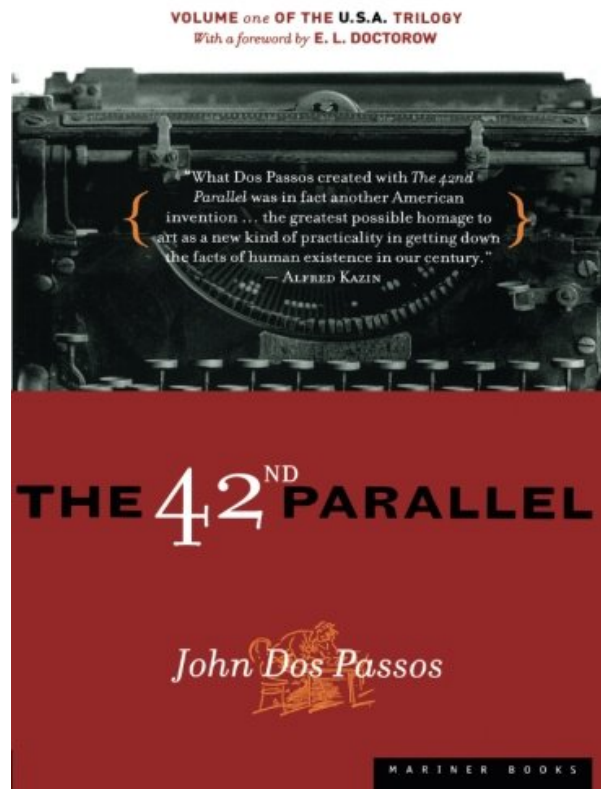


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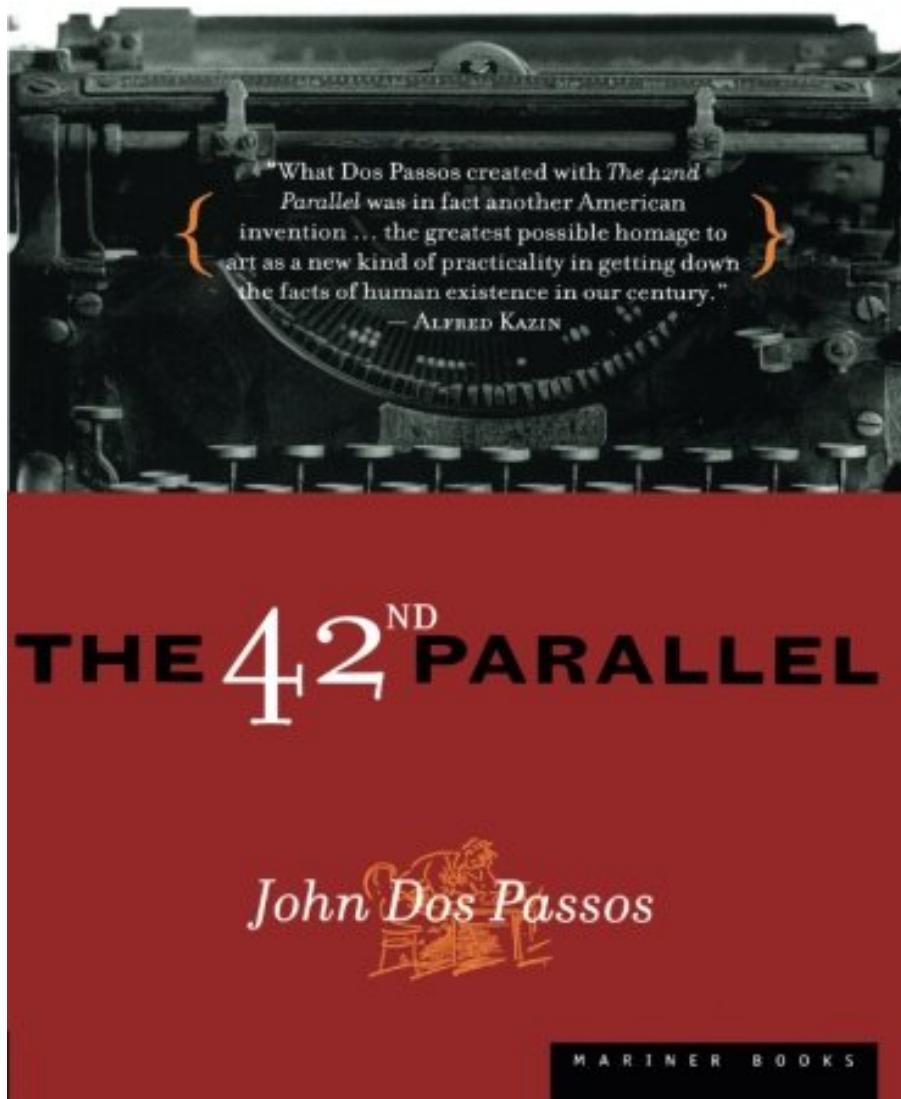


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VOLUME *one* OF THE U.S.A. TRILOGY

With a foreword by E. L. DOCTOROW



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Review

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THE 42ND PARALLEL: VOLUME ONE OF THE U.S.A. TRILOGY BY JOHN DOS PASSOS PDF

With his U.S.A. trilogy, comprising *THE 42nd PARALLEL*, 1919, and *THE BIG MONEY*, John Dos Passos is said by many to have written the great American novel. While Fitzgerald and Hemingway were cultivating what Edmund Wilson once called their "own little corners," John Dos Passos was taking on the world. Counted as one of the best novels of the twentieth century by the Modern Library and by some of the finest writers working today, U.S.A. is a grand, kaleidoscopic portrait of a nation, buzzing with history and life on every page.

The trilogy opens with *THE 42nd PARALLEL*, where we find a young country at the dawn of the twentieth century. Slowly, in stories artfully spliced together, the lives and fortunes of five characters unfold. Mac, Janey, Eleanor, Ward, and Charley are caught on the storm track of this parallel and blown New Yorkward. As their lives cross and double back again, the likes of Eugene Debs, Thomas Edison, and Andrew Carnegie make cameo appearances.

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- 448 pages

Review

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Most helpful customer reviews

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

One I always wanted to read - finally did it!

By Kim Crosser

This is one of those "must read" books that you hear about in any advanced English classes. While Fitzgerald wrote about the wealthy, Dos Passos wrote the stories of those on the other end of the spectrum.

First - a note on the physical book itself - it is a wonderful tangible thing. The Library of America has produced a beautiful tome - high quality paper, binding, even the red ribbon placekeeper (remember those?). Despite being nearly 1300 pages, it is comfortable to hold and a joy to read.

The stories themselves vary from ne'er do well idlers to the upwardly mobile. Reading these from end to end, you can feel Dos Passos gradually changing from a socialist world view to his eventual Republican views (yes - he went from Red in the old sense to a Red-stater). Towards the end, I feel he might almost have embraced Ayn Rand, as he clearly viewed the Russians/Communists as a poor option to American Democracy.

Throughout, the book could serve as a textbook for MADD, with many of the protagonists undone by their descent into drink, or simply failing to make progress through lapses into benders where they lose everything they saved.

Worth reading to get a feel for how the poor and lower middle classes lived from the late 1800's through WWI and up to just before the Great Depression (highly foreshadowed, but just beyond the end of the last novel).

Dos Passos idiosyncratic style of combining adjectives and nouns ("shellshredded woods", "upperclasslooking young man") is jarring at first, but feels natural after a while. The injections of "Newsreel" headlines (or headline fragments, anyway) and the odd "Camera" sections sometimes help frame the stories and sometimes seem forced.

Is he a great writer? I am not convinced, but then I am not that sure that Fitzgerald was either. Both have written fairly straight-forward story-driven novels. Dos Passos people generally feel more real and certainly you can picture yourself meeting these folks and discussing politics and economics with Dos Passos' characters.

If you want a good sense of how everyday people lived in this time, then U.S.A. will give you a very good grounding.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Dos Passos had his finger on the pulse of America

By JfromJersey

Before reading U.S.A. it would help to learn something about John Dos Passos. At the back of this edition is a Chronology which serves this purpose. The wealth of experience Dos Passos obtained in America and abroad, from his earliest childhood until his death in 1970, serves to illustrate that the trilogy was written with an air of authenticity and expertise that very few works of historical fiction possess. Knowing about the author's experiences before, during, and after WW1, his social and political leanings, his personal friendships, successes, and failures, help the reader not only in understanding the inspiration for some of the fictional characters in the books, but to understand the choices made (and biases for or against) the historical figures presented in fairly extensive vignettes that are interspersed between the fictional narratives throughout the work. It also aids in understanding the "Camera Eye" sections..personal musings of Dos Passos, in stream of consciousness style, about events that transpired in his own life during the time in question. He had his finger on the pulse of America during a critical time in it's history.

U.S.A. was not originally intended as a trilogy, but as 3 individual novels..The 42nd Parallel, 1919, and The Big Money. The idea to publish the 3 books as a trilogy, was made by the author and his publisher in 1938 (2 years after The Big Money was published). The work in total covers the first 3 decades of the 20th century, spanning the period from just after the Spanish American War to the great Crash of 1929, with the 1st World War serving as a pivot point upon which much of the action revolves. Highlighted within this time frame are events and circumstances which affected Dos Passos deeply..not only the Great War in Europe where he drove an ambulance and witnessed first hand the horrors of war, but the growth of organized labor in the U.S. (Dos Passos was a supporter of the Wobblies), the Sacco and Vanzetti case (Dos Passos interviewed both and firmly believed in their innocence), the rise of Soviet Communism (which the author soon came to

reject as it polluted the labor movement), and the economic imbalances during the boom period of the Roaring 20s which led inevitably to the big Crash. The narrative isn't linear and straightforward, but experienced through the lives of various fictional characters in the books, some of which intersect in later parts of the work. In this manner the telling of history is enriched through the intellectual and emotional raveling of a range of minds, some ordinary, some a bit more than ordinary, as they mature..struggle to survive, succeed, and fail in relationships and in careers..as they dream, and see those dreams shattered..as they live and sometimes die, oblivious to the slow, cold grip of circumstance tightening around them..and through this method, we as readers can relate to them, can empathize with them, even if at times, we find ourselves despising them.

The 3 novels can stand alone, but the full effect is only experienced together. The only quibble I have is that you get so wrapped up in these individual characters that you miss some of the early ones that disappear in the later books. For example, the character of Mac dominates *The 42nd Parallel*, but his story ends somewhere in Mexico at the end of that volume. I yearned to know what happened to him later. It would have been nice to have a coda at the end of *U.S.A.* describe what happened to the characters who survived. It also is difficult leaving the narrative of one character, and getting back to another whose story was interrupted much earlier in the book. You often have to go back and read the last page or pages of that character's earlier narrative to refresh your memory of what happened.

U.S.A. is arguably the greatest literary work concerning the early 20th century American experience. It has been called *The Great American Novel*, although that is certainly open to debate. Some critics find it too ambitious, comprehensive, bloated, and prejudiced to have earned that accolade. Criticism is subjective of course, but to me, *U.S.A.* is a great and important piece of art and history, and anyone who cares about such things should read it and come to their own conclusion.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

This is a handsome edition of the entire work, ...

By Marchman

This is a handsome edition of the entire work, the three-volume classic that won a wide readership, critical acclaim, and put Dos Passos on the cover of *Time* magazine in the late 1930s (to Hemingway's chagrin). It is one of the most innovative, imaginative and original narratives in modern English fiction and a vivid canvas of the U.S. in the first quarter or so of the 20th century. Dos Passos later changed his politics, moving to the right, but his leftist orientation while writing *USA* does not diminish its social or literary importance.

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