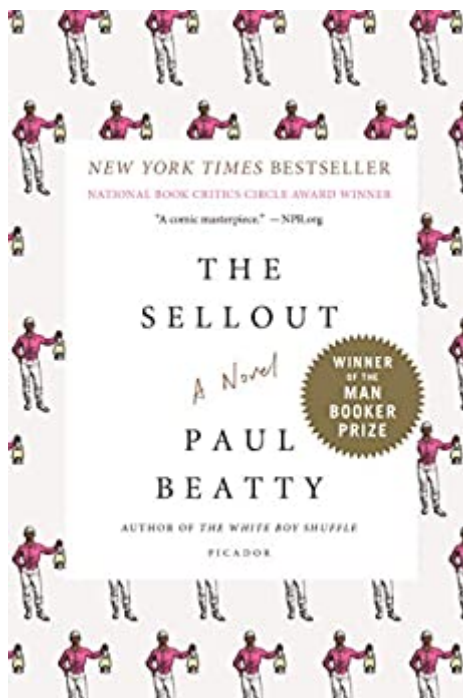


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The Sellout: A Novel



Synopsis

Winner of the Man Booker Prize Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award in Fiction Winner of the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature New York Times Bestseller Los Angeles Times Bestseller Named One of the 10 Best Books of the Year by The New York Times Book Review Named a Best Book of the Year by Newsweek, The Denver Post, BuzzFeed, Kirkus Reviews, and Publishers Weekly Named a "Must-Read" by Flavorwire and New York Magazine's "Vulture" Blog A biting satire about a young man's isolated upbringing and the race trial that sends him to the Supreme Court, Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* showcases a comic genius at the top of his game. It challenges the sacred tenets of the United States Constitution, urban life, the civil rights movement, the father-son relationship, and the holy grail of racial equality—the black Chinese restaurant. Born in the "agrarian ghetto" of Dickens on the southern outskirts of Los Angeles—the narrator of *The Sellout* resigns himself to the fate of lower-middle-class Californians: "I'd die in the same bedroom I'd grown up in, looking up at the cracks in the stucco ceiling that've been there since '68 quake." Raised by a single father, a controversial sociologist, he spent his childhood as the subject in racially charged psychological studies. He is led to believe that his father's pioneering work will result in a memoir that will solve his family's financial woes. But when his father is killed in a police shoot-out, he realizes there never was a memoir. All that's left is the bill for a drive-thru funeral. Fueled by this deceit and the general disrepair of his hometown, the narrator sets out to right another wrong: Dickens has literally been removed from the map to save California from further embarrassment. Enlisting the help of the town's most famous resident—the last surviving Little Rascal, Hominy Jenkins—he initiates the most outrageous action conceivable: reinstating slavery and segregating the local high school, which lands him in the Supreme Court.

Book Information

File Size: 1872 KB

Print Length: 305 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (March 3, 2015)

Publication Date: March 3, 2015

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00MLN1TT0

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #5,656 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #8 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Literature & Fiction > Literary Fiction > Satire #14 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Literature & Fiction > Literary Fiction > African American #44 in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Humor > Satire

Customer Reviews

Rather than copy the other very astute reviews, let me just tell you how to read this book. It's challenging, and it doesn't always follow the standard dictates of plot, but you may enjoy it more if you know what to expect.1) It's not a page-turning, finish-in-one-night kind of book. If you try, you'll miss out. I had to read it over several days, each session giving me a hundred things to think about.2) When you get anxious for the plot to pick up, think of it as satirical standup, and read it like you'd listen to the comics to which Beatty's compared, namely Dave Chapelle. (If you're thinking of it as a novel instead of as satire, you can lose the thread of hilarity) When you're overwhelmed by the satire, think of it as a novel and try to piece together the experiences that make up Bonbon's character. It's hard to get hold of his character at times, and trying to summarize Bonbon Me's character is a (rewarding) reading experience in and of itself.3) You may want to have google at hand so you don't miss out on the plethora (this word is on my mind after one particularly funny bit near the end), of cultural and historical references. You might know Plessy v. Ferguson and the scopes trial, but it would be hard, I think, to catch every reference, and the satire depends on them.4) Yes, it's funny, but not in the LOL way as often as 'that so true it's painful' way. Reading the reviews, I expected to be chuckling every few pages. Instead I had a wry grin every few sentences. Don't let this deter you. The verbs come at the end of sentences so often that you really have to read it at a run if you don't want to lose the thread of what's going on, but I can guarantee the thread is worth catching. In the last few pages of the book, Beatty comes as close to speaking to you plainly as the author as he does in the entire novel, and what he had to say tied the its many disparate observations together perfectly.

Who writes like this? I asked myself, having been overwhelmed with satiric jabs after about 25 densely written pages. Ishmael Reed? And then why compare Beatty only to another black writer?

Was that racist? Woody Allen wrote this densely, stories full of caricatures and outrageous situations, but New-York-Jewish in subject, and then only a few pages long, not an entire novel. Surely Beatty couldn't keep it up. But by page 227 his comic inventions were still going strong. Here the protagonist converts the "long out-of-business brushless car wash" in his L.A. ghetto into a "tunnel of whiteness" for the local children, with "several race wash options:" Regular Whiteness: Benefit of the Doubt Higher Life Expectancy Lower Insurance Premiums Deluxe Whiteness: Regular Whiteness Plus Warnings instead of Arrests from the Police Decent Seats at Concerts and Sporting Events World Revolves Around You and Your Concerns Super Deluxe Whiteness: Deluxe Whiteness Plus Jobs with Annual Bonuses Military Service Is for Suckers Legacy Admission to College of Your Choice Therapists That Listen Boats That You Never Use All Vices and Bad Habits Referred to as "Phases" Not Responsible for Scratches, Dents, and Items Left in the Subconscious By "dense," I mean that almost every sentence contains a comic explosion, a twist, something that leaves you breathless or laughing out loud. Who does that? I thought of Barry Hannah, a Southern writer now gone. I think Hannah would have admired Beatty and recognized a literary kinsman. Also, something about Beatty's writing seemed to come from African-American oratory, its ornateness maybe, like Stanley Crouch's writing about jazz, but it wasn't self-conscious. Certainly the point of view was uniquely African-American, and I'm sure as a white reader I missed some of the inside humor. But plenty hit home with me, and would with almost any other half-alert citizen of this great land. Speaking of which: this is a horrible time in our culture "with everyone's cell phones recording the underbelly of brutal racist policing, with political reactionaries running amok" to be attempting satire. It damn well better be funny. Beatty succeeds with a scenario that's not only side-splitting but right up to the minute. (I'm tempted to give more examples but will forbear) He's brilliant. (He's also profane and vulgar, as how could he not be? The n-word alone is used probably 1000 times) Chris Rock can be devastatingly funny sometimes. Key & Peele can be outrageously funny sometimes. Making a barb leap off the written page is harder. As one critic said: Beatty can reduce a sacred cow to hamburger with one sentence.

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