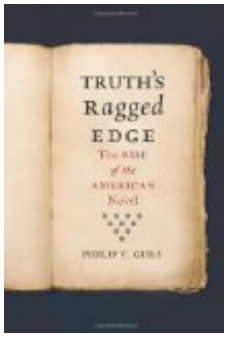
That Damned Mob of Scribbling Women



In 1855, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a letter to his publisher in response to the overwhelming success of female writers at the time. Novels such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1849), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time* (1854) by Sara Payson Willis Parton (aka Fanny Fern) were dominating the era both in terms of critical acclaim and sales. His envy overwhelming him, Hawthorne told William Ticknor: "America is now wholly given over to a d[amne]d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public is occupied with their trash." Having genuinely appreciated Susan Warner's novel for its stylistic innovations, he goes on to say: "This woman writes as if the devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading...Generally, women write like emasculated men, and are only to be distinguished from male authors by greater feebleness and folly."

This anecdote appears in Philip Gura's astonishing, extraordinary book *Truth's Ragged Edge: The Rise of the American Novel*. It is a seminal work of literary history and criticism, and revolutionary in its organic inclusion of women and African Americans. Gura's study is a thorough, fascinating, and gratifying survey of American fiction from its beginnings to the late nineteenth century -- and how that fiction reflected the developing American character. His work compellingly examines the effects of liberalism and capitalism on fiction, contemplates how Americans have perceived the function and object of literature, and interrogates the effects of fiction on society and vice versa. He traces the development of the American character, both fictional and real, from its Puritan beginnings when Americans defined themselves in relation to God and religious scripture to their mid-century obsession with self-examination and human motivations to the post Civil-War American who was more likely to turn to science than scripture for answers and who was deeply concerned over an entrenched individualism to the sacrifice of civic duty and society's greater good.

Over the course of his book, Gura recovers an astounding number of female novelists, many successful, influential, and popular in their own time, who have since been marginalized to oblivion. By integrating these women's biographies along with analyses of their novels so plentifully and seamlessly into his book, Gura shows us what the future of scholarship could look like, providing a glimpse of when "women's studies" as a corrective to centuries of female exclusion from the canon will become obsolete. For Gura, American writers in possession of a vagina or dark skin are inherent to the definition of an American writer. This, alas, is decidedly not true for the Hawthorne-types who continue to prevail over our literature and history, lately

exemplified by the editors of Wikipedia who have been systematically removing women writers from their "American Writers" category and placing them in the subcategory "American Women Writers;" and similarly for African-American writers.

Gura provides a fresh look at the Great Male Writers of the period and introduces lesser-known male authors deserving of greater recognition. But the Bombshell will stick to her bias and address here a sampling of the women Gura has unearthed. I do hope and expect we'll be seeing many of these women's novels reprinted by the growing crop of excellent small presses devoted to salvaging our literary past.

Susanna Rowson was a late eighteenth century writer of international renown most remembered for her highly popular novel *Charlotte Temple* (1794). A seduction and betrayal narrative common to the era, it spoke, especially in light of the recent French Revolution, to a fear of the anarchic and transgressive effects the American Revolution might be having on the American people. Similarly, Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*, almost as successful as Rowson's novel, transformed "a sad tale of frailty and human sorrow into a parable about democracy and its incipient discontents." Foster, along with other novelists of the period including Tabitha Tenny, author of the popular *Female Quixotism, Exhibited in the Romantic Opinions and Extravagant Adventures of Dorcasina Sheldon* (1801), wrote about and satirized the restrictive and unfair treatment of women regarding sexual transgressions.

Catharine Maria Sedgwick's novel *A New-England Tale* (1822) established her as a chief competitor to the reigning distinguished man of letters James Fenimore Cooper, much to his consternation, and the two dominated American fiction from the mid-1820s through 1840. Her very popular and enormously influential 1827 novel *Hope Leslie; or, Early Times in the Massachusetts* introduced nonwhite characters into her fiction and "challenged both the traditionally patriarchal trajectory of American history and, more particularly, Native Americans' role in it." Her "true innovation" was to give voice to Puritan women and Native Americans excluded from narrative histories; it was claimed that her depictions of "savage life" were "more truthful than Cooper's."

Warner's phenomenal success with *The Wide, Wide World* followed by Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* inaugurated an era when women writers commanded the publishing world and many of their novels had strong feminist themes railing against the pervasive sexism and racism of American society. Still, African American writers in general, and African American women writers in particular, met with great difficulty when trying to publish their work. For example, it took the "talented and unique" Harriet Jacobs four years to find a publisher for *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself* (1857).

In the 1850s the influential cultural journals *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, *The Nation, The Galaxy* and especially *The Atlantic Monthly* encouraged and sought out female writers to be published in their pages. Women writers penned fully half of *The Atlantic Monthly's* early issues. Many careers were thus launched and these women -- including Alice Cary, Lillie Devereux Umsted Blake, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard -- "created their own distinct vision of authorship," and were "responsible for

the final important development in the early American novel." Stoddard's novels *The Morgesons* (1862) and *Two Men* (1865), penetrating studies of family and social life, were both so innovative she was seen as the harbinger of modernism and hailed as "the first of the American realist school." Rebecca Harding Davis's short story "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861), an exposé of the brutal lives of immigrant laborers, established her reputation as a writer; her novel *Margret Howth: A Story of To-Day* (1862) solidified it. She and her fellow female novelists, according to Gura, "brought in a new and robust skepticism of religion and the market to American fiction a few decades before their male peers... [I]n showing the obstacles that real women routinely faced, they suggested an alternative to the status quo."

Nathaniel Hawthorne would feel greatly vindicated by the state of affairs for women writers today. That mob of scribbling women is still scribbling in droves and in force but women writers are as damned as ever to being grossly under-published and under-reviewed compared to their male colleagues. *Truth's Ragged Edge* is a brilliant and welcome antidote.

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