



Hawthorne: A Life

Brenda Wineapple

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Handsome, reserved, almost frighteningly aloof until he was approached, then playful, cordial, Nathaniel Hawthorne was as mercurial and double-edged as his writing. “Deep as Dante,” Herman Melville said.

Hawthorne himself declared that he was not “one of those supremely hospitable people who serve up their own hearts, delicately fried, with brain sauce, as a tidbit” for the public. Yet those who knew him best often took the opposite position. “He always puts himself in his books,” said his sister-in-law Mary Mann, “he cannot help it.” His life, like his work, was extraordinary, a play of light and shadow.

In this major new biography of Hawthorne, the first in more than a decade, Brenda Wineapple, acclaimed biographer of Janet Flanner and Gertrude and Leo Stein (“Luminous”—Richard Howard), brings him brilliantly alive: an exquisite writer who shoveled dung in an attempt to found a new utopia at Brook Farm and then excoriated the community (or his attraction to it) in caustic satire; the confidant of Franklin Pierce, fourteenth president of the United States and arguably one of its worst; friend to Emerson and Thoreau and Melville who, unlike them, made fun of Abraham Lincoln and who, also unlike them, wrote compellingly of women, deeply identifying with them—he was the first major American writer to create erotic female characters. Those vibrant, independent women continue to haunt the imagination, although Hawthorne often punishes, humiliates, or kills them, as if exorcising that which enthralls.

Here is the man rooted in Salem, Massachusetts, of an old pre-Revolutionary family, reared partly in the wilds of western Maine, then schooled along with Longfellow at Bowdoin College. Here are his idyllic marriage to the youngest and prettiest of the Peabody sisters and his longtime friendships, including with Margaret Fuller, the notorious feminist writer and intellectual.

Here too is Hawthorne at the end of his days, revered as a genius, but considered as well to be an embarrassing puzzle by the Boston intelligentsia, isolated by fiercely held political loyalties that placed him against the Civil War and the currents of his time.

Brenda Wineapple navigates the high tides and chill undercurrents of Hawthorne’s fascinating life and work with clarity, nuance, and insight. The novels and tales, the incidental writings, travel notes and children’s books, letters and diaries reverberate in this biography, which both charts and protects the dark unknowable core that is quintessentially Hawthorne. In him, the quest of his generation for an authentically American voice bears disquieting fruit.

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