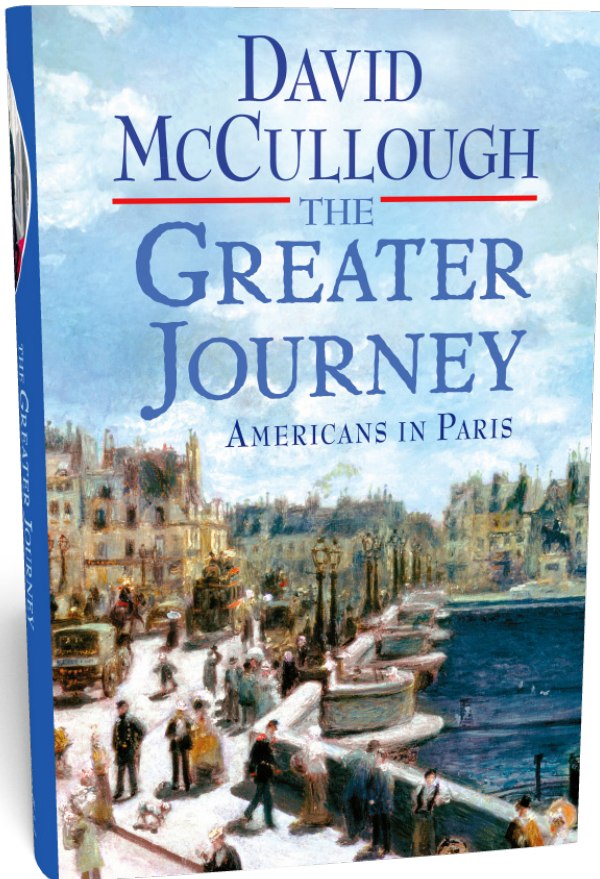


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# THE GREATER JOURNEY

BY DAVID MCCULLOUGH

Simon & Schuster Reading Group Guide



## Introduction

“Not all pioneers went west,” writes David McCullough in the beginning pages of *The Greater Journey*. From the 1820s to 1900, generations of Americans made the pioneering journey across the Atlantic on a mission of learning and accomplishment in the intellectual, scientific, and artistic capital of the western world: Paris. David McCullough tells the story of the generations of Americans whose struggles and discoveries in the City of Light set them on the path to high achievement. James Fenimore Cooper, author of the beloved Deerslayer novels, formed an important lifelong friendship in the halls of the Louvre with Samuel F. B. Morse, the renowned painter and inventor of the telegraph. Charles Sumner, the leading abolitionist U.S. senator, first examined his views on race when he studied at Paris’s diverse Sorbonne. Elihu Washburne, the U.S. Minister to France, performed heroically during the Siege of Paris and the horrors of the Commune, serving Americans and other foreign nationals as the official representative of his country. Augustus Saint-Gaudens arrived in Paris as an impoverished young engraver and despite personal and professional hardship became the most celebrated American sculptor of the time. Mary Cassatt, determined to excel as a painter, recognized the genius of the Impressionists and became the lone American among them. And John Singer Sargent, worked unceasingly to perfect his exceptional talent and won international renown while still in his twenties.

Ambitious Americans of all kinds, from musicians to medical students, sought inspiration and opportunity in Paris and changed America through the work they did there and the ideas and accomplishments they brought home. Through it all there was Paris with its incomparable splendors and charm, its deadly epidemics and bloody revolutions, and everlasting joie de vivre. The Americans were never to forget their Paris years. How they were changed by that experience has had profound effects on American history...

## Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. *The Greater Journey* opens with a quotation by the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens: “For we constantly deal with practical problems, with moulders, contractors, derricks, stonemen, trucks, rubbish, plasterers, and what-not-else, all while trying to soar into the blue.” How does this quotation set the stage for *The Greater Journey*? What kinds of “practical problems” did Americans in Paris face, and how did they manage to “soar into the blue?”
2. What were some of the challenges travelers faced on the journey from America to Paris? “Great as their journey had been by sea, a greater journey had begun, as they already sensed, and from it they were to learn more, and bring back more, of infinite value to themselves and their country than they yet knew.” What is the “greater journey” that these Americans began after their voyage across the ocean? Why do you think McCullough chose the title *The Greater Journey* for this book?
3. Describing Augustus Saint-Gaudens, McCullough writes, “he had something he was determined to accomplish, and thus became accomplished himself.” What were some of the reasons that Americans made the trip to Paris? What did they need to accomplish in Paris, and how did they become accomplished there?
4. Describe the role of women within the community of Americans in Paris. What unique problems did women face in the city during the 19th century? How did female students, artists, and wives write about their experiences in Paris, as compared to their male counterparts?
5. Describe the friendship between James Fenimore Cooper and Samuel F. B. Morse. What seems to have drawn these men of different backgrounds and professions to each other? What kind of support did Cooper offer Morse during the creation of *Gallery of the Louvre*, and how did Morse include the Cooper family within the painting?
6. The painter George Healy sailed to Paris in the 1830s, and according to his granddaughter, “His love of France and the French never changed him from an out-and-out American.” Which of the other travelers within *The Greater Journey* would you also describe as out-and-out Americans? How did they express their patriotism while they lived overseas?
7. Consider the significance of letters and journals within the book. What kind of information does McCullough draw from historical letters and diaries? How would you compare the importance of letters and journals in the 19th century to the present day? How have issues of privacy, diplomacy, and record-keeping changed?
8. In *The Greater Journey*, we see France in political turmoil—Restoration, Franco-Prussian War, and Commune-led Paris—through the eyes of the young sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, medical student Mary Putnam, and the diplomat Elihu Washburne. What perspective on politics and violence does each of them offer? How do their motivations and opinions on war and revolution differ?
9. Oliver Wendell Holmes called medicine “the noblest of arts.” How is medical study portrayed in *The Greater Journey*? What advances in the profession does the book chronicle? What are some major differences between medical practice in 19th-century Paris and medicine as we know it today?
10. Compare the two painters who dominate the final chapters of *The Greater Journey*: Mary Cassatt and John Singer Sargent. How were their lives and work similar, and how were they different?
11. How would you classify *The Greater Journey*—is it the history of a community, the history of a place, or both? What is McCullough’s particular style of narrating history? Which of McCullough’s “narrators”—the men and women who witnessed the history of Paris—provides the clearest view of his or her environment?

12. If you could tour Paris with any of the historical figures in *The Greater Journey*, who would it be? Would you want to explore the Louvre with Samuel Morse, discuss politics with Elihu Washburne, attend a concert with Louis Moreau Gottschalk, witness surgery with Elizabeth Blackwell, or appraise canvases with John Singer Sargent? Explain your answer.

## Enhance Your Book Club

- Get inspired by the descriptive letters that Americans in Paris wrote to their families and friends back home. Exchange letters with another member of your book club. Share observations about your daily life—from your routine to your reaction to the headlines of the day. Send these letters through the mail, and don't forget to save them as little pieces of history!
- Have a day of art appreciation with your book club. Visit your local museum, or meet at a public monument or statue.
- Celebrate the invention of the daguerreotype—the first form of photography, which Louis Daguerre premiered in Paris in 1839—by taking a group photograph of your book club. (Feel free to use the latest technology, like a digital camera!)
- Samuel F. B. Morse co-invented Morse code for his innovative telegraph system. Try this translating tool to hear what your name sounds like in Morse code: <http://morsecode.scphillips.com/translator.html>.
- Set the mood for your book club meeting by playing compositions by Louis Moreau Gottschalk, an American piano prodigy who launched his career in Paris. You can download his music or purchase a CD here: [http://www.amazon.com/Louis-Moreau-Gottschalk-Piano-Music/dp/B00008OP1W/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=music&ie=UTF8&qid=1300278520&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Louis-Moreau-Gottschalk-Piano-Music/dp/B00008OP1W/ref=sr_1_1?s=music&ie=UTF8&qid=1300278520&sr=1-1).