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Reading Group Gold

The Sellout: A Novel By Paul Beatty

ABOUT THE BOOK

New York Times Bestseller

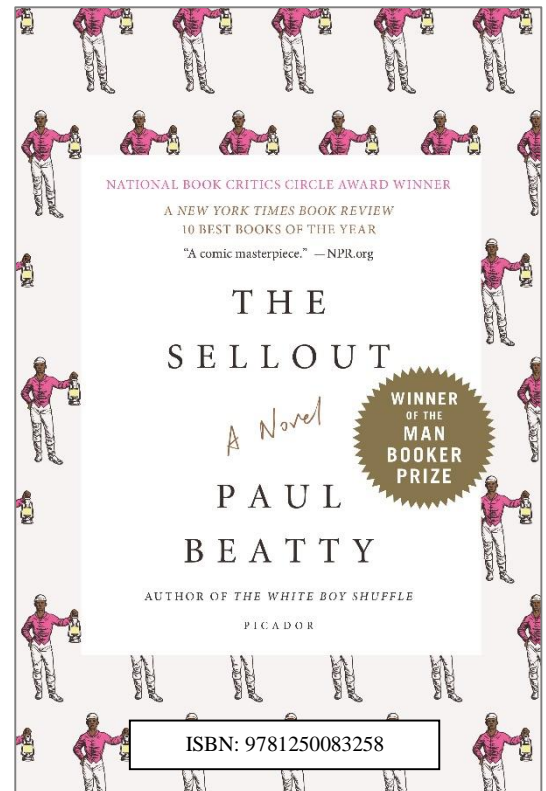
Winner of the Man Booker Prize

Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award

Historian Amanda Foreman, 2016 chair of the Man Booker Prize, calls *The Sellout* “a novel for our times” and describes Paul Beatty as an author who “slays sacred cows with abandon and takes aim at racial and political taboos with wit, verve, and snarl.” Populated by buffoons who wear their stereotypes with pride, and by inventive, identity-bending characters unlike any you’ve ever met on the pages of a novel before, *The Sellout* is both riotously funny and deadly serious, lambasting everything from the entertainment industry to the court system—and even the naïve optimism of the Civil Rights movement itself.

Our guide is a black man called Bonbon (it was his lucky word in a spelling bee, morphing into the closest thing he ever had to a street name). He was raised by a single dad, a psychologist who frequently used his son as a lab rat in a series of hopeless social experiments. Bonbon’s world unravels after his father is shot to death by the police, while their town—the “agrarian ghetto” of Dickens, a lower-middle-class village on the outskirts of Los Angeles—is erased from the map because it’s too embarrassing. That’s when Dickens’s most famous resident—the last surviving Little Rascal, Hominy Jenkins—begs to become Bonbon’s slave, and together they lead a band of segregationists who attempt to purge their enclave of non-blacks. Handcuffed and high as a kite, the narrator must defend his actions before the Supreme Court (through his attorney, who has a passion for 1970s fashion), spurring a perennially silent African American justice to finally speak.

Packed with dazzling, rapid-fire word plays, Paul Beatty’s prose skewers the Ivory Tower and the public square in equal measure. A book that will test your beliefs and stretch your imagination on a multitude of topics, *The Sellout* will keep your reading group mulling long into the night. We hope that the following topics will enrich your discussion of this provocative masterwork.



QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. If you were a Supreme Court justice hearing the case of *Me v. The United States of America*, how would you rule? What does Hampton Fiske, the narrator's attorney ("Don't say shit! Don't run! Don't resist arrest!"), ultimately prove about America's attempts to legislate life?
2. Did you laugh or cry (or both) at the experiments run by F. K. Me, the narrator's psychologist/social scientist dad? Does your experience of the world support his three-stage Theory of Quintessential Blackness, summarized in Fiske's closing monologue?
3. Does the concept of a ledger, designed to keep track of who owes a debt and who is entitled to receive a payment, accurately reflect the history of humanity in America? When Foy Cheshire calls the narrator a sellout on page 98, what is he saying was sold? Who were the buyers?
4. Marpessa calls the narrator Bonbon, a lightweight nickname that emerged when he was competing in a spelling bee at age 11 (page 124). Is she tougher than he is? Besides the bus, what else does she control? Would *The Sellout* be very different if it were narrated by a black woman?
5. On page 138, after Marpessa dismantles the car industry's fantasyland ads featuring affluent black men, Laura Jane tells Marpessa she's "far too smart not to know that it isn't race that's the problem but class." Is Laura Jane right?
6. How does the cover art (an illustration of a lawn jockey) summarize the narrator's core conflict?
7. How did you react when the narrator created Dickens's boundary lines (page 99), and Marpessa ejected strangers from the bus (page 134, taking her cue from George Wallace's "Segregation Now" gubernatorial inauguration speech)?
8. Why does Hominy want to be the narrator's slave? Even though he calls Bonbon "massa," is Hominy ultimately his own master now that he has been emancipated by the entertainment industry?
9. Paul Beatty has said that he isn't comfortable with labeling *The Sellout* a satire; many of the novel's cartoonish elements are steeped in realism (for example, Beatty's inspiration for the Dickens charter was a list of actual deed restrictions from the Richland Farms section of Compton, which was zoned for agriculture). How does Beatty use tragicomedy to bring reality and absurdity into focus?
10. On page 274, the beautiful Supreme Court Justice from the Upper West Side asks her colleagues to consider what the words "separate" "equal," and "black" really mean. How would you answer her? Do your answers explain the shooting of Bonbon's father?

11. Paul Beatty is the first American to win the Man Booker Prize (which in 2014 was opened to any book written in English and published by a British publisher). Affirmed by a panel of British judges, does the novel deliver a universal message? Or is it exclusively a book about American strife?
12. Most canonical novels that explore race in America are either set in the South or in New York City. How does *The Sellout*'s backdrop of Los Angeles change the conversation?
13. What's so smart about the Dum Dum Donut club? When the narrator ponders "What exactly is our thing?" (page 288), what is he simultaneously asking about who has the power to create a cultural identity, who has the right to appropriate it, and who has the right to erase it?
14. From Beatty's reinvention of Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" ("The Charge of the Light-Skinned Spade," page 38) to his *The Pejorative-Free Adventures* (of Huckleberry Finn and Jim, page 95), which of the riffs in the book will stay in your mind the longest?
15. In the closing chapter, appropriately titled "Closure," as Foy and the narrator debate whether the U.S. finally paid off its debts when "the black dude was inaugurated," why isn't Foy able to consider the plight of other non-white populations? Will it ever be possible for race to not matter in America?
16. In Paul Beatty's previous novels and poetry, what is unique about the way he sees the world, and the words he uses to draw us in?

About the Author

Paul Beatty is the author of three novels—*Slumberland*, *Tuff*, and *The White Boy Shuffle*—and two books of poetry: *Big Bank Take Little Bank* and *Joker, Joker, Deuce*. He is the editor of *Hokum: An Anthology of African-American Humor*. In 2016, he became the first American to win the Man Booker Prize. He lives in New York City.

Guide written by Amy Root Clements



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