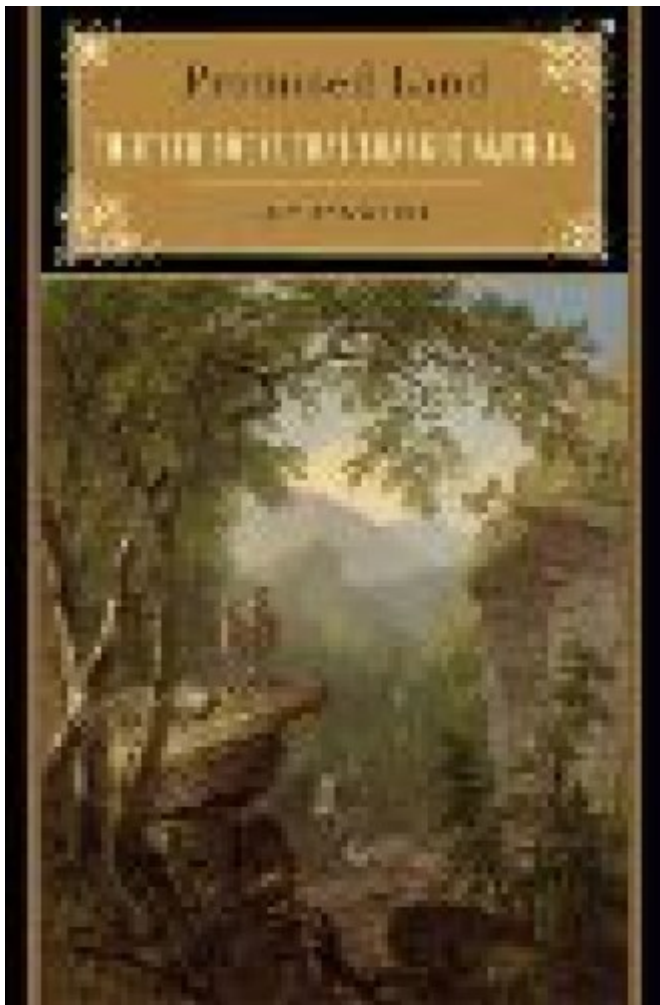


Promised Land: Thirteen Books That Changed America

reviewed by [Jeffrey Johnson](#) in the [September 8, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Promised Land: Thirteen Books That Changed America

Jay Parini
Doubleday

Few books have had sufficiently potent content to carry them into the hands of readers and imaginations of writers for generations. Jay Parini has selected 13 books published in the U.S. from the early colonial period through the 20th century that have “helped create the intellectual and emotional contours of this country.”

Each of the books stands out among the streams of ideas and events that are the intellectual and cultural waterways of America. Each has its own line of literary antecedents and its own circle of influence (in government, child care, interpersonal relations, history, biology). Not all of them would be considered great books by literary standards; only two novels and not a single volume of poetry made the list. Instead Parini, a poet and novelist, includes in his row of honor books of wisdom and advice written for the benefit of ordinary citizens, works that reflect the nation’s undeniable immigrant experience, and a few seminal volumes written out of Americans’ restless need to be on the move across the massive continent.

Parini places each book in its historical context, offers a biographical section on the author and summarizes the volume’s main themes and content, then surveys the book’s influence and enduring value. An appendix contains an annotated list of 100 more books that changed America, from *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, by Bartolomé de Las Casas (1552), to Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006).

In a concluding essay Parini writes of Americans’ “intense connection to the traditions of spirituality.” Alongside—and sometimes within—the rational voices of Benjamin Franklin, Lewis and Clark, and Benjamin Spock, for example, is the individual human spirit adapting to life on a new continent and setting down spiritual roots. As Americans abandoned Old World forms, adopted New World optimism and developed intense, contradictory relationships to the world around them, they showed themselves to be “by nature entrepreneurs of themselves.” Since the earliest days of coastal settlement, Americans have strained after independent, authentic spirituality. From William Bradford declaring that English settlers would live as a Christian “city upon a hill” and “evangelize those who live in ignorance of the true knowledge of God,” to Henry David Thoreau and the American Transcendentalists letting their spirits roam freely over the same New England soil, to the rebellious voices of W. E. B. Du Bois, Mary Antin and Betty Friedan, religious thought, religious commitment and rejection of religion are vivid, textured features of the American cultural landscape.

Readers of a certain age and background might smile at Parini's inclusion of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Carnegie wrote for ordinary, hard-working Americans uncharacteristically trembling under the cloud of the Great Depression. He showed them a method for regaining confidence and vitality in their work. Parini recalls the effect the book had on him: as a shy preteen, he followed Carnegie's advice, systematically paying attention to others, listening to them, thanking and praising them and so on. When I saw in *Promised Land* a reproduction of the Carnegie book's dust-jacket cover—with him looking kind and confident below a border proclaiming that millions of copies had been sold—I recalled finding *How to Win Friends* on my sales-manager father's desk and reading it. Parini reports that the Carnegie formula is “hovering in the background” of Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* and that Joel Osteen has “somewhat crassly” reworked it for his popular television presentations.

Some of the books profiled in *Promised Land* brought the pain of social injustice forward for public scrutiny and debate and provoked discussions that helped to create a more just American society. Quoting Lincoln, Parini argues that such books helped tease out from their hiding places “the better angels of our nature.”