

Sellout (Beatty)

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The Sellout

Paul Beatty, 2015

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

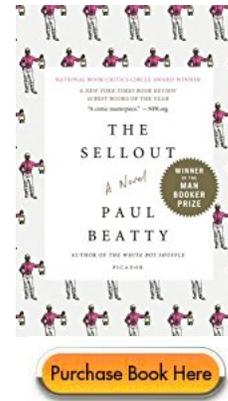
304 pp.

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Summary

Winner, 2016 Man Booker Prize

Winner, 2016 National Book Critics Circle Award



*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.

Fuelled 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. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—1962
- Where—Los Angeles, California, USA
- Education—M.F.A., Brooklyn College; M.A., Boston University;
- Currently—New York, New York

Paul Beatty is a contemporary American author. He received his MFA in creative writing from Brooklyn College and an MA in psychology from Boston University. He is a 1980 graduate of El Camino Real High School in Woodland Hills, California.

Poetry

In 1990, Paul Beatty was crowned the first ever Grand Poetry Slam Champion of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. One of the prizes for winning that championship was a book deal—which resulted in his first volume of poetry, *Big Bank Takes Little Bank*.

This was followed by another book of poetry *Joker, Joker, Deuce* and appearances performing his poetry on MTV and PBS (in the series *The United States of Poetry*).

In 1993, he was awarded a grant from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts Grants to Artists Award.

Fiction

His first novel, *The White Boy Shuffle* received a positive review in the *New York Times*, whose reviewer, Richard Bernstein, called the book "a blast of satirical heat from the talented heart of black American life."

His second book, *Tuff* received a positive notice in *Time* magazine. In 2006, Beatty edited an anthology of African-American humor called *Hokum* and wrote an article in the *New York Times* on the same subject.

His 2008 novel *Slumberland* was about an American DJ in Berlin.

In *The Sellout*, released in 2015, Beatty returns to Los Angeles, to a fictional neighborhood called Dickens, for this novel about an urban farmer who tries to spearhead a return to slavery and segregation. (*From Wikipedia. Retrieved 11/17/2015.*)

Book Reviews

The first 100 pages of [Paul Beatty's] new novel, *The Sellout*, are the most caustic and the most badass first 100 pages of an American novel I've read in at least a decade. I gave up underlining the killer bits because my arm began to hurt.... [They] read like the most concussive monologues and interviews of Chris Rock, Richard Pryor and Dave Chappelle wrapped in a satirical yet surprisingly delicate literary and historical sensibility.... The jokes come up through your spleen.... The riffs don't stop coming in this landmark and deeply aware comic novel.... [It] puts you down in a

place that's miles from where it picked you up.

Dwight Garner - New York Times

Swiftian satire of the highest order.... Giddy, scathing and dazzling.

Sam Sacks - Wall Street Journal

[*The Sellout*] is among the most important and difficult American novels written in the 21st century.... It is a bruising novel that readers will likely never forget.

Kiese Laymon - Los Angeles Times

The Sellout isn't just one of the most hilarious American novels in years, it also might be the first truly great satirical novel of the century.... [It] is a comic masterpiece, but it's much more than just that—it's one of the smartest and most honest reflections on race and identity in America in a very long time.

Michael Schaub - NPR.org

Beatty's satirical latest is a droll, biting look at racism in modern America.... Beatty gleefully...question[s] what exactly constitutes black identity in America. Wildly funny but deadly serious, Beatty's caper is populated by outrageous caricatures, and its damning social critique carries the day.

Publishers Weekly

Beatty, author of the deservedly highly praised *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), here outdoes himself and possibly everybody else in a send-up of race, popular culture, and politics in today's America . . . Beatty hits on all cylinders in a darkly funny, dead-on-target, elegantly written satire . . . [*The Sellout*] is frequently laugh-out-loud funny and, in the way of the great ones, profoundly thought provoking. A major contribution. —Mark Levin

Library Journal

Beatty has never been afraid to stir the pot when it comes to racial and socioeconomic issues, and his latest is no different. In fact, this novel is his most incendiary, and readers unprepared for streams of racial slurs...in the service of satire should take a pass.... Another daring, razor-sharp novel from a writer with talent to burn.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

Use our LitLovers Book Club Resources; they can help with discussions for any book:

- [How to Discuss a Book](#) (helpful discussion tips)
- [Generic Discussion Questions—Fiction and Nonfiction](#)
- [Read-Think-Talk](#) (a guided reading chart)

1. Do you find this book offensive? Why or why not? What other readers might take offense at *The Sellout*? Why is Paul Beatty's language so incendiary?
2. In his lengthy Barnes & Noble review, Stefan Beck says that *The Sellout* will "shock all of us into reexamining what we think we know about race in America." Did the book have that effect on you? Did it alter how you, personally, view black-white relations in the US?
3. What is the thematic significance (and humor) in the fact that the father of the book's narrator dropped the double-e from his last name, resulting in the surname Me—and, thus, the title of the Supreme Court case, *Me vs. the United States*?
4. How off-putting, or difficult, did you find the first 300 pages or so of this book? Was it difficult to follow the narrative thread, to get your "fictional footing"? Why might the author have opened his book with this stylistic technique?
5. What is the purpose of instituting slavery? What does Me hope to accomplish by doing so?
6. What do you think of the white woman who utters this: "[Y]ou're a beautiful woman who just happens to be black, and you're far too smart not to know that it isn't race that's the problem but class"? What do you think of her statement? What do you think the author thinks of it?
7. What about academia? What does Beatty think of black intellectuals and, particularly, the attempt to sanitize Twain's classic?

I also improved Jim's diction, rejiggered the plotline a bit, and retitled the book *The Pejorative-Free Adventures and Intellectual and Spiritual Journeys of African-American Jim and His Young Protege, White Brother Huckleberry Finn, as They Go in Search of the Lost Black Family Unit*.

(By the way, pay attention to the use of the word "rejiggered.")

8. What is the title's significance? First, what is a sellout?—define it. What is being sold out...or who is being sold out...and who is doing the selling out?

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