David McCullough has ranged widely across American history, from early books about the Johnstown Flood, the Panama Canal and the Brooklyn Bridge to later, Pulitzer-winning biographies of Harry Truman and John Adams. He gets around. You can even find him narrating Ken Burns documentaries and the movie “Seabiscuit.” Having been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, McCullough could, at 78, rest on his laurels and hold forth in interviews. Instead he has been working for years on a big book about the allure of one of his favorite cities: Paris.

“Not all pioneers,” McCullough says early on, “went west.” Thus he establishes his theme, the intellectual frontier mentality that drove countless Americans to brave the rigors of a sea voyage and an alien culture to imbibe the Old World charm and history of Paris. There they could write, paint, sculpt, compose, study medicine or indulge the other creative yearnings that propelled the multitude crowding this panoramic book.

McCullough begins his story in the 1830s, sketching the characters as they prepare to leave for their journeys — novelist James Fenimore Cooper, portrait painter Samuel F.B. Morse, poet and medical student Oliver Wendell Holmes, women’s education advocate Emma Willard and others. At the time, sea travel is fraught with risk. Only a determined band of adventurers (mostly young, mostly male) has the means and ambition to face it. Later, as the voyage becomes safer and less expensive, the cast enlarges. More women join the pilgrimage, including tireless medical student Elizabeth Blackwell, who later founded the New York Infirmary and College for Women, and art student Mary Cassatt.

A third of the way through the 19th century, Paris’s population of 800,000 was four times the size of New York City’s. A historic center of art, literature and medicine, it could lay claim to being the most influential city in Europe. McCullough provides glimpses of many lives, from Cooper, America’s first writer to achieve huge popular success, to future senator and abolitionist Charles Sumner. Crusading novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe liked Paris because it seemed less utilitarian and Protestant than her homeland. “With all New England’s earnestness and practical efficiency,” she complained, “there is a long withering of the soul’s more ethereal part — a crushing out of the beautiful — which is horrible.”

For each American visitor to Paris, the recurring theme upon arrival is surprise at how much better everyday life seems there. “A dinner here does not oppress one,”
marveledCooper. “The wine neither intoxicates nor heats, and the frame of mind and body, in which one is left, is precisely that best suited to intellectual and social pleasures.”

One of the many interesting characters is abolitionist and fugitive slave William Wells Brown. He faced death if he denounced slavery in his native Kentucky, but in Paris he was among 800 delegates to an international peace conference with Victor Hugo as its figurehead. At Hugo’s request, Brown delivered a widely quoted speech about the need to “break . . . in pieces every yoke of bondage.” He was feted at a reception hosted by none other than Alexis de Tocqueville, the French foreign minister.

“At home [Brown] could have been present at such a reception only as a servant,” McCullough writes. “Curious to know more about him, Madame de Tocqueville asked him to sit beside her on the sofa. The only disapproving look he saw among the many watching was from the American consul, Robert Walsh.”

“The Greater Journey” is a lively and entertaining panorama, with abundant details along the way. A parade must keep moving, and McCullough is a practiced hand at managing such a cast. His specialty is clarity. His voice is straightforward, more journalistic than literary despite its largely artistic subject matter. The many brief paragraphs — often a single sentence — can give scenes a disjointed air, like a newspaper article that ought to have had one more iteration to polish transitions. Fortunately, McCullough quotes extensively from letters, diaries and published comments by his many attentive American visitors. This symphony of diverse voices lifts the book’s tone above the workmanlike level of the author’s own narration.

McCullough’s best scenes unfold in an extensive, detailed section on the surprising (and apparently largely forgotten) career of U.S. ambassador Elihu Washburne. He became a witness to both the German siege of Paris in 1870 and the atrocities of the Paris Commune in the spring of 1871. One of Washburne’s onerous duties at the American Legation was to arrange safe passage for the 30,000 Germans evicted from Paris during the Franco-Prussian war. “There were women in various stages of pregnancy,” McCullough writes. “One day a child was born on a bench outside near the door” of the legation.

McCullough’s plain-speaking tone is at its best in such scenes, which easily might have been overplayed. Elsewhere his description of the horrors of medical dissection is more powerful because of this kind of understatement. By the time he shows us the triumphant Exposition Universelle in 1889, witnessed through the eyes of such characters as painters John Singer Sargent and Robert Henri, we share McCullough’s enthusiasm for the city and his affection for the many Americans who improved their lives, their talent and their nation by drinking at the fountain that was Paris.
By Anne Davenport:

"In his latest book, "the Greater Journey: Americans in Paris," David McCullough turns his historians eye toward 19th century Americans as they travel to Paris and are profoundly influenced for decades to come.

The two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award recently sat down with Jeffrey Brown at a French café in Washington. He described why he decided to write his book and the approach he took:

"People don't realize to what degree we are affected by the French and by French history. Here we are in a city designed by a Frenchman: We're sitting in a French restaurant in the United States...History is more than politics and the military and social issues. Yes, it is politics and the military and social issues, but it's also art and music and architecture and ideas and science and medicine, it's the works, it's human. And I think that the more we teach history that way, the more we realize that's obviously true."

See the PBS interview with David McCullough: