

Critics lambasted Zane Grey's Western novels, but his millions of readers couldn't care less.

By Kent Oswald

As much as anyone, Zane Grey created America's Wild West—that chivalric land of imagination we know via books, television and movies. He created it out of family legend, out of his own and others' experiences, and out of those great American inspirations: the pursuit of a dream and the quest for an income.

Grey believed, and wrote, that writers should use their talents for "the betterment of the world," and that the novelist has "an appalling responsibility in these modern days of materialism to foster idealism and love of nature, chivalry in men and chastity in women." He gained his legitimacy as a writer not via critical praise, but through his ideas and images that pervade our lives. More than 135 million copies of his books have been sold worldwide; his books graced the bestseller list every year from 1915 (*The Lone Star Ranger*) through 1924 (*The Call of the Canyon*); well over 100 full-length feature films have been made from his stories; and more than 80 Westerns, fishing-story collections, young adult novels and even three baseball novels have been published. He was so prolific that enough unpublished manuscripts existed at the time of his death for a new book to come out each year for the next 14 years.

Even people who have never read a word he wrote or seen a single frame of any of the movies made from his works will recognize *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) as a romance of the American frontier, a romance that embodies American myths and ideals. In the 1924 essay "Breaking Through: The Story of My Life," Grey wrote: "To my mind, romance is only another name for idealism; a glimpse through the painted windows of the dreams of youth; the spirit, not the letter of life. We all have in our hearts the kingdom of adventure. Somewhere in the



Revisiting some of the terrain that he made famous, Zane Grey pauses at southern Utah's Rainbow Bridge in 1927. Grey began conducting his research in the West in 1907—guided by Charles "Buffalo" Jones.

depths of every soul is the inheritance of the primitive day. I speak to that."

Grey, who died October 23, 1939, in Altadena, Calif.—just three days after publication of his 54th book, *Western Union*—did not invent the Western genre. James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, Ned Buntline's numerous dime novels and Owen Wister's *The Virginian* presaged his work. Still, Grey shaped the form. Ed Breslin, the editor at Harper-Collins Publishers who oversaw the reprinting of more than 40 of Grey's works, explains Grey's pre-eminence as resulting from his work's "authentic detail [and] evocation of time and place." Harper Brothers was Grey's primary publisher during his life, and his sales success was an important contribution to the publisher's ability to stay afloat during the Depression.

Grey created "the American West" from what he thought should be and what seemed to him like a good story. Perhaps there never was a land or time like the one

he described. But his vision of the frontier, that American Eden of wild men redeemed by glorious nature and virtuous women, has through books and movies become a paradise we strive to return to and citizens throughout the world yearn to achieve. For many, it is what America is all about. He wrote of the good old days that never were, and which, because of him, we recall so fondly. Grey's work has been translated into 23 languages.

Pearl Zane Gray was born January 31, 1872 in Zanesville, Ohio. Perhaps named in honor of Queen Victoria, whose clothes were often *pearl gray*, Grey would be called "Pearl" through his boyhood. Later he would use just "P." and then drop it altogether in favor of his middle name, while also changing the spelling of his last name. His family had founded Zanesville after military land warrants were issued to Grey's great-grandfather Ebenezer for Revolutionary War deeds. They moved there from across the Ohio River in Wheeling, W.Va., which they had settled in 1769, and which Ebenezer's wife, Betty, had prominently defended during one of the war's last skirmishes. Her life and this episode would be the basis for Grey's first novel, *Betty Zane* (1903).

Grey preferred to work from life. He prided himself on the truth in his fiction. He usually traveled to places he would write about to ensure accurate physical detail in his work, to pick up local stories about feuds and natural disasters, and to mine the memories of local characters. His first story, "Jim of the Cave," was written on pieces of wallpaper stolen from his house. Its protagonist was one of a group of boys Grey led who used a local cave as their clubhouse. Turned out of the cave for some infraction of the club's rules, this same Jim ratted to Grey's father about where his kitchen's missing pots and pans

were. Furious, Dr. Lewis Gray surprised the boys, collected the purloined items and ripped apart the story, keeping it from ever seeing the light outside the cave.

Lewis Gray was determined his son would become a dentist—and an “informal” practice established in his teen years did, Grey noted in some reminiscences, prove a successful way to meet women. However, Zane Grey was much more interested and successful in baseball. As he remembered one game, he hit a grand slam “over the fence into the corn field,” and caused his team to forfeit in the seventh inning. He and his brother Romer Carl (who would go 2-for-6 at the plate in two Major League appearances with the 1903 Pittsburgh Pirates) had been brought in as ringers.

In another game, Grey baffled the home team with a newfangled curveball until the umpire called it a “crooked ball” and declared a forfeit, precipitating a local uprising. This adventure and others, playing pro, provided the basis for Grey’s baseball novels. He played baseball in college (1892-96) after a University of Pennsylvania scout convinced Grey to accept a four-year scholarship. In 1895 he signed a contract to play ball for Wheeling in the Interstate League and four years later was playing with Toronto in the Eastern League.

Although Grey liked to read, academia held little of the allure of the outdoors. He later recalled that his thoughts

had often wandered during classes and even after graduation, when he set up a dentistry practice in New York City in 1898. For exercise and extra money, he played baseball with a New Jersey team, attending to fans’ teeth after the game. At night he worked on *Betty Zane*, “in a dingy flat, on a kitchen table under a flickering light. All of one winter I labored over it, suffered, and hoped, was lifted up, and again plunged into despair.” When numerous publishers turned it down, he borrowed money and printed it himself. The title page read: “*Betty Zane* by P. Zane Grey. Cover design, letters and illustrations by the author.” Book in hand, and with the encouragement of Lina (“Dolly”) Roth, whom he met in 1900, he quit dentistry to write full time.

In November 1905, the couple married and moved to a home in Lackawaxen, Pa., on the Upper Delaware River (see Travel, P. 74). They had met on the river, and the move was foreshadowed by Grey’s first published article: “A Day on the Delaware,” printed in *Recreation* magazine in 1902. He published *Spirit of the Border* with A.L. Burt in 1906, but was having little luck selling to major book or magazine publishers until a well-known Western personality named Charles Jesse “Buffalo” Jones took him on a trip out West in 1907. Jones, the basis for numerous Grey characters and stories, includ-

ing *The Last of the Plainsmen* (1908), recommended him to Ripley Hitchcock, a Harper Brothers editor. Hitchcock returned *Plainsmen* with the comment, “I don’t see anything in this to convince me you can write either narrative or fiction.”

Jones also introduced Grey to Jim Emmett, who Grey described in an *American Magazine* article of 1926 as “The Man Who Influenced Me the Most:” “All Western men, developed by hard contact with the desert, are great whether they are good or bad. But Emmett was good, and he typified all that was rugged, splendid, enduring. He was an old Viking of the desert.” Emmett became the model for August Naab in *The Heritage of the Desert* (1910), which Hitchcock did accept for publication. This book’s success and *Riders of the Purple Sage*, which Harper at first turned down because it was, in the words of one reader, “too bludgy,” moved Grey’s magazine work from the pulps to the glossies, moved his books to the forefront of his publisher’s list, and moved his bank account firmly into the black.

Grey’s ability to write quickly and to attract a faithful audience perfectly matched the needs of the developing motion picture medium. In 1918, he moved to California. At first he sold film rights to his works, but to gain greater control over the work (and make more money) he began to co-produce. He apparently tired of the

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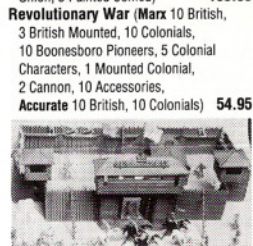
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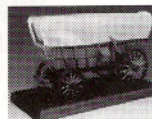
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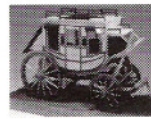
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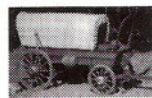
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Dr. Loren Grey—for 30 years a psychology professor at California State University at Northridge, the author of four books about parents and children and 11 Westerns based on Lassiter (one of the characters his father created), and today president of Zane Grey, Inc.—sums up what people miss by failing to recognize his father's abilities and influence: "Critics may yell and scream, but it is the people who buy the books who are most important...and they continue to do so even after all these years." □