not control the narrative, so that the conquerors don't control the narrative, so that corporations and governments and money men and authoritarian systems don't control the narrative. We tell the story again to even out the balance, to set things in reverse, to have our revenge, to take the deserving down a peg, to level, to raze, to counterattack a history of lies. (Though ironically this is done most effectively by employing further *fictions*.) That John Smith was "an ambitious yeoman whose dreams came to nothing"; that he studied and practiced and employed the lessons of Good Prince Machiavelli in pursuit of worldly riches, power, and status (but yet was also motivated by something more mysterious and ineffable...); that his *Trve Travells* and his *Generall Historie of Virginia...* were packs of lies that glossed over, embellished, contradicted, conflated; that he used and exploited his relationship with Pocahontas to further his place in the world and attain AMBITIONS; that he was a murderer and a malcontent, a manipulator and a butcher- that is, an all around typical Goode English Adventurer! And what of our dear titular Captaine Argall? *That euerworthy gentlemen!* That malignant spirit of power haunting the first half of the novel, he who is everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing, whose eyes are "holocausts of starres", who disappears belowdecks into insubstantial darknesses and then is sensed twinkling in the vast

empty regions between Betelgeuse, Rigel, and Bellatrix (their cold reflections shimmering on the black ocean); he who would boil men alive in lead and hack children's hands off; He Who Brings Peace to *Virginia* By Terror And An Act of Kidnapping...

~

...and I've not even mentioned our good Lord De La Warre! Or Ratcliffe. Or gentle Percy, who takes time during a slaughter to contemplate the shadows of mulberry bushes...

~

As *Machiavell* does whisper into Sweet John's dreams, so Arkill's singing breath fills the sails that speed our novel along.

~

Some relevant selections culled from William the Blind's Glossary of Terms (let's call this The Vocabulary of the Conquerors):

**Bing to Romeville-** We go to London

**Chamber-lees-** urine

**Cly the jerk-** To get whipped

**Cockatrice/Punk/Trull/Wenchen-** Colloquialisms for "prostitute"

**To catch Gawp-seed-** To gape one's mouth

**Morion-** A soldier's helmet

**Niggle-** To copulate

**Pilliewinks-** Thumbscrews

**Secret-** The female pudenda

**Zurna-** A kind of trumpet *Trarintra-rarara!*

~

...all men wishing to ply their bets and gambles with *Captaine Fortune* eventually find themselves holing up in **Gravesend**, where masts creek like rotten tree-crosses on the creeping waters, and the wind bites at your skin as it blows violently off the Thames and down the narrow lanes creakily whispering "*come back, come back*" (a distant voice riding the tail-end of this wind can be heard humming "Red at night Sailor's delight Red in the morning Sailors take warning") and we, all of us, wait our turns dockside to be carried off and churned down into that muck and black mud and ever rising, eternal **Ooze** ... ambitious young yeomen like Sweet John Smith most especially...

### **Pen & ink, pen & ink**

The years encapsulating the greater part of the events in this novel overlap nicely with the career of a certain William Shakespeare, and many of the chapters' epigraphs are taken from a variety of the Bard's plays. In addition, Captaine Argall's crewmen all sport Romanized names, many of them recognizable from that author's famous portrayal of *politickal* intrigue and assassination *Julius Caesar* (Brutus, Cassius, Casca, Octavius, etc.). Much of *Argall* is written in a mock Elizabethan English prose (as followers of my status updates might attest to). In addition to the fact that London was colloquially called "Romeville" during this time, drawing the line between Elizabeth's England and Caesar's Rome is a neat little illustration of the

equivalence of empires and their abuses, and a brilliant and complex stylistic undertaking for Vollmann to immerse the novel in and employ the language of the empire as a means of subverting historical narratives (while also paying homage to the foremost poet of the tongue). (But then again, how else could a writer hope to attack power structures except through language?) This particular Vollmannesque question of "the voice of the book" is most pronounced in *Argall*. The voices of each section, each set-piece, shift in accordance to the subject. All sections dealing with the English colonists and Sweet John are rendered in that farcical Elizabethan English, which ends up making an especially beautiful and strange *Musick* of itself. The sections dealing with Native Americans switch to a more straightforward narrative voice, one still influenced by the rhythms and characteristics of the speech of the time, but certainly less ironic, less satiric- more sparse, more "objective". Then there are moments of time travel where something approaching a neutral voice emerges, and we find ourselves gazing with Bill the Blind at roadside ads for fast food and cheap motels in the good ol' modern Mid-Atlantic US of A. The point is, each voice is a result of *listening*, listening and imitating, like the Sybils and orators of old, listening to the voices that emerge when we press our ears to the past, listening to what the Dead are reciting when we cock our heads and listen ever more closely to those songs trailing off on the edge of the winds of Time...

So what do we have here? We have the mingling, the overlapping of historic voices, a Dream of history retold as bloody nightmare from which we can never wake; we have William the Blind, resurrector of corpses and playwright, director, curtain-raiser on the phantasmic stage; we have the deity, the Devil of the Waters and Starres Captaine Arkill; we have The Great Comforting Myth, Princess Pocahontas (whose popular retellings tell us we are clean, free of the muck, painted powder white and satiated on dainties, dressed up like a civilian, in love and progressive in our blindness, untouched by our foundations, above and beyond the atrocities we made our wealth with); and we have The Ooze, the final **Gravesend** of all our ambitions, each and every one of our longings, the end point of every venture & undertaking we ever depart on, our final port and place of disembarkation, our last bawdy-house, where we slurp down ale and tell rounds of ribald jokes about our Adventures with the worms and the grubs and the serpents and the mouldering, cackling skeletons.

\*All descriptions of the Disney animated retellings of the legend of Pocahontas are culled from Wikipedia. I am simply too weary and cynical to sit through the films. Thus don't trust my interpretation of them, as it is a blind one..

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**To The Right Honourable** (good)Reader(s):

I, *King Geoffrey Bloody-Axe* , do announce my embarkation into the **.3rd.** of these Seven Dreams, *The Argall-Text*;  
being, a return voyage 'cross the Great Ocean,  
-as choppy as a longitude of tildes-

(~~~~~)



to Vineland the Good!

and the founding of *Virginia*-

(this greene Earth's embodiment of our Sovereign Queen Elizabeth's **intact maidenhead**)

accompanied by:

*Captaine Titular*

*Sweet John Smith*

*Princesse Pocafreydis*

the story-weaver *William the Blind*

and, sovereign to all Sovereigns, *Captaine Fortune* himself!

amongst sundry others...

bearing in the hulls of our vessels Cheap Cigarettes, Muskets, Puccoons, Fine English Lennons, Wench-Paint, Shillings 'pon Shillings, COCKboats & Ketches, Lost Kingdoms, Brandy & Mead, and sufficient barrel-fulls of PLAGUE-

to trade with and make war on this nation of **Salvages** (much engaged in their heathen Dance of the Naked Privities oh my!)

....so let's hoist a-mast and our sails will drink their full of Winds, as we set forth from

**Gravesend**, the beyond

*(from which men return salt-encrusted and tanned by time, stripped of flesh and skeleton-pure)*

My ignorance shall be my compass! May the **Redeemer** allow safe crossing, and let the covers of the book lie open in my hands comfortably, like a freshly harvested scalp!

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## Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

**Opechancanough** [*Powhatan*] "He Whose Soul Is White." "This kind King." -- John Smith, who was his captive and who later humiliated him by extorting corn from him at gunpoint. Half-brother to **Powhatan**, Werowance of Pamunkey, and in time Powhatan's successor. This cunning, dissembling enemy of the English orchestrated two massacres of the colonists, the first in 1622, the second in 1644, after which he was captured and murdered in an English prison. **Had the Indians won, he would be remembered today as a freedom fighter.** [Also: "Apachankano," "Ophechankanough."]\*

Today we are not descendents of Opechancanough, but of e'erworthy Argall. Argall tarry-fies no more in Virginia, all Virginians having sunk deep into the ooze we call history and its forgetting, but in other lands such like Afghanistan and Iraq and soon Syria, to mention only a small portion of Argall's Undertakings during my short life-time.

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This Review is a **STRIKE** ;; with foolish audacity, I dedicate it to Opechancanough and ALL of Opechancanough's children throughout our world.

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from, **The Grammar of Wives, .2.nd Part (1615-1616)** :

See (from behind the window of an ornate frame whose metal is the deadened gold of autumn leaves) the darling *Pocahontas*. She sits looking out at us with a gaze of barely lowered mildness, while her little boy in his white ruffled shirt offers the same gaze, altho' barely upraised as he shelters between her arm & breast, holding her delicate hand in both of his. She does not draw him in to her because that would have spoiled the geometry of portrait, the .2. calmly lost faces arrayed side by side.

All agreed the child was handsome. (For yes, just as in Lincoln-Towne the Baker must prick his mark into the bread he's made, for the sake of accomptability, so Maister Rolfe found it most convenient to inscribe in his new wife that holy signature call'd *Progeny*.) By the time the portrait was painted (if indeed 'twas ever painted from life, which I misdoubt), the mother was finishing her life. GOD forbid we feel sorrow; she'd attain'd to the true knowledge of CHRIST! Her maidenhead had been shar'd to its uttermost. *Behold, thou art fair, my beloved* (saith the Scriptures), yea, pleasant; *also our bed is green*. Aye, dearling, a green grave shall be thy bed. Never mind; e'en Argoll shall also become dust.

Her dark hair cuts across her forehead in .2. widening diagonals before it falls behind her shoulders; beneath her Indian cheekbones her face narrows again, so that it seems she has a diamond face, in which her eyes are so meek and brown as to cut me to the heart (the boy's eyes, however, are brightly black). Beneath those shadowed eyes, her rather homely nose is similarly cut by shadow; her mouth smiles a little, but the longer I look at her portrait the sadder I conceive her to be, unless it's simply that (as would be logical) her illness already shows in her face as in the darkness around it, on it and in the heavy shadows round her neck, that Englishwoman's neck from which hangs the pearl necklace which her father apocryphally sent her at her .2.nd marriage, its white gleam matched forlornly by the glisterings of her earrings; then the widening angle of her shoulders and the narrowing cut of her pale red dress forms another diamond -- because she's all diamond, the *Nonpareil of Virginia*, come to stay for a pawn!

Fraudulent simulacrum she may be (like unto that Caucasian angel of her Church-yard monument). No matter. She's tamed as is her original! She stares out, sick, gentle and queenly, & her son stares out with the guarded regality of children, & they wait, both of them, to offer themselves. Just as a dog when devouring some trifle leaves a puddle of spittle behind, so the fever which gobbled her life left an oozy puddle of sweat for her to lie cold in. But, after all, as she remarked to her husband from her deathbed: 'Tis enough that the child liveth. [p525f]

Turn we thus to the corresponding endnote :: "page 525 Description of Pocahontas and her son -- After the Sedgeford Hall portrait (1615). Many biographers believe it to represent Pocahontas. Barbour writes: '...I was able to inspect the painting and to convince myself that it has nothing to do with Pocahontas. Dr. Sturtevant believes that it may represent an 18th -century Iroquois mother and child...' *Pocahontas and Her World*, p.235."

Just as Vollmann pulls out a fiction of his own from the, if not fictional itself, at least ideological, triple volumes of the *Complete Works of John Smith*, among other moldy books subsisting from centuries past -- the writing of history is the privilege of the victors -- so too see him paint word pictures of Pocahontas and her **TRUE STORY** from the fiction of a painting not painted of her own likeness. Below the lines and between them speak those voices which have never spoken by their own power ; having nothing but ooze trap'd in their throats for centuries ; and animated ooze contorting them into vicious fantasies of those like Argull, by whom we are surround'd still unto our own day.

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Listen to William the Blind summarize his Dream *Argall* for us :: "page 322 Smith's decision to raid the Indians to save the colony from starving --The ethical error made by the English, in my opinion, was their assumption that they were justified in defending territory which did not in fact belong to them. For general discussion of this all too common abuse, see the chapter 'Defense of Ground' of my unpublished monograph *Rising Up and Rising Down*."

And listen to how William the Blind reads history books :: "**Pocahontas** [American] Grace Steele Woodward's biography, published in 1969. This pleasantly written, painstakingly researched monograph, which was published by a reputable academic press, is as fascinating as any official product of Stalinist hagiography. Woodward has Pocahontas and John Smith becoming friends on the very first summer of his arrival (no primary source mentions her before the famous rescue of the at winter). The atrocities committed by the English are either not mentioned or else toned down. The fact that Pocahontas was already married before she was kidnapped and married John Rolfe also gets avoided. The net result is that the tale of Pocahontas becomes more passionate, more romantic, and above all less disturbing to the descendants of the English conquerors. There are dozens of books in the same vein, especially those written for children."

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See me, No Reviews, read reviews before reading *Argall: The True Story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith* ::

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The NYT Book Review ;; a hatchet job, but endorsed naturally by William the Blind in his review found following :: 'Argall' Reviewed by Jay Parini: September 30, 2001 ;; <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/30/boo...>

"Doubtless Vollmann has some postmodern idea about history that he hopes to convey." -- Parini

You will forgive me for pointing out that Parini shows his hand with his use of the abuse word "postmodern." What *in fact* is going on is Parini's own hang ups about something he's decided to call "postmodern" finding any given outlet into which to insert himself, whether it is illuminating or no; have weapon, must find target. He has decided that Vollmann must be doing something "postmodern." And for that he ought to be chastised. This is pure projection on Parini's part. It is Parini's own know-betterism which makes *him*, not Vollmann, the "postmodern" offender. His sly ironic wit about knowing about all those cute little "postmodern" tricks Bill is up to, ETC :: Parini ought to publish on goodreads. Although, in truth, his kind of childish (mock) ironic(satiric/witty/straight=from=SNL) voice is found daily in the stuff linked through aldaily.com. [thnks to Friend Steve for the notice about the NYT review]

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[now with restored text]

The Stench of Corpses: *Argall*, a novel by William T. Vollmann, reviewed by William the Blind. The LA Times Oct 07, 2001.

<http://articles.latimes.com/2001/oct/...>

"A hundred years after William T. Vollmann was killed in a gun cleaning accident, I, William the Blind, received a commission to review the long novel *Argall*, which marks the midpoint of his uncompleted *Seven Dreams* series. According to Dombey's 'Easily Digested Biographies of Minor Authors,' which I just happen to have right here inside my reading pod, it was always Vollmann's hope that the *Seven Dreams*, which were second in ambition only to his still-unpublished essay on violence, *Rising Up and Rising Down*, would 'somehow, uh, mean something to people a hundred years from now.'

"This desire is best understood as a form of wish compensation. Vollmann lived what can only be called a pathetic life. Isolated within and stubbornly estranged from millennial American society, he consoled himself with a sophomorically romantic belief that art, if protected in time capsules, can outlast Dark Ages. Let's temporarily ignore the fact that Vollmann's so-called art was never worth preserving, being infested by individualism, moral relativism and sexual depravity. More to the point, since stars, elephants and gods suffer death, how could even the greatest art be 'immortal'? As we all know, the Liu-Mallinger Act of 2027, which made cranial stimulation devices compulsory for all inhabitants of the Global Trans-Industrial Zone, reduced the printed word to irrelevancy at last."

.....

And the final portion with text restored (**in bold**) which the LA Times editors thoughtfully excised for its anti-Americanisms and thereby protected its reading public from the indignity of thinking about the nature of US foreign policy:

"Vollmann wants us to regret the inevitable, to privilege the melancholy of the few over the honest subsistence of the many, to slur just conquest--and he goes about it insidiously, never coming right out to say that it was wrong for the English to dispossess the indigenous inhabitants of that spot in retaliation for their terrorism against Jamestown--good God! **If that was wrong, what would Vollmann have said about our obliteration of Iraq in 2003, or the absolutely essential police measures taken in Palestine in 2004?** Not to put too fine a point on it, Vollmann's book doesn't just stink (I think it's the stench of corpses), it's positively un-American." --restored text provide my McCafferty and Hemmingson in *Expelled from Eden: A William T. Vollmann Reader*.

\* From "Glossary of Personal Names", p688. Bolding of final sentence by me.

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## Brent Hayward says

80%, on the Vollmann scale anyhow, which is like ten times the rating scale of mortal books. William the Blind wrote this massive novel in old English, probably to challenge himself or stave off boredom, and that decision made me struggle and need to remain alert at all times, so one star out of five is lost. As grim as its predecessors in *Seven Dreams*, *Argall* follows the establishment of Jamestown, Virginia, by the British, and the shitshow that soon unfolds around it. Every nasty trait of humanity is evident. Certainly no hot Disney princess or romance is in sight. John Smith is an egotistical extortionist, and his presidency is followed by that of even worse monsters. The natives are in turn angered, betrayed, exploited, and slaughtered. This is

another bleak chapter in history and a very believable slice of Vollmann's project to capture the disastrous encounters between indigenous and Christian explorers who wanted, basically, to rule the world.

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## **Benito Jr. says**

Weighing only a little less than his latest book *Imperial*, *Argall* is Vollmann's 746-page retelling of the "true" story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith -- though by "true" Vollmann refers to what he calls a "Symbolic History", and that the facts contained within are "often untrue based on the literal facts as we know them, but whose untruths further a deeper sense of truth." I can't claim to be any good arbiter of the ethics behind this, only to note that it's fiction, after all, and that Smith, as meticulous a chronicler as he was, was guided by ideological and commercial considerations just like anyone.

And indeed, *Argall* is perhaps closer to that "deeper sense of truth" in the sense that it's stubbornly, refreshingly, anti-Romantic. (Smith himself barely mentions that famous incident -- enshrined in elementary schools all across America, at least in the pre-Howard Zinn days -- when Pocahontas supposedly saves Smith from execution, and so Vollmann similarly glosses over it.) One can imagine *Argall* almost as the dark twin of Terrence Malick's film "The New World" (my favorite film of the last decade). Where Malick's vision of America is precisely to embrace the myth and the promise, in all its swooning, idyllic, but haunted, glory, Vollmann's rendition is the opposite, a dense thicket of a nightmare: brutish, ugly, miserable, shit-streaked, and in the end, deeply, quietly, tragic.

And did I write that it's all written in barely penetrable Elizabethan English, complete with variant orthographies, italics and font sizes whirling out of control, florid introductions and epigraphs, and almost a hundred pages of endnotes and glossaries? What at first looks like literary grandstanding gives way to a slow immersion into a Language peppered with unexpected moments of rapture. Paradoxically, the distance created by the prose makes the events even more unbearable. (I do wish we heard more from our good narrator William the Blind, whose rare atemporal interruptions are very welcome, as it shocks the reader momentarily out of the muck and into some sort of self-recognition.)

So read it all, if you can, even the endnotes; if anything, the latter provides a fascinating, if somewhat daunting, glimpse into Vollmann's indefatigable capacity for historical research. I'm happy to wander down any digressive garden path Vollmann wishes to lead me, in any case.

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## **Hadrian says**

Another massive installment of the Seven Dreams series. Anti-romantic. The ornate Elizabethan style reminds one of *Mason and Dixon*, which is also excellent, but wholly different in tone.

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## **Zadignose says**

This is a novel of unrelenting frustration, sadness, bitterness. It also has more than a tinge of naive hope, idealism, and ambition that is unfortunately mired in the all-conquering ooze of history. The setting is what I've decided to term a "far-fetched time" when reality was extremely improbable. We witness the collision of English desperadoes with Virginian tribes, especially the Powhatan and allied tribes, as both sides

demonstrate a great capacity for atrocity, duplicity, and blind idiocy. There are some big characters, each with their own compelling perspective on events. The center of the tale, to a large extent, is John Smith. Amonute/Pocahontas is revealed to us in ways I had not encountered before, but I think that she will always be an enigmatic character of sorts. The truth of her tale is in many ways bizarre, no matter what that truth may be (and much is highly speculative). The title of the book, Argall, is rather arbitrary, but the character of Argall does also loom large... his mystery and frequent absences are also ominous. With the central players being, perhaps, Smith, Pocahontas, and Powhatan, the big spooks on the fringes are Opechancanough and Argall... and of course there are many other "powers that be," including the English royalty and the twinkling-fear.

The conflicting cultures are doomed to some degree by the fact that they can't see through the complex maze of infinite differences AND infinite similarities between their cultures and their standards of behavior.

I think I have a great deal more to think about based on this book, but I'm not sure what else to say at the moment, so I'll terminate now, except to point out that in our current very dark literary age, I was very happy to discover a great work could be written even in the 21st century.

Bye bye.

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## **Doubledf99.99 says**

A much better read the second time around a bittersweet read to be sure, and it's to be read slowly, liked the prose, the atmosphere was streamy and lush, and the a few of many characters involved with the early days of Virginia where diabolical doing anything to gain more land or corn. Native Americans had their chances, and the early Colonists died of disease and lack of food in big numbers, though a river with plenty of fish was close by.

Captain John Smith was a survivor, survived the wars in the Low Countries, captured by Turks, and Indians, knew how to take care of himself and as far as the early planters were concerned should have been a model of hope.

And it's always fun to read through Vollmann's, Glossaries, Time lines, and definitions at the end of the book.

I'll mostly likely be reading this again next year sometime or the year after, it's just one of those books that grow on you.

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## **Jesse K says**

In lieu of reading both side by side, which may have been a worthy venture since they have many parallels, I opted to dabble with the first 60 pages of Imperial (procured a day before release) and then launch back into Argall so as to finish it in order to gain cleanse my queue for the lengthy read to come with Imperial.

Argall is quite a bit better than the other Seven Dreams books published so far. By narrowing his scope to two primary characters, Vollmann managed to broaden the effect of his storytelling. I've always known that the shit that was pulled during the settling of the USA was completely and totally wrong. I went to an alternative school run by washed out hippies who drilled that into our heads by age 6. However, having known that at an earlier age than most, it was always simply fact.

Aside from that thick and most likely fairly accurate Howard Zinn book, it's not a topic that I've opted to delve into during my readings, willing to leave it at "it was fucked, it was wrong." Luckily, being a the type who must compulsively read everything by his favorite authors, I was forced to confront it with the Seven Dreams series. I read the other books 8 years ago, so my memory may be hazy or my perspective may be different, but I don't recall being so affected by them. Reading the book, I wanted nothing more than for the original inhabitants of the continent to have immediately killed anyone who stepped foot on the shores, so word could never have reached back. This wouldn't have mattered because someone would have eventually managed to get here and get word back and, whether delayed 10 or 100 years, Europeans would have done what Europeans (and now Americans) do just as they did. All the same, I found myself wishing for some other outcome.

I used to think my Sociology teacher was a dick when he would argue for giving the entire country back. Being partially (a small part) "Native American" and a larger part poor ass "white folk who came here either really late or as indentured servants," I didn't really get why I should be giving anything to anyone. I mean, would someone take my apartment and give me 1 10th of an acre of farm land, or what exactly?

I still don't feel a sense of responsibility, but I do feel a sense of shame. I feel ashamed of the extent to which we whitewash our past and act as if we're this pure nation while still participating in what are effectively imperial wars. That's not to say that I don't think he was unrealistic (I mean, are there even enough descendants to inhabit the place at this point?), but at the same time and in a contradictory fashion, I feel like something should be done to atone and nothing possibly can.

I'm sure that as I continue to educate myself beyond the bullet point history lessons given in a public education, I will likely come upon a multitude of atrocities beyond the recent obvious ones (holocaust, slavery, etc.), but this one is distinctively ours. It is the very pretense upon which the punchline of our country is founded, and 500 years later, many still act as if finding and founding this country was a great thing. Nearly every country has committed atrocities, but it seems as if most own up to them. In America, we turn it into a Disney movie and make our atrocities into virtues. That is to be expected with recent events. Someone with power, be it dominion or merely the power of speech, will (provided they don't have self-esteem issues) always put themselves in the best light possible. Yet, it seems like most countries take responsibility for their actions. I think we apologized or something at some far later date, but that still doesn't take care of all of the eulogy head and lip on ass service that we still give to tryants.

In other words, the book made me pissed off at, sad about, and in awe of just how fucked the founding of our country was and how fucked the country remains. In other words, it was one hell of a book. At the same time, the element that caused me to shy away from it for 9 years after purchasing the hardcover, the Elizabethan English **of the whole damn book** did, in fact, detract. That's not to say that the conceit wasn't executed brilliantly. It's simply that, for one not used to it, it is very difficult to get into that flow. Consequently, the first 100 or so pages were difficult and not a "natural" read per se. That's my flaw, not the flaw of the book, but I give it 4 stars nevertheless because I rate based upon the effect of the book on me, not the quality of it, if that makes sense. I'd rate many of Vollmann's volumes ahead of Argall (everything aside from the book on Copernicus and the other three Seven Dreams books), yet it's worth reading, especially if you happen to be from England or the US.

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## Jim says

I've read Vol.1 (Ice Shirt) and Vol. 2 (Fathers and Crows). Vollman is so Scary-Brilliant. God help me I feel

myself drawn to the beautiful-brilliant looking, but massive book. The Prose Style looks dense, archaic and beautiful. Although this doesn't look like a fast read, I think I'll be reading this in the next several months. \

Hmmmm....this was written approx 3 1/2 years ago so several "months" didn't happen i guess. I'll get to it.

Once again, this looks both daunting and brilliant so I may read it soon, but then again, see above!

So many books...so little time. (so trite. so true.)

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## **Max says**

Vollmann ends up crafting a narrative just as saccharine and insipid as those he snarkily distances himself from; I'd genuinely argue that you can learn a lot more history from the Disney movie than this \*ROMANNCCE HISTORIKALL\* or whatever. It occasionally redeems itself - and this is why it's superior to Europe Central - in the raaaaaaaare moments when Vollmann just lets himself be silly, e.g. "He saved himself in the West Indies by eating Oranges and Lemonds."

I honestly think the turning point in Vollmann's career as a writer, the fulcrum where he transformed from an outcast deeply enthralled and enamored with the human condition to just another American writer churning out massive books about topics slightly too boring for an episode of *This American Life*, was *Rising Up and Rising Down*. *The Ice-Shirt*, *Fathers and Crows*, and especially *You Bright and Risen Angels* are masterpieces because there's no conception of a moral compass, it's a completely foreign idea, right and wrong don't exist, it's every man (and bug)'s strife against every man. But then he writes 3,000-odd words about when violence is justified and suddenly his narratives are completely inert. They're watered-down versions of textbooks. He anatomizes human behavior instead of just letting it exist, and he doesn't even do a good job of it. What is Argall if not a poorly-realized Disney villain?

Vollmann used to be a storyteller, and he was great. Now he's a moralist and he sucks

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## **David says**

Extreme. & wonderfully written with much wind mostly in the sails & tacking here to there with a master's nautical precision.

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## **Edward says**

*List of Maps*

*Argall-Text: The Generall Historie of Virginia (1624)*

--Argall

*Gravesend (1348-1996)*



*A Chronology of the Third Age of Wineland*  
*Orthographic Note*

*I Glossary of Personal Names*

*II Glossary of Orders, Isms, Nations, Professions, Hierarchies, Races, Shamans, Tribes and Monsters*

*III Glossary of Places*

*IV Glossary of Texts*

*V Glossary of Calendars, Currencies, Legalisms and Measures*

*VI General Glossary*

*Sources (and a Few Notes)*

*Acknowledgements*

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## **Tony says**

This is one sumbitch of a book.

In every sense of what that means. It's longer than its 700 pages. Dense. And written in the vernacular of the time. So it takes both concentration and commitment.

And this is not the Disney version of Pocahontas. No smiling blue birds cavort around her singing face. It's brutal and cynical and ironic. True? Hell, I don't know. The author equivocates in endnotes. But it reads true. And slaps you in the face with that possibility. Mostly it insists that you think.

I wasn't there. My ancestors weren't there. But I am here, in part, because of *Argall*, a person, but also a spirit, a way of doing things. Three questions: a) Does that absolve me? b) Wasn't everyone a 'Salvage' - victim and winners alike? and c) Are there reasonable, let alone legally cognizable, remedies? Legislatively mandated gaming licenses are just so many more blue beads, aren't they? Especially when there's some Argall behind the curtain getting rich.

Maybe the only 'remedy' is literature. This book redeems. It's my first Vollmann and I intend to read the rest of the Seven Dreams series.

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## **Justin Kern says**

Pocahontas historical fiction. a brutally honest-yet-fictional interpretation of the Jamestown / John Smith / Pocahontas / Powhatan story.

The thing I really remember about Argall, above all else, was the helpless frustration of John Smith, who is fated to die poor, unless he finds a ton of gold in a land that, let's face it, just does not have any gold. he knows it, we know it, his patrons and sponsors back in England know it - yet, by god, does he try his best. Not the best person, but he certainly has a long and storied career. His relationship with Pocahontas is interesting, much less romantic than in the popular novelizations of this story - she's just a child, and he needs her to like him so that her grandfather doesn't kill him.

Like much of vollman's work, this doesn't feel like fiction. It's a window into the past. Not an easy read, but it takes you back to a time period and shows you the destruction of a particular group of indians at the hands of colonists. Unforgivingly realistic and cynical, but so meticulously researched and detailed. And of course, Vollmann's ever-present gallows humor.

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### **Jonathan says**

Forgive the lack of review, which is something this novel deserves. Please see the wonderful reviews already up here. I did feel there were some sections where my interest and enthusiasm waned a little, and some sections which felt as though he simply felt the need to re-tell some of the stories he had uncovered in his reading, regardless of their relevance. My least favorite of the three dreams I have read so far, but still an incredible work.

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### **Ohenrypacey says**

Vollmann is a brilliant writer. He has taken a story that is mostly known to us as a feel good fable of settler-native first contact and deftly shown us it's murky underbelly.

Vollmann is also an excellent historian, able to use his source material not only to enlighten the reader in the finer details of the players, but also do it in period language. no small feat.

Argall's one fault is the enormity of the detail Vollman puts on each page, but only in that it's not as delightful a read as it would be if there weren't so much to process.

I began this book back well before the election when the horrors of the way the white settlers eradicated the natives didn't resonate so much with our current times. The chilling realization that we are not so far removed from darker times did not make reading the end of this a pleasure.

Q -- 4

E -- 3

I -- 3

(15)

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