



The Virginian

Owen Wister

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For anyone fascinated by how the myth of the Western hero came into being, "The Virginian" is the book to read. Published in 1902, it became hugely popular for decades and inspired movies (a version with Gary Cooper in 1929) and a long-running TV series (1962-1971). A modern reader could easily guess the storyline without reading a synopsis - the classic elements are all there: tall, dark, handsome cowboy hero; pretty schoolmarm from back East; the villain who must finally face justice at the end of a gun. Few historical novels are dedicated to American presidents, however, and another whole dimension of the novel opens up with the name appearing on the dedication page -- Theodore Roosevelt, a college friend of the author's. What Wister does, besides telling a story of adventure and romance, is portray a particular kind of heroic figure, a natural man whose integrity is untainted by the corrupt (though civilized) values of the East. The book is a deliberate and often worshipful character study for the age of Teddy Roosevelt-style masculinity. The young Virginian charms us (and the narrator) with his courage and modesty and his thoughtful attempts to understand a world in which some men (even good ones) act dishonorably and make cowardly choices. Stoic and cool on the surface, the currents of sentiment run deep in this man. So does the will to self-improvement, as he reads Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott. This book connects with so much of American myth over the last 100 years that you could easily write another book about it. Or you can simply enjoy it for what it is, a historical romance so well-conceived, in spite of its sometimes dated views, that you keep on reading through each episode of the story, glad that Wister was in no hurry to cut to the chase. This is a book for any reader of Western literature, fiction or nonfiction. In it the many traditions of the western come together in popularized form for the first time.

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