

the almost partylike atmosphere that came with having survived and then rediscovered a place in the community. The joyful aftermath of a disaster, Solnit writes, “is by its very nature unsustainable and evanescent, but like a lightning flash it illuminates ordinary life, and like lightning it sometimes shatters the old forms.”

These ephemeral utopias raise radical possibilities for social rearrangement. But they go largely unappreciated, due in large part to the mainstream media’s adherence to preconceived narratives that have more to do with Hollywood disaster films, Solnit claims, than with actual events. At best, ordinary citizens are depicted as passive victims who linger in the disaster area until they are rescued by the authorities. At worst, they are seen as dangers to themselves and to each other, prone to panic, looting, and violence. Only one thing can head off chaos: swift and decisive action by the police, the military, and other authorities.

In fact, Solnit argues, the evidence does not support this anti-democratic paternalism. The public almost never panics en masse, let alone runs wild: People tend instead to be calm, clearheaded, competent, and surprisingly altruistic. Indeed, ordinary citizens are not only the first but quite frequently the best responders to disaster. Official efforts can go wrong precisely because they are excessively paternalistic, militaristic, and authoritarian.

What elites tend to fear more than the disaster—given their power and wealth, they are probably well prepared to ride out an earthquake, fire, or flood—is the social destabilization that they believe will follow. It is not the image of rising water, but of looters at the door, that haunts the nightmares of the bourgeoisie. After the San Francisco earthquake, Brigadier General Frederick Funston sanctioned his soldiers’ use of deadly force against looters—an action typical of the official response to disasters, and one that makes little sense, considering that most “looters” are not thieves, but victims scavenging for food, clothing, and other necessities.

Officials aren’t the only ones who resort to violence in the defense of status quo property arrangements. By far, Solnit’s most depressing chapter

describes the killing of black men by white vigilantes in New Orleans following Katrina. A virulent mixture of racism and fear—spurred by wildly exaggerated news reports suggesting that the entire area had been plunged into anarchy—led middle-aged white men to slaughter innocent people whom they saw as potential thieves and killers. The murders are an open secret in the communities in which they occurred: One of the vigilantes was filmed bragging, “It was like pheasant season in South Dakota. If it moved, you shot it.” But neither the police nor the media have shown much interest in the story. As Solnit writes, “If the facts don’t fit the beliefs, murders in plain view can go largely unnoticed.”

The Katrina murders are meant to reinforce Solnit’s claim that during disasters the underclass has reason to fear privileged elites, rather than the other way around. But the crimes also undermine her thesis that human nature, as revealed in moments of crisis, should lead us to prefer anarchic over authoritarian political structures. Despite its subtitle, Solnit’s book has less to say about post-disaster utopias than about the forces that prevent such communities from enduring, or even from arising at all. Readers of *A Paradise Built in Hell* may find themselves on the same page with many readers of Dante: It is hell, not paradise, that makes the more vivid and lasting impression.

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ARTS & LETTERS

The Middle-Class Ghetto

Reviewed by A. J. Loftin

EVERY SUNDAY, *THE NEW YORK TIMES* reviews serious, intelligent books no student of literature will read 50 years from now. Or so Gordon Hutner believes—and historically, he’s got a point.

Hutner, an English professor at

WHAT AMERICA READ:

Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920–1960.

By Gordon Hutner.
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the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and the founding editor of the journal *American Literary History*, spent quite a few years reading the books we don't read in English class. Not the potboilers and thrillers, but the *New York Times* bestsellers and prizewinners, the books that were respectfully reviewed and passed around among an educated, enlightened readership in the first half of the 20th century, then largely forgotten. His theory is that these books didn't make it into the canon because influential literary critics and academics, especially those who came a generation or so after, passed over books that described the realities of

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their own middle-class lives. Instead they championed difficult books, books that were critical of the middle class, or books subversive of middle-class values.

As a result, those who wrote in "the majoritarian tradition" of regionalism, historical fiction, family sagas, and novels of middle-class manners are rarely studied these days. Hutner names Josephine Lawrence, John P. Marquand, Michael Foster, Ruth Suckow, George Weller, and Waters E. Turpin as once well-known writers whose reputations did not endure. Well, it's true that I've never read Marquand, who won a Pulitzer Prize for *The Late George Apley* (1937), but I recognize the name. Waters Turpin—now there's a name I've heard, but OK, it's true, I haven't read *O Canaan!* (1939), a novel about the black migration northward, praised for its "social and historical sweep" by *The New York Times*.

Hutner concedes that feminist scholars have recovered some of the important women who wrote in the first half of the 20th century, namely Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, Fannie Hurst, and Zora Neale Hurston. But where, he asks, is Helen Hull's *Hardy Perennial* (1933), "the story of a wife who helps her husband through the loss of his business position"?

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Philip Roth may yet get his comeuppance, and by 2050 John Updike will be out on the street.

Hutner is not saying that the unsung books are *better*, exactly, although he says some of them, unsurprisingly, are very, very good. But he wants English majors to read more widely, with an eye toward America's cultural history. "Like the middle class itself, the America that these novels amply witness is not inert but insistently supple, always redefining its boundaries, redesigning its purposes, rearticulating its bewilderments, reaffirming its triumphs, and reenacting its worries."

What America Read supplies a chapter for each decade, and (perhaps because I was born then) I found Hutner's discussion of the 1950s most interesting. That was the moment, he says, when book reviewers began losing their ability to shape American cultural life. Critics openly "despised and mocked the ambitions and experience of a large portion of the book-buying public—the middle class—and scholars, as a group, turned away from the interest of middle-class social experience in fiction and settled their attention on formal achievements," heralding the postmodern patter of John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon. Already the novel was said to be dead or in decline. Two of that decade's popular books, Allen Drury's Pulitzer winner *Advise and Consent* (1959) and Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), survived only as movies. Frederick Buechner's *The Return of Ansel Gibbs* (1958), one of many Washington novels of manners published in the 1950s, is rarely read anymore.

Hutner says he rejected at the outset the idea of writing a critical monograph about some of the books he rediscovered, in favor of a historical survey. And that's the main problem with his book, at least for the middle-class reader. Since we haven't read the books Hutner talks about, and since he doesn't describe them in any detail, all we really get is a recitation of unfamiliar titles and authors, along with excerpts from the reviews published in *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, or *Partisan Review*. It's like having a child tell you the plot of a movie you haven't seen.

In short, this is a very long book once we take

Hutner's point. *What America Read* is a legitimate corrective to the English department syllabus, but we don't need a 450-page lecture. We probably just need to read some of these books and judge for ourselves.

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How Sofas Changed the World

Reviewed by Winifred Gallagher

THE HOME AS WE UNDERSTAND it—not just a place to eat and sleep but also one that supports and enhances personal life and well-being—is a remarkably recent invention. The clean, comfortable private residence, which first proliferated in 17th-century republican Holland, was a tangible sign of the dawning Age of Reason and its educated middle class, embrace of progress, and recognition of human rights.

Joan DeJean's claim that the French rather than the Dutch invented the modern home may tweak history. But DeJean, a professor of Romance languages at the University of Pennsylvania and a historian of French culture, makes a strong case that between 1670 and 1765 Paris was the world's capital for designing the stuff of life, from furniture to clothing. In *The Age of Comfort*, she traces this outpouring of creativity to a shift in cultural ideals from magnificence and public display to ease and private delight.

To appreciate France's transition from *la gloire* to *le commodité* (cleanliness and convenience), one might revisit the splendid misery of aristocratic life as wonderfully depicted in Roberto Rossellini's film *The Rise of Louis XIV* (1970). At court, everything was engineered for the public display of royal power and grandeur. Both sexes were uncomfortably dressed to the nines at all times. Rooms—including those used for sleeping—were large, more-or-less public spaces that opened directly

THE AGE OF COMFORT:

When Paris Discovered Casual—and the Modern Home Began.

By Joan DeJean.
Bloomsbury.
295 pp. \$28

onto each other and were sparsely furnished with hard chairs that enforced bolt-upright perching. Regarding hygiene, ooh la la! The malodorous hallways of Versailles were pocked with piles of human excrement.

Fed up, the Sun King's descendants set about changing things. Perhaps in gratitude for the new flushing toilets and bathtubs with hot and cold running water at Versailles, Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV's mistress, gave *him* a bidet. The young aristocrats riddled their stately palaces with secret passages that led them to private lives in newly cozy, intimate rooms. They ordered the first padded armchairs and sofas with slanted backs that encouraged lounging, to say nothing of seduction, as well as the early armoires and chests of drawers that conveniently stored their many new possessions. Ladies shed the rigid, boned *grand habit* in favor of loose, kimono-inspired clothes made from the new lightweight, washable Indian cotton, so that they looked to one older noblewoman "as if they were dressed for bed."

Nouveau riche financiers and real estate moguls followed the breezy young royals' lead, and soon tourists flocked to Paris to ogle the chic *goût moderne*. By the turn of the 18th century, the new "interior decorators"—often upholsterers whose shops were the first furniture stores—were advising clients on cutting-edge "French taste," which featured innovations such as large windows, white ceilings, and hardwood floors.

In a major architectural change, the upper-class home turned from the display of status and the past's Classical splendor to an emphasis on the functions of daily life and the pleasures of the present. Smaller rooms meant for specific activities, such as sleeping and bathing, were connected by hallways that allowed privacy. In her boudoir—a feminine version of the male study—even a woman could read, write letters, or indulge in *recueillement*, or gathering her thoughts.

The Age of Comfort is most engaging when De Jean connects changes in design with shifts in what we've come to call "lifestyle." Writing about the bedroom, for example, she suggests a link between the popularity of private sleeping chambers and hy-