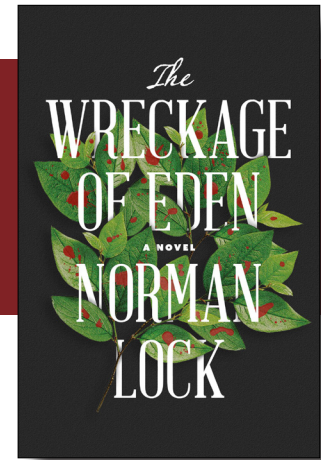




The Wreckage of Eden

A novel by Norman Lock

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“Perceptive and contemplative. . . . Bring[s] the 1840s–60s to life with shimmering prose.”
—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“A firsthand view of the fracturing of society leading to the Civil War. The novel is structured as Robert’s correspondence with Dickinson, whose ideals and aesthetics serve as a contrast to his own loss of faith. . . . Lock deftly tells a visceral story of belief and conflict, with abundant moments of tragedy and transcendence along the way.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*

“*The Wreckage of Eden* is a huge and dark fresco of an army chaplain’s journey through very difficult and troubling periods of American history (normally denied us in school), and all the while this fine angle of approach is like a slow cinematic zoom and track onto an elusive Emily Dickinson ensconced in her Amherst.”
—**The Brothers Quay, award-winning film directors**

INTRODUCTION

When U.S. Army chaplain Robert Winter first meets Emily Dickinson, he is fascinated by the brilliance of the strange girl immersed in her botany lessons. She will become his confidante, obsession, and muse over the years as he writes to her of his friendship with the aspiring politician Abraham Lincoln, his encounter with the young newspaperman Samuel Clemens, and his crisis of conscience concerning the radical abolitionist John Brown. Bearing the standard of God and country through the Mexican War and the Mormon Rebellion, Robert seeks to lessen his loneliness while his faith is eroded by the violence he observes and ultimately commits. Emily, however, remains as elusive as her verse on his rare visits to Amherst and denies him solace, a rejection that will culminate in a startling epiphany at the very heart of his despair.

Powerfully evocative of Emily Dickinson’s life, times, and artistry, the novel captures a nation riven by conflicts that continue to this day.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Robert Winter’s name may be interpreted as allegorical. How does “winter” pervade the novel, and how are the other principal characters touched by it?
2. In what ways is Robert Winter, as a U.S. Army chaplain, given a privileged view of his times? In what ways is his viewpoint prejudiced by his times?
3. The novel’s title is *The Wreckage of Eden*. If the Eden of the story is a young America, how is its “wreckage” wrought? Are there other possible interpretations of the title?
4. Robert Winter, in his first-person narration, reveals himself to be an unreliable witness to the book’s historical events, and his fallibility can be seen as an example of the infidelity of both individual memory and national memory. Has this novel changed your perspective on American history, which often relies on individual testimony? What are our responsibilities to the historical record as witnesses to the events of our own time?



5. In the context of the unreliability of storytelling and of history, what is the role of historical fiction? What “truths” might fiction be able to reveal that nonfiction cannot?
6. “I’d lost my way while we were bringing fire and the sword to the Mexicans,” Robert Winter writes. “The sketch that, moment by moment, we make of ourselves had smudged.” How have his experiences throughout the book changed him, particularly his belief in God, his government, and himself? Has his relationship with Emily Dickinson helped him resolve his doubts?
7. Did Norman Lock’s portrait of Emily Dickinson in the novel conform to ideas you may have had about her from her poetry or works based on her life? Does her representation in the story seem plausible? What, if anything, does her depiction in the novel reveal about artists’ roles in shaping history and national identity?
8. Robert Winter encounters several other famous figures from history, including Abraham Lincoln, Samuel Clemens (aka Mark Twain), and John Brown. How do their interactions with Robert Winter shape his perspective on his country and himself?
9. What is the novel’s message about slavery and Manifest Destiny in America? How are they linked, and how do their effects continue to this day?
10. Toward the end of the novel, John Brown declares that taking action, doing God’s work, often involves the sacrifice of a clean conscience and is “the greatest service a man can render unto God, even if he be damned for it.” Do you think Robert Winter comes to agree with him? Do you?

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.

GO BEHIND THE SCENES

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