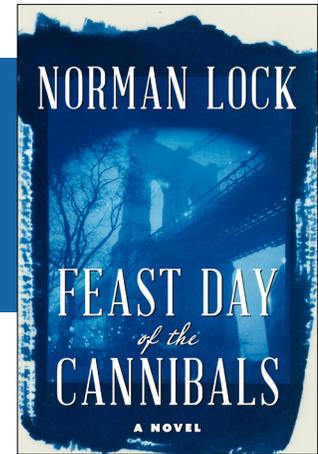




Feast Day of the Cannibals

A novel by Norman Lock

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“This spectacular work will delight and awe readers with Lock’s magisterial wordsmithing.”
—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“Transfixing. ... This historically authentic novel raises potent questions about sexuality during an unsettling era in American history past and is another impressive entry in Lock’s dissection of America’s past.”
—*Publishers Weekly*

“Lock’s latest entry in his superb American Novels series again features his remarkable eye for historical detail and fine-tuned felicity with the language of the period. At times, the sparkling prose is nearly indistinguishable from that of the authors Lock so clearly admires, Melville, Hawthorne, and Thoreau. . . . The mellifluous language, literary allusions, and some subtle *Moby-Dick* parallels, such as Melville using a harpoon to kill rats in the hulls of ships, will delight fans of classic American literature.”
—*Booklist*

“While *Moby-Dick* is often referenced by the characters, it’s *Billy Budd*, a later work of Melville’s, that’s alluded to thematically, as Lock addresses questions of desire and repression, both personal and societal. . . . [*Feast Day of the Cannibals*] memorably provides a window into old New York and its narrator’s conflicted mind.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Engrossing and elegant, *Feast Day of the Cannibals* captures America’s kaleidoscopic spirit during a tumultuous, rapacious era.”
—*Foreword Reviews*

INTRODUCTION

Shelby Ross, a merchant ruined by the depression of 1873–79, is hired as a New York City Custom House appraiser under inspector Herman Melville, the embittered, forgotten author of *Moby-Dick*. On the docks, Ross befriends a genial young man and makes an enemy of a despicable one, who attempts to destroy them by insinuating that Ross and the young man share an unnatural affection. Ross narrates his story to his childhood friend Washington Roebling, chief engineer of the soon-to-be-completed Brooklyn Bridge. As he is harried toward a fate reminiscent of Ahab’s, he encounters Ulysses S. Grant, dying in a brownstone on the Upper East Side; Samuel Clemens, who will publish Grant’s Memoirs; and Thomas Edison, at the dawn of the electrification of the city.

Feast Day of the Cannibals charts the harrowing journey of a tormented heart during America’s transformative age.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. In each of Norman Lock’s books from The American Novels cycle, he invents a protagonist who engages with historical characters drawn from the nineteenth century. In this novel, Shelby Ross, a failed merchant, tells his story to Washington Roebling, shut-in chief engineer of the Brooklyn Bridge. How do the perspectives of these characters influence the story and your understanding of its historical moment?
2. Is Shelby Ross a reliable narrator of the story he tells Washington Roebling? How much should the reader believe his version of events?
3. Does Shelby Ross’s character develop in significant ways over the course of the novel? Did you find him to be sympathetic?



4. How is the character of Herman Melville different from the man you had imagined as the author of *Moby-Dick*? What is the relationship between a fictionalized character and its historical original?
5. In *Feast Day of the Cannibals*, Shelby Ross encounters two more historic figures, Ulysses S. Grant and Samuel Clemens. What role, if any, do they serve in the protagonist's characterization and growth?
6. The Brooklyn Bridge, seen outside Roebling's bedroom window as it nears completion, stands as a backdrop to Shelby Ross's narration. What might the bridge represent for the narrator and for his creator, the author?
7. The image of the caisson, the air-tight chamber slowly sinking toward the riverbed beneath the bridge, appears frequently throughout the novel. In what way are the characters akin to the "sandhogs" laboring underwater inside the caissons?
8. The language of the novel is often weighted with significance, verging on poetic. Why do you think the author wrote in this grander register? Did the language succeed in elevating the story?
9. How does *Feast Day of the Cannibals* echo Melville's own novels, including *Moby-Dick*? What references did you spot throughout the novel?
10. *Publishers Weekly* praises the novel for raising "potent questions about sexuality during an unsettling era in American history." How is homophobia addressed in the novel? What has changed since the era the novel is set in, and what hasn't?
11. At the end of the novel, Shelby Ross imagines a different ending to the story of his year spent with Herman Melville on Gansevoort Pier. Why might have Lock invented this alternative ending to Ross's tale?

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

Find interviews with the author and much more at www.blpress.org.