



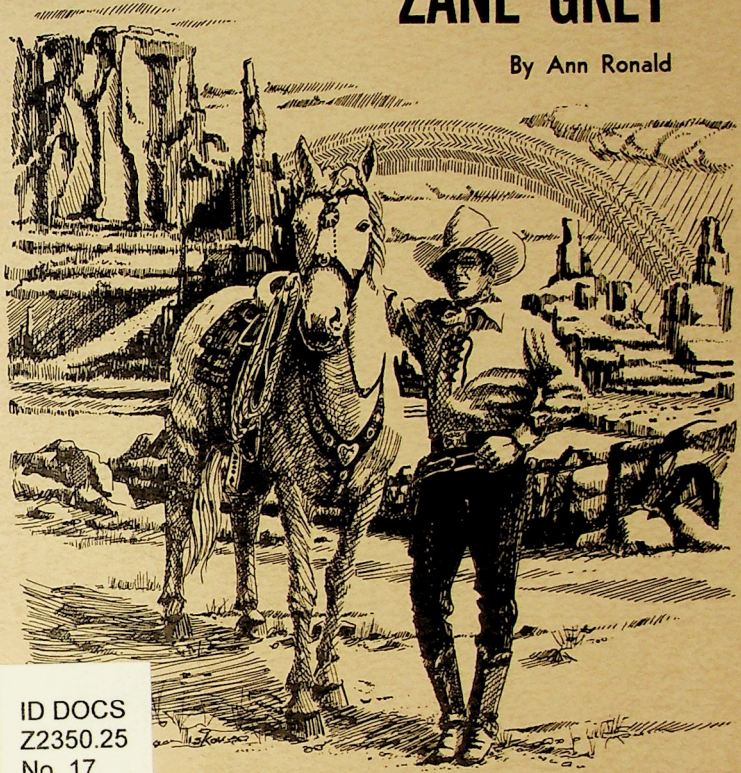
# WEST WRITERS SERIES

No. 17

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## ZANE GREY

By Ann Ronald



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Boise State University Western Writers Series

Number 17

# *Jane Grey*

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*Jane Grey*

## Zane Grey

No one knows how many words Zane Grey wrote for publication, but the estimates vary between five million and nine million. No one knows how many copies of his novels have been sold, but the number must be well over forty million. No one knows how many different languages his novels have been translated into, or how many copies of those translations have been sold, but again, the figures must be high. Ultimately, no one knows how large an audience Zane Grey's novels have reached, either directly or through serialization and reprint, as well as through movies and television. One can guess conservatively, though, that his audience numbers well over 250 million. Two generations of Americans grew up on *The Heritage of the Desert*, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, *Desert Gold*, *The Light of Western Stars*, and fifty-four subsequent novels of the West, besides a variety of such other offerings as short story collections, books for boys, and tales of hunting and fishing.

During the ten-year period between 1915 and 1924, Grey's novels reached the best-seller list nine times. For three of those years they headed the list, and this achievement remains unequaled in the first half of the twentieth century.

He was a contemporary of many more noteworthy American authors—Jack London, Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner—but he probably earned more money than all of them together. They viewed the world through skeptical eyes; he through rose-colored glasses. They offered original narratives

dealing with serious contemporary concerns and did so with stylistic innovations. His narratives are repetitious, his concerns naive, and his style trite. Their books are taught in most colleges and universities; his are dismissed scornfully. The point remains, however, that during his lifetime his novels outsold all of theirs.

How can we account for this extraordinary phenomenon of the American publishing scene? What specific needs must his books have satisfied for a nation first torn by war and then pasted back together with the insecurities of the 1920's and 1930's? The answer is not simple but rather is a complex of romantic dreams, idealistic hopes, escapist urges, and wishful thinking. His novels transport the reader to a simpler life where the scenery is beautiful and the people are predictable, where choices are clear-cut and obstacles surmountable. But most important, Grey's books renew the spirit of the frontier that has almost vanished from the life of the typical American. By providing a new frontier, albeit an idealized version of the West, he offered a distinctly American Shangri-La to readers caught in everyday lives in everyday places. Using a formula that became increasingly familiar, he aimed his novels directly at middle America and gave that audience comfortable conservative answers to questions of law and order, justice, morality, religion. His ideas provided an ethical oasis in what must have seemed to them a desert of changing mores. Because the scope of his writing is tied inseparably to the needs of his readers, then, the various aspects of his work must be seen primarily in terms of their popular appeal.

First of all, the man himself had many qualities that his reading public would have admired. He was an all-American boy from the midwest, an athlete-turned-author who married the girl of his dreams, became rich and famous, and lived happily ever after. Born in Zanesville, Ohio, in 1872, the son of a dentist and the fourth of five children, he was christened Pearl Zane

Gray. He dropped his first name and changed the spelling of his last when he overheard two young ladies chatting about him on a train. One remarked, "She certainly writes well," and the horrified Pearl Gray instantly became Zane Grey.

Any young boy named Pearl must be open to gibes and taunts, but this one, always ready to fight, never let himself be called a sissy or a weakling. Instead, he became the terror of the neighborhood and enthusiastically led his pals into all sorts of adventures. When he was not getting into trouble, he occupied his time with three boyhood loves—fishing, baseball, and dime novels. Fishing became an avocation that lasted throughout his life, baseball provided him with the opportunity to go to college, and dime novels led him into his initial literary venture. At the age of fifteen he wrote his first story, "Jim of the Cave," which his father called scribbling nonsense and promptly destroyed.

In 1890, Dr. Gray rather abruptly moved his family to Columbus, Ohio, after suffering financial reverses from unwise investments. His son worked in Columbus as a theater usher, helped out in Dr. Gray's dental office, and played baseball for a semi-professional team. Throwing a good curve ball, Grey pitched perhaps his best game while a scout watched from the stands. As a result the young ballplayer won an athletic scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania. He might have had a career as a professional baseball star had the National League not moved the pitcher's mound back ten feet, making his curve ball ineffective.

After graduating from college in 1896, Grey moved to New York City. There he set up a dental practice, but he hated every minute he spent at work. On weekends he played baseball, since he was still a fine hitter, but by now a passion for writing was gradually replacing his other interests.

He had always loved to read, even though he had never been a scholar. As a boy he had adored tales like *Swiss Family Robin-*

son, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*, along with a variety of boys' books, notably Harry Castlemon's *Frank in the Mountains* and *Frank at Don Carlos' Rancho*. In "Breaking Through," an article which Grey wrote after he was famous, he mentioned other writers: "I leaned most to romance and poetry. Hugo, Stevenson, Poe, Kipling, became close friends and teachers. I devoured Ruskin, Hudson, Jeffries, Darwin. And I knew by heart Tennyson, Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold." He disliked those novels by his contemporaries that he derisively termed "realistic." Technical books on writing fascinated him, and he read as many as he could find, although later he asserted he had learned little from them. As his knowledge of other authors continued to expand, Grey began believing that he too might earn a living from his writing and thus escape the dental office which he so despised.

At first he tried non-fiction, relying upon his own fishing experiences for material. In May 1902, *Shield's Recreation* published "A Day on the Delaware," and the young author received his first income from writing—ten dollars. A second Grey article appeared in *Field and Stream* a year later. Hoping to earn more money by writing novels than by writing articles, he then began work on a piece of historical fiction.

For inspiration he used his own ancestors. On his mother's side Zane Grey was descended from an old colonial family which had migrated to America in the seventeenth century. Most famous of the Zanes was Grey's great-grandfather, Ebenezer, who had helped to settle the Ohio Valley. Zanesville, where Grey was born, had been named for his mother's family. One part of the Zane history appealed particularly to Grey's imagination—the rôle which Ebenezer's sister, Betty Zane, had played during a British and Indian siege of Fort Henry. At the peak of the attack she ran from the fort to the pioneer's ammunition supply and back, to retrieve precious gunpowder in her apron and save the lives of her family and friends. Zane Grey spent the



winter of 1902-1903 rewriting this adventure as the climax of his first novel, *Betty Zane*, but he received only rejection notices for his effort. He published the book at the expense of a "wealthy patient," probably his future wife, Lina Elise Roth.

Grey had first met her in 1900. For five years they courted, while she attended Hunter College, and while he tried to combine dentistry, baseball, and writing. During that time Grey managed to complete three full-length novels—a trilogy of the pioneer Zanes. After *Betty Zane* came *The Spirit of the Border*. It was accepted for publication by the A. L. Burt Company in 1905, but it sold few copies. The third, *The Last Trail*, met only a round of rejections. Each of these novels bears a strong resemblance to the Leatherstocking series, which Grey had loved as a boy. Lewis Wetzel, Grey's "crafty, tireless and implacable," indeed "incomparable" Indian fighter, seems to be an idealized Natty Bumppo. He has Bumppo's kinship with nature and his alienation from society. But he is too aggressive. He kills too readily, and he lacks Bumppo's essential humanity.

Grey tries other Cooper devices also. Easterners naively defy the frontier, females arrive unprotected in the wilderness, opposing forces kidnap innocent victims. There are mistaken identities, traitors from within, vindications of initially suspicious characters, and, throughout, extensive portrayals of physical settings. But in these first three books Grey fails to catch the original spirit of Cooper, and so *Betty Zane*, *The Spirit of the Border*, and *The Last Trail*, despite occasional flashes of creative talent, remain only imitations.

At this point Grey's career as an author seemed to be headed nowhere. But Lina Elise Roth had faith in his future. On November 21, 1905, she married Grey, and he closed his dental office. They moved to a small cottage overlooking the Delaware River near Lackawaxen, Pennsylvania, where he could devote all of his time and energy to writing.

He could not have found a better wife. She encouraged him

constantly; she helped him when he needed assistance and left him alone when he needed solitude; she proofread and polished every novel he wrote; she managed his financial affairs; she allowed him time to pursue the activities he loved most—fishing and hunting. For the rest of Grey's life, Dolly provided her husband with all necessary help while he followed his chosen career.

But during his first year as a full-time writer, 1906, he sold only one four-page article, and his income from his novels was negligible. As a result, his spirits were particularly low when, early in 1907, he met "Buffalo" Jones, a retired buffalo-hide hunter turned conservationist.

Jones had come east from his ranch in Arizona to give a series of lectures on the hybridization of black Galloway cattle and buffalo. He had hoped to raise money to continue his experiments, but Eastern audiences were skeptical of his claims. One believer, however, was Zane Grey. The hopeful young writer talked at length with the Westerner, let him read *Betty Zane*, and offered to accompany him back to Arizona and to write about his experiences there.

Jones was delighted. So Zane Grey consulted with Dolly, took the last of their savings, and headed west. This was not his first trip beyond the Mississippi, for he and Dolly had taken a train across the country for their honeymoon. But it was his first experience with the masculine background that he was to adopt for his novels of the West.

The adventures following his arrival in Flagstaff appear fully narrated in his account of the trip, *The Last of the Plainsmen* (1908). The reader accompanies Grey across the desert on horseback to the Grand Canyon. He sees Grey chasing buffalo, finding ancient Indian ruins, capturing wild horses, tracking and killing mountain lions, and acquiring a deep love for the West. Determined to convey his feelings to the reading public, the writer went back to the East. Although he worked hard on

*The Last of the Plainsmen* and believed it was his best work to date, it too was firmly rejected. This time Ripley Hitchcock, an editor of Harper and Brothers, added a devastating comment: "I don't see anything in this to convince me you can write either narrative or fiction."

But still Grey kept on writing. His wife, convinced that he would produce a successful book, simply would not let him quit. Eventually the Outing Publishing Company agreed to publish *The Last of the Plainsmen*, although the author was to receive no money unless the book went into a second printing. He continued to sell a few articles about fishing each year, but these brought him little money. The Grey resources dwindled. At last he began writing stories for boys, and indeed, his first appreciable income came from the sale of *The Shortstop* (1909), a fictional account of his own boyhood experiences as a baseball player.

Meanwhile, he was at work upon his first novel with a setting in the Far West. Using as a background the northern Arizona-southern Utah locale which he had visited with Buffalo Jones, he created a Western adventure, *The Heritage of the Desert*, and promptly sent it off to Harper and Brothers. Ripley Hitchcock, who had rejected all four earlier manuscripts, not only accepted this one but apologized for his earlier remarks. Grey's career as a novelist of the West was shakily under way.

*The Heritage of the Desert* (1910) received moderately favorable reviews and sold fairly well, but for the next two years the Greys lived chiefly on income derived from three more boys' books. This series, featuring Ken Ward as its hero, was growing ever more popular when Grey went back to writing about his real love—the West. The result was *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912). He was pleased with his manuscript and expected little trouble in getting it published. But Hitchcock feared the anti-Mormon sentiments he found in it, as did the editor of *Popular Magazine*, who had just serialized *The Heri-*

*tage of the Desert*. Grey by-passed Hitchcock and gave a copy of *Riders of the Purple Sage* to the vice-president of Harpers, who was wholeheartedly enthusiastic. Grey signed a contract, and from 1912 until the end of his career Harper and Brothers published every book that Zane Grey wrote.

At last the young novelist was a success, and he could spend the rest of his life doing what he wanted—writing, fishing, hunting, adventuring. As his fame grew, his income grew. His books sold in vast quantities. Magazines serialized them; movie companies bought the film rights. The story of the last twenty-seven years of his life is almost idyllic—an American fairy tale come true. He generally wrote two novels each year, plus a number of articles, and spent the rest of his time out-of-doors. He covered much of the American Southwest on horseback and on foot, explored unmapped rivers in the jungles of Mexico, fished for every conceivable kind of big-game fish (at one time he held nine world's records for fish), and sailed through most of the waters of the world. The Greys bought houses and property in every place that caught his eye, from Oregon's Rogue River to Arizona's Tonto Basin and to California's Catalina Island. But "home" came to be a house in Altadena, California, where he did most of his writing. There he would sit alone in his study and write sometimes as many as 100,000 words a month, in pencil on lined paper. He wrote so much that when he died, in October 1939, he left enough unpublished manuscripts to last another fourteen years.

This output was staggering, but as long as the public kept buying, he kept producing. Most of his novels used the basic formula which he had established at the beginning in *The Heritage of the Desert*, although he offered enough variations to keep the public interested. That formula is both a key to his popular success and a reason for his literary failure. Psychologically, it is immensely satisfying, but he repeats it too often, and after the first fifteen novels or so his books take on a sameness that seems

almost mechanical. The formula is not uniquely Grey's. It is a cross between James Fenimore Cooper and Owen Wister, an echo of Grey's admiration for the Leatherstocking series and his recognition of *The Virginian's* (1902) popularity. It is also a restructuring of the Horatio Alger success story, which at that time had a huge following that copied it exactly, and a smaller group that used its pattern for inspiration. Most important, the Zane Grey formula is an outgrowth of the author's personal experiences, a reiteration of his own journey to the frontier.

An Easterner—that is, an innocent—arrives in the West. He, or she, has been a failure in the past and seems unprepared to meet the challenges ahead. The land at first seems harsh and unforgiving—the sun is too hot, the canyons too deep, the peaks too rugged, the rivers too swift. Problems are compounded by the appearance of evil, of men who live by their guns and who care nothing for the rights of others. Gradually, however, the neophyte becomes a man. Rather than be beaten by the environment, he learns to conquer the elements, and in doing so he acquires a deep appreciation for the land. Rather than see innocent people tormented by evil, he learns to fight and to protect those he has come to love. The West, seeming almost a Garden of Eden, becomes a proving ground for man. Here he loses his innocence and gains knowledge. In Grey's words, the hero learns "the heritage of the desert" exactly as the author did on his first trip with Buffalo Jones, and exactly as he hopes the reader will do while reading each of his novels.

*The Heritage of the Desert* presents the formula in its purest state. John Hare, suffering from a lung ailment, seeks a cure in the high plateaus and thin air of Utah, but his illness and his innocence equip him poorly for the challenges he will find there. A variety of natural phenomena—violent sandstorms, turgid rivers, extreme heat, rampaging animals—confront Hare, and these are all phenomena that Grey had found on his own journey. Hare also finds himself caught between two conflicting cultural

forces—the Mormon community and a band of unprincipled outlaws. But his health improves, and as his strength grows he manages to win each succeeding confrontation with nature. His moral strength grows, too. He learns the power of love, he protects those who have protected him, and ultimately he eliminates evil, even though he has to kill to do so. The result? He assimilates “the heritage of the desert.”

Essentially, then, in *The Heritage of the Desert* and in most other Grey books, we have a novel of education, one that initiates a character into manhood through a series of masculine rites and challenges.

For the process to work, that character must begin as an innocent. John Hare is precisely that, since when the novel begins he has no grasp of the difficulties that might lie ahead. He is not an out-and-out failure, as are many other Grey heroes, but his ill-health is a manifestation of weakness. Actually he is an author-reader surrogate, the kind of character we can easily identify with, one with whom we can experience many things vicariously. And this quality is the first key to Grey's popularity. His heroes, or heroines, generally start out as people like us.

The next step in the formula is essential: Grey places his main character in a special setting, the American West. He includes numerous, extensive, effusive descriptions of this physical environment until he has created almost a visual onslaught of shapes and colors. Indeed this visual richness is what readers remember most clearly about his books, even years after they read them. Grey himself felt that this was the most important element of his novels, but his actual use of setting is even more meaningful than he might have suspected. In the “Preface” of *To the Last Man* (1923) he said, “My inspiration to write has always come from nature. Character and action are subordinated to setting.”

The first half of his statement is accurate. We know that a close correlation exists between the places he visited and subse-

quent settings of his novels, from the canyons and deserts of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, along the cattle trails of Texas, Colorado, and Wyoming, to the rivers, forests, and wheatlands of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. The second half of his statement does not give him enough credit. Character and action are not subordinated to setting, but rather are developed by it. The three work together, with setting providing the impetus for change. Grey symbolically indicates as much in the opening chapter of *The Heritage of the Desert*:

The desert, gray in the foreground, purple in the distance, sloped to the west. Eyes keen as those of hawks searched the waste, and followed the red mountain rampart, which sheer in bold height and processional in its craggy sweep shut out the north. . . .

A broad bar of dense black shut out the April sky, except in the extreme west, where a strip of pale blue formed background for several clouds of striking color and shape. They alone, in all that expanse, were dyed in the desert's sunset crimson. The largest projected from behind the dark cloud-bank in the shape of a huge fist, and the others, small and round, floated below. . . . it seemed a giant hand, clutching, with inexorable strength, a bleeding heart. . . .

Then, as light surrendered to shade, the sinister color faded; the tracing of the closed hand softened; flush and glow paled, leaving the sky purple, as if mirroring the desert floor. One golden shaft shot up, to be blotted out by sudden darkening change, and the sun had set.

This particular setting implies all the things that a Grey Western environment accomplishes during the course of a novel. First, it is a pictorial rendition of a specific place previously unfamiliar to both the main character and the reader. The shift of scene takes the reader away from his own everyday surroundings

and gives the character an environment where he can have a fresh start. The fictional setting, in effect, provides a frontier. Second, the setting is initially seen as hostile, with the sunset suggesting a giant hand clutching a bleeding heart, and then as kindly, with the hand softening. This is precisely how both John Hare and the reader will perceive the desert as the novel progresses. Increasing familiarity will make the land seem less harsh, and each succeeding step in the action will lead toward a fuller sense of its benevolence. Last—and this is how setting determines character—we learn “the heritage of the desert.” Grey’s description—a golden shaft blotted out by darkening change—parallels Hare’s development. Innocence is replaced by experience, and Hare becomes a man through his confrontations with nature.

In the Garden of Eden (Kenneth W. Scott’s article in the *Markham Review* cites several similarities between the setting of the novel and the Garden), Hare learns of good and evil. He also learns what Grey had learned from reading Darwin many years before—that in the evolutionary process only the most adaptable survive. Hare looks at the desert, sees its plants and animals fighting the barrenness and the heat, sees them fighting each other. When he realizes that he, too, must fight not only the desert but also his fellow man, he has learned “the heritage of the desert,” and he behaves accordingly.

So setting has led character through the initiation process, and this process is synonymous with the action of the novel. For example, after Hare becomes an excellent shot he kills a marauding grizzly to save a herd of sheep and then kills an evil outlaw to help the Mormon community. Or, after he toughens his body he can break Silvermane, the leader of a band of wild horses; then he can overcome desert sand and heat to rescue his love; and at last he can successfully confront the whole outlaw band. Each action leads to another action that leads to another that leads to manhood, and each action is first precipitated by setting.



*The Heritage of the Desert* ends as do most Zane Grey novels. The hero marries and presumably, to use the appropriate cliché, will live happily ever after. He is now capable of combating "nature red in tooth and claw." He will survive; he will endure. Just as the author himself went to the West as a failure and turned the experience into success, most of his protagonists do the same. And the reader, looking from his vantage point in middle America, can vicariously enjoy similar sensations while reading the books. This formula of turning failure into success gives a psychological lift that can be immensely satisfying.

But eventually the formula itself becomes the failure. The chief reason why Zane Grey has never been recognized as a significant American novelist is that his formula always remains a formula. Several key phrases that are appropriate to Grey's work—Garden of Eden, innocence and experience, survival of the fittest—might suggest a mythic pattern. But the novels never rise to the level of myth because the formula, rather than setting the characters free, only binds their actions by restricting their choices. Life in a Zane Grey novel is too simple to create mythic patterns. His men and women are too rigidly characterized, their problems too clear-cut, the solutions too easy. Ultimately we read his books not because he tells us about life, but because he does not. For this failure the critic can find fault and the scholar can condemn. But one must credit him for giving his readers exactly what they want—escape fiction, novels that let those readers forget their own comparatively colorless existence while they live alongside the characters.

Many enthusiasts call his second novel of the West, *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), the best Western ever written. A close look at its plot shows how Grey varied his basic formula to suit the demands of a particular idea, and created a story which continues to fascinate the reader.

The rather complicated story focuses on Jane Withersteen, a Mormon by birth, who is in constant conflict with the Mormon

community. Like most of Grey's books, the novel opens *in medias res* when Lassiter rides upon the scene of a group of Mormons preparing to whip Venters, a gentile cowboy who has befriended Jane. Lassiter forces them to release their victim and then asks Jane to show him the grave of the girl who had been Jane's best friend, Milly Erne. That night, rustlers capture a herd of Jane's cattle, and Venters heads out to track them to their hidden valley. Surprised from behind on his venture, he kills one rustler and wounds a masked rider who turns out to be a girl, Bess. He then finds a second hidden valley, Surprise Valley, which can be reached only by a steep climb past the ruins of an ancient Indian civilization, and which is guarded at its entrance by a balancing rock. A single push of the rock would isolate the valley forever. There Venters nurses Bess back to health, and gradually, in their idyllic surroundings, they grow to love each other.

Meanwhile, Lassiter has become Jane's champion in her troubles with the Mormons. After several crises, including more rustling, the Mormons kidnap Jane's adopted child, Fay. In response, Lassiter cruelly kills the Mormon Bishop, and then he and Jane flee. On their flight they meet Venters and Bess, who have decided to leave Utah and seek a new life together. Lassiter discloses that Bess is not the daughter of a rustler, as everyone had thought, but instead is the daughter of Milly Erne, Lassiter's sister, who had been seduced by the Mormons many years before. After that revelation, the two couples go their separate ways, exchanging mounts to confuse their pursuers. Bess and Venters take the fast Arabian horses and escape to the railroad, while Jane and Lassiter take the slower burros and start into the mountains. On the way they recover Fay in a brief skirmish with the villains. Then they rush toward Surprise Valley, with the Mormon forces close behind. They reach the balanced rock above the entrance, and Jane turns to Lassiter to utter perhaps the most memorable of all Zane Grey lines—"Roll the stone! . . .

*Lassiter, I love you!"* The three refugees—Jane, Lassiter, and little Fay—seal themselves into their retreat for all eternity.

At first glance this story seems very different from the basic formula of *The Heritage of the Desert*, but actually it is not. Although the main character is a wealthy female Westerner instead of an Eastern male failure, she is innocent in the true ways of the West—that is, she does not understand its code. She is gradually losing the wealth she inherited because she refuses to fight back against her oppressors. In order to be successful she must undergo a process like John Hare's, replacing innocence with experience.

The setting, of course, is the physical proving ground where Jane acquires her education. The time is the late nineteenth century; the place, southern Utah. Her ranch seems hostile, not because it is harsh desert, but because it is infested with religious persecutors. Jane does not find her surroundings friendly until she takes refuge in Surprise Valley, where her enemies cannot reach her. But southern Utah, with its hostile Mormon residents, teaches Jane a lesson that irrevocably alters her character. She must stop being a pacifist; she must start fighting.

John Hare learned part of "the heritage of the desert" from Mescal, a half-Indian girl whose own heritage intimately bound her to the desert environment. Jane's mentor is Lassiter, the typical larger-than-life gunman-hero who, for Grey, is a human manifestation of the setting, a symbolic representative of the physical West and its intrinsically masculine spirit. When Jane tries to emasculate Lassiter—to get him to put away his guns—she fails, because to do so would be to deny the whole essence of the author's thesis. Instead, Lassiter teaches her Grey's conception of manhood by exemplifying the Western heritage. He shows her that a man must fight, even kill, to survive, and that it is good to do so. Jane's education is more complicated than Hare's, and at the same time its appeal is wider, for by expand-

ing the initiation process to encompass both sexes, Grey doubled his potential reading public.

His fans, however, bought his books not only to hear about manhood and survival of the fittest, but also to escape; and *Riders of the Purple Sage* ends with an incident that is the essence of escape fiction. At the moment when Lassiter rolls the stone and seals out the rest of the world, Jane's education is complete. She has admitted that her Mormon persecutors were imposing an unreal set of mores upon her and upon those she loves, and she has seen that her only option is to reject her oppressors and their standards. She can ask Lassiter to roll the stone because at last she understands the true nature of evil—men imposing their wills upon other men. Experience has eliminated innocence, and the experience now tells her that she and Lassiter must make their own reality. Their reality must be truer than that of the Mormon world, and they must fight to make their own reality prevail. So this piece of escape fiction has an inherently satisfactory resolution. When one kind of reality oppresses, it is possible to create a new one.

There is a further problem to think about—should Jane have asked Lassiter to roll the stone? Many readers have worried about the fact that Jane and Lassiter were unmarried. But it seems that Jane has chosen a higher morality than social convention. Rolling the stone is an option not offered to most of Grey's other characters, who are destined to follow his rigid dictates. But Jane Withersteen has an option, a genuine moral choice, and she makes it. This moral option moves her story beyond mere formula, so that readers must respond to the real philosophical question which has been posed. And since this story offers a choice, *Riders of the Purple Sage* comes closer than any of Grey's other novels to reaching the level of myth, closer to saying something about the human condition. This consideration may well account for the long-standing popularity of this book. A great misfortune is that Grey never bothered to pursue

the questions he touched on. In *The Rainbow Trail* (1915) he completes his story by rescuing the refugees and sending them back to civilization; but he barely mentions their lives in Surprise Valley, and he ignores the relationship between Lassiter and Jane. Focusing primarily on Fay, the sequel does not match its predecessor, either morally or philosophically; instead, it lapses back into formula.

All the rest of his novels follow the same basic pattern—the ways of the West educate an innocent character; experience and the land teach him to fight; and according to the cliché, he lives happily ever after. It is Grey's own story, told time and again through the decades of his popularity. After his first two Westerns, however, he makes a significant modification. His next two, *Desert Gold* (1913) and *The Light of Western Stars* (1914), are set in the present rather than in the historical past. This contemporaneity suggests to his readers that the West is still alive, that the adventures of his characters could happen to his readers if they were to visit the frontier.

Dick Gale, in *Desert Gold*, has been a collegiate football hero. He goes west after quarreling with his wealthy father, hoping to find his manhood and to win his own fortune rather than to inherit one. For a setting, Grey selects a contemporary battleground, the arid desert country on the border between Arizona and Mexico, at the time when Pancho Villa is leading peasant forces against both governments. In 1912-13 that area was in a state of lawlessness; so Grey was able to impose his own particular law of the West—"might makes right."

As an ex-football player, Gale has little trouble learning that code. But despite its political backdrop, and despite a lot of gun play along with a thrilling horserace, a treacherous journey across the desert, and two solid love stories, *Desert Gold* is not really successful. The plot sprawls too much. There are too many minor characters and too many loose ends, and coincidence plays too great a rôle. For example, Gale achieves fi-

nancial success because he accidentally discovers the gold deposit which was originally found by his fiancée's father and her maternal grandfather, who had run into each other by chance on a desert mountainside many years before. The stream that is the source of that gold also happens to be the only water for the valley below; so that Gale instantly gets control over friends and enemies alike. And alongside the stream lies a metal box containing the marriage certificate of the parents of his fiancée, and this certificate saves her from the taint of illegitimacy. It is no wonder that *Desert Gold* has never achieved the popularity of many of Grey's other early novels.

*The Light of Western Stars*, however, was one of his very best sellers. Majesty Hammond is a wealthy Eastern socialite who goes west in order to revamp what she sees as a wasted life. She learns to love the New Mexico environment and buys a large property where she hopes to build a model ranch. She is unable to achieve her dream until the evil forces are driven off and until she falls in love with her Western foreman; that is, until she truly assimilates the West.

Like *Desert Gold*, *The Light of Western Stars* contains a healthy dose of Mexican politics. It also contains a fair portion of coincidence and a discursive plot, and these are two problems which plague Grey's later writing. It has some good points, though. Majesty Hammond is one of his most vivid and well-drawn characters, and he carefully symbolizes her Westernization process through "the light of western stars." When she first arrives in New Mexico, the stars are "cold, brilliant, aloof, distant"—rather as she is. As the novel progresses, the stars call to her and then haunt her, until she realizes at last that "they were to have something to do with her life, were somehow to influence her destiny." By the end of the novel, the stars have claimed her soul. She simultaneously yields to their power, to her cowboy lover, and to the West. Although the symbolism is heavy-handed, it is an unmistakable attempt at artistry. Most

readers never forget the descriptions of the light from those Western stars, nor the meaning of the stars. Almost twenty-five years later, Grey tried to recapture the same magic in *Majesty's Rancho* (1938); but as with most of his sequels, the second fails in comparison with the first.

By 1914, he had set his formula and had repeated it four times. He also had introduced one significant modification that he would continue to use in about half of his subsequent novels. His next book, *Lone Star Ranger* (1915), partially returns to the pattern of his first two Westerns, for its setting is the historical past. But in it Grey adds a decidedly new twist to his formula. He changes his hero's character.

The novel opens with a "high noon" gunfight scenario in which Buck Duane shoots the town troublemaker. Duane is not intrinsically bad, but the law responds as if he were a hardened killer. Although his uncle believes that "If we had money an' influence we'd risk a trial," the son of a gunslinger senses he has nothing except his father's reputation, and now his own, to live down. So he has to run away. Since he is a wanted man, he can associate only with outlaws; yet he manages to retain his own respectability by killing various badmen and by rescuing women in distress. Still, his bad reputation soars out of proportion until the Texas Rangers offer him a chance to redeem himself. He becomes a ranger in disguise, infiltrates another outlaw gang, and exposes their leader, who is also a crooked town mayor. He defeats the whole bunch in a violent gunfight, and after full exoneration, marries the mayor's daughter.

Rather than giving us a character who is too innocent in the ways of the West, Grey has created one who is too experienced. To continue using his successful initiation formula, he must move the reader solidly into the role of the naive outsider, who needs to be educated, and he must let Duane play the role of teacher. Like Lassiter in *Riders of the Purple Sage*, Duane personifies the Western spirit and thus exercises its code. He shows

other characters, and he especially shows the reader, that a man must fight to eliminate evil and to prove his own goodness. Instead of moving away from the basic pattern, *Lone Star Ranger* is simply another modification, one which pulls the reader more deeply into interaction with the subject matter because the reader himself is being educated. In a way Buck Duane, rather than Zane Grey, takes the reader to an imaginary frontier and personally initiates him into its code—that is, leads him from innocence to experience—while the reader sits safely in his own easy chair. Part of the drawing power of escape fiction is that it lets the reader participate in second-hand experiences, and we must not underestimate Grey's ability to use that power.

Much of that power arises from his mastery of the single episode. Even though his plots generally ramble, his individual scenes can grip the imagination. *Lone Star Ranger* contains one of his best scenes when "oppressive and menacing" bloodhounds corner Duane in a heavy thicket of gray mesquite. He runs blindly, tearing "his clothes on sharp branches" that are "fiendishly impeding his progress." Then he falls "under the burning sun, parched by thirst, laboring to breathe, sweating and bleeding." But Duane knows he is "capable of withstanding any strain endurable by the human frame." He waits, "grimly standing pain and cramp and chill," until he regains enough strength to take the only avenue of escape, crawling "inch by inch" across a morass of "treacherous quicksand" to safety. The episode covers several chapters, as the author pulls every dramatic stop, and the reader participates on every page. He can feel his own mouth drying out, his own muscles aching in sympathetic reaction to Duane's agony. Mere excerpts cannot convey Grey's magnetism in scenes like this.

A second compelling aspect of *Lone Star Ranger* is its portrayal of men living outside the law, plotting their evil deeds. Duane spends much of his time among criminals. Apparently that kind of life rather intrigued Grey, for he followed this suc-



cess with another that delves even further into the outlaw mystique. *The Border Legion* (1916) focuses solely on an outlaw gang. In its opening pages, the badmen kidnap Joan Randle and take her to their secret encampment. The book then follows their activities through various hold-ups, murders, and other hostilities until, after a substantial number of interesting episodes, Joan's fiancé joins the gang and rescues her from their clutches. The plot is typically discursive. Joan is somewhat ordinary, her fiancé downright uninteresting; but the leader of the gang, Kells, is one of Grey's best-drawn and most complex characters.

Although basically evil, Kells has a streak of decency. He wants Joan, first for his mistress and then for his wife, but he does not force the issue when she refuses his advances. Furthermore, he keeps his fellow outlaws away from her—no easy task—and at the end of the book he loses his life defending her honor. Grey based his characterization of Kells on a real-life highwayman named Henry Plummer, just as he had based his characterization of Buck Duane on a real-life outlaw turned Texas Ranger. Personally, Grey knew neither prototype, but he had heard legends of their renown and consequently was inspired in each case to reproduce a personality combining decency and villainy. Duane he made far more decent than the original; Kells more villainous. But the result for both is a strong, even subtle characterization and a person more interesting than are many of Grey's imagined individuals.

With *The Border Legion* Grey moved another step away from the basic formula, since Kells is not a fair synonym for the Western spirit. But Joan is innocent, and she certainly learns about life during her ordeal. The reader does the same—not from Kells, nor from the other outlaws, nor from Joan's fiancé, but from the whole masculine tone of the novel. Lawlessness and lawfulness interact to teach once again that "might makes right" and that

only the fittest survive. In the end, law prevails because it is stronger.

Another struggle appears in Grey's books, but it is one that goes on chiefly in Grey's mind and only secondarily on the printed page. This struggle has to do with his attitude toward sex, which outwardly seems puritanical. The heroines are generally virgins, and when a villain tries to steal a kiss, the heroine struggles and averts her lips to symbolically retain her purity. But when a hero tries, she slaps him resoundingly (until the end of the book, where she apologizes and marries him). But, perhaps unconsciously, Grey sets up scenes with obvious sexual implications. Will the heroine suffer "the worst fate that could befall a woman," or will she not? For example, probably half of his plots contain a kidnapping, during which the heroine, expecting the worst, is saved by the hero just in the nick of time. *The Border Legion* is no exception. It also has a scene that would intrigue a Freudian critic, and most readers, too. Alone with Joan one night and contemplating rape, Kells "took to striding back and forth in the circle of the campfire light. The scabbard with the big gun swung against his thigh. It grew to be a dark and monstrous thing in Joan's sight." As the scene continues, Joan watches "the heavy gun swing away from his leg" and sits "waiting, with ever a strange and cold sense of the nearness of that swinging gun." The weapon becomes an undeniable phallic symbol and one which quite fascinates her. Grey undoubtedly did not realize the implications of what he had written, but this scene is only one of several that are almost openly sexual in nature.

In both *Lone Star Ranger* and *The Border Legion*, then, a strong undercurrent seems to flow against the mainstream of what the author professed. He wrote about outlaws though he abhorred lawlessness, and about sex though he disdained sexuality. There is a third aspect of this paradox, too—the extraordinary number of violent episodes he included in his

books. They appear as far back as *The Spirit of the Border*, when Wetzel drives a "quivering dripping blade" into the groin of a renegade, "through flesh and bone, hard and fast," pinning him to a tree, where he dies a horrible lingering death, while buzzards sink their talons into his body and eat him alive. Grey modifies his tone so that his later books are not quite so repulsive, but he continues describing violence and violent action with grotesque details. Sometimes he seems to enjoy violence so much that he retells an episode two or even three times, letting his characters glory in the bloodshed, while he assuages his conscience by frowning from the background in the guise of the omniscient narrator. Although such ambivalence might irritate a reader, it is far more apt to intrigue him, since the human psyche is both repelled by and attracted to the violent.

*Wildfire* (1917), the novel that followed *The Border Legion*, is a good example of this duality because it is essentially a non-violent book whose charm lies in its love for horses but whose climax is a horrifying scene of bloodshed and death. Its hero is a wild horse trainer, its heroine a wild horse fancier. After they capture and break Wildfire, a wild red stallion, their actions center upon two horse races, one organized and the other impromptu, both of which Wildfire wins. The second race provides the gruesome climax to an otherwise placid plot. The villain has kidnapped the heroine, tied her half-naked to her horse's back, and set a grass fire to thwart pursuit. The hero chases him down and rams him with Wildfire. Grey vividly describes the result: the villain goes "hurtling through the air, limp and broken, to go down upon a rock, his skull cracking like a melon." Then the hero, still mounted on Wildfire, must pursue and catch his girl, mounted on Sage King. Both, in turn, are pursued by the relentless brushfire with its "tremendous devouring" force. After several pages of thrilling race, the hero ropes Sage King, and the heroine topples from her horse, covered with "dark bruises, raw and bloody." The two stallions fall as

well. Sage King, "a broken, beaten" animal, will "live to run another race," but Wildfire, "choked, blinded, dying, killed on his feet," gives "a terrible muscular convulsion as of internal collapse," and dies. Such lurid details are typical of the author's grotesqueries. Equally typical is the ending of the book, where the hero retells the episode "with a strange sternness that seemed almost bitter," and where the omniscient narrator explains that the heroine had lost "the old spirit" because of what she had seen. He clearly implies that the violence he pictured was evil and will never again intrude on his characters' lives.

Grey strongly believed that he did not resort to sensational methods for popularizing his material. He made no secret of his contempt for the decadence he saw creeping into the writing of his contemporaries. He insisted that they were producing "books of stark-naked realism" which were meant only to show man "retrograding to the level of the brute," while he felt that one ought to lift one's characters rather than to drag them down. In one respect he does what he professes to do: he lets many of his vilest characters perform one decent deed to redeem their souls. Also, through the voices of his narrators, he often speaks out against violence and likewise against lawlessness and sexuality. But the point remains that in every novel he includes scenes like the preceding one from *Wildfire*, scenes which emphasize brutality and the baser side of man.

A continued chronological exploration of the books shows that in the next three years the central focus of his novels changes. He writes more about history than outlaws, more about anti-war sentiments than violence, more about religion than sexuality. This is not to say that he abandons his other instincts, but he broadens his interests to include aspects of life that a wider range of readers might find appealing. However, it may be advantageous to jump ahead and finish noting those books which particularly stress Grey's darker concerns, before moving to the novel that followed *Wildfire*.

In the early 1920's there was a spate of "dark" novels. *The Mysterious Ride* (1921) contributes to the list of outlaws a reformed gunman, a man who behaves non-violently until the end of the novel, when he kills and is killed in a bloody gunfight. *To The Last Man* (1922) is far more vicious. It presents a modified Romeo and Juliet story whose feuding factions seem much nastier than most gangs. Neither of these books uses the exact pattern of Grey's earlier outlaw tales, and neither is as good, but each continues offering violence as a problem-solver. Before the end of the decade, though, Grey went back to his *Lone Star Ranger* pattern to create his most memorable Western gunman.

*Forlorn River* (1927) introduces Jim "Nevada" Lacy in a rather incoherent plot where he saves the life and reputation of Ben Ide by shooting several badmen. Because he has to kill, "Nevada" feels unworthy of the love of Ben's sister and so forces himself to ride off into the sunset. "*Nevada*" (1928) is the sequel, and it is the only one of Grey's sequels that clearly out-classes the original.

In honor of Hettie Ide's memory, "Nevada" has vowed to stop fighting, but he has trouble keeping his promise. He drifts for four years until he learns that the Ides have moved from California to Arizona and are having financial troubles. "Nevada" decides to help them anonymously. He joins a rustler gang, helps steal the Ide's cattle, and then kills all the evil-doers. When he reveals his identity to the Ides, he discovers that despite his murderous activities and ensuing reputation Hettie has always loved him. The novel ends with Hettie promising to marry "Nevada" and with "Nevada" promising to kill no more.

This hero is another vivid individual whose prototype is Lassiter and who combines lawlessness and lawfulness, aggressiveness and kindness. Grey compares him with a wolf—"lonely, hungry, mournful." He lives in "an environment where pro-

iciency with a gun was the law" and where a man must follow his instincts for self-preservation. The author uses "Nevada" to teach his code of the West to both readers and characters—all of which may seem repetitious.

Nevertheless, Jim Lacy is one of Grey's finest characters, and "*Nevada*" is one of his biggest money-makers. The book is compelling because it includes so many elements that characterize Grey's writing at its best. It contains impressive scenic descriptions of the Mogollon Rim in northern Arizona; it offers a strong main character with whom the reader can vicariously have adventures; it traces an educational process from innocence to experience; it supports the author's evolutionary code of survival of the fittest and his Western code of "might makes right"; it contains both law and lawlessness, both love and hate, both serenity and violence. It is a composite of all the elemental qualities that Grey regularly drew upon to intrigue his reading public.

By 1928 his fans knew what to expect. Indeed, one reason why people buy formula fiction is that they anticipate what pleasures await them. Through the years Grey had built himself a clientele who knew the formula, who were vulnerable to its power, who could hardly wait for each new novel to appear. But after "*Nevada*" he never wrote another best seller. His novels of the 1930's mechanically reproduce the old formula and the old interests with little innovation; and though his enthusiasts kept buying each new offering, the number of enthusiasts stopped growing.

*Robbers Roost* (1932) provides one more gunman who suddenly reforms in order to save a girl from a fate worse than death. Except for the Utah scenery, the novel is not very interesting. Early in his career Grey was not so trite as to put white hats on the "good guys" and black hats on the "bad guys," but toward the end he frequently used just as simplistic a method of character portrayal. Heroes are handsome, villains

ugly. *The Drift Fence* (1933) tells the story of Jim Traft, a Missouri greenhorn who is "handsome" with "light wavy hair and a broad brow" and who we know will be successful because he looks successful. In the sequel, the focus moves to the opposition, to outlaws who show "hardened visages," "viciousness," and who are even "scarred of face and evil of eye." Only the leader of *The Hash Knife Outfit* (1933) has a "strong and clean" profile. By the end of the novel, all of the evil gang are dead except for the leader, who has redeemed his honor and has headed for Colorado to start life anew. This kind of writing is easy for the author to produce, but deadly dull for the reader to endure.

Steadily simplifying his technique, Grey continued portraying outlaws, would-be-outlaws, ex-outlaws, and pseudo-outlaws, all in a violent context. *West of the Pecos* (1937) underscores the author's interpretation of the "West"—wild, violent, elemental—while east of the river by comparison is tame, civilized, quite prosaic and uninteresting. Practically a carbon-copy of "*Nevada*," except with a drifter-hero instead of a gunman-hero, *Raiders of Spanish Peaks* (1938) shows one more gullible, innocent family being taught to fight for their rights by an aggressive Westerner. Almost every novel Grey wrote during the 1930's contains a large dose of lawlessness, sex, and/or violence; and people bought and read his books for these qualities.

But Grey's writing had other qualities that seemed equally attractive to his audience. Until 1918 he had not written a true historical novel—one based solely on a specific event (or events) of American history. The novel he wrote immediately after *Wildfire* was such a work. Set in 1865, *The U. P. Trail* (1918) follows the heroics of Warren Neale, a surveyor for the Union Pacific, who helped lay the tracks for the first transcontinental railroad. Neale is an imagined character in a real world. Grey puts more effort into describing and delineating that world than he puts into either his characterization or his plot development;

so *The U. P. Trail* was successful and is still interesting chiefly because of its author's recreation of the historical West. It opens with an invocation to the railroad wending its way across the country from the Missouri to the Pacific; it closes with a benediction for the passing of an era when a band of Indians, standing silhouetted against the skyline, watches a train fade into the sunset.

Its thematic focus emphasizes the way in which the railroad changed the West through environmental impact and through philosophical import. Grey describes the train as a "beast that puffed smoke and spat fire and shrieked like a devil of an alien tribe; that split the silence as hideously as the long track split the once smooth plain." He recognizes that with the coming of the railway "white men would glut the treasures of water and earth," and he compares those white men to "a great flight of grasshoppers" who will "cover the length and breadth of the prairie-land." On the last page of the book he calls the train heading into the sunset "a symbol of the destiny of the Indian—vanishing," so that he ends on a note of wistful sadness. But this note is in direct contradiction to what he has already implied via his story-line, for there he glories in the building of the railway and in the subsequent taming of the wilderness. This kind of paradox, a conflict between plot and theme, recurs in most of his historical novels.

Seven years later he again turned to American history for inspiration, and he again presents the paradox. *The Thundering Herd* (1925) opens with another long invocation, this time a melancholy dirge for the buffalo. The hero is Tom Doan, a young Easterner who joins a group of buffalo hide hunters in order to make his fortune. Tom's girl, who strongly opposes his hide hunting, pleads with him to stop his part of the slaughter, but Tom wants the money. The resolution is simple and marvelously ironic. He quits shooting buffalo and instead earns money by skinning them after someone else shoots them. Equally



contradictory are Grey's descriptions of the slaughter. He pictures "thousands of bone piles and rotten carcasses" and calls the era "a time of carnage." The prairie becomes "a gruesome, ghastly shambles" with an unbearable stench, and the hunters sink to the level of butchers. But in the same breath he glorifies the fact that Tom and his two partners had killed 3,920 buffalo in a two-month period. One of the most exciting episodes in the novel is a buffalo stand where they kill 126 in a single hour. At the end he leaves the reader with the feeling that hide hunting was wasteful, destructive, and evil, but that it was great fun in which a man could get rich quick.

There seem to be several reasons for this kind of contradiction. First of all, Grey could not resist adding violent scenes to his books, and the buffalo stand is a thrilling one. Second, he obviously learned about hide hunting from his old friend Buffalo Jones, who himself had turned from hide hunting to conservation. Third, and most significant, Grey echoes the prevailing sentiments of his contemporaries. The frontier meant that riches had been there for the taking and that success had come to those who could best exploit it. The frontier was gone by 1925, but the memory lingered. The dream of success remained, and nobody cared who or what had been exploited in the process. In Grey's Western milieu, the necessity to live by the survival of the fittest inherently involves using natural resources for profit, and from railroads to ranchers his heroic forces freely exploit the land. But since he also had a strong feeling for the environment, he always acknowledges conservation as well. Therefore, the paradox continues. But Grey himself exploited the West for profit, using its resources, altering its reality, and pretending he had never tampered with it. No wonder his stories follow the same plot line.

During the rest of his career he continued writing occasional works of historical fiction. But the quality of these diminishes with each passing year, just as their reliance on historical fact

diminishes. The best is *The Trail Driver* (1936), a surprisingly realistic narration of an early cattle drive along the old Chisholm Trail which gives an unglamorized picture of cowboy life closely resembling that of Andy Adams' *Log of a Cowboy*. *Fighting Caravans* (1929) tells the story of a wagon train attacked by hostile Indians, and it was made into one of Hollywood's first talking pictures. *The Lost Wagon Train* (1936) relates another tale of Indian massacre resulting from betrayal. Just before he died, Grey published *Western Union* (1939), a novel tracing the installation of the first telegraph across the continent. But except for *The Trail Driver*, these are noteworthy only as examples of how he moved in an unsatisfying direction and not of how he developed his technique in any positive sense.

Most of Grey's successes are classic Westerns, but for a period of time during the 1920's he drew from the contemporary scene rather than from the historical past, both as background and as thematic concern. Composed during World War I, *The Desert of Wheat* (1919) opens in the wheat fields of eastern Washington, where I.W.W. forces are trying to sabotage the crops. Kurt Dorn saves his fields from fire, only to see his wheat destroyed in a warehouse conflagration. His patriotic recourse is to fight for America in the war; so he enlists, goes overseas, and then writes letters from France describing lurid combat action. Terribly wounded, Dorn returns home to his fiancée and his wheat fields, where he recovers and goes on to live a productive life. This is but the first of several novels Grey wrote about war and war heroes, and it reveals still more ambivalence in his own attitudes. He despised violence for the sake of violence, but he loved writing about it. He abhorred war, but he relished describing it. So *The Desert of Wheat* contains propagandistic anti-war passages and bloodthirsty battle scenes, both written with equal fervor.

During the next decade, Grey's belief in the inherent wastefulness of war increased. His single non-Western novel, *The Day*

of *the Beast* (1922), is a book-length anti-war diatribe which traces the homecoming of a badly wounded soldier after World War I has ended. Daren Lane discovers that he is not regarded as a hero but instead is considered a grim reminder of something (war) which the folks at home would rather forget. Grey rails against this attitude, against the slackers who had avoided being drafted, against those who had profited financially by the war, and especially against the women who had not remained true to the men who had gone off to defend them. In so doing, he echoes a point of view popular in America after World War I.

He specifically stresses his indictment in three more Westerns published during the next ten years, and he mentions his concern in a number of others. The heroes of *The Day of the Beast* and *The Vanishing American* (1925) return home from war but cannot reintegrate their lives with the peace-time environment awaiting them. Consequently, Grey sees death as their only peace, and he conveniently lets them both die. The heroes of *The Rogue River Feud* (1929) and *The Shepherd of Guadalupe* (1929) manage to find consolation and peace while making new lives for themselves. But as Grey says of crippled Kevin Bell in *The Rogue River Feud*: "His strength, his youth had been sacrificed on the altar of patriotism for something that seemed futile and false." The waste horrified Grey, but ironically and typically he thoroughly enjoyed depicting it.

The seeming disintegration of modern woman was another contemporary waste which disturbed him repeatedly. He had such a firmly fixed view of the female rôle that when he suspects the "modern girl," or flapper, of straying, he is deeply antagonistic. In *The Day of the Beast*, he goes to great lengths to condemn modern dancing (lewd), modern dress (nude), and modern slang (crude)—although he describes each fully—while reiterating his ideal of womanhood. Without question he would be opposed to the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970's; yet independent women fascinated him. Jane Withersteen and

Majesty Hammond were only the beginning. Like them and like his own wife, his ideal woman is intelligent and competent, but eminently tameable by the right man. Anti-flapper stories such as *Under the Tonto Rim* (1926) and *The Code of the West* (1934) demonstrate his theory. The first is quiet, almost Gothic in nature—its heroine goes to a new job in mysterious surroundings and learns to love the strange man who lives there—while the second is more strident, almost aggressive in its denunciation of modern girls and modern mores.

But Grey's clearest statement on the issue appears in *Wyoming* (1932), where Martha Dixon hitchhikes from Chicago to the West. After many adventures, she decides "there are some things a girl simply cannot do." At the end of the book she summarizes what she has learned: "All this new woman, modern-century stuff is the bunk. Women cannot be as free as men. A girl is restricted—that is, a good girl—by her sex. She has a responsibility a boy does not have. She is the mother of the race, and if the race is to progress instead of retrogress, she has to hold herself more sacred than men do." Throughout his writing, Grey emphasizes that loving a man and bearing his children comprise a woman's greatest achievement. She must also let her man do what he needs to do to be a man. (It sounds very much as if Dolly Grey were her husband's model.) Of course he loved to portray unmolded, flirtatious young girls so that he could show the shaping process from its rough-edged beginning to the finished product. But in the end he always wanted his women to comply with his ideal.

His philosophical stance toward women, toward war, toward life in general was basically a conservative one. That is why people who lived in unsettled times were particularly fond of his books. After World War I, many Americans, troubled by the ways they saw the world changing all around them, were searching for some kind of stationary base they might cling to. Grey tried to answer their needs by offering a stable, conservative

outlook on life. Within that outlook he included a strong back-to-nature philosophy which took his readers back to the land. And perhaps that is the ultimate appeal of his novels—his own special brand of pantheism. In *The Man of the Forest* (1920), Milt Dale explains his “religion” of the woods: “I’m never alone here or on the trails. There’s something unseen, but always with me. An’ that’s it! Call it God if you like.” Dale announces his conviction near the beginning of the novel and then repetitively preaches it to his companions, making *The Man of the Forest* an openly pantheistic book whose sole purpose seems evangelistic. But this novel is one of Grey’s all-time best-sellers. So the public must have been responding to his message, and during the following decade that message became a major theme for several more of his novels.

Another top money-maker, *Wanderer of the Wasteland* (1923) lets the theme evolve rather than announcing it bluntly. Shortly after the book opens, Adam Larey argues, “I can’t reconcile nature and God. Nature is cruel, inevitable, hopeless.” He then spends fourteen years roaming the arid regions of the Southwest. His special haunt is Death Valley, and his motivation is the agonizing belief that he has killed his own brother. The Cain and Abel overtones of the story are obvious, but most significant is the religious awakening which Adam experiences in the desert. As the novel ends, he makes peace with himself and his fellow man, and he acknowledges a reconciliation between nature and God. Adam has learned “the heritage of the desert,” and there are unmistakable echoes of the initiation formula, although it works on a higher plane. The next year Grey published *Call of the Canyon* (1924), and the year after that, *The Deer Stalker* (1925). Both of these teach Eastern “modern girls” the by-now-familiar ways of the West. Patricia Hilton, in *The Deer Stalker*, undergoes a self-realization that parallels a religious experience when she steps to the edge of the Grand Canyon and looks down into its depths. As the colors of sunset fade into night, she

recognizes the evidence of evolution that appears on the cliffs, and she sees herself as but a link in that chain. Indeed, and paradoxically, Grey's brand of pantheism is never far removed from Darwin.

But all of this leads back to Grey himself. In a 1924 article called "What the Desert Means to Me," he details a moving account of a night which he spent gazing at Rainbow Bridge in southern Utah, watching its colors change in the varying lights of sunset, darkness, sunrise. He explains that when dawn came he recognized the "truth" of existence—that in nature there exists a spirit which manifests itself in scenery of intense beauty. For an age torn by doubt, this must have been a rather comforting point of view, and in his novels Grey gave his readers an extraordinary number of scenic pictures where they might find God and thus eliminate their own doubt.

He also gave them several characters who could lead them through the experience. Nophaie, the Indian hero of *The Vanishing American* (1925), was born on a reservation and then sent east to school. As a result (and much like Martiniano in Frank Waters' *The Man Who Killed the Deer*), Nophaie is caught between two worlds—Indian and white—and he finds himself unable to resolve the dilemma. He does so only by turning away from civilization toward nature. Like Grey, he stands a nighttime vigil near Rainbow Bridge, where he too feels "the dominating power of wild, lonely, desolate places." Using nature as the source for his inspiration, he conceives the idea of a "Universal God" whose essence would unite Indians and whites in common understanding. His dream is idealistic, and with a single exception he fails to communicate it to the other characters in the book, but his experience is an exact repetition of the author's. Grey, his characters, and his readers learn together from nature "to climb to the heights of nobility and sacrifice, to a supreme proof of the evolution of man, to a realization of God." The steps on the ladder are clear. The first is an essential

ingredient of his basic formula; the second, an echo of Darwin so often appearing in his books; the third, a conviction growing ever more explicit as he writes for his post-war audience.

*The Shepherd of Guadalupe* (1939) introduces one more badly wounded war hero, but one who recovers from his experience by finding faith. Grey explains that "the desert and its thousandfold mysteries had been his salvation." He sits alone with the elements and sees "behind a veil," catching "just a glimpse of the infinite from which man had come and where he must go." God is in nature; nature reveals God; and man must know both before he can know himself. Repetitious? Yes. Grey drums his philosophy into his readers' heads just as he drummed his formula and all his other interests. But they loved it because he was telling them what they wanted to hear.

By 1930, however, he was beginning to lose his knack. Although his novels still sold well, they no longer headed the best-seller lists. He must have been physically tired from writing so much. His imagination no longer seemed able to create new variations of formula; so his later novels repeat earlier story lines and characterizations. Furthermore, his concern with contemporary issues did not keep pace with the times. His interests remained fixed on a post-World War I culture, neglecting any newer social issues. He ignores the 1929 stock market crash, the ensuing depression, the New Deal, and such naturally relevant topics as the warnings of another world war, the dust bowl, and the California boom. Even those novels with contemporary settings hang suspended in an unreal world. Unfortunately, when he lost his sense of currency, he simultaneously lost his sense of what the public wanted. Slowly, his books drifted into a backwash, away from the main stream of public interests and public concerns. For all these reasons, there is little need to mention each one Grey wrote in his later years. They do not match the quality of his previous work.

But if his novels from the 1930's are methodical, mechanical,

repetitious, even dull, those published after his death are worse, for they have most of his weaknesses and few of his strengths. Though Grey conceived them and began the writing, others readied the manuscripts for publication. *Horse Heaven Hill* (1959) contains more dialogue and less description than the earlier books; *Black Mesa* (1955) uses different diction and rhetorical patterns; *Stairs of Sand* (1943) offers more open sexual activity; *Boulder Dam* (1963) reveals different thematic concerns; and there are many more that are equally atypical and even more uninteresting.

The only one worth mentioning in any detail is *Wilderness Trek* (1944), since it introduces an untamed and unfamiliar land to readers who had never been there. Accompanied by two American cowboys, a group of Australians goes across the Outback with a herd of cattle on a 3,000-mile journey reminiscent of a drive along the old Chisholm Trail. The cowboys are tormented by all the old problems—rustlers, river-crossings, drought, sandstorms, angry natives. There are new dangers, too—crocodiles, cannibalistic aborigines, monsoons. Any reader who has speculated about the impact of Grey's early Westerns upon his Eastern audience should read *Wilderness Trek* for a similar experience.

He wrote books other than Westerns as well, but most of these are out of print and largely unavailable. During the 1920's he collected tales of his many fishing expeditions. These volumes give a first-hand view of the author and his friends while they sailed the waters of the earth looking for big-game fish. These are lively, readable accounts of his life away from his writing, and the books are filled with many personal photographs. Another kind of non-fictional view of Grey appears in the thinly-veiled autobiographical stories which he wrote for boys, but these hold little interest today. It would be easy to say that none of his books has much interest for today's reader. But statistics prove otherwise. Harper and Row originally pub-



lished his novels, and Grosset and Dunlap reprinted them. Now Walter J. Black, Inc., has re-issued a uniform set of Westerns in hardcover, and Pocket Books currently is bringing them out in paperback. Obviously Zane Grey still has a sizable reading public.

How did he sustain his audience for well over half a century? He did so by giving the customers exactly what they wanted—a satisfying formula with interesting variations, tantalizing paradoxes, and appealing themes. He was able to do this because he and his wife were so close to what he was doing. They were themselves so much like his characters and his audience. He was the Eastern failure, changed into a success by the Western milieu. She was the flirtatious female, tamed into her woman's rôle by the proper man. Together they were the moralistic conservative middle-class American couple who in 1915 would read Zane Grey's novels and who in 1975 would sit by the family television set. His books have sold millions of copies because he told people like him stories about people almost like themselves. He understood their dreams, their hopes, their needs; and he fed them vicarious success to satisfy their appetites. They let themselves be initiated into his Western world, with its strong masculinity and its staunch morality. They relished his hints of lawlessness, sexuality, and violence. They believed his historical re-creations. They heard his concerns about contemporary issues. They appreciated his religious views. They did not resent the paradoxes or the open contradictions which appeared throughout. They enjoyed their escapes from their everyday surroundings into the romantic West of the author's imagination. They wanted that last glimpse of the frontier, with its simple ethical system. They adored the comfortingly repetitious formula that carried them along.

Zane Grey was a literary phenomenon unequalled in this century because he knew his audience perfectly and because he answered their needs. He offered them "a glimpse through the

painted windows of the dreams of youth," and in so doing he gave them "the spirit, not the letter, of life." As he explained in 1924, "We all have in our hearts the kingdom of adventure. Somewhere in the depths of every soul is the inheritance of the primitive day. I speak to that."

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