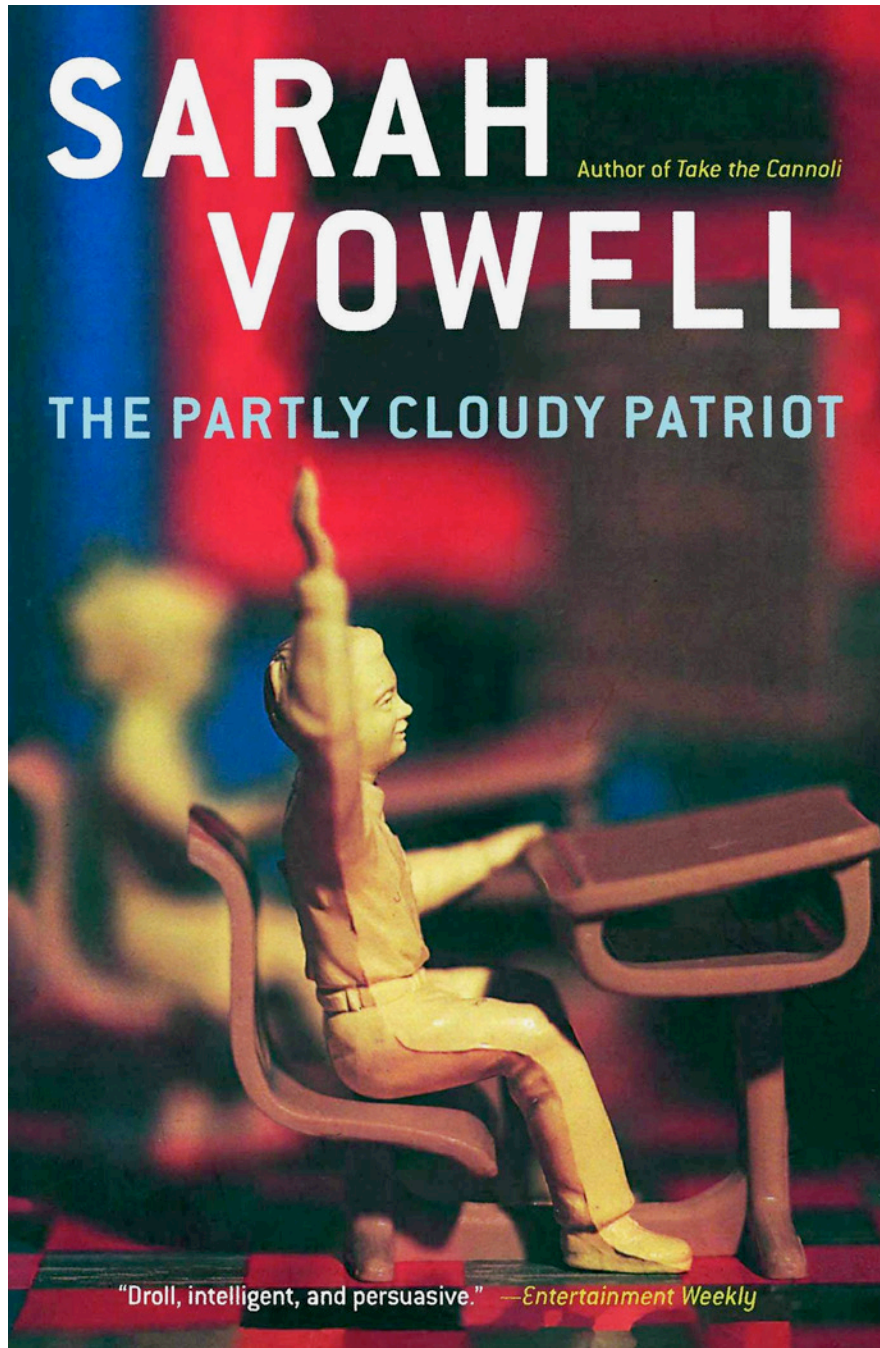
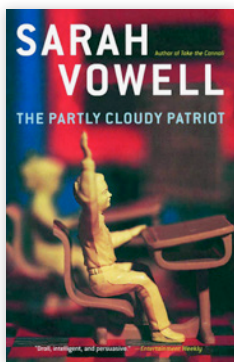


We the People Book Club

**THE PARTLY CLOUDY PATRIOT**  
Reading Guide





With this selection, the We the People Book Club takes a pointedly lighthearted turn. We read *The Partly Cloudy Patriot* by **SARAH VOWELL**, a collection of personal essays about history, historiography, and the nerd journalist who is obsessed with both. Like Mark Twain, Vowell's humor capitalizes on America's sins and foibles; but underneath the (at times) laugh-out-loud funniness of her prose is a sincere attempt to wrangle into language the complex romance she shares with the United States: She explores what endears America to her, what infuriates her about America, and how it can be that, in all this ambivalence, she can still feel deeply patriotic. What makes Vowell herself endearing to the reader is that she satirizes her own life side-by-side with America's national life, exploring how they intersect and reflect one another.

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## About This Book Club Reading Guide

Researched and written by Julia Davis (a 2018-2019 Fellow with the Practicing Democracy Project), this guide includes background on Sarah Vowell, an overview of *The Partly Cloudy Patriot*, and observations on the author's literary style. For your personal exploration and/or discussion with others in your book club, we include commentary on three themes: patriotism, truth and history, and the American character. Questions within each will facilitate three approaches to the work: (1) your interpretation of the text, (2) your personal reflections inspired by your reading, and (3) practices for you to try that animate the novel's democratic values. The guide also includes ideas for further exploration; you might decide to engage these resources before or after your discussion.

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## Background

**Sarah Jane Vowell** was born in Muskogee, Oklahoma in 1969, “‘a special surprise baby.’” Vowell's twin sister Amy emerged first, the expected child, and Sarah emerged second, “the extra kid.” The family lived in Oklahoma for another eleven years and then moved to Bozeman, Montana, where Vowell eventually attended the University of Montana and received a Master of Arts degree in Modern Languages and Literatures. She continued her education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, taking a Master of Art in Art History.

In addition to this collection of personal essays and another entitled *Take the Cannoli*, Vowell has written five other nonfiction books, including a memoir about listening to the radio for a year in 1995 and historical monographs on the Puritans and Marquis de Lafayette. Much of her published writing builds on her work as a journalist and social critic contributing to such publications as *Time*, *Spin*, *Salon*, *McSweeney's*, and *The New York Times*.

Vowell is most widely known for her radio and voiceover work. She was an original producer and longtime contributor to WPRI's *This American Life*, which served as an incubator for many of her published works. Her unique voice, described as “childlike and tremulous,” helped land her the role of Violet in *The Incredibles* movie franchise.

When not traveling for her original research, Vowell lives in New York City.

## Overview

*The Partly Cloudy Patriot* presents nineteen personal essays, many taken from her magazine and radio work from the 1990s and early 2000s. Though there is some concentration on major turn-of-century events like by the 2000 Presidential election, the terrorist attacks on September 11, and the deployment to Afghanistan, the collection ranges widely in topic — from the appeal of Tom Cruise to the appeal of Abraham Lincoln, from the state of our democracy to the state of being twins; For all that diversity of topic, there is an underlying argument about what makes American experience and the American character peculiar. As narrator, Vowell emerges both as a history nerd who is fascinated with the tragic events of the American past and as a journalist who is deeply engaged in the nation's present struggles. In these essays, Vowell treats American wars, politicians, and pop stars with the same familiarity and affection she has for her family and friends — perhaps more!

## Genre, Language, and Structure

*The Partly Cloudy Patriot* is a collection of personal essays, though it could also be characterized as a collection of historical and journalistic pieces. Vowell pushes the boundaries of how both history and memoir are written, though not in a self-conscious way. Rather, the combination of the personal and contemporary with the national and the historic is an expression of her worldview: She says she “always saw history as something that happened to people like me and my relatives, not as something separate that happened to James Madison.”

Vowell is a satirist of American life — pointing out America's flaws is her love language — but the cynicism of satire is hardly her only (or even dominant) emotional register. The essays are also full of hope, curiosity, wonder, nostalgia. Even when her sights are on satire she navigates the reader away from despair. Her self-deprecation, her geeky enthusiasm for history, and her genuine desire to love her country — these energies always lift the thruster well before a nose dive into the darkness.

Vowell has honed her humor so that she often achieves that most perfectly efficient form of expression: the funny joke that delivers a truth. These jokes can hurt, but some things have to be said, and it's sweet of her to administer them with sugar. Observing the dais at George W. Bush's inauguration, she thinks, “About the only person up there I find myself happy to look at is the former Republican senator and presidential candidate Bob Dole. I've developed a soft spot for Dole because he symbolizes a simpler, more innocent time in America when you could lose the presidential election and, like, not actually become the president.” Vowell excels at writing sentences that are a lovely mess of truth, quirk, humor, and sadness.

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## Themes

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### Patriotism

Love of country, like other forms of love, cannot be compelled; it must be offered up freely. It cannot be defined *for everyone*; it must be defined *by each one*.

Patriotism is a loaded word and a grand ideal, one that begs so many questions. What is the ground of patriotism? Is it faith in an ideal, freedom perhaps? Is it loyalty to the government and support for its decisions? Is it a belief in the people and their sovereignty? Is it love for the American spirit, however one might define that? Is it appreciation for the great landscape from sea to shining sea?

What does patriotism require? Defense of the Bill of Rights, unwavering support for the President, flag-waving, voting, organizing, dissent, caring for the environment?

These essays embody the many ways a patriot like Vowell finds to love her country. She visits the site of the tragedy at Gettysburg, luxuriating in the incomparable prose of the Address. She gets reflective at the site of the National Park Service's youthful indiscretion, a lunchroom built 500 feet underground in Carlsbad Caverns ("The only thing I can say is that it is one of those dear places that make you love the world.") She figures out the strategic flaw in Al Gore's campaign by watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

And she votes. Vowell is a regular Walt Whitman when it comes to enthusiasm for this civic duty. In "Dear Dead Congressman" she writes to Congressman Mike Synar on the eve of the 2000 Presidential Election. Vowell campaigned for him as a preteen in Oklahoma, and he became her inspiration for getting involved in politics. So, before voting, she pens her hero this letter, even though he has since died: "It's that time again. On Tuesday, I'll be going over to the housing projects on 24th Street to vote. I think of you every time I draw the voting booth curtain behind me, every time I pull the lever. I love it in there. I drag it out, leisurely punching the names I want as if sipping whiskey in front of a fire. I mean, how many times in a life does an average person get to make history?"

Certainly, finding your happy place in a voting booth is the mark of a patriot. As are analyzing politics, being inspired by the National Parks, and appreciating one man's attempt to "bind up the nation's wounds."

But the early aughts severely narrowed the definition of patriotism, making it difficult for Vowell and others to feel free in their patriotic expression. The events on September 11, 2001 evolved into a mandate for full-solar patriotism; "partly cloudy patriots" need not apply.

In times of crisis, the acceptable meaning and expression of patriotism get severely abridged. During and directly after the national trauma on 9/11, it seemed appropriate to suspend patriotic satire and criticism, just the way you would avoid blaming someone for getting hit by a bus and instead tend to her wounds. The nation was wounded that morning and dealing with fresh trauma for months after; as citizens and first responders waded through rubble and grief, people all over the country put

flags up in their yards, their windows, their taxis, their storefronts. The flag symbolized love for America and the unity of a common experience. They were signs, as Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence, that “we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”

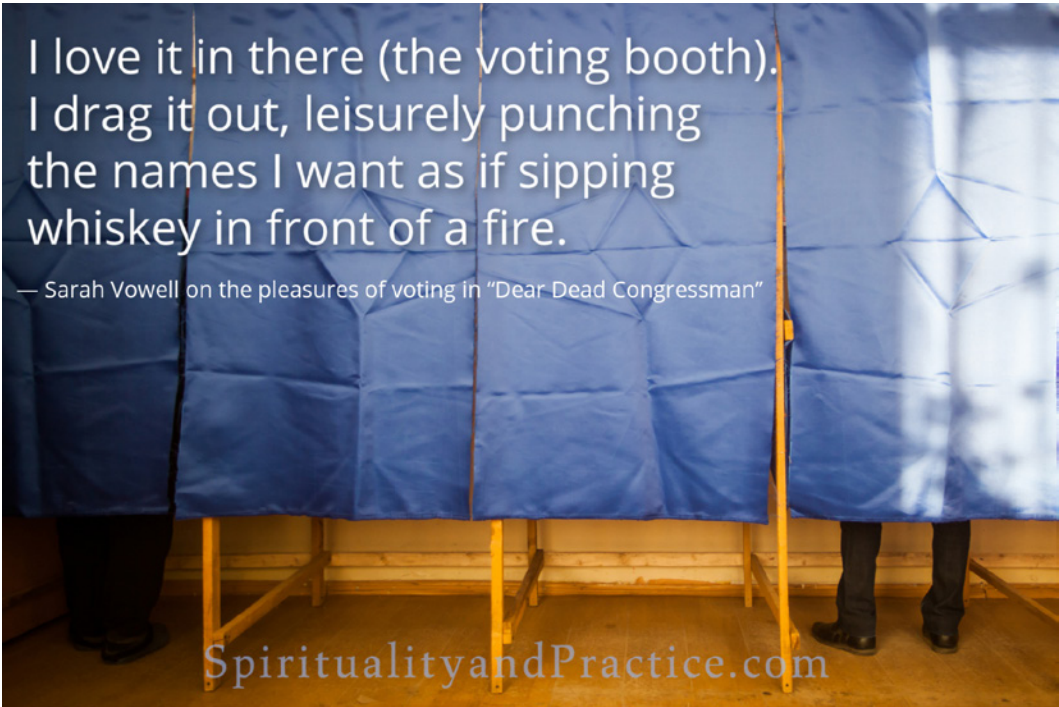
But the unity of the traumatized is something altogether different from the resolutions of the powerful and political. Vowell recalls in the title essay, “Once we went to war, once the president announced that we were going to retaliate against the ‘evildoers,’ then the flag again represented what it usually represents, the government. I think that’s when the flags started making me nervous. ... So by the beginning of October, the ubiquity of the flag came to feel like peer pressure to always stand behind policies one might not necessarily agree with.”

In this time of war, as in other times of war, patriotism became flag-waving, and flag-waving meant unconditional support of government policy. Far from encouraging love for country, this narrow “war patriotism” inhibited civic expression, emboldened hawks, and embittered thoughtful citizens. It tried the souls of every “partly cloudy patriot.” And so Vowell, “longed for the morning that I could open up the paper and the only people in it who would irk me would be dead suicide bombers and retreating totalitarians on the other side of the world. Because that would be the morning I pulled that flag out of the recycling bin and taped it up in the window. And while I could shake my fists for sure at the terrorists on page one, buried domestic items could still make my stomach hurt.”

Post-9/11 patriotism required full sun, a flag, and shopping. It did not involve free speech, and the warnings against it were not subtle and not hints. Vowell recalls the remarks of Bush’s “press secretary condemning a late-night talk show host for making a questionable remark about the U.S. military: ‘The reminder is to all Americans, that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do, and that this is not a time for remarks like that. Those are the sorts of never-ending qualms that have turned me into the partly cloudy patriot I long not to be.’”

That sentiment is moving in a classically Vowell-esque way. The partly cloudy patriot may be the very best kind. She is not someone who grudgingly loves her country, but someone who loves a grudging country. Patriotism is a relationship, a two-way street between hopeful citizen and corrupt government. The love is there to be given, but it has to be earned. It is always the citizen-patriot who takes on the relationship’s heavy lifting, holding up love and disappointment at the same time.





I love it in there (the voting booth).  
I drag it out, leisurely punching  
the names I want as if sipping  
whiskey in front of a fire.

— Sarah Vowell on the pleasures of voting in “Dear Dead Congressman”

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### Discussion: Patriotism

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#### THINK

1. Vowell takes the exploration of patriotism even further in *The Partly Cloudy Patriot*. A group of international relations geeks debate the situation of the former Yugoslavia and “They, many of them immigrants themselves, considered patriotic allegiance to be a sin, a divisive, villainous drive leading to exclusion, hate and murder.” Vowell’s response is to say that Memphis, Elvis, Johnny Cash, and Mississippi mud make her “proud to feel ... patriotic.” What is her definition of patriotism here? What is the ground for her concept of it?

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#### REFLECT

2. After this exchange with the international relations geeks, a man from Tajikistan gives Vowell “the following warning:

‘Those,’ he said, of my accolades for Elvis and friends, ‘are the seeds of war.’”

What is your response to this perspective on patriotism? Does it seem reasonable or extreme? What life experiences inform your response?

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#### PRACTICE

3. Using “Dear Dead Congressman” and “Ike Was a Handsome Man” as inspiration, write a (living) politician a letter of advice or appreciation. Maybe you’ll get a letter back!

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## Truth and History

Is there such a thing as objective truth? Do we live in a post-factual world? What is the root problem that gives rise to media misrepresentation and biased history?

The tenure of the 45th president has made “fake news” an everyday phrase, and while there are instances of bad-faith journalism, the liberal wielding of this phrase threatens to unsettle our faith in one another and endanger our democracy. In 1787, Thomas Jefferson cautioned against any suppression of information in a democracy: “The people are the only censors of their governors: and even their errors will tend to keep these to the true principles of their institution. To punish these errors too severely would be to suppress the only safeguard of the public liberty. The way to prevent these irregular interpositions of the people is to give them full information of their affairs thro’ the channel of the public papers, & to contrive that those papers should penetrate the whole mass of the people. The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers & be capable of reading them.”

So much has changed in the United States since Jefferson wrote these words. He could not have imagined Facebook and Twitter, but his warning about preserving the power of the press was issued in a political context not much different from ours. Jefferson fully participated in the kind of partisan politics that currently divides the U.S. His camp used the power and penetration of newspapers to great advantage in the rancorous campaign against John Adams — and suffered blows as Adams’ camp used the megaphone of the press against them. So, despite the seeming canyon between Jefferson’s time and ours, his emphasis on the utter necessity of the press as purveyor of good information is rather timeless.

As a member of the press herself, Vowell is sympathetic to journalistic error, to misheard, misreported quotations like the one in “Democracy and Things Like That.” What we call truth is subject to human weakness and error — to, for instance, the fatigue of a journalist who gets two hours of sleep a night.

But in that essay and others, Vowell explores other reasons why the truth gets misrepresented, including the phenomenon of confirmation bias. “‘There seems to be no end to the satisfaction one gets in having one’s opinion confirmed,’” Vowell writes in “Nerd Voice,” quoting her friend Stephen. The reporters who heard Al Gore say *another* self-aggrandizing thing were guilty of confirmation bias: “representatives of the news media carry around storylines of the candidates in their heads, and reporters light up when reality randomly corroborates these pictures.” The problem, of course, is that the storyline in the head adjusts “reality” accordingly, nudging it into the desired framework perhaps without the reporter even being aware that this mental photoshopping is occurring.

We will only get so far accusing the press of this confirmation bias because their business is to sell what we will buy, which means that we all have these narratives, these frames we want the pictures to fit into. So, more and more, we click on the link or the channel that promises to fit the stories of the day into those frames. We click for confirmation, not truth.

Truth is rarely simple, and often it's painful. History, one genre of truth, is hard work. It is messy and multivocal and does not easily point to one direction forward. Myths, however, offer more options, which is to say, the option to ignore truths. (We seem to be in a strange cultural moment where we tolerate fiction where truth should be — journalism — and truth where fiction should be—reality TV shows and the autobiographical novel!)

Vowell explores the tension between history and myth in “Ike Was a Handsome Man” and “California as an Island.” In the latter, a “patriotically inspiring” map dealer named Graham Arader sells the history people want to remember (which may, if they are white, be the only history they ever learned!). He sells images of power to the powerful: “Graham’s inventory encompasses the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Think about those dates. Think about the story being told in European and American maps that era. Dutch maps of South Africa. French maps of New France. It is not just one story but two — a great adventure of nation-building and the promise of the new world, but also one of theft and warfare and genocide. Guess which one of those stories sells maps?”

Though the signs of oppression and exploitation are represented as clearly as the signs of power, his customers don’t see them, and this subtraction is what allows for nostalgia. One customer, decided on a print of John Gast’s *American Progress*, “couldn’t have been more pleased, swooning over the little covered wagon, the little farmer plowing, the Brooklyn Bridge near the eastern edge, the quivering Indians looking over their shoulders in fear. He was smiling as I took his credit card, told me he was going to hang it over his breakfast table. Personally, I wouldn’t want to look at those shivering Indians as I munched my cornflakes. Why wake up to original sin?”

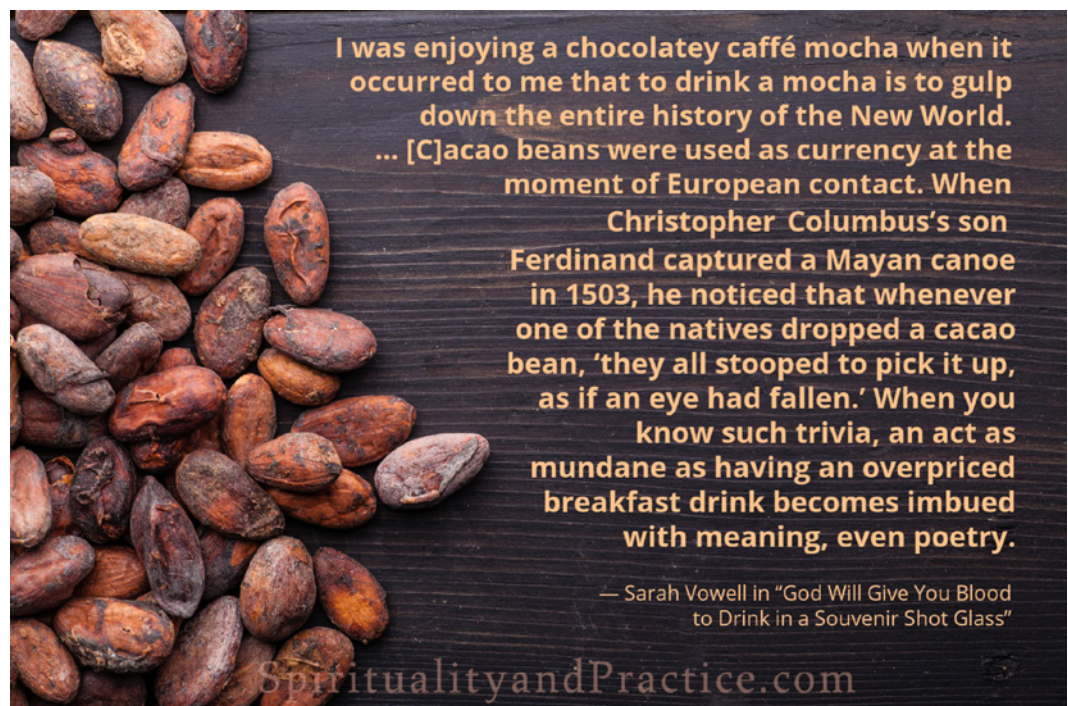
One would think that Graham Arader’s America would have given Vowell-the-history-nerd the heebie-jeebies. How could someone with a perverse attraction to history’s tragedies stomach the sugar-coating of “Manifest Desssssssssstiny?” And yet, in the name of total honesty in national *and* personal history, Vowell confesses: “Graham Arader’s America is a prettier picture than mine. And he believes in it. That is why, as he would say, he is the best, the finest, the most successful antiquarian map dealer in the history of the world. His is an easier picture to sell. But it’s also a lovelier, less sarcastic one to buy. I want to buy it. I like the telegraph and the railroad and the Brooklyn Bridge. Graham’s map of America has an elementary school quality that I admire. How many times have I wished to go back there, to live once more in the country I thought I lived in as I stood on the stage of the second grade Thanksgiving pageant, singing ‘This Land is Your Land’ in a cardboard turkey suit?” Perhaps the real dividing lines in the U.S. demarcate how many years (if any) you were allowed to believe in the elementary school version of your country.



It matters how history is preserved. For one, there is pleasure in knowing history fully. It can enrich our lives in the most unexpected ways. For instance, a daily ritual like drinking coffee can become a time-traveling adventure: "I was enjoying a chocolatey caffè mocha when it occurred to me that to drink a mocha is to gulp down the entire history of the New World. ... And, thanks to Sophie and Michael Coe's book *The True History of Chocolate*, I remembered that cacao beans were used as currency at the moment of European contact. When Christopher Columbus's son Ferdinand captured a Mayan canoe in 1503, he noticed that whenever one of the natives dropped a cacao bean, 'they all stooped to pick it up, as if an eye had fallen.' When you know such trivia, an act as mundane as having an overpriced breakfast drink becomes imbued with meaning, even poetry."

For another, as Vowell explores in "Ike Was a Handsome Man," history preserved without contradictions misrepresents not just one president or one time period, but the whole character of a nation. She advises Bill Clinton against scrubbing his sex scandal in the presentation of his presidential library: "In fact, the Nixon and Johnson libraries were my favorite ones to visit because they deal with quarrelsome subjects. Once, years ago, I was at the LBJ. I was walking away from a copy of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 towards a photo of a serviceman who had been killed in Vietnam. In the ten seconds it took to walk from that law to that face, a song from a nearby pop music exhibit started playing: 'Louie Louie.' And I felt like all of America was in that ten seconds: the grandeur of civil rights, the consequences of war, and the fun, fun, fun of a truly strange song."

"Mister president, Americans like contradictions. We elected you, didn't we? So in your library, own up to your failures ..."



## Discussion: Truth and History

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### THINK

1. Describe the pleasures of “having one’s opinion confirmed.” Describe the dangerous effects of living in this echo chamber.

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### REFLECT

2. What myths did you learn about your country in elementary school? When did you realize what you thought was history was a romanticized story? What event(s) caused you to realize this? What factors in your life made it possible for you to believe (or disbelieve) the myths? What myth do you miss the most?

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### PRACTICE

3. Make a “Presidential Library” commemorating the defining events of a recent or current leader (not necessarily the President). This could take the form of a collage, an article, a clay model.

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4. Spend some time with a news source that does not confirm your bias, either one known to be journalistically neutral or one that leans away from your political views. Notice the emotions and thoughts that accompany the experience.

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## The American Character

Vowell’s advice to Bill Clinton may get at the heart of what it means — or just what it is — to be a citizen of the United States. Her statement “Americans like contradictions” might seem like a betrayal of her exploration of war patriotism and confirmation bias, both of which suggest a human desire for consistency and simplicity. And yet there is no doubt that, as she writes of herself in “Cowboys v. Mounties,” when someone says “conformity,” it hurts Americans’ ears.

And so this advice to Clinton is not at all a betrayal but an honest rendering of the tension at the heart of being a U.S. citizen, “the conflict between freedom and community, between individual will and the public good.” Between wanting people to fall in line and being terrified when they do. Vowell’s insights into this aspect of the American character are not unique, but they are intensely personal: “I’m two parts loner and one part joiner, so I feel at home delving into the epic struggles for togetherness.” She’s a true American, according to her own definition, a one-person *argument*.

Consider the irony in this description of the American electorate and the candidates they prefer from “Nerd Voice”: “American democracy is tough. When one of a culture’s guiding credos is that ‘all men are created equal,’ any person who, say, becomes an expert on, say, nuclear weapons or, say, ecology, i.e., anyone who distinguishes himself through mental excellence, is a nuisance. And anyone, especially a presidential candidate for crying out loud, who doesn’t accept this and start falling all over himself to beat everyone else to the punch line, can just go ahead and move to England.” This description of the “land of the free” sounds like American condemnations of communist conformity and mediocrity! And yet this anti-intellectualism is not only

at the heart of American culture — where doing your homework is not cool — but a decisive factor in Presidential elections. In fact, Vowell's sadness over the "jock" president George W. Bush appears quaint from a post-2016 perspective. There were many forms of backlash in the 2016 presidential election, one of them against the intelligence of president Barack Obama.

Folks like Vowell and Obama, the "New York intellectual" and the "Washington elite," respectively, may not *vote* on the jock side of the American contradiction, but they feel it. Obama was unavailable for comment, but Vowell admits to harboring a rugged individualism in "Cowboys v. Mounties": "No true American would ever talk up the virtue of conformity. Intellectually, I roll my eyes at the cowboy outlaw ethic, but in my heart I know I buy into it a little, that it's a deep part of my identity. Once, when I was living in Holland, I went to the movies, and when a Marlboro man ad came across the screen, I started bawling with homesickness."

Sometimes the contradictions and ironies are writ large — certainly in the conduct of our politics but also in the rituals of our national holidays. Vowell observes in "The First Thanksgiving" that "It is curious that we Americans have a holiday — Thanksgiving — that's all about people who left their homes for a life of their own choosing, a life that was different from their parents' lives. And how do we celebrate it? By hanging out with our parents! It's as if on the Fourth of July we honored our independence from the British by barbecuing crumpets."

At other times, the ironies are microscopic, everyday tics that descend from our inheritance as a freedom-fighting and slave-owning republic. Vowell is particularly good at capturing these, as when, in "The Underground Lunchroom," she describes herself scowling "Through newspaper articles about the abuses of the timber industry while sitting in my maple chair next to my maple bookcase." Or when, in "The Strenuous Life," she wonders how anyone could "kill anything so magnificent" as a buffalo as she heads into town for "tasty buffalo burgers."

How can a people who don't do what they say, a people with such diversity and such willingness to fight about it — how can such a people ... be a people? How can a country so divided by race and politics, a country of Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter, a country where inaugurations cause one half of the population to cheer and the other half to mourn the death of democracy — how can this country survive?

Vowell offers two practices as adhesives. The first is love, offered in the title story: "The Emancipation Proclamation is a perfect American artifact to me — a good deed that made a lot of other Americans mad enough to kill. I think that's why the Civil War is my favorite American metaphor. I'm so much more comfortable when we're bickering with each other than when we have to link arms and fight a common enemy. ... My ideal picture of citizenship will always be an argument not a sing-along. I did not get it out of a civics textbook either. I got it from my parents. My mom and dad disagree with me about almost everything. I do not share their religion or their political affiliation. I get on their nerves sometimes. But, and this is the most important thing they taught me, so what? We love each other."

The second practice is praying, which is to say, voting. She ends “Dear Dead Congressman” with this bit of democratic poetry: “[L]ook up the word *suffrage* in the dictionary. In mine, after noting the main meanings — the privilege of voting, the ‘exercise of such a right,’ the third interpretation of suffrage is this: ‘A short intercessory prayer.’ Isn’t that beautiful? And true? For what is voting if not a kind of prayer, and what are prayers if not declarations of hope and desire?”

**It is curious that we Americans have a holiday — Thanksgiving — that's all about people who left their homes for a life of their own choosing, a life that was different from their parents' lives. And how do we celebrate it? By hanging out with our parents! It's as if on the Fourth of July we honored our independence from the British by barbecuing crumpets.**

— Sarah Vowell in “The First Thanksgiving”



### Discussion: The American Character

#### THINK

1. Is America an argument or a sing-along? What other metaphor would you use to characterize America? What important people, events, and ideas make that metaphor apt?

#### REFLECT

2. Call to mind your fellow citizens, the ones with whom you differ and argue the most. Write down what you admire about them. Avoid using qualifiers like “even though!” In fact, write without any contrast or comparison whatsoever. If you find yourself pleased with your ability to positively extol their virtues, share your writing with them?

#### PRACTICE

3. The next time you go to vote, send up a prayer with each selection. Say a few words that articulate your hopes for the good that this person will do.



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### Other Reading Guides for the We the People Book Club:

*The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck

*The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead

*A Good Man Is Hard to Find* by Flannery O'Connor

Selected Poems of Walt Whitman and Maya Angelou

*Tenth of December* by George Saunders

*Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson

*Puddnhead Wilson* by Mark Twain

*The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin and

*Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates

*Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko

*The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen

*The Partly-Cloudy Patriot* by Sarah Vowell

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston

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Download Reading Guides at [SpiritualityandPractice.com/WethePeopleBookClub](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/WethePeopleBookClub)

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The **We the People Book Club** is a year-long program contemplating America's past and possibilities as presented by classic and contemporary literary voices. It is a part of The Practicing Democracy Project, a collaboration between **The Center for Spirituality & Practice** and the **Fetzer Institute**.

**The Practicing Democracy Project** offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

**For more information on the Project, visit [PracticingDemocracy.net](https://PracticingDemocracy.net).**

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*The Partly Cloudy Patriot* book cover photo by David Levinthal; cover design by Alese Pickering.

