

# Editorial

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## *American Literature: Identity and Culture*

This issue of *Snapshot* brings together students' highly personal responses to four texts taught in American Literature. At La Trobe, this subject is premised around the origins of America, not only as a place, but as an idea. This second emphasis means that our examination of this literature is far less tethered to a geographic locale; rather it is expressed and contested in words, images and sound; whether from supporters or critics, who focus on the significance of American literature wherever they find it. Notions of an 'American dream' (or nightmare) are embedded in how people everywhere read the cultural and political environment of today. Therefore, I thought it would be fruitful (and fun!) to consider how, in exploring the story of the American dream, we might also be discovering something about ourselves.

The assessment for this subject is a workbook which encompasses students' engagements with, and reflections on, the fictional, theoretical and critical material studied in the first five weeks of this subject. This work is part 'creative', part 'critical' and this reflects an emerging trend in the way English is taught at tertiary level. While the distinction between creative writing and critical writing is obvious at a superficial level, on closer inspection many of the features of good creative writing are demonstrated when deployed in a critical essay. This means that familiar creative writing techniques, such as the attention-grabbing quality of opening sentences for setting a scene, the development of sustained tension (pressing, well-formed questions, asked but not answered immediately), advancing an argument as though telling it as a story, and many other features of creative writing are just as appropriate and effective in critical writing. And conversely, creative writing of a high order invariably includes aspects of critical writing: ideas, arguments for or against, proposed ways of asking about and understanding the world.

The reading list for American Literature is divided into Modernist and Postmodern literature. The assignment is intended to encourage students to write with a view to addressing a wider or alternate readership than would usually encounter this literature. *The Great Gatsby* is the first novel on our reading list because it sets out the premise of this subject; namely that America is a story told in relation to Europe and the rest of the world. This implies that wherever we are located in the world, when exploring the American dream, we also discover something about ourselves, our desires, hopes, fears and failures. Djuna Barnes' notoriously difficult *Nightwood* illustrates the power of language and poetics to evoke and shelter marginalised subjectivities – especially those who identify as LGBTQ. Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is an exploration of the limits and possibilities of narratives of war. Raymond Carver's story, 'So much Water, so close to Home', challenges the reader to consider the ethical costs of living the American dream. The following were the exercises set for the assessment:

1) Rewrite the first page of *Gatsby* from an Australian/non-American point of view.

2) *Nightwood* can be read as a dream or a form of madness. It is also said to be a registering of cultural malaise between the wars. Assuming this is the case, try writing something of your own which brings out Australian uncertainties about race, sexuality, or class while also told from the perspective of a particular group of people (or a singular person) who is involved.

3) Imagine this: Billy Pilgrim has consulted the doctor in *Nightwood* for post-traumatic stress disorder. Write the doctor's follow-up letter to BP or describe the consultation itself.

4) Read Raymond Carver's 'So much water, so close to home.' What, if anything, is quintessentially American about this story?

The entries selected for publication were chosen for their originality; they used the exercises as a way into local community or worldwide conversations. As I read through the publications in this issue of Snapshot, I see war, love, generosity and spirit. I feel that that courage is what strikes me most in these writings, in the way this group of students lend their voice to themes in which they are often the subject, but rarely the speaker.

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