There’s a wonderful wine shop in Vienna called Wein & Co. It’s small and so crammed with bottles that there is scarcely room for aisles, let alone the staff. Yet some of the precious area that could be given over to more Blaufrankisch or Zweigelt is devoted to a book section—perhaps thirty titles in four or five languages. Across the ocean, in the highest rent area of Center City, Philadelphia, a chain bookstore gives wine books almost twenty feet on the shelves. If volume counts and volumes count, writing about wine seems to be a robust business.

But, in fact, nobody really writes about wine. You can understand why. The real topic, wine itself—the good ol’ Ding an Sich—is completely avoided by any writer who wants an audience. If you wrote about the stuff in your glass, you’d have only three possibilities, all of them equally—you should pardon the expression—dispiriting.

You could write about the actual experience of tasting wine—the color, smells, and tastes. There are magazines that do just that. They publish hundreds of entries, each about two-dozen words long, describing either one person’s experience of a particular wine or the collective experience of a panel. It’s a genre, but it’s very narrow. Read a few of these descriptions, and your eyes start to glaze over; read too many, and you have to giggle at their silliness.

You could also, with deadly seriousness, write about the chemistry of wine that underlies its tastes and smells. At first glance this approach may seem useful: show the folks the wizard behind the curtain, pinpoint the source of that black fruit and briar bouquet. Unfortunately, the magic of wine chemistry, like most wizardry, is ultimately both mundane and obscure. The topic here is still organic chemistry, which has a certain irreducible complexity and for which the audience is necessarily small. To make matters worse, most writing about chemistry is written by, well, chemists. (There is one precious exception: Emil Peynaud’s *The Taste of Wine*.)

The third possibility is to write about wine making. This perspective is really a fusion of the first two, but it discusses wine at the level of craft. Instead of describing the dish or the ingredients, you talk about the recipe. Since wine is an agricultural product and each growing season, like each baseball season, starts out with a lot of unknowns, there is a certain drama inherent in the making of most wines. Weather happens, bugs happen, disease and labor shortages happen, and yes, in the case of some fertilized vineyards, shit happens.

The only thing wrong with this kind of writing is that—along with sharing some of the shortcomings of the first two types—it ultimately can’t answer the questions it poses. How did the severe pruning of Spencer Vineyard’s Cabernet affect the flavor of the wine? What makes the wine from Brigitte’s Bluff gamier than the same variety taken from Frannie’s Flat? What’s going on while the wine is “sleeping in oaken casks”? Much wine craft is trial and error. Most winemakers don’t know why a particular technique has a particular effect, and in the few cases where we do know why something works, the real explanation makes for pretty poor reading.

And yet there are all those books. A certain online service lists more than eleven thousand of them. If they’re not about wine, then, what are they about? The unsurprising answer is that they’re about everything else imaginable.
Because wine is both well loved and hard to talk about, we end up projecting everything that matters onto it. More important, almost any approach to storytelling can be the basis of a wine book.

So it follows that to understand any particular wine book, you first have to give up the idea that it’s actually about wine. Wine has to play a part, of course, but the best books on wine transcend their narrow subject. They no longer deal simply with wine. They become literature.

The Great Wines of America, Paul Lukacs’s lusciously readable volume is a tribute to American wine, and its very existence is a tribute to American wine drinkers. As he observes, it’s a book that “[o]nly a generation ago…would have been regarded as a joke” (p.13). In that generation a few hundred people put their money and their talent on the line to make wines that rivaled the world’s best. His book consists of forty portraits that, contrary to the subtitle, are really about winemakers and winegrowers. The combination of great vision attached to a modest and very earthy end makes for forty very interesting heroes and heroines. These are the people who invested lives and fortunes in wine at a time when that investment didn’t look so promising. When they began, they had little reason to believe that great wine was possible and only the most solipsistic reasons for thinking that their countrymen would drink it.

But it takes more than interesting or even compelling subjects to make a good book, and Lukacs’s prose is as well balanced and generous as the wines he praises. Of all the books reviewed here, his is the most erudite: he wears his extensive knowledge of wine graciously and shares it easily. It’s no small part of the book’s charm that every chapter is loaded, in an unpretentious way, with information about the history and the culture of wine. Taken together, the individual chapters are an endorsement for the idea that there is grandeur in simple pleasures.

So we have these ingredients: brave visionaries, extraordinary achievement, and unifying, even inspirational, themes. The reader may think I’m exaggerating, but this book belongs on the shelf next to Tacitus’s Agricola and Butler’s Lives of the Saints. If anything, Lukacs comes out ahead. I found Great Wines of America difficult to put down. While Butler’s saints are often difficult people, and their virtue something of a rebuke to the believing reader, Lukacs’s pioneers are true heroes, folks we could imagine...
being ourselves. When they succeed, we do too. And besides, between saints and winemakers, who would you rather spend time with?

A Wine Journey along the Russian River lies firmly in the tradition established by such American writers as John McPhee and Paul Theroux. It’s a story about how things work and what a particular place is like. In this case the thing in question is delineated by the course of the Russian River, which flows into the Pacific Ocean north of San Francisco. The river itself, as author Steve Heimoff makes clear, cuts its way through many different wine areas, and so this geographical feature—rather than wine making itself—constitutes the unifying theme of the book.

The front cover is from an oil painting by Dana Hawley that depicts a bend in the river as painted in broad strokes from above. The texture and spirit of the painting are all about earth and water—there’s not a hint of wine in the air. And the author photo on the back jacket shows Heimoff standing on the riverbank in front of his canoe, smiling against a backdrop of fall foliage. He proceeds to take the reader down the river through a bewildering variety of wines and vineyards. Along the way we meet heroes, wizards, sluggards, and knaves. Unfortunately, the book’s transcendent moments are marred by a nearly unusable map of the region. (Let’s hope for a replacement in the next edition.)

Contrary to expectation, Heimoff is at his best when he abandons the river for a chapter on clones and the politics of American Viticultural Areas. Cloning—that is, recognizing the success of individual vines and making genetic duplicates of them, which in turn become individual subvarieties—is the basis of much of the improvement in American wines over the past decades.

By the end of the book, Heimoff’s journey has begun to feel like a pilgrimage. He writes:

It was sunny when I left. At Cazadero, the sky suddenly darkened and the rain came….Ten minutes later, at the Farmhouse Inn, the sun reemerged and lit up the vineyards.” (p.251)

Compare these closing words with the following last line:

From there, we came out again to see the stars.

This sentence was written by a fellow named Dante at the end of one of his famous pilgrimages.

Mike Weiss doesn’t know much about wine. He says so himself, and if he hadn’t, there are enough misstatements in the first few pages of A Very Good Year to give him away. Nevertheless, he has written an enormously successful book that will offer new insights and perspectives to even the most sophisticated student of wine. Because Weiss sets himself a task that makes extensive knowledge of wine unnecessary, he isn’t tripped up by his lack of expertise: “I had proposed looking deeply into a bottle of California wine in order to find the whole epic of contemporary California in a single bottle of its symbolic product, its face to the world” (p.5).

Weiss’s book supports the premise of my review: that wine books aren’t necessarily about wine, and it suggests that these books may sometimes have a broader purpose. In his case the book explores George Bursick’s very successful Ferrari-Carano 2002 as thoroughly as any good biographer would explore his subject. Weiss’s biography is successful on two counts. First, it details the various skills that go into getting a bottle of wine to the table. Weiss is a good reporter, so he makes those skills come to life. We meet the winemaker and the winemaker. We see the cooperation and the tensions between them. We see the reality of agriculture and the demands of viticulture, all wrapped up in an accountant’s balance sheet.

Weiss also has a disarmingly frank view of the nature of wine marketing. His book opens with the words: “In the beginning was The Story” (p.11). Weiss acknowledges that in order to succeed in the wine business, you need a good myth as much as you need good wine. He reveals the laborious process of building the myth, of creating the right package, of fashioning—if not fabricating—the homey image that goes along with it. He tells us about the strategy of getting the wine into restaurants and about the endless series of incentives that make that placement possible.

But Weiss does even more than that: He gives us a taste of Émile Zola, Charles Dickens, and Tom Wolfe. We also meet the Mexican workers whose hands actually tend the grapes. We ride along with the noisy machinery of harvest and tiptoe through the toxic chemicals that sanitize the winery. His is an intensely real view of the wine world, a perspective that is distinct from the romantic treatment usually found in the wine press. And for that, it’s all the more refreshing and worthwhile.