

**Can you name a book written by a U.S. writer that has helped shape this country?**

**Rita Dove:** I do think that, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, really shaped America for many different ways and the fact it was made into a movie helped a lot too. But, I find that among the Americans who do not usually have a book on their night table, okay, among the greater proportion of Americans, that, that is one they know. That is one that either they have read or heard about and have issues with so it is part of a conversation, on race that we are just beginning to start to have. So I think that at the moment particularly it is very important, especially, since now we have this other side of Atticus, to consider. So I think that is really an essential book, for shaping American consciousness.

**Jennifer Egan:** The book that I found myself wanting to talk about was Ralph Ellison's, *Invisible Man*. And I think just from the point, and again I am looking at fiction because that's my field. I think, what he did that was so exciting and extraordinary in that book, which is you know is a flat out masterpiece from every angle, but the particular thing with it, he used the expressionistic and impressionistic techniques of modernism to address a very American idea of sort of the individual as outsider which we see in for example in *Moby Dick*, [and] other great American works, but what he did was that he used them to try to characterize the feeling of being an outsider within America. So not just the kind of classic American story, but a feeling of alienation within American culture and he took all of those techniques and used them as a way of evoking alienation that approaches almost a kind of madness in a sense. So he got at all kinds of things that are interesting—the way that our individual realities are so different from each other and our experience or context is what determines how in what ways we are alone. And he harnessed those techniques to tell that story in ways that I can't think of anyone else having done before and in that way he opened up a whole new way to use the techniques of modernism to tell not just the American story of the individual, but of the struggle of people who are excluded for various reasons.

**Joan Hedrick:** Boy I would have to say *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (laughs) because it really changed the way people thought about black people in this country. It really created a kind of revolution in their consciousness. They, after reading that and getting so involved with the characters and rooting for them to get to freedom, it

was very hard for people to think of slaves as things. Stowe really humanized them so I think she had a huge effect in changing consciousness. Even though, of course, she is a controversial figure, she is a product of her times, and she had stereotypical ideas about African Americans and that's part of the conversation about her book, but that's a conversation that goes on today.

**Jeffrey Marx:** *The Jungle*, by Upton Sinclair. I'm going to match that with another one only because journalism has become, has always been, such an important part of my life, I'm going to pair that with *All The President's Men*. And when you take those two, I don't know that they necessarily influenced our whole culture, the way they did this tired old writer, but for me and my view of the world and my experiences because investigative journalism specifically became such a big part of my life, I'll go with those two, I'll go with *The Jungle* and *All The President's Men*.

**Philip Schultz:** Well the first book that occurred to me was, *Moby Dick*, because, even though, at the time it was poorly received and Melville saw it as a failure and saw himself as one, because he died pretty impoverished. He had a government job as a customs inspector, but he was bitter. It was such a difficult book way back, way ahead of its time, and a hybrid book, essays inserted in the middle of narratives and original. He, John Cheever, used to tell, talk about his favorite story was Melville up in the Catskills, writing *Moby Dick* and being so feverish about the writing coming so quickly that his hand couldn't possibly keep up with the vision and, he would get hand cramps [Inaudible] and go out and stick his hand out in the snow, in the cold to lose the—to get the function back and then go right and do it around the clock. So it was such a gift and vision that book he didn't write it he lived it. And I mean he lived the actual writing of it. So I, and also the idea of it's the one book that keeps every generation makes its own movie or movies of their own interpretation of, because America like with Whitman of course and Whitman too the *Leaves of Grass*. They saw America through different eyes, the largeness of it, the grandeur of it, the newness of it, and America was probably *Moby Dick*, was the whale. And Ahab was this biblical figure trying to, whether he was seeking revenge only, he was trying to dominate something indomitable, and that certainly is the kind of America that Lincoln saw, and tried to tame in his own way and make right.

**Tracy K. Smith:** In some ways it's a book that's urgently influenced America, and it also has reminded us again and again over the decades how far we have yet to go and I'm thinking of James Baldwin's, *The Fire Next Time*, which articulates such an honest and convicting sense of how we in America continue to be hamstrung by our fears and anxieties and inability to discuss race. And the news events of the last year or two in this country that show how much and how pervasive racial injustice is makes this book seem even more relevant now, if that's possible. I feel like it is something that we all need to read or reread and think about bringing that language close to home.