



Novels and Other Writings : The Dream Life of Balso Snell / Miss Lonelyhearts / A Cool Million / The Day of the Locust / Letters

Nathanael West , Sacvan Bercovitch (Editor)

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In this volume the *Library of America* offers the most complete literary portrait ever published of Nathanael West. Along with the four novels for which he is famous, this authoritative collection gathers his work in other genres, including stories, poetry, essays and plays, film scripts and treatments, and letters.

When West died in a California highway accident in 1940 at the age of thirty-seven, his originality and brilliance were little known outside an intensely admiring circle of fellow writers: William Carlos Williams, Edmund Wilson, S. J. Perelman, and others. Not until West's four novels were reissued in the late 1950s was he acknowledged as one of the most gifted writers of his generation. His masterpieces *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*, with their blending of manic farce and despairing compassion, and their vision of an America awash in its own mass-produced fantasies, read like a prophecy of much that was to come in American literature and life.

Each of West's novels is distinct in style and theme. In the Dada-inspired *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), he freely mixes high-flown literary and religious allusions with erotic and scatological humor. *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) presents, in a series of grotesque, starkly etched episodes, the spiritual breakdown of a newspaper columnist overwhelmed by his readers' suffering. By contrast, *A Cool Million* (1934) reduces the eternal optimism of Horatio Alger's novels to a brutal, cartoonish farce. In his last work, *The Day of the Locust* (1939), West renders with hallucinatory precision the reverse side of the Hollywood dream, as he choreographs a cast of failures, has-beens, and deluded glamour-seekers in what becomes an apocalyptic dance of death.

Also included is a generous sampling of West's other surviving work, ranging from freewheeling improvisations and grotesque comic tales to more mainstream work written with Hollywood or Broadway in mind, and including his anti-war satire *Good Hunting* and his adaptation of Francis Ile's famous crime novel *Before the Fact*. The uncollected West shows him as a writer who embodied the contradictions and crazy-quilt exuberance of American culture—and raises the question of how he might have developed had his career not been cut short. Selected correspondence with William Carlos Williams, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Malcolm Cowley, Bennett Cerf, and others rounds out the volume and sets West's literary life in fuller context.

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C B says

What an incredibly eccentric, wonderful literary voice West had. Only not giving it 5 stars because I am too stupid to make it through Balso Snell.

Karen says

I'd never read any Nathanael West (who wrote primarily in the 1930s) so I tried Day of the Locust. Why did I choose that particular novel? Because one of the characters is named Homer Simpson, of course. (In fact, Matt Groening, creator of the TV show The Simpsons, named his cartoon father after the book character. They're both rather dull-witted, but West's Simpson lacks the belligerence, cheating tendencies, fondness of alcohol and humor of his animated namesake.)

The story takes place in Hollywood in the late 1930s and is told from the perspective of Tod, a painter doing film sets. He's infatuated with a 17-year-old aspiring actress, who takes advantage of Homer to support her in style. None of the characters are particularly likeable but the film noir tone of the book carries the story.

David Mc Pherson says

Just my favourite writer.

Bob Schuman says

By far one of the shortest books on the top 100 list (148 pages). Each of the 27 chapters were really little vignettes that were loosely connected to one another...the connection being how the main character (Tod Hackett) is going to get Fay Greener (Want-to-be actress) in bed. Throw in a dwarf, a cowboy, other random hollywood types and Homer Simpson (Could this be where the name really came from?) and you have a pretty funny book that was very descriptive and well written.

Ben says

To Malcolm Cowley

May 11, 1939

Dear Malcolm:

Bennett Cerf sent me a copy of your note to him about "The Day of the Locust." It made me quite a bit

happier to hear that you liked the first chapters. I hope you read the rest of it sometime because I think the first five or six chapters are the weakest.

Lately, I have been feeling even more discouraged than usual. The ancient bugaboo of my kind -- "why write novels?" -- is always before me. I have no particular message for a troubled world (except possibly "beware") and the old standby of "pity and irony" seems like nothing but personal vanity. Why make the continuous sacrifice necessary to produce novels for a non-existent market? The art compulsion of ten years ago is all but vanished.

...write out of hope and for a new and better world -- But I'm a comic writer and it seems impossible for me to handle any of the "big things" without seeming to laugh or at least smile. Is it possible to contrive a right-about face with one's writing because of a conviction based on a theory? I doubt it. What I mean is that out here we have a strong progressive movement and I devote a great deal of time to it. Yet, although this new novel is about Hollywood, I found it impossible to include any of those activities in it. I made a desperate attempt before giving up. I tried to describe a meeting of the Anti-Nazi League, but it didn't fit and I had to substitute a whorehouse and a dirty film. The terrible sincere struggle of the League came out comic when I touched it and even libelous. Take the "mother" in Steinbeck's swell novel -- I want to believe in her and yet inside myself I honestly can't. When not writing a novel -- say at a meeting of a committee we have out here to help the migratory worker -- I do believe it and try to act on that belief. But at the typewriter by myself I can't. I suppose middle-class upbringing, skeptical schooling, etc. are too powerful a burden for me to throw off -- certainly not by an act of will alone.

ALAS!

I hope all this doesn't seem too silly to you -- to me it is an ever-present worry and what, in a way, is worse -- an enormous temptation to forget the bitter, tedious novels and to spend that time on committees which act on hope and faith without a smile. (It was even a struggle this time for me to leave off the quotation marks.) How are the wife and child? Are you doing any fishing? I have been laboring on a thing called "I Stole a Million" for George Raft and so missed opening day which was very good this year. I had some great duck and quail shooting, however, when I got back after the play last fall.

As ever,

6614 Cahuenga Terrace
Hollywood, Calif.

Inder says

Full disclosure: I only read "Miss Lonelyhearts," which is on the 1,001 Books to Read Before you Die list (which I half-heartedly attempt to read from).

WHOA GUYS, THIS IS SOME DARK, DARK SHIT.

Wikipedia calls it "black comedy." Wow. It takes a strong stomach to find any of this the least bit funny. Yes, there are some funny lines, but it is very wretched, sordid humor. To me it is further proof that post-WWI fiction is the darkest, bleakest, most nihilistic, and incidentally, most hateful and misogynistic fiction out there. Holy crap was that generation disillusioned.

There is a little hint of redemption in this story, but it's mostly buried under misery and sordidness and suffering. Fun reading! This is one of those books that I can see is objectively well done - if it wasn't, it wouldn't have sent me into a (hopefully temporary, I'll keep you posted) spiral of total existential dread and

depression. If you're looking for a book that make you feel like life is pretty awful and pointless in a mere 80-some pages (and I know this is just the ticket for some of you), this is it! I'm giving it four stars for doing this very well.

For the sake of my mental health, I think I'll skip the rest of this compilation!

Darran McLaughlin says

I have had the collected novels of Nathanael West on my shelf for years and I finally thought I would treat myself and read it. It wasn't worth the wait. I was under the impression that he was one of the great, under-appreciated cult writers deserving of a place in the pantheon besides his contemporaries such as Fitzgerald, Hemmingway, Faulkner and Dos Passos. In fact he is a decidedly minor writer. Balso Snell and A Cool Million are not worth anyone's time. Miss Lonelyhearts is a brisk, bleak, updated American take on Dostoyevsky, and the Day of the Locust is along the same lines. It has merit in that it is a book that is very much of Los Angeles, but others have done it better. John Fante is definitely a better writer and Ask the Dust is definitely better than the Day of the Locust.

Rick Slane says

I read the 4 main works. I recommend them all except the first one to every mature American. Translating West seems to me almost impossible and even English readers from other cultures probably won't be able to appreciate this stuff. This is the darkest or most tragic humor I have found. I put West on the literary level of Hemingway & Fitzgerald. He died in an auto crash at 37 years of age.

Randolph says

Awesome collection of West's fiction from his all too short life. Running the gamut from stark realism to the truly bizarre it shows the true range of West's fictional talent. Miss Lonelyhearts and Day of the Locusts (avoid the dreadful film version) are the best of the lot.

Susan Emmet says

Haven't visited West in a while and was drawn to this complete set at John Merrill's. Was introduced to West by my college love many years ago.

"The Dream Life of Balso Snell" differs from the more political and apocalyptic other three. "Snell" is a surrealistic Divine Comedy with no Beatrice waiting in Heaven. Balso descends into the pit of himself, into the Trojan Horse, and meets a host of twisted characters en route in and out. Extraordinarily bitter tale it is. "A Cool Million" tracks the story of Lemuel Pitkin, persistent optimist, as he buys into the dream of capitalism and the hard-earned buck. He is torn apart by the journey, literally and figuratively, and a martyr he becomes in the end. He's a victim of trust and naivete and a willingness to believe in an American Dream based on money.

"The Day of the Locust" is dark, but stunning - dark as the darkest satire can be. West takes on all types and

again stabs away at so many targets - blind hero worship of the rich and famous, the artist's struggle to reconcile art with life, the blind and amoral violence that plagues us, the dream of fame and fortune that withers in the mob's eye.

And "Miss Lonelyhearts" - what a book. A writer of "Dear Abbey" responses, Miss L (who suffers from a desire to emulate Christ) answers "the cry for help from Desperate, Harold S. Catholic Mother, Broken-hearted, Broad-shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular -husband," goaded on by his editor, the horrific Shrike, who is the emblem of disgust.

Can't say I found this return uplifting, but it did bring back all sorts of memories of late-night discussions in college about The Meaning of Life.

Ian says

I first only read this for Miss Lonelyhearts, but got drawn in by West to read the other three pieces of long fiction he produced. I don't say novels because they are all fairly brief, especially The Dream Life of Balso Snell which is a Surrealist fantasy.

Miss Lonelyhearts stars a journalist who writes an advice column and is tortured by the plaintive cries for help of his readers and mocked by his boss, the loathsome Shrike. Unable to offer anything more than platitudes, his Christ-like suffering speaks eloquently of the disillusionment of the Depression age.

A Cool Million rips the American dream to satirical shreds as Lemuel Pitkin leaves home to the big city to earn his fortune, getting robbed, beaten up, disfigured, practically dismembered while his sweetheart is kidnapped and forced into prostitution. It is comedy, but the laughs are of the bleakest kind.

The Day of the Locust centres on Tod, an artist in Hollywood and his fixation with a wannabe actress. An examination of the tawdry fringes of the Hollywood dreams, notable I suppose for the introduction of a character who is an overweight loser with fat fingers, who goes by the name of Homer Simpson.

Michael Wais says

This is honestly some of the worst writing I've ever read.

Some parts of "Day of the Locust" were redeeming. For example the description and visualization of the apocalyptic painting that Tod Hackett is doing of the female lead character in the novel.

Most of West's other writings were pretty awful. "Cool Million" reminded me of the kind of pamphlets that fundamentalists try to force on people minding their own business on the city street. His two plays in the collection (one screenplay and one stage-play) were also really awful.

"Good Hunting" is not a realistic, funny, or even interesting stage-play. The whole play is almost dead-pan in its soap-opera-style approach with the soldiers falling for Marie and everything being tied up neatly at the end. It's not even realistic at all and the reporter in the story falls into so many damn character cliches.

Most of the writing in the collection seemed like it could've been taken from a collection of seventh-graders' prose.

I could go off on a tangent but I'll keep it short: It sucked.

Tosh says

Nathanael West was such an unique American writer. He was totally tuned into the world of European Surrealism, and it shows in his work. But it is also very American - and that was his strength or what made his work so unique, funny and wonderful. I love this man's work.

Sam Crawley says

Watching a 1942 newspaper movie today You Can't Escape Forever that featured the dominating editor and the ingenue girlfriend who screws up and is demoted to writing the advice column. This all reminded me West is one of my all time favorite authors. *Miss Lonely Hearts* was so poignant it'll make you cry. The Dreamlife of Balso Snell is a metaphor of Dante (I think) where the hero travels throughout the alimentary canal of a horse. West only wrote three novels but wrote many screenplays before he drank himself to death. I met his secretary when I lived in San Francisco shortly before she followed him and drank herself to death. In many respects West was the one who started black humor as practiced by Terry Southern and John Kennedy Toole, both of whom should be read for laughs after reading West.

A Cool Million is a Horatio Alger satire where the hero starts high and goes lower and lower with each life encounter. Very funny!

The Day of the Locust is like reading a good story on mescaline. A lot of fun too.

Greg Brozeit says

I understand how some might give up on this volume after reading the first selection, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, which is more for people who like William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*. But, don't let it stop you from reading on, it would be a mistake. This collection is a fabulous journey.

Of the first four published novellas, *A Cool Million* stood out for me. It's as though the Coen Brothers, Mark Twain and Freidrich Dürrenmatt got together to write a Horatio Alger story. It's a fantastic piece of imagination and writing. Similarly, *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* are classics centered on the theme of alienation (as a trivial aside, the latter has a character named Homer Simpson, but the only thing he shares with the cartoon character is a certain vacuous quality). Stunning stuff.

The second half of this volume contains West's unpublished writings and fragments, which would make one think that there's little there. But that, again, would be a mistaken assumption. The unfinished *Mr. Potts of Pottsdowm* is a wonderful "Keeping up with the Joneses"-type of story. Just wished West had been able to complete it. The play *Good Hunting* (written with Joseph Schrank) is a wonderful, dark take on the officer corps in World War I with humorous, ironic dialogue and plot twists. I was not familiar with West prior to reading this and now I will never forget many of the images he created. He died in 1940 at the age of 37 and this collection demonstrates what a great loss this was to American literature.

