Late on a fall day in 1974, Derek Reist ’67, M.B.A. ’69, was walking from his rent-controlled apartment/artist’s studio in Manhattan to the Harvard Club to play squash. His work had already been featured in several Manhattan art galleries, and he was at least eking out a living as a painter. But he was still engaged in a sometimes frustrating search for an artistic vision. While crossing a street, Reist looked up and spotted a rooftop water tower, bathed in the sunset’s orange light. He was transfixed.

“I had been trying to figure out how to work with light,” he says, recalling this signal moment with an intensity undimmed nearly four decades later. “It wasn’t a great composition; it was just the way the light was on the water tower. It absolutely hit me. I suddenly knew. I was really, really excited. I didn’t intellectualize it. I just said, ‘This is it!’” When he reached the squash court, Reist apologized and canceled his game. “I had to leave, to go back to my studio and paint what I’d seen,” he recalls. “Now I had an idea I could work on for years.”

The paintings that grew from that epiphany, and for which Reist is best known, are Manhattan cityscapes (www.artistwebsitepro.com/Artist/Derek_Reist). But Reist, who in 2002 moved upstate to the town of Peekskill, says that the particular urban settings of his paintings are almost incidental. The critical factor is the time of day—dusk or dawn. His real subject is the play of light and shadow and their subtle interaction. “You take something very ordinary, mundane, but when you light it, then it takes on an amazing quality,” he says. “It’s a fleeting quality. Utterly transitory.”

Caravaggio, de Chirico, Vermeer, Hopper, and “all the Impressionists” are influences Reist cites: “I was drawn to guys who incorporated light in their work.” His own canvases are large and substantially more dramatic than their online renderings: the sun-struck portions emit a fiery glow, while the cool, deep shadows feature subtle differentiations among purples and deep blues.

Downtown Gold and Midnight (reproduced above) in different ways exemplify Reist’s approach. His is a personal and private view of New York—composed of human artifacts, but devoid of human figures, with sky the overarching presence. In Downtown Gold that yellow-gold sky subtly varies from warm to decidedly cool as it stretches from the horizon to the zenith. The buildings gleam with an almost luminous and much redder gold. Cool, almost icy shadows bathe much of the surface, yielding carefully rendered details. In Midnight, the sky is an inky void, with the street, sidewalk, and trash bags painted in cool tones. The sparse warm highlights provided by the doorway of a brownstone and a bit of autumnal foliage illuminated by streetlight only serve to

Visit www.harvardmag.com/extras to watch Reist discuss one of his paintings.

Paintings courtesy of Derek Reist; photograph by Steve Potter

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emphasize the chill of a fall night.

Though Reist dates his real career as an artist to that moment on a Manhattan street, his artistic roots trace back to his childhood in Peru, where his father was an American military attaché married to a Peruvian. Reist began painting in prep school; in college, the Adams resident took a House course on life drawing taught by Boston University professor Morton Sachs. “Morton taught me how to see with a pencil,” Reist recalls. “I learned how to translate three dimensions to two, but in a way you could still see the three dimensions.” Sachs encouraged Reist to consider painting as a career.

Though he was accepted by Rhode Island School of Design, financial considerations led him to matriculate instead at Harvard Business School. “My dad wouldn't pay for art school,” he explains, “but he would for business school.” But after his M.B.A. and two years at Time, Inc., he became a full-time painter. It wasn't always smooth sailing; he worked part-time as a consultant and taught business at a local college. “There was some good luck involved,” he recalls, “but success enables more success. You can take chances if you are successful.”

__STEVE POTTER__

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**Made in the U.S.A.**

_Fiction and critique of American society_

_by ADAM KIRSCH_

The phrase “The Great American Novel” means something more than the sum of its parts. There are plenty of great American novels that are not Great American Novels: Henry James’s _Portrait of a Lady_ doesn't qualify, and neither does Ernest Hemingway’s _The Sun Also Rises_, or Willa Cather’s _The Lost Lady_, even though everyone acknowledges them as classics. No, the Great American Novel—always capitalized, like the United States of America itself—has to be a book that contains and explains the whole country, that makes sense of a place that remains, after 230-odd years, a mystery to itself. If other countries don’t fetishize their novels in quite this way—if the French don’t sit around waiting for someone to write the Great French Novel—it may be because no country is so much in need of explanation.

Hardly anyone talks about the Great American Novel without a tincture of irony these days. But as Lawrence Buell shows in _The Dream of the Great American Novel_, his comprehensive and illuminating new study, that is nothing new: American writers have always held the phrase at arm’s length, recognizing in it a kind of hubris, if not mere boosterism. Almost as soon as the concept of the Great American Novel was invented, in the nation-building years after the Civil War, Buell finds it being mocked, noting that one observer dryly put it into the same category as “other great American things such as the great American sewing-machine, the great American public school, and the great American sleeping-car.” It was enough of a cliché by 1880 for Henry James to refer to it with the acronym “GAN,” which Buell employs throughout his book.

Yet Buell warns us against taking all this dismissal at face value: “critical pissiness suggests the persistence of some sort of hydrant,” as he puts it. Even today, in our endlessly self-conscious literary era, novelists are still writing candidates for the GAN. What else are Jonathan Franzen’s _Freedom_, or Philip Roth’s _American Pastoral_, or Don DeLillo’s _Underworld_, if not attempts to capture the essence of American modernity between two covers?

Buell, now Cabot research professor of American literature, does not spend much time theorizing about the Great American Novel. Instead, he seeks to illuminate the concept by analyzing some of the books that have laid claim to the title. Most of these are, by definition, mainstays of high-school and college syllabi, from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s _The Scarlet Letter_ down to Toni Morrison’s _Beloved_. But alongside these classics, Buell ranges a number of lesser-known works, showing how the basic “scripts” of the Great American Novel are played out by writers like Helen Hunt Jackson in _Ramona_ and Harold Fredric in _The Damnation of Theron Ware_. And he takes account of contemporary works that respond to, challenge, and rewrite the classics, such as