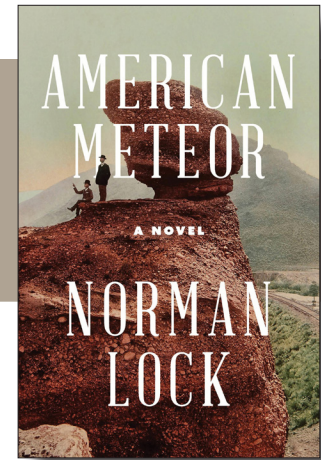




American Meteor

A novel by Norman Lock

Trade Paperback Original ISBN: 978-1-934137-94-9
eBook ISBN: 978-1-934137-95-6



“Sheds brilliant light along the meteoric path of American westward expansion. . . . [A] pithy, compact beautifully conducted version of the American Dream, from its portrait of the young wounded soldier in the beginning to its powerful rendering of Crazy Horse’s prophecy for life on earth at the end.” —**NPR**

“[Walt Whitman] hovers over [*American Meteor*], just as Mark Twain’s spirit pervaded *The Boy in His Winter*. . . . Like all Mr. Lock’s books, this is an ambitious work, where ideas crowd together on the page like desperate men on a battlefield.” —**Wall Street Journal**

“[*American Meteor*] feels like a campfire story, an old-fashioned yarn full of rich historical detail about hard-earned lessons and learning to do right.” —**Publishers Weekly (starred review)**

INTRODUCTION

In *American Meteor*, an epic novel of America’s Manifest Destiny, Stephen Moran recounts his boyhood as a Brooklyn oysterman and a Civil War bugler, elected by Walt Whitman, General Grant, and his own remarkable destiny to ride the Lincoln funeral train, playing taps en route to the dead president’s entombment in Springfield. Caught up in the “westerling” tide, Moran remains aboard the parlor car as a steward, after its purchase by the Union Pacific to carry executives to oversee construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. Apprenticed to William Henry Jackson, preeminent nineteenth-century photographer of the frontier, Moran documents the seizure of the “empty” territories beyond the Mississippi. As George Armstrong Custer’s personal photographer, Moran accompanies him to the Black Hills during the discovery of gold, to the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, and, finally, to the Battle of the Little Bighorn. When he comes face-to-face with Crazy Horse, his life is spared by the great Lakota war chief and Moran glimpses, in prophetic dreams, the dark ecology of an inglorious American future: a grievous breach of what was promised us by the apparently boundless West.

By turns elegiac and comic, *American Meteor* is a novel of adventure, ideas, and mourning: a unique vision of our nation’s fabulous and murderous history.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Abraham Lincoln witnessed the great Leonid meteor storm of 1833 and the poet Walt Whitman was inspired by the brilliant meteor procession of 1860. After hearing about Lincoln’s death, Stephen Moran, the novel’s narrator, tells us, “I closed my eye and saw in my mind’s blackness a meteor fall.” The epigraph also quotes a Whitman poem, “What am I myself but one of your meteors?” How does the novel’s title relate to its themes or observations on nature, history, and history’s celebrities?
2. A principle theme of *American Meteor* is “seeing”: how we see and what we can observe about ourselves and the times we live in. During the Civil War, Stephen loses an eye (“sight halved by a bandage over my eye”). Consider Stephen’s partial loss of vision in relation to his apprenticeship with the frontier photographer William Henry Jackson and to the “second sight” granted by the great Native American “seer” Crazy Horse. How do Stephen’s ways of seeing affect what he sees—in himself and about his country?
3. Can you recall a moment in *American Meteor* when the mechanical and supernatural worlds of seeing—of vision—converge? How does this moment connect the physical and the spiritual realms, and to what purpose?
4. Stephen Moran orbits two poles in the art of representation or “seeing”: Walt Whitman, the poet, and William H. Jackson, the photographer. How do these arts differ from each other? How might they be similar in their abilities to capture external and internal worlds?



5. The truth of what Stephen sees, either by mechanical means (the camera) or by visionary ones (dreams and visions), may be incomplete or even mistaken. How, then, does Stephen's partial blindness affect his reliability as a narrator? And if Stephen is an unreliable narrator, how are we to view—i.e., believe or disbelieve—his observations on and denunciations of racism, greed, imperialism, the waste of life and natural resources?
6. Stephen is often cruel or indifferent. How do these unattractive qualities make you feel toward him? Does your emotional response to him change during the course of the book?
7. What does the story gain by using historical figures, such as Lincoln, Whitman, William H. Jackson, George Armstrong Custer, and Ulysses S. Grant? Besides the author's claim, on the book's acknowledgments page, that all persons in his novel have been fictionalized, what can we infer about history's written representation of its principal actors?
8. What actual and symbolical place does Custer occupy in the novel? Is he a true-to-life representation of the original general of that name or a caricature? What about Walt Whitman and William H. Jackson? What can caricature achieve in fiction that realism cannot? In his writing, is the author of *American Meteor* a realist, a caricaturist, or something else?
9. Walt Whitman and Henry Jackson have very different ideas concerning progress. What are those ideas and with whom would Stephen side?
10. The Transcontinental Railroad, which employs Stephen as a steward, is both actual and symbolic. What does it symbolize in *American Meteor*?
11. Sickness and disability are omnipresent in *American Meteor*. Do they function as realistic details or do they serve an ulterior purpose in the novel?
12. *American Meteor* is not history as history is recorded in a memoir or presented in a work of nonfiction. The author asks that it be considered as "a novel of adventure, ideas, and mourning; a unique vision of our nation's fabulous and murderous history." In what ways does such a visionary and fabulous novel offer the reader insights into times, places, and people that wouldn't be possible in a work of nonfiction or a more conventionally told historical novel?
13. Did you feel you were reading a nineteenth-century novel or a contemporary one? How did the language, themes, and setting contribute to that feeling?
14. How "American" is *American Meteor*? In other words, are any of its themes universal?
15. Through poetic language and cinematic, theatrical structuring, the author manages to recreate a large and sprawling historical era in a relatively short novel. Do you believe *American Meteor* could have—or should have—been longer?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Norman Lock is the author of, most recently, the short story collection *Love Among the Particles* and six books in The American Novels series, a major literary project that exquisitely subverts traditional boundaries between history and imagination, and fiction and nonfiction, to illuminate humanity's glorious and monstrous legacy. Although each novel stands alone, Lock weaves subtle connections between each book, paying homage to major American literary figures and genres: first with Mark Twain and the coming-of-age story in *The Boy in His Winter*; then with Walt Whitman and the Western in *American Meteor*; Edgar Allan Poe and the gothic psychological thriller in *The Port-Wine Stain*; Henry David Thoreau and other transcendentalists in a marriage of slave narrative and pastoral drama in *A Fugitive in Walden Woods*; Emily Dickinson in a lyrical lament of love and innocence lost in *The Wreckage of Eden*; and Herman Melville in a dark tale of ambition and the secrets of the heart in *Feast Day of the Cannibals*. Lock lives in Aberdeen, New Jersey, where he is at work on the next books in The American Novels series. Visit his website at www.normanlock.com.

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