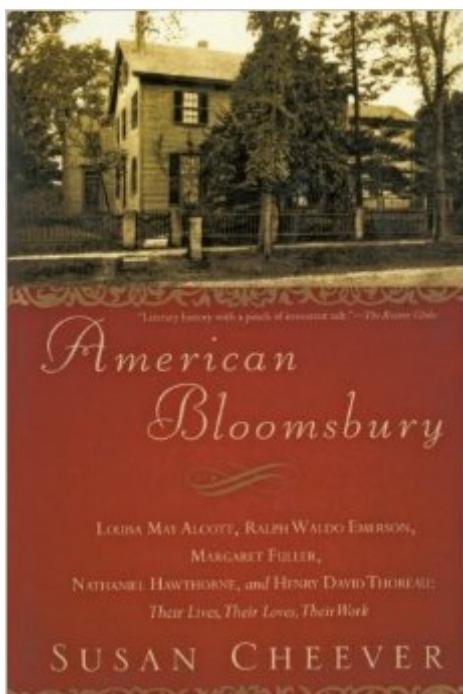


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American Bloomsbury: Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, And Henry David Thoreau: Their Lives, Their Loves, Their Work



Synopsis

The 1850s were heady times in Concord, Massachusetts: in a town where a woman's petticoat drying on an outdoor line was enough to elicit scandal, some of the greatest minds of our nation's history were gathering in three of its wooden houses to establish a major American literary movement. The Transcendentalists, as these thinkers came to be called, challenged the norms of American society with essays, novels, and treatises whose beautifully rendered prose and groundbreaking assertions still resonate with readers today. Though noted contemporary author Susan Cheever stands in awe of the monumental achievements of such writers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Louisa May Alcott, her personal, evocative narrative removes these figures from their dusty pedestals and provides a lively account of their longings, jealousies, and indiscretions. Thus, Cheever reminds us that the passion of Concord's ambitious and temperamental resident geniuses was by no means confined to the page....

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

What a peculiar book! American Bloomsbury is easy to dislike for all the reasons given in a number of the editorial and customer reviews: the factual errors riddling the book beginning right on page 1 (little Waldo Emerson was 5 when he died, not 9; Emily Dickinson and other "neighbors" were not neighbors to the Concordians; the Emasons were not married in 1838; and on and on and on), the jarring colloquialisms (Emerson as sugar daddy, Thoreau as moocher, Hawthorne as rat),

thesweeping and totally unfounded assertions, and the sporadic real-clunker sentences. Such factors as these contribute to making a bad book, but what makes this book peculiar is that the author shows herself capable, on a number of pages, of producing compelling, factual, graceful prose, but just as you are lulled into the story and willing to forgive and forget the clunkers and errors just passed, she pulls you up short with some sensationalistic or speculative doozy that utterly breaks the spell. In the worst cases, these sojourns into fantasy make one angry because they are so clearly untrue -- and purposeless except as means to stoke the potboiler theme of the book: unconsummated lust, cerebral adultery (and maybe more!), jealousy, seething resentment. The best example of this is her depiction of Hawthorne, whose complex moral and intellectual flaws receive no attention at all because Cheever chooses instead to focus one glaring spotlight on him as "a rat with women.

The premise seems interesting enough: use a light-hearted approach to detail the lives of the major Concord authors (Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau) and their sometimes steamy interpersonal relationships. To that end, Ms. Cheever does a decent job here. The nearly endless combinations indeed weave a transcendental web: Louisa-Henry, Louisa-Waldo, Henry-Lidian, Waldo-Margaret, Nathaniel-Margaret. And that's not even mentioning Ellen, Sophia or Count Ossoli. Thus does "American Bloomsbury" provide an overview of the lives of the originators of truly American literature. And yet, nonfiction readers deserve accuracy. And the Concord writers deserve to be remembered honestly. This book is fraught with factual errors. And we're not talking about infinitesimal, esoteric, or subjective ones. We're not even talking about interpretations. These are mistakes that could have, nay, SHOULD have been corrected by consulting the very books listed in the bibliography on pages 211-214. To Ms. Cheever's credit: she at least knew that the North Bridge wasn't standing in the mid-1800s. That's the most common mistake that writers make about this time period. But what about something as basic as the natural environment? Thoreau wouldn't have pointed out deer tracks or beaver dams to his students because both animals were rare in New England back then. He didn't see cardinals either, for they were "Dixie invaders" that didn't come north until decades later. OK, you might say. Those don't sound like big deals. We could overlook those assumptions. Fine. Concord devotees will find here more than a dozen inaccuracies regarding Thoreau alone.

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