



*Zane  
&  
Grey*

ROMANCING  
THE WEST

Stephen J. May

# Zane Grey

*Romancing the West*



Stephen J. May

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*Frontispiece:* Zane Grey on Don Carlos in the Tonto Basin, Arizona in 1919, at the zenith of Grey's career. This part of Arizona was one of Grey's favorite haunts. *Courtesy of the G. M. Farley Collection, Hagerstown, Maryland*

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Zane Grey

*To the memory of Frank Waters  
and Marshall Sprague:  
mentors, friends.*

“He may be no Henry James, Bret Harte,  
or Stephen Crane, but in the short run at least,  
his impact on the American folk mind has been  
greater than that of those three, or of any other  
contemporary trio of authors combined. When  
you think of the West, you think of Zane Grey.”

—Frantz and Choate, *The American Cowboy*

### Author's Note

Zane Grey changed the spelling of his last name by replacing the *a* with an *e*. To avoid confusion I will use the spelling of *Grey* to refer to Zane Grey only, and the spelling of *Gray* to refer to the rest of the family.

## Preface

In this book about Zane Grey I wished to accomplish several things. Primary among them were: (1) to explore Grey's childhood, especially his relationship with his father; (2) to reveal how this relationship affected his writing, his philosophy, and his emotional life; (3) to show how Grey was predisposed to authoring romances; (4) to discuss Grey's major novels in terms of the parameters of romance; (5) to expose his often ambivalent feelings regarding Mormonism; (6) to trace his development from New York dentist to best-selling Western novelist; (7) to explore the Grey mystique and to place him fairly in twentieth-century literary context. My goal was not to write a full-scale biography, but to focus on the key periods of Grey's life that shaped his major novels. Although he was a perceptive and prolific short story and feature article writer, I have chosen to remain with the novels. Here, I believe, are the windows to Grey's mind. I have first of all endeavored to analyze the man in order to understand his novels, and to explore the novels as a way of understanding the man.

One of the reasons why Grey appealed to me as a literary study was his remarkable staying power in this century. This evidence came to me personally several years ago. While driving through Utah I hap-

pened to stop at the house of friend whom I hadn't seen in some time. He lived in a sprawling ranch house deep in the cottonwood and purple sage country that Grey had known so intimately. After he had shown me around the place, we stepped into the living room. In one corner I noticed several bookshelves of Zane Grey books in their familiar beige, blue, and red jackets, which were reprints published by the Walter Black Company. I commented on their good condition. My friend explained that his father had passed the books down to him and that he remained an avid reader of Grey. As he talked, I quickly became aware of the enduring Grey mystique.

When I began writing this book, I often reflected on those shelves of books, in that particular living room, in that rolling sage region, and my friend extolling the qualities of Zane Grey as if he were describing the virtues of a Ming vase or a Rembrandt etching. Those silent shelves of books became a kind of symbolic testament to Grey's persistent legend. This is the legend that I wished to probe in this book. How, after, nearly a hundred years of enduring critical scorn, did a popular writer still cling to the public imagination?

One answer seems to be that the land itself chooses the best and worst qualities of its writers and artists. Although it is ultimately undefinable, the American West has a unique place in American letters. For one thing, it is the only region, except perhaps for the South, that comes with the imposing definitives "the" and "American." The American West. What tonnage. Even in our language, we refer to the West as a special place: a place that is not only part of our territory and our history, but part of our imagination as well. It is this place which chose Zane Grey as its spokesman. And for all his defects as a writer, few of his admirers have voiced objections over the years.

Zane Grey appeared in American literature just about the time the frontier era was ending and the vivid memories of it were just beginning to coalesce. Grey never really considered himself simply a writer of westerns, nor was the western his chief influence. Although he kept tabs on other Western writers, he claimed the great European and eastern American authors—Wordsworth, Hugo, Conrad, Hawthorne, and

Cooper—as his literary gods. He was never very comfortable with the mantle of “writer of westerns” until much later in his career, and then he only admitted it only grudgingly.

Variouly dubbed the “oater,” the “shoot-em-up,” or a “blood and thunder” novel, the western emerged during Grey’s lifetime as a major literary genre and remains one of the singular American contributions to literature and the cinema. In this study of Grey, I have tried to explain Grey’s part in that development. In the tradition of James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, and Owen Wister, Grey championed the role of the frontier in shaping and defining the ideal American character. The great novels of Zane Grey—those discussed in this book—cover the years 1903 to 1926, and are part of the extensive mythology of the West.

Because the phrase “western novel” has traditionally had a pejorative ring to it, Grey and his colleagues have attracted little recent critical attention. One reason clearly is that Grey’s brand of romance is out of fashion. In an age that prizes realism and anti-heroism, Grey’s distressed women and rescuing knights seem somewhat ludicrous. I have tried to explain in this book that any critical understanding of Grey must include a background in the romance form, for Grey was firstly a writer of romances and secondly a writer of westerns.

Because the writers who influenced Grey make a surprisingly eclectic group, I have endeavored to look both forward and backward in contextualizing his work. There is no question to me that Grey was a 19th nineteenth-century writer trapped in the twentieth century. He fed upon Wordsworth and the romantic poets’ worship of nature; he identified with Hawthorne’s melancholy, Cooper’s individualism, Hugo’s social protest, Theodore Roosevelt’s vitality, and Wister’s knowledge of cowboy lore. Grey was twenty-eight years old when he encountered the twentieth century; however, he felt a distinct obligation to explain the values of the nineteenth century and its great writers. He translated these values and beliefs—morality, heroism, self-sacrifice, honor, chivalry—into stories about the West. In terms of the man himself, however, Grey was not as predictable as his stories. He could be

merciless with himself and contemptuous of fellow writers. He hid an enormous amount of shame; his childhood turmoil frequently contributed to periods of depression and immobilization; he had an unappeasable appetite for worldwide adventure, often using it to overcome his blue periods. The late G. M. Farley, a Grey scholar who probably knew him better than anyone else did, once confessed to me that in all of his studies of Grey he always “came up a little short.” Perhaps all biographers feel this way. Perhaps all writers defy easy categorization, even though their works are quite accessible. In any event, Grey the man was complex and enigmatic. And I must concur with Farley that, despite all my investigations, the real Zane Grey is an elusive rider escaping into the vast Arizona desert. So it must be.

I have first and foremost striven for historical accuracy. All weather conditions, landscape descriptions, thoughts and feelings recorded here have documentable support. Where it seems called for, the evidence appears in the notes. Any errors of omission or commission are entirely my own.

All quotations from Zane Grey’s novels are taken from the reprint editions by Walter J. Black, Inc. (Roslyn, New York).

Finally, I would like to thank some people and agencies that made this book happen. The late Grey scholar G. M. Farley was indispensable in finalizing the manuscript, and I will always remember him as a generous, warm soul; Holly Panich of Ohio University Press provided support and guidance over the years; Senior Editor Gillian Berchowitz and Manuscript Editor Nancy Basmajian of Ohio University Press assisted in making this a much better book. Additionally, I would like to thank the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; HarperCollins Publishers, New York; Zane Grey’s West Society; Zane Grey, Inc.; and the Colorado Historical Society.



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## Beginnings

Two of the most important people in Zane Grey's early life were complete opposites. The first, his father, Lewis Gray, was fiercely patriarchal, conservative, and nattily attired. His second great influence was named Old Muddy Miser, a gentle, ragged hermit who lived at Dillon's Falls, near Grey's boyhood home of Zanesville, Ohio. Together they helped shape the destiny of young Pearl Zane Grey during his formative years, the 1870s and 1880s in Midwestern America.

Dr. Lewis Gray had coarse, <sup>粗糙的</sup> sallow skin, penetrating blue eyes, a walrus mustache, a little cleft chin, and an air of aristocracy. He was a traditionalist in just about everything. <sup>粗犷的</sup> He believed that children should be seen and rarely heard. The cane was close at hand, and he would use it liberally, justifying his violence <sup>暴力的</sup> against his children by maintaining that it was for their own good. From a very early age, Zane Grey knew this sudden violence could occur, and he feared provoking his father.

Dr. Gray wanted Zane to grow up to be like him—a dentist. Every action, nearly every conversation between father and son seemed to an-