

RICHARD FORD'S FRANK BASCOMBE AS AN AMERICAN EVERYMAN

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Novelist and short-story writer Richard Ford (Jackson, Mississippi, 1944) has been considered by professor Huey Guagliardo as “first and foremost an American writer whose works often offer penetrating explorations into American culture” (2001: xi). The national experience of the citizens of the United States becomes the element that fuels Ford’s narrative engine. More specifically, Ford’s main novelistic project, the Bascombe trilogy, composed of *The Sportswriter* (1986), *Independence Day* (1995) and *The Lay of the Land* (2006), investigates different discourses of ‘Americanness’, and in doing so, proposes possible cultural identity models, attending to a variety of social categories. In this article, I will provide a detailed analysis of the autodiegetic narrator, Frank Bascombe, as a representative US everyman.

One need not read more than a couple of in-depth interviews to realize how elusive writers of fiction tend to be when asked to dissect the components of their narrative. Understandably, they would rather not reduce their work to a series of formal elements and patterns—which literature is to a significant extent. In the essay “Nobody’s Everyman” (2009), Richard Ford refuses to attach the reductionist label ‘everyman’ to his signature character, Frank Bascombe. This should come as no surprise: the author argues that he is not interested in types but in human beings, which would be a valid point except for one detail: Frank does not have an existence outside the written text. Regardless of the artist’s intention,

his creature stands in these novels for something else, and I agree with many critics, commentators and readers that Ford's character represents one of the finest embodiments of Americanness in contemporary US fiction. For one thing, Frank assigns himself such a label —via Ford, obviously— when he presents himself to the reader as an “arch-ordinary American”,¹ a modern incarnation of the common person that, as George Lipsitz observes, has been eulogized in US fiction from the New Deal period (2001: 21). In the following pages, I will try to assess the accuracy of the term as applied to Frank.

A preliminary factor must be taken into account: there is no single version of Americanness in these novels. Frank Bascombe represents a mainstream ideal of US citizenship, but secondary characters such as Mike Mahoney —Frank's Tibetan business associate— offer challenging versions of national identity. Apparently, the Bascombe saga has little to do with questions of gender, race or class, in the sense that its dominant narrative voice and main character embodies the unmarked categories of male, heterosexual, white and middle-class.² Thus, Ford resorts to the hegemonic perspective of a WASP tradition. As Michael S. Kimmel remarks, “[o]nly white people in our society have the luxury not to think about race every minute of their lives. And only men have the luxury to pretend that gender does not matter” (2000: 7). However, the key lesson extracted from Toni Morrison's influential volume *Playing in the Dark* (1992) is that social elements apparently ignored in canonical US fiction have an unconscious yet unavoidable presence in it. In other words, the kind of Americanness Frank stands for is defined both by what he does and does not represent. In any case, this article will attend to the validity of the term ‘everyman’ as applied to Frank Bascombe, since a discussion of alternative US identities informed by racial, gender and class questions would go beyond the scope of the present work.

Therefore, Frank's self-definition as a US everyman poses an initial problem: does it make any sense to claim that there exists an archetypal US citizen? On the one hand, there is no clearly discernible group of features shared by all of the citizens of such a vast nation. Interestingly, in “How does being an American Inform What I Write?” (2002), Richard Ford admits that prior to gaining a national consciousness, he sensed the regional awareness of being a Mississippian, leading to a sense that the US represents a joining together of seemingly disparate territories. As though the description of a national identity in the United States were not complex enough, it is also subject to further regional deconstruction. Frank's biography offers an obvious example of a diverse US: a Mississippian who went to college in Ann Arbor, married a Midwesterner (Ann Dykstra), dated a Texan (Vicky Arcenault), and definitively settled in New Jersey, where he has a Tibetan business partner (Mike Mahoney). As a Southerner spending most of his life in the North,

Frank comes to draw together elements of arguably the two longest-standing male myths in the history of the United States: the Confederate chivalry and the self-made Yankee —those conflicting visions of manhood whose opposition during the Civil War “signaled the triumph of the urban industrial entrepreneur over the genteel southern patrician” (Kimmel 2006: 50). In Frank, too, the booster Yankee prevails over the Southern cavalier.

As a matter of fact, Frank's feelings toward both his native South and its inhabitants conflict in various ways. A case in point would be the relationship between Frank and Fincher, a character he meets in *The Sportswriter* and greatly dislikes, especially when he begins acting “Southern”,³ which means, among other things, relating to family and place in a particular way, along with an idiosyncratic diction and tone. In general, Frank does not feel at ease in the presence of fellow Southerners, and is happy to avoid the topics *he* assumes they would like to discuss: namely politics and race.⁴ What emerges as significant is that Frank himself realizes that there is no such a thing as a Southern essence, and offers his own experience by way of example: “I simply couldn't imagine going to high school with a bunch of Yankees —though, of course, I would someday become one of them and think it was great” (*LOTL* 319). The connotations of the term are explained by Kimmel: “Southerners saw northerners as crassly commercial, avaricious, unscrupulous, aggressive, and mercenary; ‘Yankee’ was a decidedly negative term, denoting unethical business practices and concern only for the bottom line” (2006: 51). In any case, the fact that a Mississippi-born citizen can become a convinced Yankee must mean that nationality (or in this case, regional belonging) is to a great extent a performance, a habit that can be either exercised or challenged.

1. A self-made everyman

As A.O. Scott notes, Frank has been labeled as “a Representative Man, an Everyday Hero, a shining exemplar of the Great American Average” (2006).⁵ In Vivian Gornick's words, the opening Bascombe novel offers “life inflicting itself on the most ordinary of men” (2008: 156). One assumes that Frank would sanction such terminology; not in vain, “being an ordinary citizen” is one of the modest goals he establishes as soon as readers begin to familiarize themselves with him (*SW* 11). Frank craves for anonymity and for an ordinariness that justifies the term ‘everyman’: “Better to think that you're like your fellow man than to think [...] that no man could be you or take your place” (*SW* 78). In fact, one of the reasons why he reckons he is good at sponsoring (a home-delivery version of telephone counseling) is that he suspects he has “a lot in common with *everybody*” (*LOTL* 139; emphasis in the original), a feature he benefits from in his business activity.

However, race, class and gender differences will stand between him and a large number of his fellow US citizens, challenging his self-assigned representative quality. The regular incongruities between Frank's self-image and his acts,⁶ along with his idiosyncratic yet rather superficial meekness, which seems to facilitate Ford's goal of writing about an essentially decent human being (Bonetti 2001: 29), reinforce the notion of a man who displays an idealized image of himself.

For one thing, Frank self-fashions as an ideal practitioner of the quintessential profession in the land of commerce and consumerism: "'I understand conventional wisdom,' I say. 'I'm a salesman'" (*LOTL* 224). Furthermore, the figure of the traveling salesman reflects an ideal of simplicity promulgated by Frank, in contrast to the intricacy of writing fiction (*SW* 39). In truth, Frank is a descendant of what Daniel Boorstin called "*Businessman Americanus*" (1965: 121), not necessarily a new species *per se* but an individual whose uniqueness emerges from the peculiarities of the American experience. In Kimmel's historical review, salesmen were the twentieth-century version of the self-made men, who sold "themselves, their winning personalities, their smiles and shoeshines" (2006: 71). In his introduction to one of the novels that best captured the Puritan ethos, Henry James' *The Bostonians*, R. D. Gooder emphasizes many of the features associated with the Puritan tradition, which are equally present in the myth of the self-made man, such as determination, self-control and self-examination, or rectitude (1998: ix, xviii).

Puritanism's strong urge for success, ambition and work-ethic are inextricably linked to capitalism. In his analysis of Cotton Mather's biography of John Winthrop, Sacvan Bercovitch remarks that Winthrop's life becomes a model for the American stories of thriving, in part because "Puritanism opened the way to material as well as spiritual prosperity" (1975: 3). Indeed, in the first Puritan communities of the New England area, material prosperity was seen as a proof of moral grace. With God on their side, not only did settlers sanction a concern for wealth, they also promoted it. These circumstances combined to form a typification of the way US citizens have historically faced material progress—especially since the New England Way was adopted to a significant extent as the American Way (Bercovitch 1975: 108). As the nation relentlessly consolidated its position as a capitalist power controlled by corporations, the myth of self-made men became increasingly harder to sustain—especially when the United States completed the transition from "a nation of small entrepreneurs [...] into a nation of hired employees" (Kimmel 2006: 158). Being bossed by a superior dramatically challenges the self-reliance that has characterized the ideal American man. Individualism has to be redefined to fit the social and economic reality of corporate America, where men are "subject to so many forces outside their control" (Kimmel 2006: 159). In his deconstruction of the myth, George Lipsitz sees the ideology of the self-made man as an element

of the conservatives' allegiance to the American master narrative (2001: 79). In a similar vein, Howard Zinn describes the 'rags to riches' myth as an ideology designed to facilitate social control of the working class, "a lesson in values [rather] than as a description of reality" (1995: 156, 248). When social mobility failed (and that was commonly the case), the nation searched for alternative myths to avoid despair. Geographical mobility acted as a compensatory option —or, as Kimmel puts it, "one could at least head west" (2006: 61).

An interesting question ensues: does Frank respond to the ideal of the self-made man? His parents were "rural Iowans" who moved around before Frank's birth until they finally settled in Biloxi, Mississippi, where his father "had some work that involved plating ships with steel" at a ship-building company (SW 21-22). Therefore, Frank's humble origins are a fact. Upon his father's death, Frank was sent to Gulf Pines, a military school through which he came to win an NROTC scholarship (i.e. a scholarship granted by the Navy) that allowed him to enroll at the University of Michigan. Frank's stroke of luck continued and he wrote a book of short stories he managed to sell "to a movie producer for a lot of money", as he confesses in *The Sportswriter's* opening page. Thanks to the deal, "I was rich, at least for those times. It was 1968" (SW 34). Arguably, fortune was on Frank's side. Although his promising book of fiction was a product of his talent, it became his only successful attempt at literary creation, since he failed to write a follow-up. Shortly after the sale and with the help of the money earned by Ann Dykstra's modeling —they had met and married along the way—, they bought a house in the fictitious suburb of Haddam, New Jersey. A number of sporadic articles, followed by an offer to write sports news full-time for a magazine, secured his position even as Ann got pregnant and quit modeling. Any lingering economic worries he might have had came to an end in the period between *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, with the profitable sale of his house (after Ann divorced him). From that moment on, already a well-established real estate agent, Frank would not need to concern himself about money anymore.

Therefore, against the oversimplified template of the self-made man narrative as a 'rags to riches' story, with wealth as the result of hard work and resilience, Frank does not exactly match the myth: a little less chance and a little more persistence would probably do the trick. On the other hand, for Michael S. Kimmel, the self-made man was defined by "success in the market, individual achievement, mobility [and] wealth" (2006: 17). Without being a hypercompetitive salesman, Frank is certainly successful in the new line of work he takes up in *Independence Day* and *The Lay of the Land*. A degree of individual achievement can be granted him in virtue of his business success and his having written a valuable piece of fiction —despite his faults as a husband and a father. He is likewise presented as a man on

the move, in part due to the fact that these three novels are set in holidays (Easter, Independence Day and Thanksgiving), and his mobility provides Ford with narrative possibilities in his attempt to show a rich picture of contemporary USA. In conclusion, Frank's life experiences are at the same time specific and ordinary enough to allow his ascription to the malleable myth of the self-made man.

2. A male utopia

Frank recurrently insists on, even boasts about, his average character: "I think I'm just more at ease in the mainstream. It's my version of sublime" (*ID* 272). Anonymity represents for him a possibility of continuous renewal, the kind of new beginnings longed for by his proverbial optimism (*SW* 148). Along these lines, he explains at the Deerslayer Inn, where he and his son Paul arrive after dinner time:

I hate to be the one asking for special treatment, who wants his dinner late, his laundry returned without his ticket, who can't find his stub for his prints, has to have his tires rotated *this* afternoon because he needs to drive to Buffalo in the morning and the left front seems to be wearing a little unevenly. I prefer my regular place in line. (*ID* 312; emphasis in the original).

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Better not pay much attention to the fact that after this declaration of principles, he tries to get a meal although the kitchen is closed; as usual, Frank's self-fashioning is a source of contradictions. He belongs to the stock of twentieth-century "other directed" men described by Kimmel (2006: 81), characterized by an urgent need to be liked by their fellow men (in the case of Frank, first and foremost, his readers). One might have expected quite the opposite: that such a ruminative and reflective character would have rather resembled the lonely nineteenth-century "inner directed" man with a strong character, but that is something Frank realizes he lacks, much to his dismay (*LOTL* 74). Kimmel summarizes that turn-of-the-century social change thus: "[t]he rugged individualism of the nineteenth century had been replaced by the shallow sociability of the modern American personality" (2006: 176). In fact, when Frank applies his own version of individualism to his personal relations as disconnectedness, the result is nothing short of disastrous, as Brian Duffy (2008) observes.

Frank's ideal of (male) Americanness is embodied by Lloyd Mangum, the man in charge of Mangum & Gayden Funeral Home in Haddam:

Lloyd is a man not much made in America now, though once there were plenty: men without preconditions or sharp angles the world has to contend with, men who go to work, entertain important, unsensational duties, get home on time, mix a hefty brown drink after six, enjoy the company of the Mrs. till ten, catch the early news, then trudge off to bed and blissful sleep. (*LOTL* 95)

Frank refers with nostalgia to the simplicity of a gendered pastoral past, so that the elegiac tone of this novel marks one of the fundamental changes of a character who proclaimed in *The Sportswriter* his belief that “Americans put too much emphasis on their pasts as a way of defining themselves, which can be death dealing” (21). The autumnal mood of *The Lay of the Land* depicts Frank trying to maintain his innate optimism, not an easy task once life has become permanent and the largest part of it is already on the books; in Frank’s words, the Permanent Period (his name for his vital moment in the months previous to *The Lay of the Land*) can “erode optimism, render possibility small and remote, and make any of us feel that while we can’t fuck up much of anything anymore, there really isn’t much to fuck up because nothing matters a gnat’s nuts” (*LOTL* 109). So his consolation consists in being content with what the present offers rather than expect much from the future (a life stance, I would argue, not that different from the one advocated by the Existence Period, his approach to life in the days covered by *Independence Day*’s plot).

Some other male characters, much as Frank may have reservations about them, represent in his view an idealized US identity. Such is the case of Tom Benivalle, the possible business associate of Mike Mahoney —Frank’s partner— in *The Lay of the Land*, whose description echoes Lloyd Mangum’s: “he’s exactly what this country’s all about: works like a dray horse, tithes at St. Melchior’s, has never personally killed anyone, stays in shape for the fire department, loves his wife and can’t wait for the sun to come up so he can get crackin’” (*LOTL* 282). In his semi-ironic description, Frank goes so far as to offer Benivalle as a symbol of the United States, as the fulfillment of the American Dream. However, unlike Lloyd, Benivalle comes out as an ambitious character that yearns for economic profit, which on the other hand suits Mike perfectly well, since Frank’s partner “sees clients as rolls of cash that happen to be able to talk” (*LOTL* 613). The contradiction here is merely apparent. In fact, Frank’s eulogy makes complete sense when one considers the similarities between the two: both Frank and Benivalle thrive through speculation, although the former lacks the ambition of the latter, which may explain Frank’s reservations about him. Indeed, with this in mind, Frank’s praise of Benivalle may be read as being not far from self-flattery.

Not only does Frank highlight the character traits of his model US citizen, he also eulogizes the external appearance of the American everyman, which he tries to imitate: “an ordinary-looking Joe in a crew-neck sweater, chinos and a John Deere Tractor cap I’d affected when I got to Berkshire” (*SW* 221). This last item, more commonly associated with the clothing of a farmer than with a sportswriter or a Berkshire College professor (Frank’s profession for a short time), strikes readers as particularly out of character. It seems that Frank tries to evoke the idealized quality

of physical labor (and the manliness it implies) he never really had to resort to in order to earn his living, first as a writer of fiction and sports events, then as a residential agent. Throughout the trilogy, Frank's lack of distinction is reflected by his physical aspect. He wears what he describes as “[g]eneric clothing” ordered from a catalog (*ID* 296). In fact, he maintains that his dress style has remained unchanged since the early sixties (*LOTL* 211). He does, however, confess the rationale behind his clothing choice: to make buyers feel not only comfortable, but also slightly sorry for him. His reasons evoke those expressed by Kimmel in his reference to the plain and simple businessman clothes designed to inspire confidence in clients (2006: 20). Thus, in *The Lay of the Land* Frank asserts that both his car and his clothes are “intended to make as little statement as possible, letting me portray myself to clients as the non-risk-taking everyman with a voice of reason, who only wants the best for all” (547). In a word, he aims for conveying the same “steadiness” that his parents’ clothes represented when he was a child (*LOTL* 548), which at the same time contributes to the search for continuity with the past he carries out in the last Bascombe novel. Therefore, as is the case with virtually any aspect of his behavior Frank’s attention, or lack thereof, to his physical appearance is driven, consciously or not, toward obtaining some profit or advantage.

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3. Temporary about himself

In his essay on isolation and alienation in the Bascombe novels, William G. Chernecky mentions Alexis de Tocqueville’s assertion that “Americans seemed to take more pride in their sameness than in any sense of individuality or personal independence” (2000: 174). It seems that Frank perfectly responds to that observation. The protagonist of these novels is not “particularly a private person” and his interests are limited to the public “parts of man” [*sic*] (*SW* 84, 187). Arguably, Frank wishes to join the not-so-exclusive group of US everymen in order to keep anxiety at bay; his problems do not seem so important upon the realization that “there’s no way that I could feel what hundreds of millions of other citizens haven’t” (*SW* 367). This feeling of belonging to something greater provides Frank with solace in times of need, as when he is diagnosed with prostate cancer: “you share your condition —a kind of modern American condition— with 200,000 other Americans, which is comforting” (*LOTL* 168-69). Thus, Frank resorts to the national imagery in order to produce a self-serving version of the equalizing feeling inscribed in the mythology of the United States. Indeed, Frank’s consolation on the misery of others also reflects the self-deceptive nature of the character.

In several instances the narrative stresses Frank's lack of a distinctive individuality. In *The Sportswriter*, he feels "as invisible as Claude Reins in the movie" after being defined by Ann as "a cliché" (330-31) for his suggesting that they have sex in Walter's post-suicide house; and he is even mistaken for another person in his quick Easter visit to a Presbyterian church, though he is not bothered by this, "since nothing here could matter less than my own identity" (232). Similarly, in *Independence Day* Frank advocates a lifestyle that goes unnoticed, which is actually a fitting summary of his so-called Existence Period. In fact, the Existence Period, with its low expectations, equips Frank with a lukewarm perspective that infuriates other characters who interact with him, such as Joe Markham, an unusually difficult client. As a reply to Frank's criticism that Joe should stop looking at 'things' (i.e. his life) from above, Joe abruptly states that Frank "just see[s] everything from the fucking middle, that's it" (56). As a matter of fact, Joe's disgust with Frank's attitude is not completely beside the point. The narrative in *Independence Day* seems to suggest that Frank's lack of commitment, his reluctance when it comes to complete involvement and full self-disclosure, lies at the heart of his personal problems. On the other hand, in *The Lay of the Land* invisibility is better understood as the consequence of contemplating the penultimate stage of one's existence. Thus, both Frank and one of his clients are rendered invisible by a much-younger group of volleyballers during a stroll on the beach (419), an appropriate image for a fictional world where the limits of its protagonist's existence are constantly reassessed.

According to Huey Guagliardo, the Bascombe novels transcend the plight of the modern individual and chronicle the larger cultural malaise of contemporary society, a scenario that features "the individual's sense of alienation, restlessness, displacement, and fragmentation; the sense of rootlessness, of being cut off from the past, which so often characterizes life in an increasingly mobile society; the disintegration of community; the breakup of the family; and the impoverishment of all human connections" (2000: 5). Obviously, certain hidden anxieties are brought to light by Frank's lack of specificity. For one thing, there is an undefined existential quandary associated with not sensing a strong unique personality, a regular and recognizable character, or an inner essence. This was precisely Frank's plight during his Existence Period, the result of which was the unnoticed and unnoticeable life of "a man with no calculable character" (*LOTL* 75). Frankfurt School psychologist Erich Fromm describes the predicament of the contemporary alienated individual as a person with "opinions and prejudices but no convictions, [...] likes and dislikes, but no will" (in Kimmel 2006: 158). The reader of the trilogy is constantly confronted with Frank's capricious preferences and aversions, but Frank himself admits that he lacks a strong character and moral position — a troubling condition, specially for his confused son, Paul, who in *Independence Day*

stands for the contemporary teenager in need of a point of reference. But Frank, rightfully labeled as “a perpetual escapee” by Alice Hoffman (1986: 14), seems to be even more lost and less reliable than his son.

Frank believes that the modern predicament —exemplified by his clients’ “realty dreads”— stems from “the cold, unwelcome, built-in-America realization that we’re just like the other schmo, wishing his wishes, lusting his stunted lusts, quaking over his idiot frights and fantasies, all of us popped out from the same unchinkable mold”. Although he praises a nondescript existence, Frank is aware of the giddiness resulting from “being tucked even deeper, more anonymously, into the weave of culture”, as symbolized by owning your own house (*ID* 57). Thus, Joe Markham’s refusal to be content with any of the large number of houses shown by Frank can be read as a modern instance of the escape from culture and civilization epitomized by US mythical figures such as Huckleberry Finn. Different though they may seem, both Frank and Joe yearn to be like any other fellow citizen, but not too much —the American equalizing feeling can be a scary burden too.⁷

In conclusion, Frank Bascombe represents an embodiment of a mainstream US national identity. His biographical details and his profit-driven behavior facilitate a discussion of the social utility of myths such as the American salesman and the self-made man, along with the equalizing ideal and the cultural and regional diversity of the United States. Interestingly, these mythical representations, based on a paradigm of self-reliance and allegiance to the principles of capitalism and consumerism, are discourses presented by the hegemony as unquestionable historical facts. Due to Frank’s self-characterization as an American everyman, the deconstruction of such an ideal of standard identity—with its implied racial, gender, sexual or class features, questioning its validity as an eternal narrative, becomes not only relevant but necessary. Cultural identity in the Bascombe novels is exposed as a performative act where citizens, consciously or not, participate in order to reinforce their ‘Americanness’. The golden mean promulgated by Frank crystallizes in the picture of a man with no strong personality or unique individuality. At the same time, his encompassing nature as an average man does not exclude the necessity to examine alternative ways of Americanness in the fiction of Richard Ford. Indeed, although Frank epitomizes an exclusively male ideal of citizenship, the Bascombe novels resort to both their protagonist and multiple supporting characters, besides the interaction between them in a particular context, in order to display a rich image of life-as-it-is in the last few decades of the United States. Nevertheless, the fact that Ford’s character-driven novels primarily focus on the existential tribulations and anxieties of their main character justifies an exploration of the qualities that account for Frank’s self-fashioning as a quintessential US individual in a complex portrait of the white, male, middle-class segment of US citizens.

Notes

¹. Richard Ford, *Independence Day* (London: The Harvill Press, 1995): 141-42. Further references to the novel will be to this edition, and will appear parenthetically, with the acronym *ID*.

². I borrow political scientist Francis Fukuyama's simple definition of the middle class as "people who are neither at the top nor at the bottom of their societies in terms of income, who have received at least a secondary education, and who own either real property, durable goods, or their own businesses" (2012). In other words, the group of people placed, in the social stratification, between the upper and working classes.

³. Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter* (London: Bloomsbury, 1986): 64-66. Further references to the novel will be to this edition, and will appear parenthetically, with the acronym *SW*.

⁴. Ford, *The Lay of the Land* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006): 497. Further references to the novel will be to this edition, and will appear parenthetically, with the acronym *LOTL*.

⁵. However, the *New York Times* journalist and film critic maintains that "Frank

Bascombe is not a type [...], but rather the irreducible, expanding essence of himself", an almost unique representation of life-as-it-is in US fiction.

⁶. In Alice Hoffman's opinion, Frank is "an emotionally untrustworthy narrator" (1986: 14).

⁷. A summary of that feeling would be what Daniel Boorstin calls the "priority principle" (1965: 78; emphasis in the original). Popularized by the dictum 'First come, first served', it is a philosophy of life that, Boorstin argues, works as an equalizer: your past makes no difference, you only need to pass the winning post first in order to achieve a benefit (1965: 112). However, the work of progressive historians like Howard Zinn, whose *A People's History of the United States* focuses on class struggle and the role of the underprivileged in national construction, reminds readers of the fact that the relentless growth of the United States as the model of a capitalist society cannot possibly be explained without the presence of an exploited workforce, exposing along the way the myth of the US as the land of opportunity.

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