



In America

By Susan Sontag

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A glorious, sweeping new novel from the bestselling author of *The Volcano Lover*.

The *Volcano Lover*, Susan Sontag's bestselling 1992 novel, retold the love story of Lady Emma Hamilton and Lord Nelson with consummate power. In her enthralling new novel-once again based on a real story-Sontag shows us our own country on the cusp of modernity. In 1876 a group of Poles led by Maryna Zalewska, Poland's greatest actress, travel to California to found a "utopian" commune. Maryna, who has renounced her career, is accompanied by her small son and husband; in her entourage is a rising young writer who is in love with her. The novel portrays a West that is still largely empty, where white settlers confront native Californians and Asian coolies. The image of America, and of California-as fantasy, as escape, as radical simplification-constantly meets a more complex reality. The commune fails and most of the migrants go home, but Maryna stays and triumphs on the American stage. *In America* is a big, juicy, surprising book-about a woman's search for self-transformation, about the fate of idealism, about the world of the theater-that will captivate its readers from the first page. It is Sontag's most delicious, most brilliant achievement.

Susan Sontag is the internationally acclaimed author of three novels, a volume of stories, and six collections of essays. In 1990 she received a five-year fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation. She lives in New York City.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

As an essayist, Susan Sontag has tended to stick pretty rigorously to the modern age, whether she's anatomizing the wild world of camp or roasting Leni Riefenstahl over the coals. But in her fiction--particularly in such fin-de-siècle productions as *The Volcano Lover*--she's clearly felt the allure of the past. And *In America*, which chronicles the travails of a late-19th-century actress, shows Sontag in top time-traveling form. What's more, it illuminates her motives for glancing so persistently backward. "Almost everything good seems located in the past," she notes in a first-person prologue, "perhaps that's an illusion, but I feel nostalgic for every era before I was born; and one is freer of modern inhibitions, perhaps because one bears no responsibility for the past." There's nothing, it seems, like the age of innocence--a golden moment before we moderns had the curse of self-consciousness brought down on our heads.

It's ironic, then, that *In America* revolves around a regular paragon of self-consciousness: a brilliant Polish diva named Maryna Zalezowska. The year is 1876, and this Bernhardt-like figure has decided to abandon the stage and establish a utopian commune in (you guessed it) California. Not exactly a logical career move, is it? Yet this journey to America does involve a major feat of self-reinvention, for which Maryna may be uniquely qualified. Writing a letter home from the brave new world of Hoboken, New Jersey, she argues against the idea that "life cannot be restarted, that we are all prisoners of whatever we have become." And once she arrives in Anaheim with her husband, child, and fellow utopians in tow, she does seem to slough off the skin of her older, European self. She is now that exotic creature, an American, existing in an equally exotic landscape--which happens to elicit some of Sontag's most lyrical prose:

They had never felt as erect, as vertical, their skin brushed by the hot Santa Ana wind, their ears lulled by the oddly intrusive sound of their own footfalls.... Hardly anything is near anything here: those slouching braided sentinels, the yucca trees, and bouquets of drooping spears, the agaves, and the squat clusters of prickly pears, all so widely spaced, so unresembling--and nothing had to do with anything else.

Like every utopia in human history, Maryna's is a failure. Following its collapse, she is moved to return to the theater--but as an *American*, now, plugged securely into the middlebrow culture of her adopted land. The rest of the novel charts her brilliant career among the philistines, along with a number of heated erotic detours.

Given its subject matter, Sontag's novel is oddly anti-dramatic: she juggles a half-dozen narrative strategies but seldom allows us to sink our teeth into a prolonged *scene*. Yet she delivers a great many other riches by way of compensation. Her take on the perils and pleasures of expatriation is worthy of Henry James (who actually makes a cameo appearance, assuring Maryna that England and America will morph into "one big Anglo-Saxon total.") And she includes a superbly entertaining portrait of theatrical life, culminating in a virtuoso monologue from Edwin Booth that suggests a Gilded Age Samuel Beckett. As always, there is the pleasure of watching the author's formidable intelligence at work, immersing us in the details of a character or landscape and then surfacing for a deep draught of abstraction. Perhaps Sontag is too cerebral to ever produce a straightforward work of fiction. But this time around, anyway, she brings both brains *and* literary brawn to bear on what Henry James himself called "the complex fate" of being an American. --*James Marcus*

From Publishers Weekly

As she did in *The Volcano Lover*, Sontag crafts a novel of ideas in which real figures from the past enact their lives against an assiduously researched, almost cinematically vivid background. Here again her signal achievement is to offer fresh and insightful commentary on the social and cultural currents of an age, with a distinctive understanding of how historical events forged character and destiny. If the story of renowned Polish actress Maryna Zalewska cannot compare in drama to that of Admiral Nelson and the Hamiltons (as a protagonist, Maryna remains somewhat shadowy and elusive), Sontag succeeds in conveying how the political and intellectual atmosphere of Poland and the U.S. in the late 19th century affected her heroine's life. Beautiful, famous and restless at 35, Maryna decides to leave her native land, suffering under Russian occupation. She convinces her husband, Count Bogdan Demboski, her would-be lover, journalist Ryszard Kierul, and various other members of the Warsaw intelligentsia to emigrate to America, where, influenced by Fourier's social philosophy, they will establish an experimental farm commune in southern California. Predictably, the community fails to prosper and falls into debt; idealism gives way to disillusionment; Maryna decides to resume her career, achieving immediate acclaim; and the romantic triangle moves to a new stage. Meanwhile, Sontag makes meaningful associations between a woman's need for freedom and independence, a nation's suffering under a conqueror's heel and the common human quest for "newness, emptiness, pastlessness... this dream of turning life into pure future" that colored many immigrants' views of America. She leads readers into the book via a long, breathless, one-paragraph prologue, narrated as if in a fever dream; indeed, it is not until many pages into the novel that the date and the geographical setting are established. Exemplary at imagining an actor's needs, impulses and sources of inspiration, Sontag also conveys the theatrical world of the time (*East Lynne* was the most popular play; Sarah Bernhardt reigned in Paris) almost palpably. There are few dramatic peaks and valleys in Maryna's story, but the historical backdrop--with pithy and evocative descriptions of American cities at the turn of the last century, cameo portraits of salty frontier types, and snippets of Western lore--supplies the vigor that the main plot often fails to engender. While this book does not exert the passionate energy of *The Volcano Lover*, it is a provocative study of a woman's life and the historical setting in which she moves. Author tour; U.K. rights to Jonathan Cape. (Mar.)

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From Library Journal

In 1876, 35-year-old Maryna Zalewska, Poland's brilliant, revered actress, packs up her 14-person entourage, including husband, child, maid, and assorted relatives and admirers, and emigrates to Anaheim, CA, determined to shed her glittering life and disappear into the unglamorous anonymity borne of the radical, hard-scrabble work of her commune. After a couple of years, with the failure of the farm looming, Maryna returns to the stage in a dazzling U.S. comeback that rockets her to renewed fame, fortune, and smashing success across the nation and overseas. Basing her new novel on the life of Helena Modrzejewska (stage name Helena Modjeska), Sontag uses dense, elegant language, inventive dialog, impassioned monolog, and diary entries to lure the reader more deeply into the fascinating historical journey of a powerful actress charging her high-energy way through the lives of her inner circle, leaving in her wake broken hearts, inspiration, and a sad inner core that may be forever masked by her inability to separate her actress side from her human one. Sontag triumphs once again with her gift for turning history into riveting fiction (*Volcano Lover*). Encourage readers to get beyond the annoyingly contrived first chapter with its invisible observer.

---Beth E. Andersen, Ann Arbor Dist. Lib., MI

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Users Review

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