

BEN'S NOTES

SHANE

**BY JACK
SCHAEFER**



**Third
Thursday**
Book Club

JACK SCHAEFER'S *SHANE*

*Shane*¹ (1949) is widely considered the finest Western novel ever written. The Western has fallen out of favor these days in literary circles – at least in its classical formulation, when it centered around themes of American heroism, man's battles against the elements, wars over open ranges and fenced-in farms, and the general challenge of carving civilization out of the wilderness. Today's Westerns focus mainly on the evils of Western expansion – predations against Native Americans, the violence of the uncultivated West, the treatment of women and minorities. But *Shane* represents a reminder that the men and women who settled the land on which the vast majority of Americans currently live were, for all of their flaws, doing something heroic, facing the unknown in order to conquer and cultivate the West. And *Shane* is something else, too: the story of how a boy learns to become a man from the men who shape him.

JACK SCHAEFER: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Jack Schaefer was born in 1907 in Ohio; both of his parents were literati, and he found himself in the company of famed author Carl Sandburg throughout his early life thanks to his father's friendship with him. He grew up on classic adventure literature, including Edgar Rice Burroughs and Alexandre Dumas, and found himself fascinated by the Western writings of Zane Grey. He went to Oberlin College, where he studied creative writing, and then moved on to Columbia University in 1929. He wanted to study the movie industry but was told that it was lowbrow; instead, he left graduate school and went into journalism. He worked at a variety of newspapers including *The Baltimore Sun* and Norfolk's *The Virginian-Pilot*.

Then, in 1945, he began work on *Shane*. It began as a short story, and then was revised and expanded after its original publication in the serial *Argosy*. The book, released four years later, was a smash and sold millions of copies globally. In 1953, it was made into the classic film *Shane*, starring Alan Ladd, Jean Arthur, Van Heflin, and Brandon deWilde, as

well as a young Jack Palance. That movie was nominated for Best Picture; it was adapted for the screen by Pulitzer Prize-winner AB Guthrie Jr., a great Western writer in his own right for *The Way West* (1950).

Schaefer wrote other books, including *Old Ramon*, which was listed on the Newbery Honor Roll, and *Monte Walsh*, which was adapted into a movie starring Lee Marvin. Schaefer died of heart failure in 1991.

COWBOYS VS. FARMERS

The backdrop of *Shane* is the conflict between ranchers and homesteaders – small farmers attempting to set down their roots on large ranges generally utilized by the ranchers. Under the Homestead Act of 1862, territory was designed to be settled by claimant farmers rather than sold to large landholders; the North had generally supported such a policy in order to incentivize agricultural settlement, while the South preferred wide tracts of land owned by slaveholders. One of Abraham Lincoln's first moves as president was to sign the Homestead Act, which would serve as the legal basis for distribution of some 1.6 million homesteads covering 420,000 square miles of federal land. Homesteads were granted to any citizen who demonstrated the ability to live on and farm the land; any citizens, including women, were eligible for such residency. The only requirements were that the occupant had to stay on the land for five years and demonstrate improvements on that land. Serious conflicts between competing claimants were commonplace.

In *Shane*, the chief conflict is between Joe Starrett and Luke Fletcher, a rancher who wants to aggregate the rights to all of the local area. Because he simply wants to graze his herds, he cannot claim the rights to the local homesteads so long as the homesteaders stay on their land and cultivate it, showing improvement. His goal, then, is to run them off their land by any means necessary. Joe Starrett, by contrast, is dedicated to the belief in usefulness, in traditional American pragmatism. As he tells Shane:

Yes, Shane, the boys I used to ride with don't see it yet. They will someday. The open range can't last forever. The fence lines are closing in. Running cattle in big lots is good business only for the top ranchers and it's really a poor business at that. Poor in terms

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