

A STRANGE UP-FLINGING

By Michael Ventura

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“Life’s hell out here... It’s bloody. You’d think churches an’ churchmen would make it better. They make it worse.”

The speaker is Lassiter, a gunman, come to Utah to revenge the abduction of his sister by religious fanatics. They happen to be Mormons, “creed-bound” and “creed-mad,” but God-justified rage behaves the same no matter the professed faith. Tull is one of their leaders: “As his religious mood was fanatical and inexorable, so would his physical hate be merciless.” In Tull and his kind, Lassiter says, “you meet... the cold steel of a will as far from Christlike as the universe is wide.” When Lassiter sees the gentleness and faith of just-folks Mormons, he can only exclaim bitterly, “Quiet beauty -- sweet music -- innocent laughter! By what monstrous abortion of fate did these abide in the shadow of [Bishop] Dyer.”

The novel is *Riders of the Purple Sage*, by Zane Grey, in print since its publication in 1912 despite exclusion from the canon by literati then and now who assume it’s just “a Western” and not worth their attention. Interestingly, many of these same literati genuflect before the cinema Westerns of directors like John Ford, Howard Hawks, Budd Boeticher, Sam Peckinpah, and Anthony Mann, all of whom were influenced by the novels of Zane Grey. But rarely have these directors approached the depth and complexity of *Riders of the Purple Sage*.

Grey was, first and foremost, a stylist. In writing of the American West, he gave himself a tough assignment. Our language came from an island of forests, marshes, and moors, a place of modest distances, depths, and heights, human in scale. English is not a fit tool to describe the fantastic variety and vastness of the American West, a wild geography where fossilized seashells sit high upon desert mesas just miles from where the land plunges into great canyons, and jagged mountains overlook vast wastelands, and the horizon goes on forever. The minimalism preferred by most American writers is simply not up to the task of conveying such topography. Grey created a wild, anything-goes prose to match the land -- a prose, I am told, almost Arabic in its swoops and dives and flourishes. He must be quoted at length to get the flavor. This is from *Riders*:

“Across the sage-flat rose a strange up-flinging of yellow rocks. [Venters] could not tell which were close and which were distant. Scrawled mounds of stone, like mountain waves, seemed to roll up to steep bare slopes and towers... the valley appeared to have been filled in by a mountain of melted stone that had hardened to strange shapes of rounded outline... All about him was ridgy roll of wind-smoothed rain-washed rock. Not a tuft of grass or a bunch of sage colored the dull rust-yellow. He saw where, to the right, this uneven flow of stone ended in a blunt wall. Leftward, from the hollow that lay at his feet, mounted a gradual slow-swelling slope to a great height topped by leaning, cracked, and ruined crags... It was no less than a mountain-side, glittering in the sun like polished granite, with cedar-trees springing as if by magic out of the denuded surface. Winds had swept it clear of weathered shale, and rains had washed it free of dust. Far up the curved slope its beautiful lines broke to meet the vertical rim-wall, to lose its grace in a different order and color of rock, a stained yellow cliff of cracks and caves and seamed crags...

beyond a mile of the bare hummocky rock began the valley of sage..."

It is more than mere description. With careful attention to rhythm and a thick mix of consonants and vowels, Grey creates in language the land he sees. The topography of the paragraph *is* the land it describes. The land lives on the page, page after page.

On that landscape Grey sets a story no more or less melodramatic than *Wuthering Heights*, and just as concerned with how primitive and elemental are our deepest passions. Lassiter, the gunman, is seeking revenge upon the Mormons who long ago abducted his sister. He kills Mormon men almost for sport. But he's no lean low-voiced movie archetype. Rather, he's something of a mystic. "I'm a man of strange beliefs an' ways of thinkin', an' I seem to see into the future an' feel things hard to explain." He falls in love with a Mormon woman, Jane, who's inherited a great ranch. The Mormon elders, who are used to strict obedience in their flock, are pressuring Jane to marry Tull, a vicious man she cannot love. She says, "I might be led; I won't be driven." "She asked only the divine right of all women: freedom -- to love and to live as her heart willed." (A radical statement in 1912, before women could even vote.) But it was Jane's father, another fanatic, who years ago sent Bishop Dyer to abduct Lassiter's sister. Sophocles would have enjoyed Grey's plot, in which you never know whether you're killing or fucking a blood-relation or at least an in-law -- your own, your lover's, your friend's, or your enemy's.

Nor is there anything simplistic about Zane Grey's vision of human identity. Young Venters, Jane's "Gentile" ranch-hand, wounds a dreaded outlaw known as the "Masked Rider." But Venters is in for a surprise: "He had shot a masked outlaw the very sight of whom had been ill omen to riders; he had carried off a wounded woman whose bloody lips quivered in prayer; he had nursed what seemed a frail, shrunken boy; and now he watched a girl whose face had become strangely sweet, whose dark-blue eyes were ever upon him, without boldness, without shyness, but with a steady, grave, and growing light." Outlaw, woman, boy, and girl, are the same person (Bess, the daughter of Lassiter's lost sister) -- and the reader is in a human world as many-faceted and unexpected as the landscape.

There is a marvelous audacity in the structure of *Riders of the Purple Sage*, an audacity that some call "melodrama," but it rings true. And, within that audacity, a symmetry: a young good man (Venters) and a young outlaw woman (Bess) counterpoint a mature outlaw (Lassiter) and a mature good woman (Jane). Male meeting female, lawlessness meeting law. Grey is insistent that they all exchange qualities. Bess becomes man-like and girl-like by turns; Lassiter (unlike any gunfighter in the movies) becomes woman-like under Jane's influence, while Jane becomes more man-like -- and all of this seems normal, if not inevitable, to Zane Grey.

Morality shifts too. Jane is pure. But events push her. "Good and evil began to seem incomprehensibly blended in her judgment." She finds herself at the nexus of a dicey existential question: "What am I, what are my possessions, to set in motion such intensity of secret oppression?" Lassiter answers, "Jane, the mind behind it all is an empire builder." Suddenly, larger social issues are invoked. (Grey is not imposing these concerns upon his characters, as anyone knows who has read the writings of gunfighter John Wesley Hardin, lawmen Bat Masterson, Wyatt Earp, and Seth Bullock, and the socialist tracts written by Jesse James' brother Frank. Movie Westerns have created the impression of an emotionally and intellectually shut-down Western terseness that doesn't

jibe with the reality of those times.)

Sooner or later, as we all know, Lassiter will massacre the evil fanatics. But Grey is far too good a narrative strategist to simply fulfill the reader's expectation. The climactic gunfight happens, as it were, off-stage, to be revealed to Jane and to us by Judkins, a classic peasant Fool. Listen:

"Wal, now, jest let me talk. You know I like to talk, an' if I'm slow I allus git there somehow... I'm gettin' to think a lot, fer a feller who doesn't know much." We expect to be very much involved in the triumph of Good over Evil; instead, we're laughing. But, as we're laughing, true to the tradition of the Fool, Judkins lets us in on the truth: Lassiter shoots everyone around Bishop Dyer, and then he shoots Bishop Dyer, who, Judkins says, "stared at a horrible somethin' thet wasn't Lassiter, nor anyone there, nor the room, nor the branches of purple sage peekin' into the winder. Whatever he seen, it was the look of a man who *discovers* somethin' too late. Thet's a terrible look! An' with a horrible *understandin'* cry he slid forward on his face."

A horrible understanding cry. That, in Zane Grey's West, is the justice that awaits evil.

But good does not triumph. Nothing and no one is saved. Now a huge posse of Mormons are after Lassiter, Venters, Jane, and Bess. Venters and Bess may have a life -- we last see them galloping away across a range of purple sage. But Lassiter and Jane are doomed. Earlier she'd asked, "Lassiter, what can I do?" "Nothin', I reckon, except know what's comin' an' wait an' be game."

For Lassiter and Jane, the only choice left is to die on their own terms. Zane Grey makes clear that no one will find their bodies, but he refuses to wrap things up nicely. We're not sure when they will die, just where, and probably sooner than later. They have discovered an almost inaccessible Edenic canyon; when they roll the great rock down the pass, it will be utterly closed -- no way in, no way out. Adam and Eve on the run back to Eden, Adam with five bullets in him and Eve to live on alone as best she can, for as long as she can, after he's gone. Finally, who has won, and who hasn't lost? Earlier in the story Lassiter said, "You dream -- or you're driven mad."

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