



U.S.!: Songs and Stories

Chris Bachelder

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In this hilarious and wildly inventive novel, Chris Bachelder brings Upton Sinclair back from the dead to see what he might make of our modern world.

U.S.! is a playful, darkly comic novel that imagines the serial resurrection and assassination of tireless muckraker Upton Sinclair. In Chris Bachelder's bizarre world, Sinclair is repeatedly brought back by beleaguered but optimistic leftists (whose refrain is "Hope and Shovels Forever"), and then gunned down (and once harpooned!) by those seeking fame, fortune, and American business as usual. As he grows more and more politically and culturally insignificant, Sinclair keeps writing his embarrassingly bad muckraking novels and keeps risking his life for the Socialist revolution, which is perpetually just around the corner.

In documenting the demise (but dogged faith) of the American Left, as well as the violence and hysteria of the Right, Bachelder uses a wide range of forms: stories, songs, letters, journal entries, book reviews, memos, a syllabus, newspaper and magazine articles, Internet auctions, and transcripts of talk shows, interviews, and toll-free hotlines. The second part of the novel is a fast-paced narrative that brings the myriad characters together in an explosive encounter. A dazzling mix of laughs and revelations, *U.S.!* is not only an exploration of American politics and culture, but an investigation into the possibilities and problems of political art. Its publication will coincide with the hundredth anniversary of the publication of *The Jungle*, Sinclair's internationally renowned novel about the meat industry.

U.S.!: Songs and Stories Details

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Author : Chris Bachelder

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From Reader Review U.S.!: Songs and Stories for online ebook

Trin says

Upton Sinclair, author of *The Jungle* and dozens of other books advocating socialism and social reform, is resurrected periodically to fight the good fight—resurrected and assassinated, both with bullets and bad press. This is not only an incredibly imaginative novel, it's an incredibly imaginative *political* novel, that touches on how hard it is to keep fighting for what you believe in such a fucked up world. The story is told first in fragments—snatches of narrative interspersed with letters and jokes and interview clips and songs—and then with a climactic narrative showdown in a small American town. Bachelder does an amazing job making everyone—even, at times, various assassins and other unlikable folk—sympathetic, while also keeping them realistically flawed. Sinclair—as Bachelder portrays him and as he doubtless was in real life—is far, far from a saint; he's mostly just a tired old man. As someone who at 23 already feels exhausted with the political machine, I found this book incredibly moving and painful and funny and inspiring. It's far more interesting and weird than I could possibly describe it. You should give it a read.

Annie says

The great U.S. just won't die.

In Bachelder's U.S., political literary icon, Upton Sinclair, is the constantly reincarnating target of conservative discontent. The stories (more like beautifully crafted literary anecdotes all strung together) skip around time and perspective as Sinclair tries to constantly avoid assassination. The overblown muckraker stirs the political pot, writes and inspires grit in wide-eyed Americans to DO SOMETHING. The character is heartbreakingly loveable and hateable at the same time - a sentiment shared by all of his ambitious young male secretaries (don't get your sexual hopes up). His annoyingly blind devotion to his cause and craft make appealing the most American in us, but also make him a terrible father. Tsk hm. Bachelder is undoubtedly a king of craft, able to wrench emotion out of a dank basement while layering plots like baklava phyllo dough. The ending was sentimental, neatly tied in all the right places and pleasant to put down. Bear vs. Shark is waiting for me next.

Ben Loory says

Stephen had only slept three hours, and when he awoke, on the floor with the novel on his chest, he found that nothing in his life was the same. He felt that the book had been a strange dream and that he was still trapped within it.

Brent Legault says

Wooden and weak and worst of all, dull. Much in the spirit of Upton Sinclair! I suggest you read the article that Bachelder published in *The Believer* (<http://www.believermag.com/issues/200...>). It is far superior to this watery grave of a novel.

Sarahjane says

I loved this book. The tension between its reverence for those who believe in utopia and the recognition of the deadening effects of so much rhetoric, the language and sense of fun, the commitment to its ridiculous premise, everything.

Chris says

This book is basically divided into to sections-

1. a strange multi-perspective, multi-format, mish mash of stories of Upton Sinclair coming back from the dead at various points in time, what he did at those times, and how people kept murdering him.
2. A comic-novella of one time he returns and how a series of ridiculous events coincide to both leave him alive for a change, but also to make him want to retire.

The first section is fun, often non-sensical, and rather beating it into you about how ridiculous Upton Sinclair is, how ridiculous the people of America are, and how much the author likes playing with the conventions of a novel. It's a fun read, but it doesn't really do anything new, outside of the bizarre "plot".

The second section is a pretty funny story, and as far as satires go, a pretty direct hit to Middle America, although nowadays I'm not sure if Americans are quite as anti-Socialist as they used to be.

Darrin Doyle says

An impressive book that takes a comical premise -- the left-wing keeps resurrecting Upton Sinclair, and he keeps getting assassinated -- and turns it into a smart, incisive satire with some pathos thrown in, too. Comparisons to Saunders are appropriate, but this is its own animal, and in lots of ways it surpasses Saunders, in my opinion.

Jeff Laughlin says

If I were forced to choose between the books this man has written, I couldn't. Reading this book makes one feel hopelessly lost yet eager and attentive simultaneously. Quite an accomplishment. I recommend the author HIGHLY.

Ted Burke says

Chris Bachelder is a lovable prankster who likes to turn the nicely fitting glove of literature inside out. while the rest of us are looking for meanings and various forms of significance in the interior decorating of conventional fictional devices--to this day, we all yearn to have poets and novelists to tell us The Truth-- Bachelder prefers to spray paint on the props and show us the cluttered backstage of these settings. And better yet, he rather likes in tying the shoelaces together of the pompous, the serious, the bizarrely sanctimonious. "U.S.!" has him imagining a world where the true believers in an American Socialist Revolution manage, through some vaguely revealed ritual of magic realism, to bring the dead activist novelist Upton Sinclair back to life; back to life the poor, steadfast, solemn socialist does, looking

increasingly awful and putrid at the edges, going on the lecture trail, writing and publishing more of his cardboard narratives, trying to convince an amazingly uninterested citizenry the exact nature of what's killing them. Nothing comes of this, as expected, and the intrepid Lewis finds himself talking himself hoarse, only to find himself being killed violently and then ingloriously resurrected yet again.

A surreal fish-out-of-water story, Bachelder has a perfect ear for duplicating the static prose of the late novelists, and excels at demonstrating the striking contrasts between those who think that literature can make populations shed their entrenched and deeply rooted versions of Bad Faith and rise to the selfless cause of The Common People; this is a story of where the idea of the progression of history toward a final and just time, intersects with a culture where history does not end anywhere at all. Rather, it splits off into many tributaries, a crossroads every five metaphorical miles. Sinclair Lewis, tragicomic figure he is, stops at each of them, scratching his head as to which road to take.

Rayroy says

Better than Bear V. Shark, the second part of the novel was brilliant and fast paced! What makes U.S.! so good, is how well Chris Bachelder writes Upton Sinclair as a hopelessly optimistic Socialist curseder, who's come back to life in present day America, and is funny and very likeable to anyone that picks up U.S.! even if that person were Ayn Rand!!

Kevin Luy says

Funny and thoughtful.
It feels like the kind of political satire people give Chris Buckley credit for writing.
Fans of Vonnegut might like it for the humor and style.
The chapter about Sinclair and Doctorow's meeting is genius, and a pure delight.

Danny says

I would definitely recommend brushing up on Upton Sinclair's biography before starting in on this book. If all you know is that he wrote The Jungle, too many of the humorous jabs of Bachelder's satire will fail to land as successfully as they should. The quickly paced first half offers a different comic experiment every few pages, and most of them worked very well for me. The 2nd half unspools in a more standard novel form which left me a little underwhelmed, but mostly satisfied. An absurd novel for cynical times, especially the Trump era where American democracy has "jumped the shark"

Josh says

Imagine if Upton Sinclair, the great Socialist novelist, author of The Jungle and 1934 Democratic candidate for Governor of California, were brought back to life today to comment on the modern world of strip malls, drug companies and high school wrestling. And then imagine if he were assassinated. And then imagine if he

were brought back to life again, and then assassinated again, and then brought back to life...

OK. It's not the most obvious premise for a novel.

But with *U.S.*, Chris Bachelder makes it work. More than work: It's hard to think of a better political novel from the past few years.

Without ever quite spelling it out, Bachelder has written a parable for the relationship of the Left with its heroic past. Like any inspired conceit, the revived Sinclair takes on a life of his own, functioning both as allegory and as plot driver. It's easy to read through the book (as I do here) in terms of what it says about the American left, but it reads (like Sinclair's books were supposed to, whether or not they ever did) just as much as a page-turning adventure story.

What do we want from our political forebears, anyway? Bachelder's Sinclair is the cheerful, literal-minded, slightly unworldly, tireless, humor-impaired, good-natured, occasionally infuriating older activist all of us involved in left politics have crossed paths with. He has all the virtues of the '30s; he carries an aura of heroism with him along with dirt of the grave. And come on, if you're reading this, I know you've felt that's exactly what's missing from your life.

The book has all the postmodern devices, first-person narrative interspersed with imagined reviews of imagined Sinclair novels, transcripts, letters, and EBay listings. But I tend to think the book owes more to the USA trilogy than to David Foster Wallace. And anyway, whatever postmodern elements it incorporates, it's quite free of postmodern irony. Sinclair's appeals for Socialism may be stilted, old-fashioned, unconvincing: well, that strand of politics hasn't left much of a usable legacy: but Bachelder doesn't leave much doubt that, as far he's concerned, it's still right.

Gabriel says

On the surface, *U.S.!* is similar to Mark Binelli's *Sacco and Vanzetti Must Die*: a "real" re-imagined historical person(s) as subject of a crazy-quilt collage of forms.

Bachelder succeeds where Binelli falls short, partly because Bachelder doesn't ask the reader to superimpose his appropriated "character" onto a "real world" that exists only outside of the book. Everything that you need to know about Upton Sinclair (for this book to work) is right here. Binelli takes a more restrained, cautious route with his *Sacco and Vanzetti* (only bits and pieces from the trial transcripts and from letters that one or the other write appear in his book), and as a result, the sense that you even really understand what world it is that Binelli is describing is lost. There is simply not enough there, there.

Because ultimately I think that Binelli and Bachelder were after different things, I won't carry the comparison any further. I will say that *U.S.!* is very, very funny at times, and that the satire is pretty clear and pretty clever. Bachelder manages his many different forms pretty well. I only give this book four stars because I believe that he might have made better use of many of them (which is not to say that he didn't make better use of them than most writers who go in for this sort of appropriation do), and because I think that the second part (the long narrative of the book-burning) is essentially Bachelder throwing in the towel when he realizes that he can't get a story told through the "scrapbook" approach of the first book.

It is a difficult to balance, on the one hand, the need to more or less perfectly mimic the form that you are appropriating, and on the other, the need to "tell a story" through that form (or the succession of different forms). How often do you read a shopping list or a class syllabus that tells a story? Really, really be honest

with yourself: not that often. And if it did tell a story, you would suspect that its motives were precisely to tell a story, and thus you would be less likely to mistake it for the form that it is supposed to ape. And yet you will extend some of that courtesy to a writer like Bachelder or Binelli. Their job is simply not to tilt their hand so much that you can't maintain that particular fiction for yourself in reading them.

But those forms, in the real world, are static, for the most part-- they can't, when strictly imitated by fiction, really "move," really tell a story, complete with rising action, climax, etc. It is the reader that must provide these for him or herself outside of, and through, the form; the person who follows that shopping list or class syllabus that then lives that "story," that potentially narratable experience.

Binelli fails in this respect, because, having chosen to follow his forms, he declines to tell a story; Bachelder abandons his forms to tell his story. In the end, Bachelder's book is the more compelling because it does tell a story, but that does not make it a better book. There is still ground to be covered, in both books: walking that thin line between imitating the form and telling a story, that ridge that is the author's realization that the reader must be allowed both the space to imagine him or herself encountering that form as in the real world, and the reader having enough information in front of her that she can safely make the leap between peaks, until finally she has the entire chain of Freytag's triangles behind her and the story has been told.

MJ Nicholls says

Original Review:

Touching satire about poor old utopian socialist Upton Sinclair and his habit of being shot and resurrected by avid left-wingers intent on egalitarianism. Bachelder is a keen Barthesian and uses playful PoMo techniques, among them lists of Sinclair's unreviewed Amazon books, items listed on ebay, and assorted epistolary games. The first half of the novel has no structure as such, merely following Sinclair as he battles his hopeless but noble cause. The second half of the novel is more purposeful, and riffs on the political thriller, taking the stock assassination scene to absurd heights (there are a dozen assassins attempting to kill Sinclair) during a Bradburyian book-burning. I can't quite place the book's politics since Bachelder takes the piss out of everyone and everything. So I suppose this is the perfect stocking-filler for the despairing political cynic in your life. See also Bear V. Shark.

Books Whose Titles Would Change Considerably With the Addition of an Exclamation Mark:

To Kill a Mockingbird!
Things Fall Apart!
Bleak House!
Poor Folk!
Crash!
Crime & Punishment!
The Holy Bible!
The Murder of Kurt Cobain!
Malcolm X!
Wuthering Heights!
Rebecca!
The Diary of a Young Girl!
Dead Souls!
Choke!
The End of Everything!

