

Sanitation Department started its recycling program, it cut back on street cleaning.

• Are reusable cups and plates better than disposables? “A ceramic mug may seem a more virtuous choice than a cup made of polystyrene. . . . But it takes much more energy to manufacture the mug, and then each washing consumes more energy (not to mention water),” Tierney notes. According to one chemist’s calculations, the mug would have to be used 1,000 times before it consumed as little energy per use as the foam cup. And then there is the matter of bacteria surviving on the reusables. . . .

But isn’t landfill space disappearing? Well, no, says Tierney. While the 1987 saga of the

garbage scow *Mobro* was presented by the news media as “a grim harbinger of future landfill scarcity . . . it actually represented a short-lived scare caused by new environmental regulations.” Landfills in the rural South and Midwest now vigorously compete for East Coast garbage.

Does that make these dumping grounds losers? Not at all, argues Tierney. The private operator of the new landfill in Charles City County, Virginia, for example, pays the county fees totaling \$3 million a year—as much as the county takes in from all its property taxes. “If you are heavy with garbage and guilt,” Tierney writes, “Charles City is the place to lay down your burden.”

ARTS & LETTERS

The Great American Novel?

“U.S.A.” by Daniel Aaron, in *American Heritage* (July–Aug. 1996), Forbes Bldg., 60 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011, and “‘U.S.A.’ Today” by Joseph Epstein, in *The New Yorker* (Aug. 5, 1996), 20 W. 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

John Dos Passos’s monumental trilogy, *U.S.A.*, was hailed by Lionel Trilling in 1938 as “the important American novel of the decade,” and indeed, many people at the time felt the novelist had achieved what Joseph Epstein, editor of the *American Scholar*, calls “the literary Holy Grail”: the Great American Novel. By casting his fictional characters into “the snarl of the human currents of his time,” Dos Passos was attempting to evoke, in Epstein’s words, “the tumult of American life in the first three decades of the century.” Aaron, a Harvard University English professor, calls the work “an idiosyncratic biography of a nation,” one that has, in his view, lasting worth.

In *The 42nd Parallel*, *Nineteen Nineteen*, and *The Big Money* (all initially published between 1927 and 1936, and now reissued by the Library of America to mark the centenary of Dos Passos’s birth), Dos Passos portrayed an America populated by “a servile generation of white-collar slaves” and “moneygrubbers,” and a huge “disunited strata of workers and farmers kept mostly in an opium dream of prosperity by cooing radios, the flamboyant movies, and the installment plan.”

But how best to depict the nation’s moral bankruptcy? Building on techniques he had employed less successfully in *Manhattan Transfer* (1924), Dos Passos wove together

the fictional strands of *U.S.A.* by employing three distinctive literary devices: “newsreel,” in which he strung together scraps of popular song and newspaper clippings to convey the interconnectedness and fabric of seemingly unrelated events across the nation; biographies—26 portraits of “important personalities of the time,” including the Wright brothers, Thorstein Veblen, and Eugene Debs; and, finally, “The Camera Eye.” This last is the closest thing the books have to a narrative voice, with the protagonist being, Aaron explains, the author self-observed as he passes through a “moving cyclorama” of his own design. At the trilogy’s core is the politically charged Sacco-Vanzetti case, which led to the 1927 execution of the two anarchists convicted of murder and outraged Dos Passos and others on the left.

U.S.A., Aaron notes, “isn’t an atlas or a cultural guide to the United States”; the South and Far West receive short shrift and black Americans “are conspicuously absent.” Moreover, the fictional characters in Dos Passos’s swirling pastiche of the American scene are reduced, as one critic said, to “colliding billiard balls.” Nevertheless, Aaron maintains, in the 60 years since the final volume in the trilogy appeared, no other work has come closer to realizing that oft-pursued but elusive dream

of the Great American Novel.

Epstein once shared Aaron's enthusiasm but says he finds his opinion tempered by a fresh reading. Originally awed by "the god-like aura of a novelist working on a vast stage with a huge cast of characters," Epstein now believes U.S.A.'s "truths were almost entirely

political ones—and such truths are all too mutable." Dos Passos "missed the main story"—"the eternal confusions of human beings." Still, although Dos Passos failed to fashion "a book for the ages," Epstein says, U.S.A. "was a book for his age, and that is no small thing."

When Bebop Was Born

"Bebop: Modern New York Jazz" by Peter Rutkoff and William Scott, in *The Kenyon Review* (Spring 1996), Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio 43022.

On November 26, 1945, a little-known young saxophonist named Charlie Parker entered the recording studios of radio station WOR in New York with trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie and four other jazz musicians. They were about to introduce the public to a startlingly different sound: bebop.

"Energetic, sometimes frantic, and bluesy, bebop's incendiary style, pulsing rhythm, and intensity contrasted with the melodic, linear, and commercial qualities of swing," note Rutkoff and Scott, who teach history at Kenyon College. With bebop, they argue, modern jazz divorced itself from the dictates of commerce and returned to its African-American roots—and black jazz musicians liberated themselves from "white control."

The jazz world was segregated during the first three decades of the century, the authors note. "White musicians, played, wrote, and arranged jazz, organized orchestras and tours, made recordings and performed on the radio, often borrowing the most innovative styles and songs of African-Americans for their own, achieving commercial success and popularity." Most black jazz musicians in New York, for example, recorded on "race" records and performed in Harlem for black audiences.

Only during the '30s did this racial segregation give way. But the music and the industry remained white dominated. Parker, like many other players, chafed at the creative restrictions imposed by the swing bands. He and others also resented the money white bandleaders made by "covering" tunes originated by black artists.

Playing alto saxophone (and washing dishes) at Dan Wall's Chili House at Seventh Avenue and 140th Street in December 1939, Parker had a musical epiphany. Working over "Cherokee," a danceable and melodically straightforward tune, he later related, "I

found that by using the higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, I could play the thing I'd been hearing. I came alive."

During the next few years, the authors write, Parker, Gillespie, drummer Kenny Clarke, and pianist Thelonious Monk, "individually and collectively, built on that innovation" and created bebop. It was a form of music that demanded extraordinary virtuosity, and so, they believed, could not be "covered."

A union ban on recording (in effect, a strike against record companies) from mid-1942 to 1944 kept the new music underground. In the fall of 1945, Parker and his friends stepped into the WOR studios and put "Ko-Ko," whose jagged melody he constructed over the harmonic structure of "Cherokee," on acetate for the Savoy record label, starting a revolution in jazz that has never really stopped.



Charlie Parker, shown in 1948, led the bebop revolution in jazz.