

What America Reads: Myth Making in Popular Fiction

Attempting to form generalizations about so broad a topic as best-selling fiction is tricky business. Ultimately, there is no explaining why such disparate authors as Willa Cather, Zane Grey, Saul Bellow, and Jacqueline Susann have all appeared on best-seller lists in the years since 1895, when the first list was officially compiled. At one time or another in the last 90 years, American readers have made best-sellers of every conceivable kind of novel, from the trivial to the esoteric, from the erotic to the pious. Therefore, as we begin to work our way toward some sense of why we read what we do, it is important to move tentatively, realizing that, as we speak, there is almost certainly a best-seller being written that will confound our most had-won conclusions.

The five books introduced here all make sure of certain aspects of the epic tradition. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *From Here to Eternity* are written with an obvious epic scope; they set out to tell big stories in a big way. If one thinks of John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee series as being one long book – of which *A Tan and Sandy Silence* is one chapter – then it, too, certainly qualifies as epic-like. Only *Shane* lacks the sheer length and breadth of scope that one associates with epic fiction. As we will see, however, *Shane* manages to provoke the same sort of emotional response in its readers that the other epics do; it addresses the same archetypal subject matter but does so within a more limited framework. Like many other westerns, *Shane* is a kind of shorthand epic.

Along with its physical bulk and breadth of scope, the best-selling epic is securely grounded in a readily identifiable historical setting. Margaret Mitchell gives us the nineteenth-century South in both its glory and agony, from the antebellum days of taffeta petticoats and mint juleps, through the horrors and hardships of the Civil War years and the humiliations of Reconstruction. James Jones provides a similarly detailed treatment of the prewar Regular Army – soldiers wearing “soup-bowl helmets” and smoking “tailor-made” cigarettes – and John D. MacDonald presents a razor-sharp vision of contemporary Florida, a starkly contrasting amalgam of natural beauty and ecologically ruinous expansion in which the condominium developer becomes an evil figure on the same scale as the carpetbaggers in *Gone with the Wind*. In *Shane*, the story unfolds in the context of the settling of the West. The recalcitrant natural world, whether it takes the shape of an immovable stump or the unpredictable weather, is an overwhelming presence throughout the book. Physical setting is equally important in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but it is used differently than in the other books. Stowe's vision of

plantation society is certainly vivid, but her details are selected not so much to establish historical ambience as to further her propagandistic purposes.

A powerful, carefully delineated sense of place is, of course, not unique to the blockbuster novel. John Cheever's suburbia, for example, is presented with all the detail and clarity of MacDonald's Florida. But the use of place in relation to character is very different in a realistic "literary" work than it is in a best-seller. Cheever's characters are as realistically portrayed as his settings. They are drawn in all the shades of gray and levels of ambiguity that define our quotidian lives in the real world. On the other hand, there is nothing ambiguous about Scarlett O'Hara, and we are never in doubt about how Travis McGee will behave in a given situation. In no way are the characters in our five novels realistic. And yet, they are made of something more than cardboard; they engage our emotions with what critic Leslie Fiedler calls a "mythopoeic power." From Stowe's Eliza Harris dancing across the ice on her way to freedom, through Private Robert E. Lee Prewitt refusing to knuckle under to the army in *From Here to Eternity*, to Travis McGee's equally bullheaded avoidance of a nine-to-five life-style, these characters capture (and magnify) essential aspects of our personalities. Their appeal, in other words, is mythic rather than realistic. We don't see ourselves in them, as we may in Cheever's befuddled commuters, but we do see parts of ourselves, parts that we care about very deeply.

The mass appeal of many fiction best-sellers, then, seems to come from the combination of mythic characters and realistic, historically identifiable settings. Our five novels, published between 1852 and 1971, are united not only by their reliance on a sense of place, but also by the similarity of their myth making. They all reflect, in different ways, a basic split in the American psyche between seeing domestic life – the idea of Home – as embodying humanity's greatest virtues, or, on the other hand, as representing an impediment to individual freedom. We yearn to be Huck Finn lighting out for the territories (and thus avoiding civilization), but at the same time we hunger for the stability and sense of shared experience that are associated with traditional family life. Is domesticity a subtle form of entropy, or is it the key with which we can unlock the best part of ourselves? In reality, of course, it is something of both, but in myth – and in much best-selling fiction – it is often one or the other. The dialogue continues, in a direct line of descent from Huck Finn to Robert E. Lee Prewitt to Travis McGee, on the one hand, and from Little Eva to Melanie Wilkes to Marian Starret in *Shane*, on the other.

Perhaps the Huck Finns have had the upper hand in literature, but that is at least partly because critics seem to feel more comfortable talking about mavericks and individualists than they do about domestic virtues. On the other hand, the idea of Home has always

been paramount in American movies; anyone who thinks otherwise need only be reminded that two of the most popular movies of all time are *The Wizard of Oz* and *E.T.* It was perhaps inevitable that the line “E.T. Phone Home” would become a cultural catchphrase; it captures, after all, the mythic resonance of an archetypal character struggling to reach the ultimate safety of home. Dorothy had her pair of ruby slippers, E.T. his makeshift phone, and American audiences have never been able to resist either one of them.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin is perhaps the purest expression in American literature of the joys of family life. For Stowe, the family is the yardstick by which all good and evil are measured. She abhors slavery, finally, because it breaks up families. Her prose seems to shift into a higher gear, to attain an almost evangelical fervor, when she describes yet another incident of a black family being torn asunder when wife or children are sold “downriver.” That Stowe’s novel played such a vital role in the emancipation process (Lincoln contended that it started the Civil War) can be attributed largely to her reader’s emotional identification with the family issue. Even for contemporary readers, who are likely to be put off by Stowe’s condescending treatment of blacks or her overt sentimentality, the image of Uncle Tom separated from his family (or Eliza’s heroic efforts to bring hers together) continues to have power. We no longer need to be convinced of the evils of slavery, and we may believe that aesthetically *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a “bad” novel, but our emotions remain susceptible to the clarion call of Home.

Harriet Beecher Stowe captured only one side of our dual consciousness, but Margaret Mitchell wanted it all. The enduring popularity of *Gone with the Wind*, both as a book and a movie, comes largely from its ability to give us both Huck Finn and Dorothy Gale – and not to force us to choose between the two. In life, of course, we sublimate our desire for individual freedom in the interest of our families, or we do without families to remain independent (“unsivilized,” in Huck’s terms). In identifying with Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler, however, we are able to indulge both sides of ourselves. We respond to Scarlett’s gumption (“I’ll never be hungry again”), but we are equally responsive to her yearning for home, the red earth of Tara. Similarly, we see the Huck in Rhett, applauding his individualism when he escapes the stifling propriety of his family in Charleston, or when he refuses to align himself with the doomed Confederate cause. Yet Mitchell lets him off the hook by assuring us that, after all, Rhett is an idealist (he joins the army during the siege of Atlanta) and he does love family (see how he dotes on his daughter).

The choice in *Gone with the Wind* should be between gumption and tradition. Mitchell, however, wants to pull every archetypal heartstring she can find, so Rhett becomes a maverick with a heart of Confederate gray, and Scarlett is a Huck Finn on the make who

always remains within a day's ride of Tara. Even the end of the novel gives us a way out. Scarlett gets her comeuppance, to be sure, but at last she sees the value of "true love." If we are inclined to do so, Mitchell makes it easy for us to envision Rhett and Scarlett, a pair of reformed Huck Finns, growing old contentedly on the porch at Tara. Rhett Butler Phone Home.

Gone with the Wind may have been the most successful novel ever at playing both ends of a myth against the middle, but many others have attempted the same trick. *Shane*, for one. The story of the gunfighter who helps a farmer, his wife, and son in their fight against a land-hungry rancher (yet another version of the carpetbagger and the condo developer) is the most thoroughly archetypal of any of the five books. Shane is the complete loner, the independent agent who lives by his wits (and his Colt-45). When he rides up to a small farm and sees a "freckled kid on a rail and a real man behind him," he remembers what might have been – a life with roots. Soon he has put his gun away and finds himself helping out around the farm and becoming involved in the lives of Joe and Marian Starrett and their son Bob.

Schaefer teases us with this vision of the drifter being domesticated by a (macho) farmer and a countrified madonna who bakes great pies, but we know it can't last. Inevitably, evil rides into town wearing a black hat, and Shane realizes that "he was not a farmer and never really could be." He promptly straps on his gun and dispatches the rancher's hired gun and his henchmen in a saloon shootout that has been replayed hundreds of times in western fiction. Ultimately, Schaefer is more honest than Margaret Mitchell; he understands that Huck Finn doesn't belong on the farm, and when he ends his book, we know that Shane won't be coming back. Phone Disconnected.

Gone with the Wind and *Shane* both acknowledge the attractions and the limitations of home. In *From Here to Eternity*, James Jones sees about as much good in domesticity as Harriet Beecher Stowe finds in the open road. Private Robert E. Lee Prewitt and Sergeant Milt Warden, the novel's main characters, would like nothing better than to light out for the territories; their problem is that the territories aren't there anymore. With no place left to run to avoid being trapped by wives, kids, and mortgages, they join the army. Set in Hawaii just before and immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Jones' novel is about what happens when stubborn individualists wear uniforms.

Although Prewitt and Warden are very different in the ways they adapt (or fail to adapt) to the army, they both cherish the camaraderie of rootless men living without women, and they take infinite pride in a job well done ("I can soljer with any man"); on the other hand, they resent the strain that army life puts on one's sense of individual integrity. Prewitt refuses to compromise, and the army exacts its revenge: that he is killed by

mistake while trying to return to his regiment is the final irony in a lifetime of futile gestures. Warden takes a different tack; he is Tom Sawyer to Prewitt's Huck Finn, manipulating rather than defying the opposition, always managing to trick his superiors into whitewashing the fence. In the army, Jones seems to be telling us, the defiant individual is crushed while his wily counter-part survives, diminished but alive.

As frontiers become harder to find, and as the would-be Hucks and Shanes discover that civilization follows them everywhere, we begin to see more novels about individuals struggling to retain their identity on the edges of society. These die-hards don't always stay in the army; sometimes they become "savage consultants" and take up residence on a houseboat moored in slip F-18, Bahia Mar, Fort Lauderdale, Florida. John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee ("a refugee from a plastic structured culture, uninsured, unadjusted, unconvinced") is perhaps popular literature's most enduring nonconformist. McGee's popularity can be traced directly to his mythic grandeur. He lives the life that every individualist craves: independent, adventurous, unpredictable. When someone he cares about loses something – money or even self-respect – McGee leaves *the Busted Flush*, his houseboat sanctuary, long enough to get it back and keep 50 percent of the profits. In the process, he usually goes up against a ruthless, amoral, often psychotic con artist (still another version of the evil carpetbagger); inevitably, this adversary is both outsmarted and outmuscled ("I have plenty of quick"). Along the way, McGee usually can be counted on to nurse at least one "wounded duckling" – an emotionally scarred woman – back to psychological and sexual health. There's nothing like a short cruise on board the *Flush* to whet one's appetite for life.

Like most of the characters we have examined in these pages, Travis McGee is anything but realistic. His repartee is as quick as his left jab, and his ability to empathize with other people is astounding. McGee's virtues, however, are offset nicely by his sense of irony and self-deprecation. Shane is so pure he looks a little foolish to our somewhat jaded modern eyes; McGee, on the other hand, recognizes his potential foolishness, describing himself as a "tin-horn Gawain with a spavined sense of mission, galumphing out to face the dragon's fiery teeth." MacDonald's hero is the perfect Huck Finn for our overly circumscribed era, the ideal antidote for all those J. Alfred Prufrocks found in "serious" literature, who agonize their way through modern life. McGee may be fantasy, but his presence has the rejuvenating effect of a shot of Plymouth gin (his favorite drink). It is probably every bit as silly to identify with Travis as it is to believe that Rhett phones home, but we can't help ourselves. Like Margaret Mitchell, we want it all.

Uncle Tom's Cabin

by Harriet Beecher Stowe

Stowe's novel sold more copies than any other work of American fiction prior to *Gone with the Wind*. Its popularity is commonly assumed to have come from its abolitionist message. Certainly, the topicality of the slavery issue in the 1850's had much to do with the book's success. As we have seen, however, the story of Uncle Tom's separation from his family and of George and Eliza Harris' struggle to reach Canada has gripped generations of readers by rekindling their strong identification with the idea of Home. Yet, if modern readers are to be moved by the book on this archetypal level, they must first surmount several hurdles.

One of these hurdles is the role of religion in the novel. The degree to which the black characters, especially Uncle Tom, are willing to endure suffering in the name of Christian charity is simply beyond belief, even for the most devout modern reader. The idea that one should love one's oppressor, even willingly embrace death rather than fight back, is for Stowe an indication of true virtue, but to us it inevitably suggests weakness. The difference in point of view is largely responsible for the modern conception of an "Uncle Tom" as a black person who courts the favor of racists rather than attempting to assert his or her rights.

Stowe's religion beliefs are inextricably tied to her maternalistic treatment of blacks. Her theory that the Negro race is docile by nature is offered in the novel as proof that blacks make the best Christians, but to modern readers such a claim is as outrageous as it is demeaning. In fact, it is testament to Stowe's mythic vision that we can read the novel at all today. We despise its racial attitudes, yet we respond to the family-under-siege story. Our perceptions of social and religion issues change, but our attachment to myth remains consistent.

Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. 1852, various editions available in paperback.

Gone with the Wind

by Margaret Mitchell

Perhaps the most enduring best-seller of all time, *Gone with the Wind* is inevitably many things to many readers. The antebellum South, the Civil War, Reconstruction, the role of women in southern society – the novel's treatment of these and many other themes has left an indelible imprint on the popular imagination. Still, the novel is most often remembered as a love story – "the immortal love epic of Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler," to quote one publisher's blurb.

Its reputation notwithstanding, *Gone with the Wind* is a very peculiar kind of romance. The hero and heroine are more sparring partners than lovers, and their great love affair never really gets beyond the opening bell. Scarlett and Rhett share a single night of passion, after which Rhett is so embarrassed he embarks on a three-day drunk. These epic lovers sleep in separate bedrooms during most of their married life – Scarlett dreaming of Ashley Wilkes (the wimp as sex object) and Rhett sleeping off another hard night at Belle Watling's brothel.

What Katie Scarlett O'Hara doesn't know about sex would fill up all the bathroom walls in Atlanta. Her track record of three husbands, three children, and one orgasm might impress Aunt Pittypat, everybody's favorite virgin, but it hardly seems to add up to an enviable love life. Scarlett knows how to attract men – “the nuance of the side-long glance, the half-smile behind the fan” – but it is the thrill of the conquest she's after, not what comes later. Miss O'Hara is a female Huck Finn with a 17-inch waist, but being a woman in the antebellum South, she is denied the pleasure of lighting out for the territories. Beaux are her only frontier, and she discards them like John Wayne does bad guys.

Scarlett and Rhett as lovers is an idea in the reader's mind, not a fact in the novel. The popularity of their story is a testament to the American preference for romance without sex – or at least without the sheer physicality of it. Even in an era of relaxed sexual attitudes, Scarlett and Rhett still maintain their appeal. Paradoxically, we seem to find pining for the apparently unattainable more romantic than actually making love. The ghosts of Scarlett and Rhett continue to haunt us as we recline languidly on the psychiatrist's couch. One can only ponder what popular culture might have been like today if Scarlett O'Hara hadn't been totally bewildered by the reality of sex.

Margaret Mitchell. *Gone with the Wind*. 1936, Macmillan, *Avon.

Shane

by Jack Schaefer

The unique characteristics of western fiction make *Shane* a very different book from the other four titles being considered here. MacDonald, Jones, Mitchell, and even Stowe need an abundance of realistic detail to set up their archetypal characters. The isolated farm outlined against a vast plain, the sagebrush-strewn main ubiquitous saloon – these aren't places in history, they are landscapes of myth, no more real than the land of Oz. Westerns serve their archetypes “neat.”

Like many other westerns, *Shane* comes very close to being allegory. Joe and Marian Starrett are one side of our personality – the home-loving, roots-planting side –

and Shane is on the other – the independent, no-strings side. The point of the novel in allegorical terms is to introduce our warring selves to one another. Accordingly, Shane develops respect for home life, and Joe and Marian learn that drifters sometimes have good manners. Only young Bob Starrett, the novel's narrator, remains puzzled. He knows that his father and Shane are both good men, but he doesn't understand why they can't be the same person.

To respond to a western, one needs to be willing to accept myth in its purest form. They aren't called "horse operas" for nothing. Shane performs his own kind of aria when he confronts the aptly named Stark Wilson in the saloon. The intensity that such a familiar scene is able to generate comes largely from its ritualistic quality. We return again to *Shane* or *High Noon* to feel the reassuring simplicity with which they express our mythic consciousness.

Jack Schaefer. *Shane*. 1949, Houghton, *Bantam.

From Here to Eternity
by James Jones

By the time *From Here to Eternity* was published, there had already been a wave of successful World War II novels. But by focusing on a period just before the war, Jones was able to capture the reading public's nostalgia for a time when the Regular Army had not been overrun by draftees, when Honolulu was still a quaint mix of bars, hotels, and brothels. From his travelogue-like descriptions of the city's Hotel Street strip to his sometimes poetic, sometimes overblown hymns to good soldiering, Jones asks us to remember a brief moment in American history when things seemed a little clearer and moved a little slower.

Today, however, some of the problems with Jones as a writer may seem a bit more evident than they did in 1951. It is hardly surprising that Thomas Wolfe was one of Jones' heroes, because Jones' prose, like Wolfe's, is a frustrating mix of eloquence and rhetorical bombast. He has great difficulty keeping himself out of his characters' dialogue, and he often belabors an idea as if it was an army boot that needed spit-shining. Modern readers also will have trouble accepting the soldiers' attitudes towards women. Prewitt sums it up best when he says, "What the hell do you dames want? To take the heart out of a man and tie it up in barbed wire and give it to your mother for mother's day?"

Like many best-selling epics, *From Here to Eternity* cannot bear much close inspection under the microscope of real life. Not only are Prewitt's attitudes about women antediluvian by modern standards, but his refusal to compromise seems

downright silly. And yet, we root for him all the same. Prewitt speaks to that part of us all that wants to say “Take This Job and Shove It,” and when he plays “Taps” on his bugle like it’s never been played before, we weep right along with all the other dog soldiers.

James Jones. *From Here to Eternity*. 1951, Delacorte, *Dell.

A Tan and Sandy Silence
by John D. MacDonald

This novel, the thirteenth in the series, represents an important turning point for Travis McGee. On the surface, it may look like a typical Travis story: our hero discovers that one of his former “wounded ducklings” has disappeared, leaving a distraught husband who needs her to authorize a \$300,000 stock-option deal. McGee smells foul play and is soon locked into mortal combat with a Ted Bundy-type psycho who enjoys torturing his victims.

Although McGee eventually dispatches his antagonist, it is not before much damage has been done, both to the people Travis was trying to protect and to his own sense of self. For the first time in the series, McGee is truly vulnerable: “In all my approximate seventy-six inches of torn and mended flesh and hide, in all approximately fifteen-stone weight of meat, bone, and dismay, I sat on that damned bed and felt degraded.”

McGee’s “wounding” forced MacDonald to deal with an inevitable problem: how to let Travis grow and change without sacrificing his mythic stature. The problem was solved by allowing real life to sneak up on the archetypal hero. By immersing Travis a little further in the everyday world of slowed reflexes and failing nerves, MacDonald heightens the tension between myth and reality, and we receive a stronger jolt of mythic energy when that tension is released. “I know that what counts,” Travis tells us, “is the feeling I get when I make my own luck.” After *A Tan and Sandy Silence*, that feeling is harder to come by, but it’s all the more satisfying when it finally arrives.

John D. MacDonald. *A Tan and Sandy Silence*. 1971, *Fawcett.

For Further Reading

Critical Studies

80 Years of Best Sellers: 1895-1975. Alice Hackett and James Henry Burke. Updated every 10 years, this reference volume is the best source available for factual information on American best-sellers. 1977, Bowker.

The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America. Russel B. Nye. More historical survey than critical analysis, this wide-ranging treatment of popular art provides a wealth of useful information for both scholars and general readers. 1970, Dial (out of print).

What Was Literature? Class Structure and Mass Society. Leslie Fiedler. Fiedler's thought-provoking defense of popular literature deals in part with the "Home as Heaven" and "Home as Hell" myths discussed above. 1982, *Simon and Schuster.

Fiction

The Big Sky. A. B. Guthrie. Perhaps the classic western epic, this sprawling adventure tale makes a persuasive case for the wisdom of escaping civilization. 1952, *Houghton.

Centennial. James Michener. Another example of the way best-selling epics throw together as many ingredients as possible in their archetypal stew, this blockbuster combines elements of the classic western with the traditional family saga. 1974, Random, *Fawcett.

Forever Amber. Kathleen Winsor. This classic historical romance features another heroine who satisfies her craving for adventure in the taking and discarding of lovers. 1944, *New American Library.

The Godfather. Mario Puzo. Puzo's famous novel (and the award-winning films based on it) proves that the mythic pull of the family-under-siege theme is strong enough even to make us root for the Mafia. 1969, Putnam, *New American Library.

The Group. Mary McCarthy. A tightly-knit group of Vassar graduates, spiritual descendants of Scarlett O'Hara, find that dealing with sex and society is as difficult for a woman in the mid-twentieth century as it was in the mid-nineteenth. 1963, Harcourt, *Avon.

The Long Goodbye. Raymond Chandler. Chandler's detective hero, Philip Marlowe, belongs in the same company with Travis McGee – a hard-boiled individualist who rails against the lack of integrity in contemporary life. 1953, *Ballantine.

The Naked and the Dead. Norman Mailer. This perennially popular World War II novel tracks a small group of soldiers on an ultimately meaningless mission that becomes an exercise in existential self-realization. 1948, Holt (hardcover and paperback).

Peyton Place. Grace Metalious. Sex comes to suburbia – this once-"shocking" novel plays successfully on the American reader's fascination with and fear of sexuality. Can the power of titillation destroy the Home? 1956, Messner (out of print).

To Kill a Mockingbird. Harper Lee. An *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for our time. Lee's memorable novel contrasts the stability of a loving if unconventional white family with the trauma of a black family decimated by the effects of racism. 1961, *Warner.

The Virginian. Owen Wister. This early western attempts to bring back the cowboy home from the range. Jack Schaefer knew better. 1925, various editions available in hardcover and paperback.

The World According to Garp. John Irving. Although very contemporary in its use of sex and violence, this surprisingly old-fashioned novel is largely a reinterpretation of the archetypal family-under-siege theme. 178, Dutton, *Pocket.

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