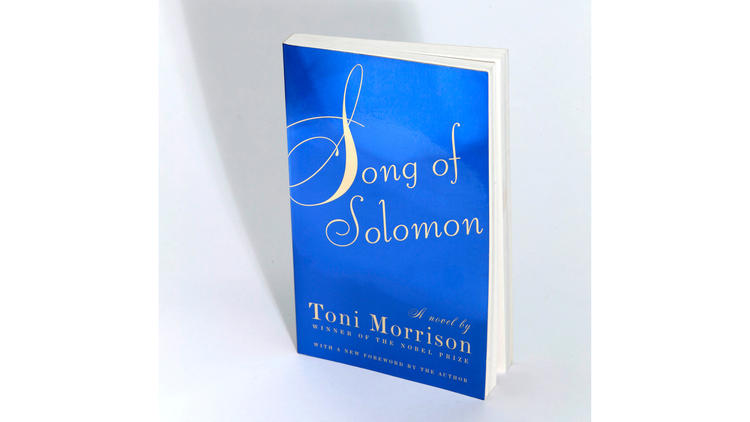
*Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison

Laila Lalami

C:\Users\Skip\Dropbox\Graphic Bits & Tools\Logos\LATimes_1.pngTo ask about The Great American Novel is to invite a debate about every portion of the phrase. Why use the definite article, which suggests that only one book can lay claim to the title? What parameters do we use to define greatness? In this era of global migration, some of which is documented and some undocumented, who counts as American? And finally, with the lines between fiction and nonfiction becoming ever blurrier, what is a novel? Such questions can lead to a semantic knot that may be nearly impossible to untangle.

One way to examine this knot is to place it under the strobe light of American history. And when I do this, one novel stands out to me as truly great: [Toni Morrison](http://www.latimes.com/topic/arts-culture/toni-morrison-PEHST001410-topic.html)’s “Song of Solomon.” This is the story of a black man who grows up sheltered from his community, and thus from his past, by his parents. But the past is present, right there in his name — Milkman Dead. “Milkman” is the nickname he is saddled with after it is discovered that his mother nursed him well beyond an appropriate age. And “Dead” comes to him from his father and grandfather, heirs to a clerical mistake made by a Union Army officer.

**“To ask about The Great American Novel is to invite a debate about every portion of the phrase.” — Laila Lalami**

Milkman is privileged, selfish and greedy and one day he tries to rob his aunt Pilate’s shack. But instead of gold he finds clues to his family’s history. He hears how his great-grandfather Solomon escaped slavery by “flying” back to Africa, how his grandfather lost his farm to a white family, and how his father built his real estate fortune by renting “houses that stretched up beyond him like squat ghosts with hooded eyes.” History, this novel shows us, comes not just in the form of official documents, but also in the myths, songs, folk tales, or barber shop gossip passed down from one generation to the next.

Because it is concerned with the messiness of history, *Song of Solomon* doesn’t follow a straightforward plot. Rather, the text masterfully braids together Milkman’s journey from childish loafer to responsible adult with anecdotes, scenes and memories from his family’s past. And Morrison’s use of free indirect style — telling the story in the third person, while maintaining attributes of the first person — keeps readers anchored in Milkman’s consciousness.

Morrison’s characters are revealed through cutting and often heartbreaking perspectives, as when Milkman dismisses a woman he no longer cares for: “She was the third beer. Not the first one, which the throat receives with almost tearful gratitude; nor the second, that confirms and extends the pleasure of the first. But the third, the one you drink because it's there, because it can't hurt, and because what difference does it make?”

The great achievement of *Song of Solomon* is that it asks readers to rethink American history, to have an argument with it, and to wrest its unsavory details from the comfortable erasure that makes American life what it is today. *Song of Solomon* is, quite simply, a masterpiece. And if I ever write a book this good, you can bury me. Because my life’s work will be done.

Laila Lalami's Great American Novel: 'Song of Solomon' by Toni Morrison

*Lalami is one of our* [*Critics at Large*](http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-times-critics-at-large-20160330-snap-htmlstory.html)

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