

Country Real Estate, #338: September 7, 2014
Shanes answers raise questions
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va. On Sunday night, I watched Shane once again. The American Film Institute rates it the third-best Western of all time.

Jack Schaefer, a veteran journalist, published the novel in 1949 without ever having been west of Toledo, Ohio. He was born in Cleveland in 1907 and graduated from nearby Oberlin College where he edited its literary magazine, The Shaft.

Schaefer enrolled at Columbia University in 1929-1930, but left without his graduate degree when the English Department laughed at his proposal to write a thesis on the development of motion pictures. His foresightful advisers told him that movies were nothing more than cheap reproductions of stage plays and did not merit scholarly attention.

The framework for Schaefer's plot is a fight over dirt. It pits newcomer, small farmers, each of whom is legally working 160 acres of federal land, against a large, pioneer rancher with an Army beef-supply contract. The cattleman wants his stock to have access to every blade of grass and sip of water on the newly fenced-in farms, which was the way things were before the passage of The Homestead Act of 1862.

Refusing to adapt to changed circumstances, the rancher defends with violence what he's seized by force.

The Jeffersonian, family-valued homesteaders are virtuous and hardworking but unable to protect themselves and their claims until Shane drifts into their lives.

Schaefer uses the classic device of a mysterious and super-competent stranger who appears out of nowhere lugging a heavy past to start his story. Shane sides with the underdogs, does good, makes things right and then disappears into the mists.

The Shane of the novel is a barely contained explosive. Dressed in black, he was terrible.., lean and hard.., endless ly

searching from side to side and forward..., dark and foreboding..., the symbol of all the dim, formless imaginings of danger and terror.

The Shane of the movie -- golden-haired Alan Ladd dressed in buckskin -- is, by contrast, gentle, thoughtful, courteous, considerate, kind, polite, loyal, a good dancer, an appreciative guest and a warrior now reluctant to fight or shoot.

Shane is dangerous, though not to his friends, the settlers Joe and Marian Starrett. He treats their young son, Joey, with a respect and seriousness that his age doesn't merit.

Nothing Shane does is ever out of line. He only fights for honor and principle, not money. But Shane's unsettling past is always unsettling his present.

The homesteaders find it impossible to solve their local terrorist problem through reason or law. They are also unable to defend their rights as a group. So Joe Starrett, their leader, decides to shoot it out with the cattle baron who has set him up for a stacked-decked ambush at Grafton's Saloon.

Shane chooses to ride into the trap in place of Starrett, because he wants to save Joe from a fight that he will inevitably lose. Shane kills the three bad guys by reverting to the fast-gun skills that he had been trying to abandon and forget. The lesson he gives to himself is that he can't be other than who he was.

Having fixed things through necessary violence like Rick in Casablanca, Shane rides off through the town's graveyard paying no

attention to a bullet wound, Joey's pleas to come back and the additional gun-slinger baggage he now bears. The Knight vanishes, unthanked but always remembered.

Schaefer's story is also about the love that unwillingly develops between Shane and Marian who embodies motherhood and apple pie but not outright sexuality. These feelings are

acknowledged but kept at length by all six arms.

The repressed romantic triangle adds complexity to the overarching land struggle but not enough to tarnish the three who are working hard to not cross any line.

Professor Forrest G. Robinson found a ...powerful [perfectly manifested] homoerotic dimension to the relationship between Shane and Joe, who exchange long, knowing, silent glances across the base of the stump that they, together, have labored heroically to sever from the earth. (Forrest G. Robinson, Heroism, Home, and the Telling of *Shane*, Arizona Quarterly Review 45, Number 1, Spring, 1989.)

If Shane and Joe are repressing homosexual longing as they chop and shove at the giant stump that Joes been hacking at for two years -- a stump that can symbolize almost anything -- I didn't catch it in either the movie or the book.

Their feat appears to me to be a demonstration of deep friendship through shared hard work, of understanding, of commitment and of agreement on the core value of the farm. Of course, even if I don't see it, it might be there for those with better eyes.

Robinson finds Marian to be frivolous, sexually vain and manipulative, all the more so in comparison to the two men in her life. She is pulled toward Shane by the sexual gravity of his violence, which, he writes, ...seems replete with potent erotic promise.

I see Marian and the straight-up values she represents as the axis around which the two men spin. They do what they do *for* her—and the good she represents.

The fight between Shane and Joe is not a fight for Marian or over her, it is a fight to see which man accepts being killed so that the other can live with her in peace. By clubbing Joe into unconsciousness, Shane enables the three Starretts to stay together as a family on the land that keeps them centered.

I don't see the novel's Marian as a woman drawn sexually to

a violent male. The movies Marian might be drawn to the handsome Alan Ladd, but not to his deadliness.

Professor Robinson concludes that Shane is about subverting all of the noble endorsements of home, family and square-shooting (in the non-bullet sense) that his character expresses and seemingly acts on.

Schaefer, according to Robinson, ...was largely unconscious of the subversive strain that runs through his novel. I do wonder how its possible to find stuff in a book thats exactly the opposite of what the author thought he was putting in.

The reader of Shane has to decide whether the cig ar in this tale is just a cigar or some phallic club pounding out a stop-smoking message.

I admit that Shane is the kind of story that can be read in many different ways. The book is more complicated psychologically and darker than the 1953 movie. The books Shane is men acing and scary; Alan Ladds Shane is the boy next door with a bit o f magic and a couple of hang ups.

Shane sacrifices his own rehabilitation to bring peace to the valley and keep the Starretts marriage whole and wholesom e. After killing the bad guys, Shane says: Theres only one more thing I can do for them [Joe and Marian]. He leaves, taking the complicati ons he represents with him.

Shane can be appreciated in different ways. Its a great fightingand-shooting Western where good wins over bad. You can take it that way and leave the rest.

It can be admired for its technical ingenuity. George Stevens, director and producer, amplified the sound of gunfire to magnify its effect on a theater audience. A WWII vet who had seen combat, Stevens created an early surround sound for the scene where Shane empties his revolver on a white rock. Stevens muted the sound in the preceding scenes and then dubbed in the sound of an eight-inch howitzer cannon along with a rifle shot for Shanes pistol.

For similar effect, he had Elisha Cook, Jr., who plays a hot-headed Alabama farmer, outfitted with a harness and wire. When Wilson (Jack Palance), the gunfighter hired to kill Starrett, shoots Cook, the outmatched sodbuster is yanked off his feet and six feet backwards into the muddy street. The sound magnifies the assassination.

Stevens knew that guns were not the toys of Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. Palance did, too. He had piloted bombers in WWII and received severe burns in a crash. The gaunt, skin-tight repaired face that he lived with after plastic surgery helped his career.

Shane can be experienced as a Greek tragedy where the hero cannot change his most prominent characteristic and thus his fate. Or as a coming-of-age tale that points everyone in the right direction.

Shane has been interpreted as the Resurrected Christ, traveling not from Emmaus but from Cheyenne. In that vein, Shane can be seen as trying initially to bring Christian pacifism to the selfish, powerful and violent. In the end, he gives up his own life to save the Starretts.

Amanda Kaylon of the Purity and Precision website, however, warns viewers that Shane, the movie, contains minced oaths like gosh, by Godfrey and even gosh omighty. There is, too, a by Jupiter, making four instances of objectionable language. (I apologize if I've offended readers by writing these no-no words in an effort to keep them from being heard in the privacy of your own home.)

Certain followers of Ayn Rand see in Shane the Nietzschean, individualist superman they admire. Certainly he was a loner and an outsider, but this story is about him backing away from those qualities, not endorsing them.

Of all the ways of looking at Shane, the one that appeals to the late teenager in me is to see him as a force for good with superhuman powers—the fastest draw around, the knack for

bending circumstances to his will, the ability to run and not grow weary, walk and not be faint.

Jim Caviezel's character, John Reese, in the CBS show Person of Interest is similar. He, too, has a past he wants to escape as a disillusioned former Green Beret and black-operations CIA operative.

Reese can walk into a bar, disable five or six thugs in 30 seconds and emerge without breathing hard or a hair out of place. At 68, I'd do pretty good to walk into a bar and walk out without tripping over my shoelaces.

Women I know may or may not mull such fantasies. If they do, they don't share them with me.

Sixty-five years ago, Jack Schaefer came up with a male superhero, a noble sidekick and a pretty, little woman who nursed their wounds, baked apple pie and hoped for peace.

Today, Person of Interest included three women -- Carter, Shaw and Root -- who are as endowed with as much of the superhero magic as Reese.

All concerned, I think, are now better off.

