



## Union Atlantic

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## **Union Atlantic** Adam Haslett

The eagerly anticipated debut novel from the author of the Pulitzer Prize finalist *You Are Not a Stranger Here*: a deeply affecting portrait of the modern gilded age, the first decade of the twenty-first century.

At the heart of *Union Atlantic* lies a test of wills between a young banker, Doug Fanning, and a retired schoolteacher, Charlotte Graves, whose two dogs have begun to speak to her. When Doug builds an ostentatious mansion on land that Charlotte's grandfather donated to the town of Finden, Massachusetts, she determines to oust him in court. As a senior manager of Union Atlantic bank, a major financial conglomerate, Doug is embroiled in the company's struggle to remain afloat. It is Charlotte's brother, Henry Graves, the president of the New York Federal Reserve, who must keep a watchful eye on Union Atlantic and the entire financial system. Drawn into Doug and Charlotte's intensifying conflict is Nate Fuller, a troubled high-school senior who unwittingly stirs powerful emotions in each of them.

Irresistibly complex, imaginative, and witty, *Union Atlantic* is a singular work of fiction that is sure to be read and reread long after it causes a sensation this spring.

## **Union Atlantic Details**

Date : Published February 9th 2010 by Nan A. Talese (first published 2010)

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Author : Adam Haslett

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## From Reader Review Union Atlantic for online ebook

### Lobstergirl says

How interesting that this has an average rating of only 3.34. For me, it's one of the strongest novels of the 21st century I've read so far. (Granted, I don't read a lot of current literary fiction.)

It combines the pacing of a thriller, the social acuity of Tom Wolfe, and the phrase-crafting of Jonathan Franzen. I'd rank it above *Privileges* by Jonathan Dee, a somewhat similar novel. Haslett writes with equal facility about leveraged stock trades and margin calls and the mechanics of gay sex, which explains why the novel was both a Financial Times/Goldman Sachs Business Book of the Year Nominee and got a Lambda Literary Award for Gay Fiction.

Sometimes good writing is deceptively simple: "He said nothing for another moment or two, time enough, he figured, for the man to begin wondering about his own liability once the shareholder litigation began." A fairly ordinary sentence, yet think about how much a writer has to know both about finance and human behavior to create it. And: "This was the kind of Business Roundtable chump who spent his lunchtime decrying government intrusion and now found himself on a cell phone in the middle of the night pleading with the government to save him."

Or this Zeitgeisty sentence: "Now and again Sabrina employed this sort of presumption, a compensatory fantasy, he imagined, for the inherent powerlessness of a person with an advanced degree in short fiction." Ouch.

And: "Like a luxury car with poor turning radius, it took some effort for her to steer back through the door, which Doug closed behind her."

There are a few false notes: Charlotte serves Nate a tray of tea and "biscuits," as if we're in some country other than America. And a huge Fourth of July party thrown by a megabank CEO and his wife descends into farce, as the flock of sheep he owns in order to get a farming tax deduction are accidentally let loose and begin to nervously shit on the partygoers' feet, and fireworks explode prematurely, setting the lawn on fire. We visit Charlotte's youthful live-in love Eric, in flashbacks; Eric is a heroin addict who in Charlotte's (and Haslett's?) eyes seems near Christlike. We are also subjected to too much of high schooler Nate's friends and their drug binges; I always find myself hoping that a book aimed at adults, featuring adult characters, will remain that way, and always cringe when the teens and their bongs emerge.

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### Dani says

4,5 stars.

Basically what Apeiron said in her beautiful review.

There were a lot of scenes, small and bigger, that were marvelous. This author has a rare, keen eye for interpersonal dynamics and at some point I felt driven to google his age. There is something really mature in the way he brings characters to life - a compassionate yet detached perspective that is highly perceptive and

unique.

Just one example, to give you a taste (I'll reuse this as it is the most powerful one without any character-backstory)

*"Now and again Sabrina employed this sort of presumption, a compensatory fantasy, he imagined, for the inherent powerlessness of a person with an advanced degree in short fiction. It was as though she'd bargained on receiving a certain cultural cachet that had yet to materialize and in the meantime needed a bridge loan of prestige paid out in the quasi-glamour of international travel. Her parents were doctors who'd covered everything through graduate school but had drawn the line at outright patronage."*

Dead-on, unflinching, insightful characterizations - it's like Sabrina, all disappointed entitlement and naive yearning and sullen attitude, is walking off the page into my livingroom.

And Sabrina is only a very minor side-character - just imagine what he is able to do with focusing this kind of observational eye combined with a beautiful mastery of language on a main character.

That's what really made this book for me.

That said, I feel the weakest part, both in regards to the psychological deftness and storyline, is actually (view spoiler)

But these are minor quibbles, because in the end every single character's development managed to stir me up deeply in a strangely quiet, calm way that lingered afterwards. Recommended.

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### **Joana says**

Escrito nas vésperas da grande crise financeira do subprime, dos créditos de risco e da bolha especulativa e imobiliária, Union Atlantic é um livro sobre a economia mundial, mas também sobre pessoas, sobre os medos e as ambições que inexoravelmente vão regendo as vidas de cada um.

Iniciei a leitura deste livro com receio de não ter conhecimentos suficientes para compreender alguns termos técnicos que se adivinhavam: swaps, subprime, créditos de risco, etc. No entanto, o autor só recorre a uma linguagem mais técnica quando é estritamente necessário e quando quer conferir autenticidade às suas descrições ou aos diálogos entre as personagens que estão diretamente ligadas ao mundo da banca e da alta finança.

A crítica aplaudiu a obra de Haslett precisamente pela contemporaneidade do tema escolhido: a crise económica que assentou na concessão de empréstimos de alto risco; a forma como a falta de regulação dos mercados (especialmente do Norte-Americano) levou à insolvência de várias instituições bancárias (que também estendiam a sua ação ao ramo dos seguros e da imobiliária); e a quebra de confiança geral no sistema financeiro após a crescente percepção de que a falta de liquidez no sistema não era uma possibilidade, mas sim uma realidade.

No meio deste furacão financeiro, entrecruzam-se as personagens de Union Atlantic: Doug Fanning, um jovem e ambicioso banqueiro, que fez fortuna a dirigir as operações financeiras de alto risco no "pequeno" império que é a instituição que dá nome ao livro; e Charlotte Graves, uma professora de História compulsivamente reformada, cujos esforços para recuperar a herança de família a colocam em confronto direto com Doug, numa cruzada jurídica com reviravoltas muito significativas.

Ainda assim, o antagonismo entre Doug e Charlotte é mitigado pelo que há de comum entre estas personagens que estão inexoravelmente unidas pelo caos em que se encontram as suas vidas despedaçadas, e a própria espiral de descontrolo que os envolve acaba por ter paralelo no próprio desgoverno em que se encontra o sistema financeiro.

O conflito entre Doug Fanning e Charlotte Graves é, na realidade, uma parábola, que ilustra a forma como a intromissão generalizada do dinheiro, do desperdício e da ostentação (como é referido pelo próprio autor) colidem inevitavelmente com os valores da justiça, da lealdade e da transparência.

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O autor não optou por um fim moralista ou redentor. Acaba por não ser feita justiça no sentido literal do termo, pois não há condenações efetivas para os que perpetraram os crimes em causa, e o sistema mantém-se inalterado - aqui e ali somos alertados para as complexas relações que se forjam entre o sistema político e financeiro dos EUA, sendo evidente que o Capitólio e Wall Street funcionam em estreita cooperação.

Ainda assim, o desfecho é circular e o leitor fica com a sensação de que não ficam pontas soltas por atar: Doug pacifica-se com o passado e Charlotte acaba por conseguir exorcizar todos os seus demónios, mesmo que o seu destino acabe por ser o mais trágico de todos.

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### **Stephanie Sun says**

**Union Atlantic** has everything one could need from a contemporary novel, except for, perhaps, a sense of humor. Which isn't to say that it isn't a pleasurable read: it is. Just not exactly... satisfying.

Much of the pleasure here comes from Haslett's prose. Haslett knows exactly when to flex his muscles: in conjuring up the romance of a New England summer; the romance of youth; the romance of a secret, old, and useless pain; and, of course, the romance of money, both kept safe and played with.

However, parts of Charlotte's story felt like a cheat, both in terms of character and plot—the dogs and the land and the unlikely links to power all a *deus ex machina* that ends up mattering little in the end. Charlotte's ultimate fate is recalled for us at a distance by young Nate, in his final POV.

What to make of Nate, exactly? Haslett has joked in interviews that Nate's story is his "coming of age novel." It's impossible not to love Nate—Haslett's physical descriptions of the boy pretty much make you want to hug him every other sentence. However, I missed something deeper in his thread—some incisive conclusion or argument about youth—embedded as Nate's story is in an old world full of old mistakes, old money, and history repeating itself.

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### **Jaclyn Crupi says**

I cannot believe that this book existed in the world for six years before I read it. Haslett is now up there with my must-read favourite contemporary authors and I'll read anything he writes. His two novels and one short story collection show tremendous range and skill and intelligence and wisdom and I want more from him as

soon as possible please.

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## Diane says

Watching the Congressional hearings into Goldman Sachs made me appreciate the prescience of Adam Haslett's brilliant novel, *Union Atlantic*.

Written in the year before the economic collapse of 2009, Haslett's novel features a young gun investment banker, Doug Fanning, whom we first meet in 1988 when he is stationed on a US naval ship that is escorting Kuwaiti tankers through the Straits of Hormuz. Fanning sees an unidentified plane on his radar, and alerts his commander. A decision is made to fire upon the plane and 290 people lost their lives as their Iranian Airbus passenger jet was shot down by the Americans.

The incident gets covered up, as well as the fact that Fanning failed to tell his commander that the jet was ascending, not descending as the commander was told. This incident and its aftermath leads Fanning to become the kind of man who later sets in motion a financial disaster that threatens the U.S. banking system.

Fanning becomes a big success as an investment banker at Union Atlantic. He takes risks there as well, and as long as he produces big profits for the bank and in turn himself, he can cut all the corners he likes. His boss is willfully ignorant of Fanning's schemes.

When Fanning builds a huge McMansion next to property owned by Charlotte Graves, he underestimates her. The land was owned by her grandfather, and Charlotte believes his house is obscene. Charlotte, a retired teacher, is eccentric, slipping into insanity. She believes that her two dogs are the incarnated Malcolm X and Cotton Mather, and they frequently share their conflicting advice with Charlotte.

Charlotte ends up tutoring Nate, a teenage boy whose father recently committed suicide. Nate and his mother are barely existing together. He breaks into Fanning's home, and ends up in a dangerous sexual relationship with Fanning. Fanning wants Nate to help get Charlotte off his back, and he is willing to use Nate's vulnerability to get what he wants.

When a colleague working for Fanning runs a scheme that unravels, Charlotte brother Henry Graves, the president of the New York Federal Reserve, becomes involved in trying to keep this from ruining the entire entangled U. S. economy. (Hank Paulson, anyone?)

How Haslett weaves these stories together is a wonder. He doesn't write this novel, he crafts it. It took me along time to read this book because I frequently reread passages, they were that beautiful. Of Nate realizing that Charlotte needed him, he writes

These last many months the intuition of others' needs had become Nate's second nature, as if his father's going had cut him a pair of new, lidless eyes that couldn't help but see into a person such as this this: marooned and specter-driven.

His characters are vivid and complex. Nate is flailing about, wanting to be loved and willing to debase himself to do it. Charlotte is a genius, bordering on insane, and Fanning is amoral, sinking further into the morass.

It is astonishing that a fiction writer created this dialogue in 2008, when Henry the NY Fed Chair says to the

CEO of Union Atlantic

"Let me start by saying that if you or your board is under the impression that Union Atlantic is too big to fail, you're mistaken. There's no question here of a bailout. If you go under, the markets will take a hit, but with enough liquidity in the system we can cut you loose. I hope you understand that." This, of course, was a bluff. Henry has already begun receiving calls from the Treasury Department.

This novel is one of the best books I have read this decade. The story is relevant and the characters are powerful. Haslett is a true craftsman. If you like good fiction, this is a book you must read.

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## Apeiron says

Union Atlantic :

So good even negative reviews are basically recommendations.

One star reviews mention unsympathetic characters, complex prose, ponderous chapters, moral ambiguity. They call it a bad book, I call it

Adam Hasslett is so scary good at words he must've studied writing at Hogwarts.

And he writes fucked-up, pathetic and convoluted characters with staggering empathy.

Like Charlotte, an elderly feminist scholar who loathes unfettered capitalism with a passion rivaled by her strange and elusive love for her brother, the president of New York Fed. She is the conscience of American history turned into a force of nature, proud and armed to teeth against complacency.

(This interview with the author, where he talks about Charlotte and the other characters, made me fall in love)

In this book Haslett creates people all over the moral and political heatmap and delivers them into this world with an eloquence that makes you marvel at things that you might have thought before, but perhaps never saw them phrased in such a keen way:

Now and again Sabrina employed this sort of presumption, a compensatory fantasy, he imagined, for the inherent powerlessness of a person with an advanced degree in short fiction. It was as though she'd bargained on receiving a certain cultural cachet that had yet to materialize and in the meantime needed a bridge loan of prestige paid out in the quasi-glamour of international travel.

All those characters, whose only connection at first is accidental in a comic twist that tragedies are made of, get tangled up in a power struggle before the dawn of the financial crisis that imploded in 2008.

They come saddled with luggage of their pasts, anxiety and self-importance. Everyone wants something

from someone, even if just a validation of their own worthlessness. Or to find meaning in destruction of another.

I seem to love stories about loneliness. Or maybe I've been falling victim to a conspiracy that puts stories like that on my path relentlessly.

But that's only a part of what I found in *Union Atlantic* and so I'm putting my morbid musings in a spoiler because I don't want to make you all sad; it's not spoilery for the book in case you're curious:

(view spoiler)

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Haslett writes about people who let their loneliness shape them and seek to impart the products of their isolation on the world in different ways. He writes it without a clear agenda, they're not characters for you to judge and learn from. They're too messed up to empathize with, but proud, magnificent and courageous enough to admire.

## **Vestal McIntyre says**

I love books that put me in the morally compromised position of rooting for a villain. In Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*, for example, we watch Undine Spragg, a creature of pure ambition and greed, as she goes through husband after husband in her search for wealth and status. She leaves in her wake a neglected son and a suicide. More than her downfall, though, I wanted to see her prevail. This phenomenon is old news, I suppose, considering fiendish scene-stealers from Milton's Satan to Alexis Carrington. Worthy of inclusion on this list is Doug Fanning, the spider at the center of Haslett's fantastic web of a book, *Union Atlantic*.

Doug is not only a banker, but a bad banker, one of the greedy speculators who got us into this mess we're in. But Haslett cannot make a character without making him wholly human. We are granted an understanding of Doug which translates into a better understanding of our age. And when Doug comes into conflict with Charlotte Graves, an elderly history teacher who was forced into retirement for her unflinching honesty and perspicacity, the results are wrenching. Charlotte is the my favorite character in recent memory; her monologues as she tutors teenager Nate are hilarious, moving, and eye-opening. And Nate is a perfectly wrought boy at sea. I yearned to protect him both from his exploiters and his own bad decisions.

Haslett has combined Whartonesque wit and authority with the heart and wide sympathies that made his collection *You Are Not a Stranger Here* so memorable. As a result, *Union Atlantic* achieves something many of our best and most enjoyable works of art fall short of: importance.

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### **Doug says**

More like a 2.5 for me. Haslett's latest book, the NBA nominated *Imagine Me Gone*, is probably my favorite novel of the past year, and I also thoroughly enjoyed his Pulitzer nominated book of short stories. So this came as somewhat of a major disappointment for me. I just couldn't get into the minutiae of the banking business that the convoluted plot revolves around ; it played out like an even more boring version of *The Big Short*, nor was I interested in the scenes set on a war ship or in the Kuwait desert. Haslett's strong suit is his characters, and even here I thought he was deficient. The prose is often just as fine as in his other work, but to little lasting effect, since I found the characters largely dull and uninteresting. And what was with the Biblical/philosophy spouting dogs?

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### **Stefanie says**

WOW.

I was about 100 pages into this novel and continually thought, "Why am I reading this?" Then I just got to a point where I couldn't put it down and THEN IT STATED TO TOUCH MY SOUL TO THE POINT OF OPEN-JAWEDNESS. WTF ADAM HASLETT. I was so scared that this was going to be nothing like "You Are Not A Stranger Here," but it was of the same brilliant caliber.

Honestly, if I could have written one character in my life it would either be Lisbeth or Doug from *Union Atlantic*. This novel was so understatedly PERFECT. It sneaks up on you, it hides until it wants you to see it, and then it kidnaps you and you love every second of it. I don't know what it is about this book or Haslett's phrasing but it is genius and it says a lot when a reader has no idea how to explain what they are in love with... isn't that true love?!

There isn't much going on in this novel but it is a whirlwind and you find yourself lost in the characters and their honest and true humanity. Oh my goodness... this is literature. This is why I read.

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### **Sofia says**

In an interview Adam Haslett said: "My interest is always to get as deeply as I can into the minds and spirits of the characters and let the readers empathize or judge as they will". Well he quite succeeded in doing this in my opinion.

With *Union Atlantic* he tells the story of group of people whose lives intersected for a little period of time. Haslett gives all dues to each character and easily drew me in making me feel that particular character. The loneliness, the confusion, the passion that was Charlotte, the loss, the pain, the escape, the want of Nate, the sleekness, the barrenness of Doug etc. He knows how to write people.

As I read this during the time of the Greek bailout the story struck more chords than just what happened in the past. Because money-meddling is not just a thing of the past. I don't think that we found the perfect

solution yet. Our world is controlled by ‘might is right’, not by ‘fair and just’. Maybe like Henry, I too have to be pragmatic enough to bend my wish for the ‘better’, for the greater good, even if this galls. Or no, should I be like Charlotte? A stalwart Don Quixote fighting at windmills. But without the Charlottes where would we be? Much more worse than we are. We need them, at least to brake a little, the headlong rush of greed. Because our world is a good breeding ground for the sleek sharks that do not get wet like Doug. Shortsighted yes because they need to drink that water to live. But then maybe my definition of ‘live’ is not the same as theirs.

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An enjoyable group read - where we talked this to death.

### **Nicholas says**

I was skeptical. Yes, I had really, really loved his collection of short stories, *You Are Not a Stranger Here*. But in his NPR interview I heard the description of this novel and it had to do with banking. And all of those things that made our economy nearly collapse. Not that these things aren't important, but I generally don't understand them: swaps and trades and mortgage-backed securities and markets and exchanges.

Turns out that it is about that, but about a lot more than that as well. Like all novels that I love, *Union Atlantic* is really about people. And the characters are wonderful. One of them, Doug Fanning, is indeed an irresponsible banker. And another, Henry Graves, is the chief of the New York Federal Reserve. But there is also Charlotte, Henry's sister and Doug's neighbor: old school WASP, retired history teacher, curmudgeon, and crank, who you end up rooting for. And Nate, her tutee, whose father has recently committed suicide. All of these people are all bound up together in ways that I would have thought implausible had you told me (were I to tell you) how it happens, but in Haslett's hands it really works.

This is a big and sweeping novel about money and sex and history and money again, and it's clearly trying to be big and sweeping. To be honest, I didn't care all that much about the sweep; the characters were enough for me. And speaking of: sit tight till Part II when you meet Evelyn Jones. I was moved. I still am, just thinking about her.

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Did some parts irritate me just a little bit? Yes, they did, the talking dogs particularly (you'll see). And if I could give it 4.5 stars, I would, but I'm still going to go with 5 instead of 4.

### **Carol says**

Very good, with so many beautiful scenes, insightful observations and interesting characters. But the first chapters are pretty boring.

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Still wondering how this got the Lambda, because the LGBT-part is just so minor.

## **Maya says**

Buddy read - Aug 2015

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## **Rebecca says**

Another capable fictional response to the banking crisis. Main character Doug Fanning is seemingly invincible: he thinks he is perfect and untouchable – that the property dispute threatening his mansion will just go away, that he can have an offhand sexual relationship with a teenage boy and no one will be any the wiser, and that he can commit fraud without getting caught.

When his inevitable fall comes and he is returned to the Middle East setting where he experienced his first humiliation in Gulf War service, it's a bit of a letdown; he is no classic tragic hero, just another disaffected young narcissist. The novel is reminiscent of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (and indeed, Franzen and Haslett seem to be pals) with its setting of suburban angst, and of *A Week in December* with its Dickensian fable of society gone wrong – through the lens of banking misconduct. Haslett will be one to watch out for in the future.

(This review formed part of an article about books on the financial crisis for Bookkaholic.)

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