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# Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and Other Short Fiction by Stephen Crane



With an Introduction by Jayne Anne Phillips

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Maggie  
A Girl of the  
Streets  
and Other  
Fiction

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MAGGIE: A GIRL OF THE STREETS  
AND OTHER SHORT FICTION  
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## STEPHEN CRANE

Stephen Crane was born, in 1871, in Newark, New Jersey. Raised in a strict Methodist household, he rebelled openly, developing a strong and lasting attraction to the vices his parents had condemned. He attempted college twice, the second time failing a theme-writing course while writing articles for newspapers such as the *New York Tribune*. In 1892 Crane moved to the poverty of New York City's Lower East Side—the Bowery so vividly depicted in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. Destitute and depressed after the initial failure of that book, Crane had almost decided to abandon writing and find a suitable trade when word came to him that William Dean Howells had read *Maggie*, and admired it, going so far as to compare Crane to Tolstoy.

Elated, Crane continued his work, and in 1894 the serial publication began of *The Red Badge of Courage*, his acclaimed and widely popular novel of a young soldier's coming of age in the Civil War. In 1895 he toured the western United States and Mexico, and his experiences soon found form in such short stories as "The Blue Hotel" and "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky." Bound for Cuba in January of 1897, Crane and three companions survived a shipwreck off the Gulf Coast; the ordeal was the basis for his masterful story "The Open Boat." He then traveled to Greece as a correspondent and returned to Cuba to report on the Spanish-American War. At twenty-eight, in failing health, Crane traveled from England to Germany to recuperate in the healing atmosphere of the Black Forest. He died there while working on a humorous novel, *The O'Ruddy*, in June of 1900.

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## INTRODUCTION

Stephen Crane, published writer at twenty-one, famous at twenty-four, dead of tuberculosis at twenty-eight, was born November 1, 1871, the fourteenth child of parents who were Methodist revivalists. Four children born just previous to Crane had died as infants; he himself was a sickly child. Crane's ancestors were among the first settlers in New Jersey in the 1660s and sent delegates to the Continental Congress during the American Revolution. Crane's father, passionately dedicated to the ministry, was presiding elder of the Newark district Methodist churches. "Much encouragement in my work," he wrote in an 1877 diary. "Still, thus far, no wave of power has come sweeping all before it. . . . Perhaps it will, if we hold on our way, doing our duty." The son who was six when those steadfast words were written would indeed supply such a wave of power, sweeping American literature into the twentieth century against its will. Crane came of a time whose values are illustrated by his father's essay in an 1869 issue of *Popular Amusements*; the Reverend Dr. Jonathan Townley Crane stated definitively that habitual novel reading creates "a morbid love of excitement somewhat akin to the imperious thirst of the inebriate."

Crane's mother took her career as a minister's wife seriously and was, like her husband, a religious speaker and journalist. Having given birth to a child at two-year intervals for the first twenty-five years of her marriage, she spent the rest of her time doing good works and left the running of the household to her daughters. Agnes, a sister fifteen years Stephen's senior, raised him, nursed him through frequent illnesses, and tutored him at home so well that when he finally started school, at the age of eight, he completed the first and second years in six weeks. Agnes called herself, in her diary, "my mother's ugly duckling," wanted to write, and became a schoolteacher; she was her brother's advocate and friend until she died, as Stephen would, at twenty-eight. Crane, bereft at thirteen of one who'd been his principal female authority and love, would always be drawn to older women who were in some way forbidden or unavailable to him.

But Crane was first taught loneliness by his parents, stern, kind people, whose demands were high. R. D. Stallman suggests

in his definitive biography that Crane "felt himself unworthy of his father because he fell short of his father's moral principles and his nobility of spiritual outlook."<sup>1</sup> Crane himself characterized his father as "so simple and good that I often think he didn't know much of anything about humanity." The elder Crane took Stephen traveling with him, driving by buggy to the small New Jersey towns where he preached. He was partial to his youngest child, but the Reverend Dr. Crane died when Stephen was nine. Crane remembered standing in the family parlor, "scared to glue," polishing the silver handles of his father's coffin as women sang hymns in the kitchen. Twenty years later he said with bitter sorrow that he'd forgotten "not a damned iota, not a shred" about that day of loss ritualized by religion.

After her husband's death, Crane's mother moved the family to a boarding house in Roseville and then back to Asbury Park, supporting them with her journalism and her judicious handling of inherited stock in coal mines. Asbury Park was a proper summer resort in the 1880s. One of Stephen's brothers worked for a Newark paper and ran a summer news-reporting agency for the New York *Tribune*; both Stephen and his mother wrote unsigned articles on the pleasant diversions of shore life. At sixteen, Crane bicycled miles of sandy roads, compiling lists of hotel guests, reporting on sailing parties and clambakes. He developed a healthy disrespect for the new rich middle class and a taste for some of the vices his mother publicly lectured against—smoking, drinking, cursing, and gambling. He was fascinated by the military, and Mrs. Crane, hoping to "strengthen him morally," sent him to Claverack Military School, which, luckily for Crane, had degenerated into the Hudson River Institute, a co-ed holding ground for semi-incorrigibles and backward students. Boys and girls roamed "like packs of cheerful wolves," and Crane was happy for two years, a brilliant, indifferent student. At eighteen he transferred to Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania (where he played baseball so well that he turned down an offer from a major professional team), and flunked out in one semester. He was sallow-complected, with tawny, unkempt hair, chiseled features, and arresting gray-blue eyes, stood about five foot six, and weighed under 125 pounds. A roommate described him as "volatile, entertaining, and giftedly profane," yet he had a "very gentle and diffident way of speaking." The

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<sup>1</sup>R.W. Stallman, *Stephen Crane: A Biography* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), p. 14.

poet John Berryman comments in his *Stephen Crane* that Crane "united from the beginning an iron self-assurance with a deep shyness."<sup>2</sup> At this early juncture, Crane's character was formed. Awed by his parents' fervent adherence to their beliefs, he'd watched them live according to endlessly interpreted religious dogma. He put his own faith, equally passionate, in reality, in his intense desire to be instructed by what he saw as a fierce and godless universe. He was proud of his aristocratic ancestry yet was drawn to criminals and prostitutes, those who openly defied his parents' principles and so had access to realities closed to them. Crane assumed naturally the perfect state of being for a writer—he was a paradox and belonged nowhere. Having come of an emotionally difficult but spiritually and materially sheltered background, he studied extremes—poverty, war, life and death struggle—because they threw human values into sharp relief. He defied fixed moral standards, a courageous stance for a youth haunted by a religious upbringing. He was an outlaw, defiant and afraid, using his own fear as a kind of compass. He would strike out alone, without the protection of religion or the comfort of belief. In the *Black Riders* poems he testifies to a knowledge of himself, deeply felt even before he put it into words: "I stood upon a high place, / And saw, below, many devils / Running, leaping, / . . . One looked up, grinning, / And said, 'Comrade! Brother!'" And so Crane was brother to all transgressors, to outsiders, to lost souls.

He had few intimate friends. Berryman relates in his biography, but was "beloved—this is the word that is used—by most of the people who knew him at all well. . . ." People liked him "with an eagerness for which they could not account. . . . Very early he seemed to many who met him a genius. To others he seemed disagreeably indifferent, arrogant, shocking."<sup>3</sup>

School officials probably agreed with the latter. After leaving Lafayette, he made a last try at formal education at Syracuse University, where he gained admittance through a family connection. He'd been writing columns for the *New York Tribune*; now he continued as city correspondent, spending a lot of time at the Putnam police court, where the lives of the Railroad Street prostitutes unfolded. During his one semester at Syracuse, in 1891, he wrote the first draft of *Maggie*, holed up in the tower

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<sup>2</sup>John Berryman, *Stephen Crane* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1950), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23.



room of his fraternity house. He then flunked out again and, like many writers before and after him, moved on to poverty in New York City, rooming in a boardinghouse on Avenue A. There he finished *Maggie*. Though he had always rebelled against his parents' crusades and had tasted every vice they had wished legally prohibited, he proved himself an activist and crusader, writing at nineteen and twenty a novel that revolutionized perspective in American literature, portraying the "familiar and low" as though such lives formed and commented upon America as it truly was. Though not as masterful as Crane's later work, *Maggie* provided the stylistic leap that inaugurated a new vision of narrative in American fiction, a narrative of intense pressure and detachment in which a banal story is given heroic stature, yet is not falsified. People are made to speak in the actual rhythms of street talk and are defined by the *sounds* of their voices rather than by what they say, which consists almost of code phrases. Crane's book is a tone painting of subtle outrage in which the characters are meant to remain nearly anonymous—in fact, the first two versions of *Maggie* featured nameless characters known only as "the girl," "the girl's mother," etc. The inhabitants of the Johnson's home seem, especially at first acquaintance, a band of grotesques.

Jimmie, Maggie's brother, is first seen fighting for honor, a losing battle in more ways than one; a mere urchin, he has much in common with that "worm of yellow convicts" crawling along the river's bank. He is rescued on Pete's whim, as Maggie later is. He comes to maturity, fixed with a chronic sneer, "so sharp that he believed in nothing." His father's early threat to "belt yer life out" is made good by life itself: "he never conceived a respect for the world, because he had begun with no idols that it had smashed." And no wonder. Mary, Jimmie and Mag's mother, is portrayed as the devil incarnate. The children crouch huddled in a corner after one of her drunken rages, afraid even to sleep in her senseless presence—"she need only to awake and all the fiends would come from below." She is a representation of rage, a victim who crushes everything in her path as she careens toward her own eventual destruction. Mag's father is not exaggerating when he tells his cohorts in a bar that "'home reg'lar livin' hell'"; he then robs his own son of a pail of beer Jimmie has fetched to buy a night's protection in a neighbor's apartment. Mary, pausing in her "career from seething stove to a pan-covered table," revels in trumpeting that her daughter has "'gone teh deh devil,'" kicks her out and delivers her to the

streets. Crane, who reportedly once remarked that "marriage was a base trick on women, who were hunted animals anyhow," wrote that "swaggering Pete loomed like a golden sun to Maggie." Pete's superiority is measured by his lack of respect for anything in the world. Maggie, timid, increasingly dependent as she asks Pete for more of what he increasingly withholds, beseches tenderness from one who will become more and more contemptuous as she reveals her needs. He introduces Maggie to progressively smokier, louder, more irregularly shaped halls as his respect for her diminishes, then goes off with an experienced, self-reliant opportunist, Nell, who manipulates him and thinks him a fool.

Women like Nell seem the only prey with a chance of survival. Deceit and irresponsibility of men toward women is one of the constants in *Maggie*; it is the very law of the Bowery jungle. Jimmie and Pete think of themselves as virtuous fellows. Pete is moved to tears by the thought of the purity of his motives in rescuing Maggie from her drunken mother, and Jimmie, doing his duty by harassing the guilty Pete, wonders vaguely if the women he himself has despoiled have brothers. In the end, he is unwilling even to claim his sister's body.

And what of our heroine? Maggie's romantic inability to see the world clearly leads to her downfall as surely as does reality. She responds to such statements as Pete's "Say, Mag, I'm stuck on yer shape" as though the remark were a declaration of love. She is a kind of starved princess, trying to better herself, continually picking up the wreckage-strewn apartment as though she could turn it into a semblance of home with the persistence of her hopes. Transparent as rain, she is the kind of woman Crane himself would have liked to rescue, but he did not cave in as an artist and allow himself the fairy tale he repeatedly attempted in life. In *Maggie* there is no confusion: "She did not feel like a bad woman. To her knowledge she had never seen any better." The scene where Maggie, "with a shrinking movement," draws back her skirts to avoid brushing against two "painted" women seated with customers in a dance hall is quiet and brief, seemingly dropped almost as an aside. The image is haunting. Crane, who wanted to write so as "to be unmistakable"—that is, incapable of being misunderstood—reveals in this moment the tremendous power of which he'll be capable in such classics of understatement as "The Open Boat."

But *Maggie* is not meant to be understated; it is an unrelenting explosion. More than any of its characters, *Maggie* stars the

teeming turn-of-the-century Bowery, whose "doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter." Tommie, the doomed baby of the Johnson household, is a telling witness: "The babe sat on the floor watching . . . his face in contortions like that of a woman at a tragedy." Here is a world presented as an assault on the senses, a relief against which human nature and political realities are exposed. Crane's characters are victimized not only by the tenement and the factory but by the sanctuaries offered them by their culture—the saloon, the theater, the missionary houses. God turns away from Maggie in the guise of a "stout gentleman in a silk hat and chaste black coat"; she is next seen as a streetwalker, her physical beauty so ruined that she is mistaken for her mother by a passerby. Crane, who called the books of his contemporaries "pink valentines," ended *Maggie* with a viciously ironic satire on the mawkish sentimentality of the day, diminishing further his chances of publishing a novel that was an undisguised war cry against the society whose depths it portrayed.

The young author first took his manuscript to an editor at *Century* magazine, who commented that "these creatures of an environment have no tenderness and no restraint of action to excuse their callousness." Asked Crane, "You mean that the story's too honest?" After several rejections, he published *Maggie* himself in 1893, under the name Johnston Smith. Cashing in the last of his inheritance, he paid \$869 for 1,100 copies printed by a house that specialized in medical books and religious tracts. The contents of the book were considered so scandalous that the firm did not include its name as publisher. Crane was unable to sell the books, used stacks of them as seats in his room, and paid his tobacconist's bill with a copy inscribed: "This story will not edify or improve you and it may not even interest you." In another copy he wrote: "This work is a mud-puddle, I am told on the best authority. Wade in and have a swim."

He continued to take the published version around to legitimate houses while he clerked and did journalism to make what money he could. He now lived in a studio room with three friends, sleeping at night with two of his roommates in a large double bed. He was too poor to contribute toward the rent and ate infrequently at the cheapest restaurants. He wore rubber boots with no shoes and the cast-off coats of friends. During his two years in New York, he'd earned \$25 as a writer.

Depressed, Crane told yet another editor who rejected *Maggie*, "I can't starve. . . . I'm going home to my brother in New



Jersey and perhaps learn the boot and shoe trade." Word came then that William Dean Howells had read *Maggie*, compared its author to Tolstoy, and planned to say as much in print. The news persuaded Crane to put off a change of vocation, but it was not until after *The Red Badge of Courage* began appearing in serial form in the *Philadelphia Press* that Appleton consented to publish *Maggie*. Crane was advised to soften the effect of the book and did so; the 1896 version featured such changes as "kick d'face off im" for "kick deh damn guts out of im," and deletion of certain "overwritten" paragraphs. A 1969 version attempted a compromise between the two texts. The present Bantam edition is the word-for-word text of the original *Maggie*.

What became of Crane, acknowledged as the hope of American letters after the success of his classic, *The Red Badge of Courage*, is a story of ironic but strangely understandable outcome. He never expected to live long, had a smoker's cough at twenty-one, and paid little attention to his health; Berryman describes him as a man of "fragile physique and . . . unreasonable courage."<sup>4</sup> The *Philadelphia Press* sent Crane West by train in 1895, just after the serialization of *Red Badge*. Though he wrote little during the trip, the experience of going West, ending in Mexico, was the foundation of some of Crane's greatest stories, notably "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" and "The Blue Hotel." Just as the Bowery had been written of only in moralizing, sentimental terms, the West, before Crane, had been represented largely as bravado and myth. In Crane's stories the myth serves as backdrop for what D. H. Lawrence called "the essential American soul . . . hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer . . . There are terrible spirits, ghosts, in the air of America."<sup>5</sup>

Ghosts were familiar to Crane. The basis of "The Open Boat"—which remains, with *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane's towering masterpiece—was hard won. Late 1896 found Crane in Jacksonville, Florida, which proved a fateful setting—it was there Crane met Cora Taylor, also known as Lady Stewart (she'd left her second husband, who would not divorce her). Crane was waiting to board a ship to Cuba, where he hoped to cover the insurrection against Spanish rule as a correspondent; Cora was owner of a high-class brothel called the Hotel de Dream. She was the last and most important in a series of relationships with

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>5</sup>D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Viking, 1961), p. 62.



older women who were somehow compromised by society; the boat was the *Commodore*, a ship loaded with ammunition and a filibustering party of Cubans. Crane had signed on as seaman, and the boat left for Cuba on New Year's Day, 1897. It sank the second day out, and Crane survived the shipwreck with three other men in a ten-foot dinghy. Each of the thirty hours in rolling seas off the coast of Mosquito Inlet are accounted for in "The Open Boat"; Crane discussed the story at length with Captain Edward Murphy, captain of the *Commodore* and a fellow survivor.

Soon after the disaster at sea, Crane and Cora Taylor, who wanted to write, traveled to Greece to report on the Greco-Turkish War. Cora saw in Crane a chance to be more than she could have been. She was not a prudent choice on Crane's part, but he was not a prudent man—his priorities were elsewhere. Cora, spirited and ambitious, similarly unrestricted by the standards of others, took Crane on as a kind of identity. In return she gave her complete, if improvident, devotion. Largely because of her, Crane settled in England, where fewer questions were asked about her past and she was known as Mrs. Crane; their friends included Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, and Henry James. The Cranes lived first at Ravensbrook, in Surrey, where Crane wrote "The Monster," one of the best of the Whilomville stories, which are modeled on the small New Jersey towns of Crane's childhood. "The Monster" is a little-recognized and major American story about love and bondage, rescue and punishment—themes Crane knew intimately and took up now with a kind of prescience as his relationship with Cora became defined and permanent. He left her for nine months in 1898 to return as a correspondent to Cuba, where he filed the best report of the war and behaved so recklessly that observers thought him suicidal. He looked so ill on a visit to New York that rumors circulated he was dying of syphilis.

Crane returned to England to find that he and Cora were being evicted from Ravensbrook for nonpayment; a friend offered them use of Brede Place in Sussex. Brede Place was a damp, unrestored baronial estate requiring a staff of servants; the mildewed cold and lack of heat completed the ruin of Crane's health. He'd driven himself to write fourteen books in eight years, and now the Cranes complicated their serious financial worries by running a kind of salon for hangers-on and guests, serving fine wines and foods and living on credit. From this point on, Crane was desperate for money. He wrote nothing major and grew more ill as pressure to pay his bills increased. He died June 5, 1900, in

Badenweiler, Germany, near the Black Forest, where Cora had belatedly taken him in hopes of a recovery. She wrote a friend: "My [husband] . . . lives over everything in dreams and talks aloud constantly. It is too awful to hear him try to change places in the 'Open Boat.' " But Crane himself represented the struggle differently, whispering to a visitor, "It isn't bad. You feel sleepy. . . . Just a little dreamy anxiety—which world you're really in."

Crane's quest and his importance to American letters are most deeply felt in the famous last paragraph of "The Open Boat."

When it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters.

Which world are we in? Crane, genius of exploration of the American and natural worlds, stands between us and pervasive mystery. His work deals not only with things human and natural, but *with the force that acts in them* and so unites us, who are utterly alone, in a connective universe. We can owe no greater debt to an artist. Crane's best work is so large in theme and feeling that its meaning cannot be fully explicated; his words stand as illumination and evidence of the mystery itself.

JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS

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*Maggie*  
*A Girl of the Streets*

(A Story of New York)



