

## Feast Day of the Cannibals: The American Novels

### Norman Lock

Bellevue Literary Press (Jul 16, 2019)

Softcover \$16.99 (240pp)

978-1-942658-46-7

Set in Gilded Age New York, Norman Lock's *Feast Day of the Cannibals* is the sixth standalone book in the American Novel series. At the cusp of the nineteenth century, fictional and real life characters intersect in a setting that's brocaded with intricate detail.

Shelby Ross recounts events to his longtime acquaintance, Washington Roebling, the engineer behind the Brooklyn Bridge. The year is 1882, and Roebling is nearly incapacitated because of his involvement with the extraordinary construction project. Ross himself is bankrupt and has taken a job at the New York City Custom House, where his supervisor is *Moby-Dick* author Herman Melville. Melville is at times genial and at others alcoholically embittered by the "ill fortune and lost fame" of his languishing literary career.

Ross is a flawed narrator who becomes more compelling and compassionate during this troubled, less privileged point of his life. Originally hoping to be a "merchant prince," Ross avoided the Civil War draft when his father paid a proxy soldier to serve for him. Though he insists that he does not want to be poetic or in any way extraordinary, Ross acts with dark honor to avenge the murder of a close friend, who's preyed upon for being presumed gay and who's referred to by a callous slur.

Among the novel's features are intriguing portraits of Melville, Roebling, and Ulysses S. Grant and a snarky yet memorable version of Mark Twain. The story prowls through Manhattan's docks, boardinghouses, brothels, and saloons with an eye to detail, even conjuring the herd of elephants sent by P. T. Barnum to thunder across the newly opened Brooklyn Bridge.

Engrossing and elegant, *Feast Day of the Cannibals* captures America's kaleidoscopic spirit during a tumultuous, rapacious era.

MEG NOLA (July/August 2019)

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