

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

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American abolitionist John Brown, here circa 1855, seized the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now in West Virginia), in October 1859 to arm slaves and incite insurrection. He was captured, tried, and executed at Charles Town on Dec. 2, 1859.

HISTORY

Martyr or Madman

John Brown's Lingering Legacy

JEFF MINICK

Sunday, Oct. 16, 1859. A light rain fell across the dark and sleeping town of Harper's Ferry, Virginia. The name of the town lost its apostrophe in 1891, and earlier, in 1863, the town itself became a part of West Virginia, as the only state to secede from a Confederate state.

But before these changes, on that night in 1859, a band of 21 armed raiders, led by an old man with a white beard, unleashed hell not only on the town but also on the nation. They kidnapped several prominent citi-

John Brown's attempt to launch a slave rebellion failed, but it changed the course of American history forever.

zens, including the slave owner Lewis Washington, a distant relative of America's first president. They cut telegraph wires in and out of the town, seized the federal armory and a rifle works, and declared to various citizens that an insurrection was underway.

Ironically, of this attempt to spark a slave rebellion, the first casualty was a freed black man, Heyward Shepherd, who worked for the railroad and, while investigating the delay of a train that Brown's men had stopped, was shot by a raider.

Despite the raiders' efforts to cut communications, word of this violent raid quickly

spread. By Monday afternoon, the old man, who proclaimed himself "here in the name of the Great Jehovah," found himself and his few surviving followers trapped inside an engine house beside the armory, surrounded by hundreds of armed and enraged townsmen.

Early the next day, after attempts at negotiation had failed, Marines who had arrived from Washington under the command of Col. Robert E. Lee stormed the engine house, captured those inside, and squashed the insurrection.

Continued on Page 4



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THE EPOCH TIMES
TRUTH AND TRADITION

An Advocate for Thinking Based on Facts

LINDA WIEGENFELD

A new biography by Jason L. Riley called "Maverick: A Biography of Thomas Sowell" focuses on the critical thinker Thomas Sowell, who seems to think with every fiber of his being.

As of this writing, Thomas Sowell is 91 and going strong. According to Prager University, he is "an economist, a historian, a philosopher, and one of the greatest social theorists America has ever produced. In a career spanning six decades, he's published more than 40 books and written thousands of newspaper columns on topics ranging from economic history and political philosophy to social inequality, education, and race. And he might be the most important scholar you've never heard of."

Why haven't more people heard of him? Riley maintains that this black scholar is not better known because his impressive body of work challenges orthodoxies held dear by most of his fellow intellectuals and the mainstream media. He is not a true conservative because of some positions he has taken, such as the decriminalization of drugs. Also, Sowell has been accused of adopting certain stances merely to curry favor. Finally, like many black thinkers, he has been labeled an "Uncle Tom."

I say, forget about labels. Sowell, as Riley calls him, is a maverick, a fabulous free thinker with street smarts who has an interest in truth based on facts, not politics. He uses, as Riley says, "data-driven evidence to test theories and examine social phenomena."

Sowell's Background

Sowell was born in rural North Carolina in 1930 to a very poor family. He was orphaned at a very young age and lived in the Jim Crow South, but at age 8, his family moved to Harlem.

When older, he was admitted to one of New York's most competitive high schools but dropped out and left home a year later. He took whatever jobs were available at the time because he was a black high school dropout with few marketable skills. He didn't get around to earning a college degree until he was already in his late 20s and had served in the Marines.

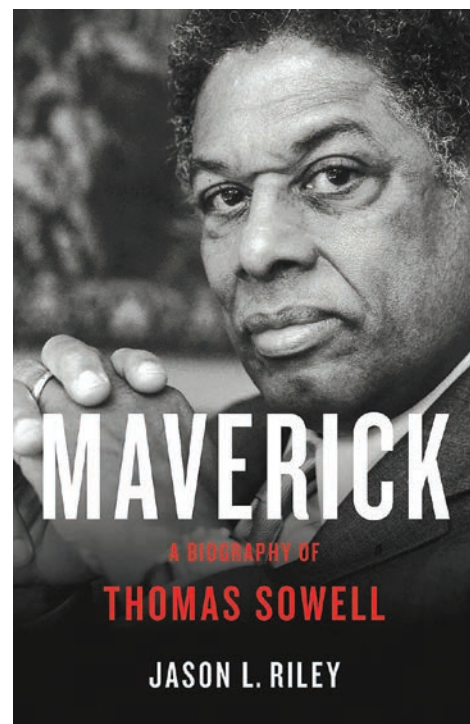
In his 20s, Sowell was a Marxist, but, as he explains, working one summer for the federal government cured him. He rejected Marxian economics theory in favor of free market economics.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Sowell served on the faculties of several universities. Again, actual experience influenced him. He concluded that affirmative action didn't work; in fact, racial double standards were actually hurting blacks since academic expectations were lowered for them. Sowell believed that if students were educated using rigorous standards, most would not disappoint. He did not like the university giving students the opportunity to "alibi, cheat, whine or intrigue."

Sowell was enormously skeptical of the idea of students having a voice in creating their own courses.

Sowell practiced what he preached. He taught mainly through discussion rather than by lecture or from a textbook. Sowell wasn't interested in merely testing the recitation skills of students or their ability to memorize facts. "My teaching was directed toward getting the student to think," he said. He challenged his students.

Also, he was enormously skeptical of the idea of students having a voice in creating their own courses. He felt that students often don't know yet what will prove to be relevant to their education. In 1980, Sowell left the academic world



"Maverick: A Biography of Thomas Sowell" by Jason L. Riley, May 25, 2021. Basic Books, 304 pages, hard cover.

In a career spanning six decades, [Sowell's] published more than 40 books.

Jason L. Riley, biographer

to join the Hoover Institution on the campus of Stanford University. He has been there ever since.

Sowell's Writings

Most of Riley's book is devoted to Sowell's writings, and thus it is not a typical biography. Rather, it features profound discussions of many of Sowell's fascinating books, including some of the following:

"Knowledge and Decisions" aims to deepen the reader's understanding of how prices serve as communication mechanisms in a society, and how people adjust over time to dynamic conditions in the real world.

"Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality?" compares the intentions of liberalism with the reality of the effects of its policies.

"Late-Talking Children" appeared in 1997, and a follow-up, "The Einstein Syndrome: Bright Children Who Talk Late" was published four years later. Based on his experience with his son, Sowell wrote it so parents would guard against having their children incorrectly labeled and put into special education programs where they might not belong. Sowell writes from experience: Close to his fourth birthday, Sowell's son began to speak. The son turned out to be an especially gifted math student, who went on to earn his college degree in computer science.

"A Conflict of Visions" is an attempt to explain why two people similarly well-informed and similarly well-meaning can reach opposite conclusions, not just on a given issue but on a whole range of them.

All in all, Sowell is hopeful that his works will inspire other blacks to advocate critical thinking.

Even if the reader does not agree with Sowell's conclusions, his advocacy of looking to the facts rather than following one overreaching philosophy would serve us well at this time.

Linda Wiegenfeld is a retired teacher. She can be reached for comments or suggestions at lwiegenfeld@aol.com

POETRY

An Interview With Leading Poet and Petrarch Translator A.M. Juster

EVAN MANTYK

A widely published translator of ancient Latin texts, a former high-ranking government bureaucrat, and an incredible poet who just released his book "Wonder and Wrath" last September, A.M. Juster is a man at the confluence of big ideas, important people, and the written word.

Under his non-poet name, Michael J. Astrue, he worked as head of the Social Security Administration for both the Bush and Obama administrations. He is not unlike the great epic poet and government official John Milton (whose Latin works Juster has translated). Juster is perhaps best summarized as being a true scholar. Among major poets today, he is unique in that he has stayed true to the traditional style of consistent rhythm (technically called "meter") and often rhyme.

As president of the Society of Classical Poets—a relatively new organization that has become a humming nexus of traditional poets who once worked alone—I jumped at the chance to have a conversation with A.M. Juster on the state of poetry today and what he's up to.

Evan Mantyk: You are regarded as among the leading poets still practicing traditional English poetry, also known as formal poetry or classical poetry. Have you seen an increase or decrease in interest in traditional poetry?

A.M. Juster: The public continues to love meter and rhyme, as is evident from the success of [the Broadway musical] "Hamilton" and so-called performance poetry. Nevertheless, "Big Poetry"—academia, the major literary organizations, and the historically important journals—has been suffocating formal poetry more than it has ever done before. I am optimistic, though, that the internet will provide a way to break our literary monopolies and give more people more of the poetry that they want.

Mr. Mantyk: If it is so suffocating, why do you choose to work in traditional poetry?



Poet and translator A.M. Juster.
JOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHY

“Translators have also tended to overlook Petrarch's wry humor, love of paradox, and freshness of language.**”**

A.M. Juster, poet



A portrait of Francesco Petrarca, circa 1370–circa 1380, by Altichiero.

Mr. Juster: In college I wrote the poetry that Big Poetry was promoting, but eventually found it unsatisfying and stopped writing poetry altogether for about a decade. In my 30s, I realized that I could write the kind of poetry I loved rather than the poetry that others wanted me to love, so that's what I set out to do.

Mr. Mantyk: In my reading of history, in the mid-19th century there was a split between the famous American poets Henry Longfellow, who used meter and rhyme, and Walt Whitman, who went toward free verse. The poetry establishment today has fully embraced Whitman and generally abandoned Longfellow. But the Longfellow line includes Frost—perhaps the last American poet, other than children's books authors, who was a household name. This Longfellow line could offer a way forward for poetry to regain esteem in American culture. What do you think of this assertion?

Mr. Juster: I agree. Big Poetry would deny that the move away from formal verse caused the decline of public interest in and support for poetry, but the evidence overwhelmingly contradicts that view.

Mr. Mantyk: Is it promising that the inaugural poem for Biden this year contained rhyming and seemed more coherent than the poem for Obama's inauguration in 2009?

Mr. Juster: Yes, it is promising. Amanda Gorman had the almost impossible task of writing a public poem on short notice under incredible pressure. While I have some reservations about the poem, it is the best of the inauguration poems—better even than the poem Robert Frost wanted to read, but couldn't because the bright sunlight blinded him. The best sections of her poem were those that embraced the music of rhythm and rhyme, sometimes in a very clever way. When the poem became more prosy, it became more preachy and sagged a bit.

Mr. Mantyk: Unlike Democratic presi-

dents, Republican presidents have never had poetry read at their inaugurations. Is poetry by nature elitist and taboo to the Republican establishment?

Mr. Juster: In countries from Ireland to Vietnam, poetry is a passion of the people, as it used to be in this country. I would tend to agree that Republican political types tend to look at poetry as an alien activity, but that's a mistake. They should remember that the first great Republican political figure, Abraham Lincoln, wrote poetry.

Mr. Mantyk: You are nearing the end of a monumental poetic feat: translating all of the great Italian poet Petrarch's poetry into metered and rhyming English, something that's never been done before. You said before that you were planning to complete the first draft translation by Labor Day. Did you meet your deadline?

Mr. Juster: Yes, with about two weeks to spare. I'm editing and working on the notes and other collateral material now, and I have hired an "internal external reviewer," ... to give it a once-over before I deliver it all to Norton, probably in March, a month or so ahead of schedule.

Mr. Mantyk: What impressions or revelations about Petrarch has the up-close experience given you?

Mr. Juster: It is clearer to me that Petrarch prior to 1950 tended to see Petrarch as a "courtly love" poet, which is a misreading, and thus they rendered his powerful confessional poems into formulaic and anachronistic language, often with little regard for what his Italian actually said. Later translators approached the poems differently, but seem to have been bewitched by skilled "literal" translations of philologists, and as a result they lost the music and many of the more subtle meanings of the poetry.

Petrarch wrote these poems in Italian rather than Latin to reach a broader readership, and thus I think that vernacular—but not slang—language is critical to this effort. Translators have also tended to overlook Petrarch's wry humor, love of paradox, and freshness of language. That freshness is particularly hard to imitate because Petrarch has been imitated so widely that some of his pioneering imagery now seems clichéd.

Evan Mantyk is an English teacher in New York and President of the Society of Classical Poets.



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An illustration of abolitionist John Brown leading a raid on an arsenal at Harpers Ferry on Oct. 16, 1859.

*Charlestown, Va., 2^d December, 1859.
I John Brown am now quite certain that
the crimes of this guilty land; will never be
purged away; but with Blood I had as I now
think: vainly flattered myself that without very
much bloodshed; it might be done.*

John Brown's last words, which were passed in a note to a jailer, as he was on his way to the gallows.



"Tragic Prelude" is a mural that measures 31 feet by 11 feet by 6 inches, painted by John Steuart Curry in 1937 for the Kansas State Capitol in Topeka. "I wanted to paint him as a fanatic, for John Brown was a fanatic. He had the wild zeal of the extremist, the fanatic for his cause—and we had the Civil War, with its untold misery," Curry said in a 1939 newspaper interview.

HISTORY

Martyr or Madman

John Brown's Lingering Legacy

Continued from Page 1

John Brown's attempt to launch a slave rebellion failed, but it changed the course of American history forever.

The Man
John Brown (1800–1859) was raised in an abolitionist family. His father, for example, helped run the Underground Railroad in Hudson, Ohio. Though credentialed as a Congregationalist minister, Brown was soon operating a tannery business like his father. He was married twice and was the father of 20 children, several of whom died young. Brown's financial fortunes rose and fell both with the economic trials of his time and from his own often poor business decisions. Despite his lifelong involvement in the abolitionist movement, it wasn't until 1855 that John Brown gained a national reputation for his opposition to slavery. Encouraged by two of his sons to go to Kansas to fight the influx of slave owners into that territory, and in retaliation for an attack made by pro-slavers on the town of Lawrence, Brown led a raid against neighbors living in cabins along Pottawatomie Creek, where he and his followers, including two of his sons, ex-

Brown's attack on Harpers Ferry and his subsequent execution deepened the fissures dividing North and South into a canyon.

ecuted five men who supported slavery. The "Pottawatomie Massacre" kicked off the killings and guerrilla warfare that soon gave this territory the name of "Bleeding Kansas." Returning East, Brown traveled in abolitionist circles, raising money to free slaves and to purchase guns. He had come to believe that only violence would end slavery in America. And he began plotting the raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry.

Trial and Execution
Ernest Hemingway's "Men at War," a thick anthology of war stories popular with GIs during World War II, contains a selection from Leonard Ehrlich's "God's Angry Man," his novel about John Brown and the raid on Harpers Ferry. In this passage, Ehrlich imagines John Brown's thoughts when his sons are dead or dying in the engine house, and he realizes his cause is doomed:

"I suffered much in Kansas. I expect to suffer here, in the cause of human freedom. I have been well known as Old Brown of Kansas. I shed blood on the Pottawatomie. Slaveholders I regard as robbers and murderers, and I have sworn



John Brown is portrayed sympathetically in "The Last Moments of John Brown," 1882–84, by Thomas Hovenden. Gift from Mr. and Mrs. Carl Stoeckel (1897); The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

to abolish slavery and liberate my fellow men. And now I am here ... I have failed ... Two of my sons were killed here today."

After he was taken into custody, John Brown's trial lasted five days, and the jury needed only 45 minutes to find him guilty of murder, insurrection, and treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia. On Dec. 2, 1859, he was hanged in Charles Town, Virginia, which is today a part of West Virginia. At that hanging were a number of Americans who would also make their mark on American history: Jeb Stuart, Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, John Wilkes Booth, who would later assassinate Abraham Lincoln, and possibly even the poet Walt Whitman.

Failure
From its inception, Brown's plan to lead a slave revolt using Harpers Ferry as the base for his operations had no chance of success. He and his men were too few in number to intimidate the citizens of Harpers Ferry, and he apparently lacked the imagination to envision how quickly the raiders would be outnumbered and outgunned.

When he revealed his intentions to a select few supporters, even some Northern freed blacks refused to support him. In his book "John Brown: The Legend Revisited," Merrill D. Peterson writes of Brown:

"In August he had a secret meeting with Frederick Douglass in nearby Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. He had counted on Douglas to join him. But the black leader, to whom he disclosed his plan more fully than to anyone else, thought it suicidal and declined. His young black companion, Shields Green, however, decided to go with the old man. He eventually met his death on the gallows."



Success
Brown's attack on Harpers Ferry and his subsequent execution deepened the fissures dividing North and South into a canyon. Though many Northerners thought his violent actions were wicked and unhinged, many more came to regard Brown as a martyr for a great cause. Fearful of slave rebellions, Southerners tended to regard him as Satan incarnate. His attempt at insurrection lent an enormous importance to the presidential election of 1860. Watching the reactions to Brown of their countrymen north of the Mason-Dixon Line, Southerners came to believe that the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency would mean an end not just to slavery, but also to a decline of Southern influence on national affairs.

Harbinger
These questions may not have clear answers, but there is one certainty: John Brown foresaw the savage struggle that would soon engulf the United States of America, a bitter war that would pit North and South against each other. He clearly understood that his attack on Harpers Ferry would cause the nation to take one more step toward that land of death.

On the day of his execution, Brown handed one of his guards a piece of paper with these words: "I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had, as I now think, vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done."

His Continuing Legacy
Just as was true in his own time, through the decades since his death on the gallows, John Brown's reputation has depended on the biases of its interpreters. As an example, in his reaction to a 1939 mural of Brown painted by Arthur Covey in the capitol building of Topeka, Kansas, state representative Martin Van Buren Van De Mark said: "John Brown was just a crazy old coot. He was nothing but a rascal, a thief, and a murderer ... whose memory should not be perpetuated."

Over the years, some historians and novelists have found grounds for agreement with that statement while others have hailed Brown as a hero and a man of conviction. In the aforementioned "John Brown: The Legend Revisited," Merrill Peterson examines in detail these interpretations. He looks at the many books written about Brown—biographies, histories, novels, plays, and even poetry like Stephen Vincent Benét's epic verse "John Brown's Body"—and discusses how authors and scholars could reach so many different conclusions regarding him. Was John Brown an egotistical fanatic or a holy man of justice? Was he insane? Was he a righteous warrior? Was he a loving father or a man who drove some of his sons to their deaths fighting slavery?

Terrorism and Murder
In our own divided time, no matter what our political persuasion, John Brown forces us to ask: Are violence and murder justifiable means to ideological ends? What happens when we abandon reason, debate, and goodwill, and turn instead to savagery and killing? Brown was a man impatient with the

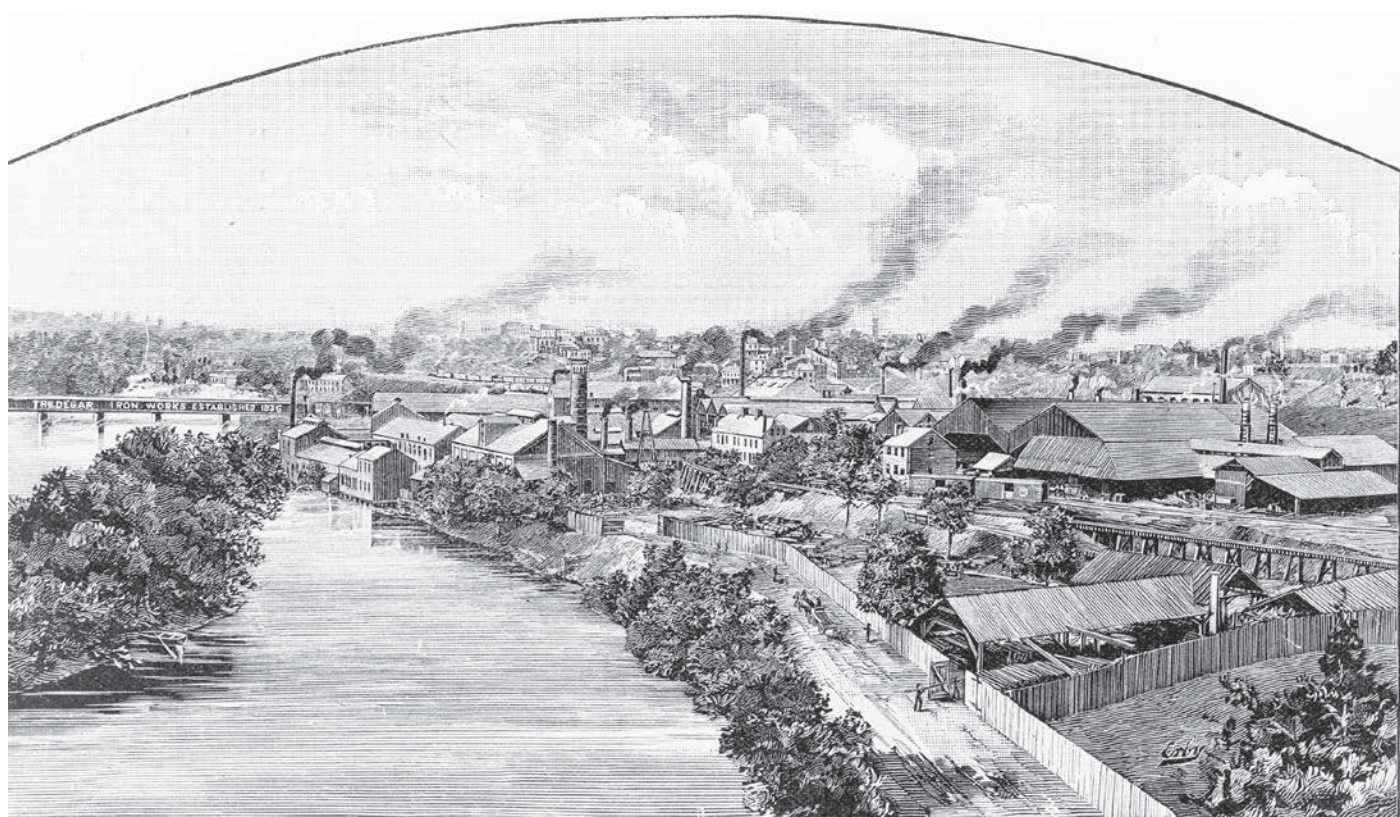


(Left) John Brown was a harbinger of the Civil War. Union Gen. Philip Sheridan riding through the Shenandoah Valley, Va., in 1864. "Sheridan's Ride" (circa 1886) by Thure de Thulstrup. (Right) While under fire from John Brown's insurgents, U.S. Marines used a ladder to ram down the engine house door in Harpers Ferry, Woodcut, Oct. 18, 1859.

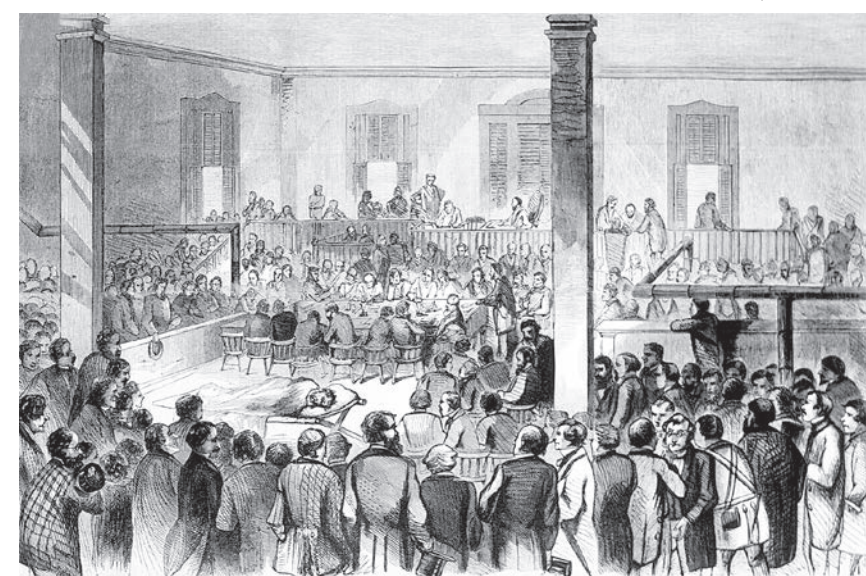
possibilities of politics, law, debate, and persuasion as avenues for ending slavery. Like some today, both here and abroad, he believed his cause so just that he was willing to commit the cold-blooded murder of unarmed men, as he and his followers did in Kansas, for the righteousness of his cause. And like some today, he was willing to resort to terrorism as the means to forward his goals, as he hoped to do at Harpers Ferry.

John Brown thus seems an amalgam of all the qualities explored by Merrill Peterson: a man of piety, a fanatic, a seeker after justice, a self-righteous man who believed he had truth in his pocket, a hero, and a villain. He is a mirror, and in him we see what we wish to see.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust on Their Wings," and two works of non-fiction, "Learning as I Go" and "Movies Make the Man." Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.



An engraving of Harpers Ferry, notable as the site of John Brown's abolitionist uprising.



The trial of John Brown at Charles Town, in an 1859 engraving from Harper's Weekly.

Imagine 2,300 Years of Musical Instruments Under One Roof!

MICHAEL KUREK

My work as a composer has taken me with some regularity to New York City, and each time I've had a bucket list of things I've either always wanted to do or wanted to do again during my free time there. One of those "do agains" has been to visit the huge Metropolitan Museum of Art at 1000 Fifth Ave., on the east side of the Great Lawn in Central Park.

Over the years, especially when my time was limited, upon entering the museum, I always made a beeline up the grand staircase to the second floor and hung a left, straight to the wing housing great European masterworks of painting. That includes

the biggest collection of French art to be found outside of Paris. Many of those famous paintings I had seen only on coffee mugs and coasters. I can happily sit on a bench for a good while, just absorbing one great painting before forcing myself to move on to another.

Thus, it took me a few visits to stumble upon a little-advertised wing of the museum and discover, to my utter delight, the historic musical instrument collection. When I meet people who have visited The Met on their trips to the Big Apple, no one seems to know about this wing. Like me, they've completely missed it. Yet anyone might enjoy this menagerie of 5,000 instruments, dating from 300 B.C., but musicians and music lovers may find it thrilling!

I say "menagerie" of instruments because some of them look like they came straight out of a Dr. Seuss book. Bathed in mysterious lighting and haunting silence are displayed all manner of bizarre experimental instruments that became largely obsolete, like the ones called the serpent and the sea dragon. You will also see the forerunners and earliest models of our modern standard instruments, including the priceless, oldest-known piano in existence (1720) and the "Francesca" violin by Antonio Stradivari (1694).

Meet Some Instruments

The serpent, a distant forerunner of the tuba, is thought to have been invented by a priest named Edmé Guillaume in 1590 in Auxerre, France, in order to support the singing of chant in churches that could not afford an organ. It managed to survive a good while and even appear in a score or two by composers like Mozart and Wagner before largely dying out. We would call it a hybrid, because it has the mouthpiece of a brass instrument but is made of wood and has keys and holes on the tubing, like a woodwind.

There are still aficionados and players of the instrument.

As a stepping stone from the serpent to the modern tuba, the ophicleide was invented in 1817 in France. The name also



The oldest extant piano, built by Bartolomeo Cristofori, in 1720. The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

means serpent, and it was essentially an improved serpent made of brass, with keys instead of holes, and in various sizes and pitch ranges. It rather gives the appearance of a saxophone (which is a reed instrument) but with a brass mouthpiece. It so happens that one of the makers (but not an inventor) of the ophicleide was Adolphe Sax, who later invented the saxophone. I wonder where he got the idea.

The exotic sea dragon in The Met, quite large—measuring four and a half feet long and eight inches wide—is essentially a bassoon, but little is actually known about it. Being rather lacking in producing a pleasing musical sound, its primary historical appearance was believed to be as a prop in Baroque Italian stage plays that depicted Hades or the underworld.

The glass harmonica will fascinate anyone who has ever produced a tone on a wine goblet by rubbing a moistened finger around the rim. In 1761, the prodigious Benjamin Franklin invented this instrument based upon that principle. He mounted a series of crystal bowls nested in increasing size, each tuned to a pitch of the scale, on a horizontal axle, with the bottom edges of the bowls dipping into a trough of water. By spinning the bowls by means of a handle or foot pedal to keep them constantly wet, the fingers can touch the edges of the bowls to play haunting, ethereal melodies and chords.

The instrument was used in chamber music and operas by Mozart, Beethoven, Donizetti, and notably by Camille Saint-Saëns in the "Aquarium" movement of "Carnival of the Animals." That part is played today on the glockenspiel, but you can also hear it played on the glass harmonica.

There are really too many fantastic instruments to discuss in detail here, but they include a "Dizzie Gillespie trumpet" (1959) with the bell bent upward, like his. There is a French horn made entirely of ceramic, as pretty as a teapot with blue flowers on white (French, late 18th century), and a Slovakian combination walking stick and flute (1820).

There are all manner of Asian and world instruments, like the Da Tongjiao, a Chinese trumpet (late 19th century), and there are various instruments that combine two instruments into one, like a combination flügelhorn with cornet in C (Italy, 1890).

As much as we hear about music history, usually in terms of the musical style itself, it would seem appropriate also to remember that there is a long history of the development of musical instruments, too. Some of them were creative acts in themselves, born of a person imagining a whole new sound or tone color and experimenting with ways to produce it.

While a good deal of mass production can be involved in manufacturing today's standard instruments, with only a few still

I say 'menagerie' of instruments because some of them look like they came straight out of a Dr. Seuss book.

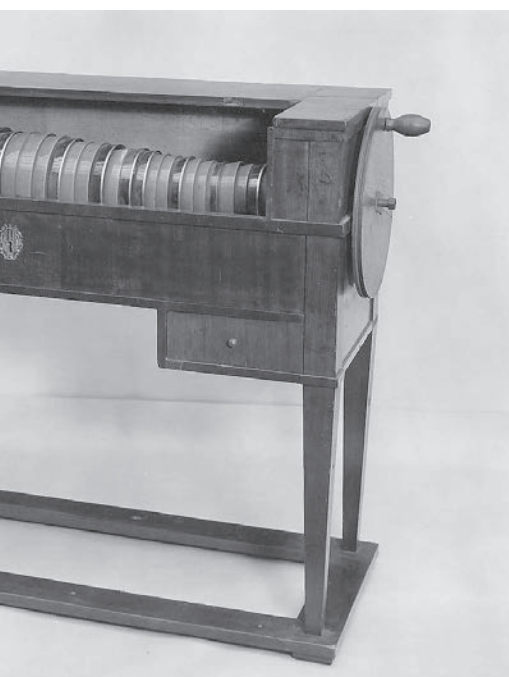
European bass brasswind, known as the "serpent," circa 1820. Purchase through the Robert Alonzo Lehman Bequest, 2012; Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Ceramic hunting horn, late 18th or early 19th century. The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889; Metropolitan Museum of Art.

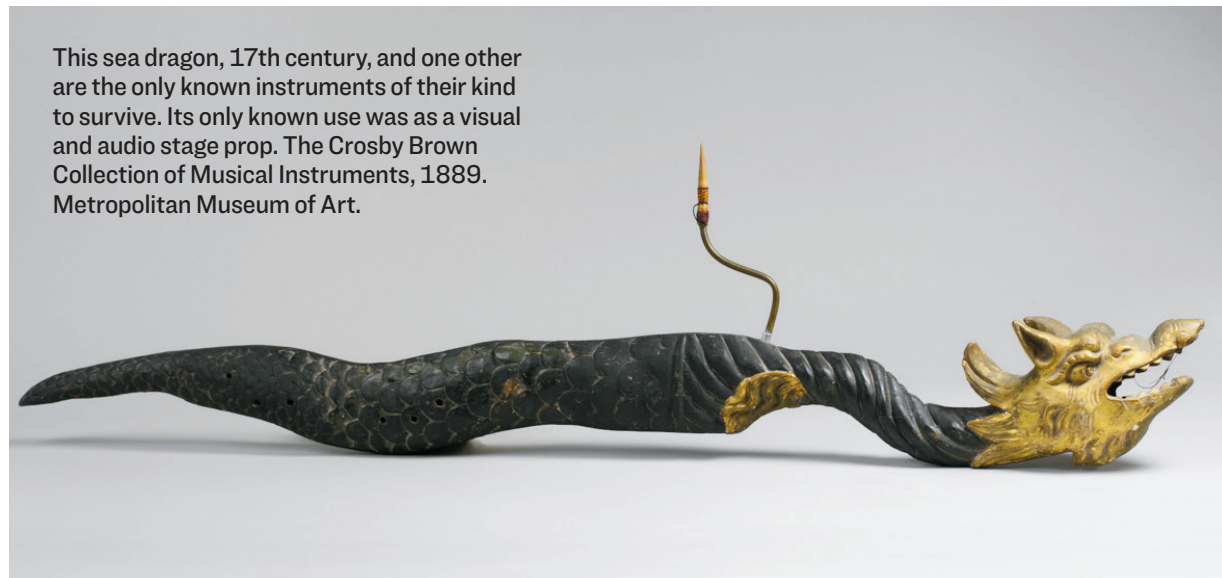
Glass harmonica, 18th century. The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889; Metropolitan Museum of Art.

made one at a time by hand, most of the instruments I've mentioned were one-of-a-kind models, both in production and design. Even if they were a standard kind of wind, string, or keyboard instrument in sound, they were often uniquely decorated and are now admired as works of art in themselves.

To see other exotic and beautiful instruments, visit The Metropolitan Museum of Art. American composer Michael Kurek is the composer of the Billboard No. 1 classical album "The Sea Knows." The winner of numerous composition awards, including the prestigious Academy Award in Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he has served on the Nominations Committee of the Recording Academy for the classical Grammy Awards. He is a professor emeritus of composition at Vanderbilt University. For more information and music, visit MichaelKurek.com



Da Tongjiao, a brass Chinese trumpet, 19th century. The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889; Metropolitan Museum of Art.



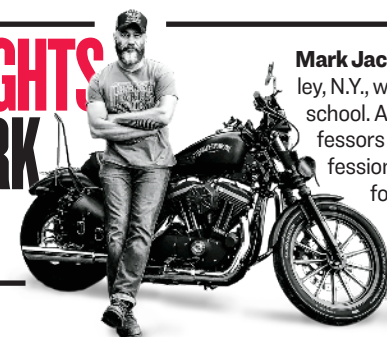
This sea dragon, 17th century, and one other are the only known instruments of their kind to survive. Its only known use was as a visual and audio stage prop. The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Vivian Ward (Julia Roberts) and Edward Lewis (Richard Gere) go to the opera in "Pretty Woman."

REWIND, REVIEW, AND RE-RATE

FILM INSIGHTS WITH MARK JACKSON



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

Pretty Woman': Pretty Sure We're All Responsible

MARK JACKSON

Anticipating backlash for reviewing the 1990 monster rom-com hit, "Pretty Woman," let me preface it by pointing out that "Pretty Woman" is a bona fide Cinderella archetype. This archetype resonates off the charts with the world's women—more than 700 versions of the Cinderella story exist, spanning the globe. The first version of Cinderella was found in ninth-century China. It's also the Pygmalion archetype.

Which is arguably why "Pretty Woman" is the fourth most profitable romantic comedy in film history. It has a worldwide box office gross of \$463,406,268. Let me repeat—four hundred and sixty-three MILLION dollars. Any film making that much money warrants talking about, because by definition it means that just about everybody on the planet has watched it and fueled the fire.

"Pretty Woman" also famously features the mother of all makeover scenes. There are numerous TV shows dedicated exclusively to makeovers. People love them. Need them. No one is completely immune to the power of the makeover. It's hard for people to resist the idea that changing your appearance can change your life.

So, yes, the lady is a tramp—but we can still talk about the cultural icon that is "Pretty Woman" and discuss what lessons it offers. And don't worry; eventually I'll say why "Pretty Woman"—an admittedly very fun movie—is a bad idea.

A Bit of Trivia

"Pretty Woman" was a dark-horse hit of Triple Crown magnitude back in 1990. It's one of those lightning-in-a-bottle movies that defies remakes or imitation, catching the right two stars at the perfect point in their star trajectories.

Most people haven't made the connection that "Pretty Woman" was prefaced, eight years prior, by "An Officer and a Gentleman," which concluded with Richard Gere's officer-gentleman arriving at a paper factory in his shiny white naval officer suit, literally sweeping the poor, working girl (Debra Winger) off her feet, and fulfilling the time-honored female fantasy of being rescued by a knight in shining armor. "Pretty Woman" concludes with Richard Gere arriving at the poor "ahem" working girl's apartment via shiny white limousine and climbing up that modern Rapunzel equivalent (the fire escape) to rescue her.

The Story

One dusky LA evening, in a fairytale Hollywood replete with a homeless guy as Greek chorus ("Welcome to Hollywood! What's yo' dream?"), two individuals meet and make a "business deal."

Vivian (Julia Roberts), a newbie call girl struggling to make a living, spies a hopelessly lost, stick-shift-clueless, immaculately dressed silver fox of a man in a Lotus Esprit driving by. He's corporate shark billionaire Edward Lewis (Gere), the ultimate allergic-to-meaningful-relationships player.

What might have started off as a business deal quickly reveals itself as powerful, undeniable chemistry.



Edward Lewis (Richard Gere) attempts to fulfill Vivian's dream of a knight on a white horse drawing his sword and rescuing her.

'Pretty Woman'

Director
Garry Marshall
Starring
Richard Gere, Julia Roberts, Laura San Giacomo, Hector Elizondo, Jason Alexander, Ralph Bellamy, Alex Hyde-White
Running Time
1 hour, 59 minutes
MPIAA Rating
R
Release Date
March 23, 1990
★ ★ ★ ★ ★

For the price of (the delightfully haggled) \$3,000, Vivian will play house in Edward's penthouse suite at the prestigious Beverly Wilshire hotel for six days, while Edward oversees the acquisition (and selling-off for parts) of a shipyard owned by one James Morse (Ralph Bellamy). Vivian's duties as Edward's "employee" will require her to accompany him to various functions. It will enhance his status to show up with drop-dead-gorgeous arm candy.

The hawk-eyed, persnickety, male Mary Poppins manager of the hotel, Barnard Thompson (Hector Elizondo in an iconic role), spotting the still somewhat trampy-looking Vivian, is not even a little bit fooled by the euphemism of "niece" she uses to describe her relationship to Edward. In fact, it's Barney's idea that she describe herself thusly, Mr. Lewis being a treasured customer, and because "things that go on in other hotels don't go on at the Beverly Wilshire."

Edward's business associates are also not fooled by the artifice, especially Edward's lawyer Stuckey (Jason Alexander of "Seinfeld," doing such an outstanding job of acting evil that I've hated him ever since), and also the exceedingly upper-class Mr. Morse and his grandson, David (Alex Hyde-White). They find absolutely adorable the fact that Vivian, dressed like a princess, is openly clueless about fine dining, and her attempt to eat escargot results in a slippery snail shell wangling across the dining room.

What might have started off as a business deal quickly reveals itself as powerful, undeniable chemistry, and Edward and "Miss Vivian" (as Barney comes to call her) find themselves falling in love.

Firsts

Part of the reason this all works is because the elite, sophisticated, only-child Edward has obviously never had prior dealings with a street hooker, and isn't altogether certain how to behave, ordering her up champagne and strawberries. Which is slightly adorable.

The second instance of adorableness arrives when Edward, seeing Vivian holding something behind her back, suspects drugs, is about to evict her, and then discovers that she's holding a little container of dental floss. "I had all those strawberry teeth ... and, and—you shouldn't neglect your gums!"

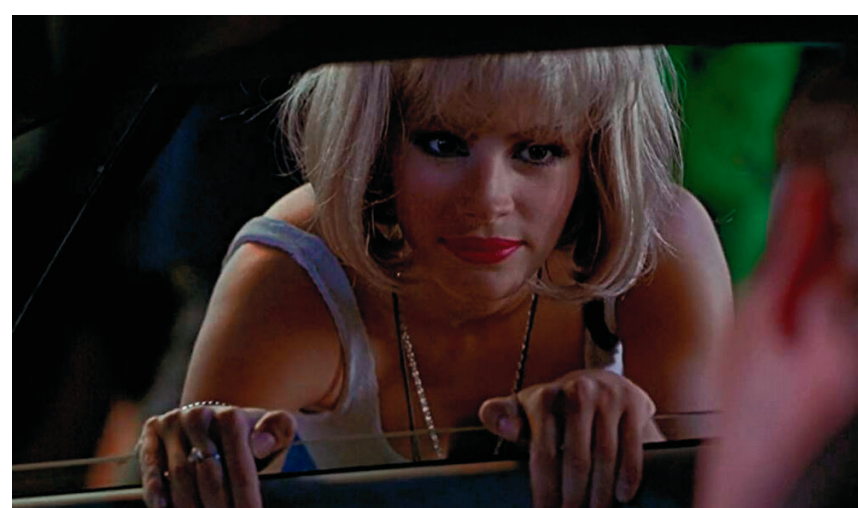
Bird With a Broken Wing
At the core of the film is the piteous image of teary-eyed Vivian, in danger of being kicked out of the hotel, holding up the wads of cash that Edward gave her to go buy elegant clothing. She shows Barney the hotel manager that she's tried very hard to buy clothes, but snooty, mean-girl, high-end saleswomen shamed her to the core and refused her service.

Who can resist that? Nobody can resist that. Everybody melts, including normally all-business Barney, who immediately comes to the rescue.

Barney is then followed up by Edward, who funds the ultimate, million-dollar female-fantasy shopping spree, and who falls easily into the role of the only thing possibly on par with the actual purchasing of clothes—the attentive boyfriend who helps pick out ensembles with great relish.

Ask any woman in the Western hemisphere what she remembers about "Pretty Woman," and she'll be able to list the black dinner gown, the brown-and-white polka-dotted polo-match outfit, the red opera gown, and the quarter-million-dollar necklace. And the improvised bit Gere came up with, to snap the blue velvet case shut on Roberts's fingers when she tries to touch the necklace, eliciting Roberts's effervescent, quarter-million-dollar laugh.

And, finally Vivian's revealed via the makeover to be a stunning, dazzling princess (flooring Edward completely), and Edward literally rolls out the red carpet and showers her with the finer things of life: taking the limo to the G6 private luxury jet, to the opera, where Vivian's virginal artistic senses get to enjoy "La Traviata" (conveniently the tale of a harlot who falls in love with a man of great wealth). The entire movie audience knows—watching experienced opera-buff Edward observing newly minted opera-enthusiast Vivian getting swept away and welling up with tears—that he's a goner.



Vivian Ward (Julia Roberts) offers to give directions to Edward Lewis (Richard Gere).

Implications and Ramifications

More than a modern Cinderella tale bisected by a major makeover montage, "Pretty Woman" contributes to society's moral downslide by facilitating and encouraging traditionally taboo female (and in this day and age, that includes young girls) sexual fantasies. Some would argue that that is liberation and therefore good.

It's safe to say that the same women who love "Pretty Woman" also go crazy for "Fifty Shades of Grey," because both allow women to have socially approved outlets for fantasies that traditional societies considered deviant. Both depict soft-porn versions of deviance, minus the smut of the real-world alternatives.

Consider: In both cases, the male lead is a highly attractive, exceptionally wealthy, impeccably dressed control freak. It's safe to say that this appeals to some women's desire to be taken care of (among other things) in a safe setting. In reality, if Edward had had a taste for paid sex, he would never have played house and there would be none of the contrived innocence that's foisted upon us by the movie.

This romanticizing of prostitution makes it actually look fun. We're already way past that now; prostitutes have now been legitimized as "sex workers." "Pretty Woman" whitewashes the inevitable drug addiction, bondage, and physical abuse that is par for the course for real prostitutes, thereby basically helping to morally legitimize the world's oldest profession and expunge the shame of earlier societies. Shame for what? Taking money for having sex with married women's husbands. Some say this is progress.

Moral Relativism Is Everywhere

What other characters can you think of involved in illegal professions who make it look fun? The high-school-teaching, meth-cooking wizard Walter White in "Breaking Bad"; the "principled" serial killer Dexter Morgan in "Dexter"; the suburban mom and marijuana entrepreneur Nancy Botwin in "Weeds"; and "The Sopranos" La Cosa Nostra boss-who-sees-a-therapist Tony Soprano. That's a whole boatload of moral relativism floating around, dropping depth charges on formerly clear delineations of good and evil.

Simply put, "Pretty Woman" and "Fifty Shades of Grey" facilitate a socially acceptable indulgence of deviance, of living fantasies vicariously through the main characters, without being exposed to all the nastiness of the real-world sex trade—and real men. And if that's what society wants, Hollywood will provide it.

But which came first, the chicken or the egg? People might want to put the brakes on all the rampant finger-pointing, denial, and shrill, hypocritical projecting. Sure, we can claim that Hollywood is to blame for all the evils of the West, because there's a large degree of truth to that. But Hollywood is also show business, pure and simple, and the business of America is business, and business is supply and demand, and if we'd all spent more time in, say, church instead of spending four hundred and sixty-three million dollars watching "Pretty Woman," we might not have slid down quite this far into our current moral morass. We might want to try owning that we all contribute to the world's current state of debauchery.

Alright, that's enough of the soapbox. "Pretty Woman" remains one of the most enjoyable rom-com movies ever made. It's just sometimes good to examine what's really going on with these things.

On a positive note, the reason we respond to the Cinderella archetype is that when societies are healthy and the polarities of male and female are equally balanced (and not in the middle of a identity crisis), then feminine and masculine look a lot like what these movies present. Traditionally, the man was a powerful warrior willing to lay down his life for his wife, and she in turn gave her life over to his protection.

"Pretty Woman" is a story of second chances and the grace of getting elevated from a life of depravity into a life of luxury and beauty—due, ultimately, to compassion. So even though this movie allows women to indulge themselves in ways that haven't helped our culture, it also suggests that those who fall from grace can redeem their lives. As the Greek Chorus says, "Some dreams come true, some don't; but keep on dreamin'—this is Hollywood."

LITERATURE

Dig Up ‘King Solomon’s Mines’

SEAN FITZPATRICK

When was the last time you read a book that got you started with a tattered map scratched out in blood? And imagine if that map led you on a perilous journey where scraps of an ominous legend brought you to a stony vault, which in turn descended to a lost treasure chamber, where presiding over an ancient table loomed a colossal skeletal figure of Death in all his grim glory, brandishing a spear.

You may wonder if Indiana Jones conducted you to such a place, but no. This is another world altogether, and it’s far more vibrant, even when it goes to the “Place of Death.”

If, by some happy fortune, you’ve read of such a thing in a tropical romance by perhaps Edgar Rice Burroughs or Rafael Sabatini (instead of seeing it in the movies), allow me to raise the stakes on the scene that I maintain has no equal: Seated at the above-mentioned table are huddled the misshapen bodies of a race of kings encased and pickled in translucent mineral cocoons created by stalactite drippings. And seated atop the table—not at the head, but on the top—behold, the headless body of the newly overthrown king, holding his own newly overthrown head in his cold, dead hands.

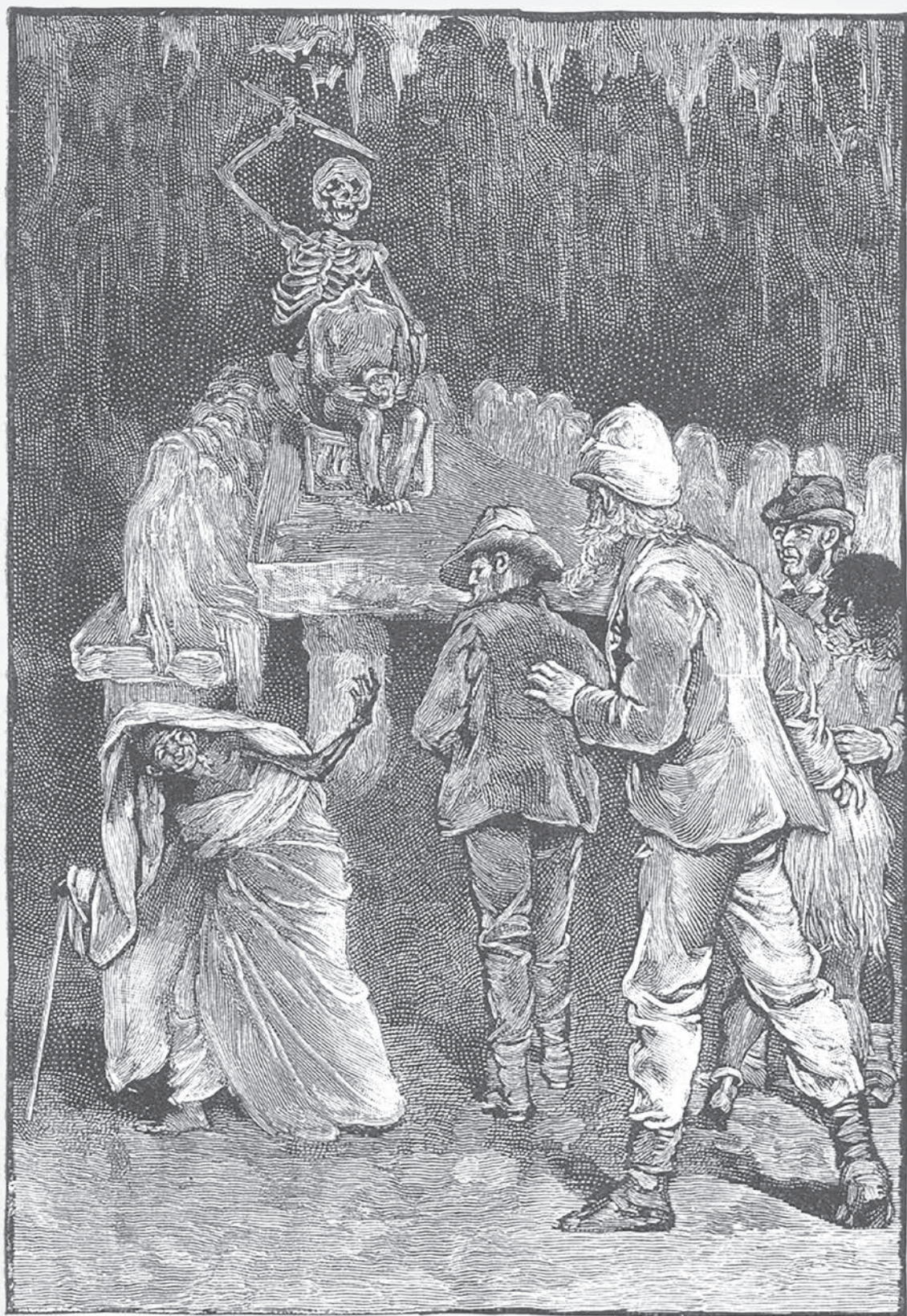
That head was hewn off in no less than a battle-axe duel with an English lord dressed in chain mail and an ostrich-plumed headdress, as the culminating event of an undiscovered African tribe’s civil war. And the shriveled, centuries-old witch who guided you there cackles and whispers to her cadaverous colleagues from ages past before revealing the secret doorway, where traps and curses and wealth await in darkness.

A Treasure Awaits

If you haven’t read “King Solomon’s Mines” by Henry Rider Haggard, you’ve probably never had any of these shocking and wonderful experiences because there’s nothing quite like it. The wonders it holds belong to it alone. What’s more, if you haven’t read “King Solomon’s Mines,” you may have never had the sudden, sweet experience of reading a book that reminds you of the joy of reading—a

King Solomon’s Mines’ is one of those strange stories that gets swept up and lost in itself.

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“TO THOSE WHO ENTER THE HALL OF THE DEAD, EVIL COMES” (p. 268).

discovery as great as any treasure.

When Mr. Haggard read the new adventure story everyone was raving about in 1883, he was not as taken with it. His brother retorted, “I’d bet you could never write anything half as good.” It was a bet, and thus, Haggard set out to write an adventure story of his own that was better than “Treasure Island.” And, with reverence to Stevenson’s treasure-hunting masterpiece, Haggard produced a yarn in 1885 that certainly holds a candle to it, if not surpasses it. Indeed, so well-matched are these two classics, they were often included in a set as companion volumes, and they are very well suited.

Like “Treasure Island,” “King Solomon’s Mines” is one of those strange stories that gets swept up and lost in

itself. With its stalwart, square-jawed characters led by the iconic Allan Quatermain—hunter, adventurer, gentleman, and so on—readers dive deep into the wild unknowns of South Africa in quest of a lost treasure buried in the legendary diamond mines of the biblical King Solomon. With safari hunts, tribal warfare, spells and hexes, myths and legends, treacherous terrain, booby traps, and towering ancient sculptures, there are few such transportive books, and this book does so with such unassuming matter-of-fact-ness even in the face of the fantastic.

In fact, “King Solomon’s Mines” is a book whose greatness lies in its oblivious fearlessness. It’s in every way self-confident and in no way self-conscious. It doesn’t realize how wonderful it is, un-

Daring adventurers must confront evil and death in “King Solomon’s Mines,” a novel set in South Africa.

restrained in its grandeur, an adventure of terrible innocence, full of cruelties and grotesqueries, but grimly unaware of the overarching romantic beauty it’s composing.

Ignorant Innocence

At the same time, the beauty of “King Solomon’s Mines” is burdened with the prejudices of its day—and in that sense, it hasn’t aged very well. But these cultural biases should not bury such a treasure from a new world of readers, no matter how modern their sensitivities. For at the same time, a Victorian innocence prevails in “King Solomon’s Mines,” even if it’s also a Victorian ignorance, that somehow absolves it of bigotry, especially as its errors are naturally, and again unconsciously, contradicted.

The book verges on misogyny, with the occasional demeaning comment about women, while its masculine heroes struggle through a world dominated by feminine powers and presences, barely surviving their trek through the mountains called “Sheba’s Breasts,” and being totally thwarted by an ancient witch-doctor named Gagool.

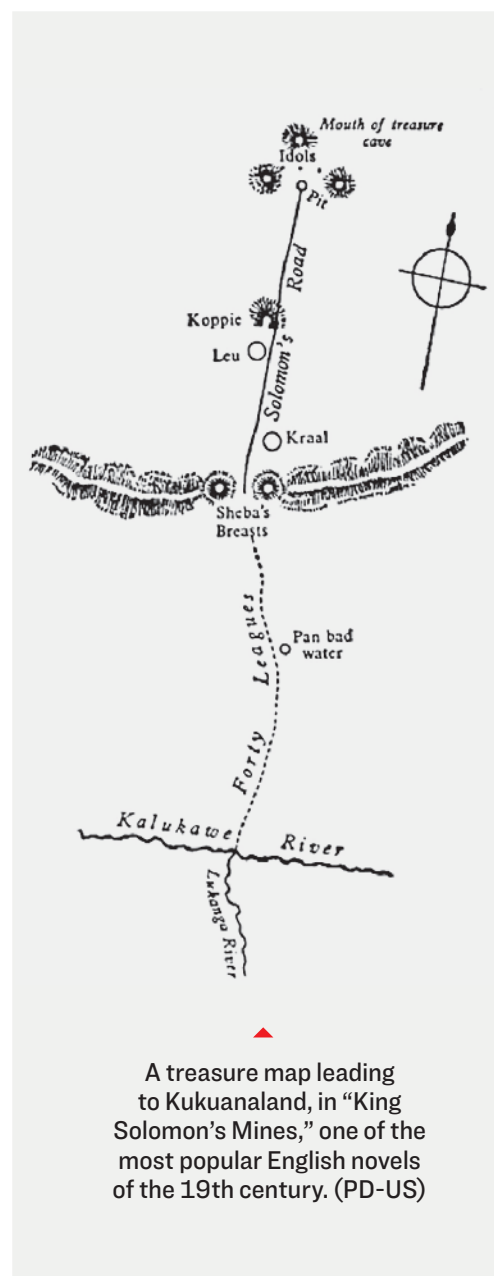
The story is tinged with a colonial racism while clearly honoring the blacks whose dignity is a rare thing in the so-called civilized world. Its characters seek the glory of lost treasure and the fame and fortune it promises, but instead find the less glittering but no less glorious treasure of comradeship instead.

The Gentleman Hero

“King Solomon’s Mines” is often uncouth and brutal, but at bottom it’s not a story of a treasure trove from a lost age, but a story of three gentlemen from a lost age. And among those gentlemen, the character of Allan Quatermain stands tall and unapologetic, further providing an apt instance of the power of literature to both reflect and affect the paradigms and perceptions of a people.

Quatermain is true to an ideology that recognizes a proper gentleman as one who holds honor and duty over all else because he is necessarily principled and not necessarily because he is paid. Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and John Buchan’s Richard Hannay from “The Thirty-Nine Steps” and Anthony Hope’s Rudolph Rassendyll from “The Prisoner of Zenda” are other examples of the true Victorian gentleman hero in this respect. Holmes, Hannay, Rassendyll, and Quatermain are amateur heroes, not professional heroes: men of the noble class who can afford a higher level of virtue than others and so are that much more virtuous, and they can spare the time for adventure and so are that much more adventurous.

The motivation of upholding a good show or fair play or common courtesy was motivation enough for Quatermain, and he took his payment in adventure (and for his trouble, as well). Quatermain and his comrades exemplify a category of hero, and in so doing, represent and reinforce their audience’s cultural convictions concerning what makes a man a gentleman. Though they are armed to

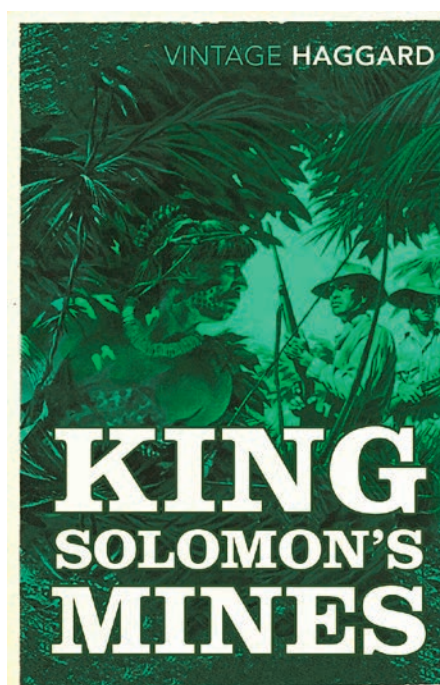


A treasure map leading to Kukuanaaland, in “King Solomon’s Mines,” one of the most popular English novels of the 19th century. (PD-US)

the teeth and tough in war and weather, these gentlemen are genteel enough to speak gracefully, lend a sturdy hand, and wear a monocle no matter what the circumstances, because such behaviors and bearings are downright decent, whether in an English club or the plains of Kukuanaaland. From Solomon’s Mines to his writing desk, the adventures and subsequent reminiscences of Allan Quatermain serve as icons of the fictional gentleman that served as a practical ideal for all factual gentlemen.

Readers at leisure should mind what they read for pleasure, for much of what can enrich our imaginations and our culture can be reduced to pulp by pulp fiction. The good news is that the dime novel can be worth its weight in gold and the thriller can be an edifier when written by the right writer. And that’s precisely where “King Solomon’s Mines” comes in, and precisely why it is well worth having at least a nodding acquaintance with the wonders it keeps hidden. So, pack your gear (a bookmark should suffice) and join the expedition.

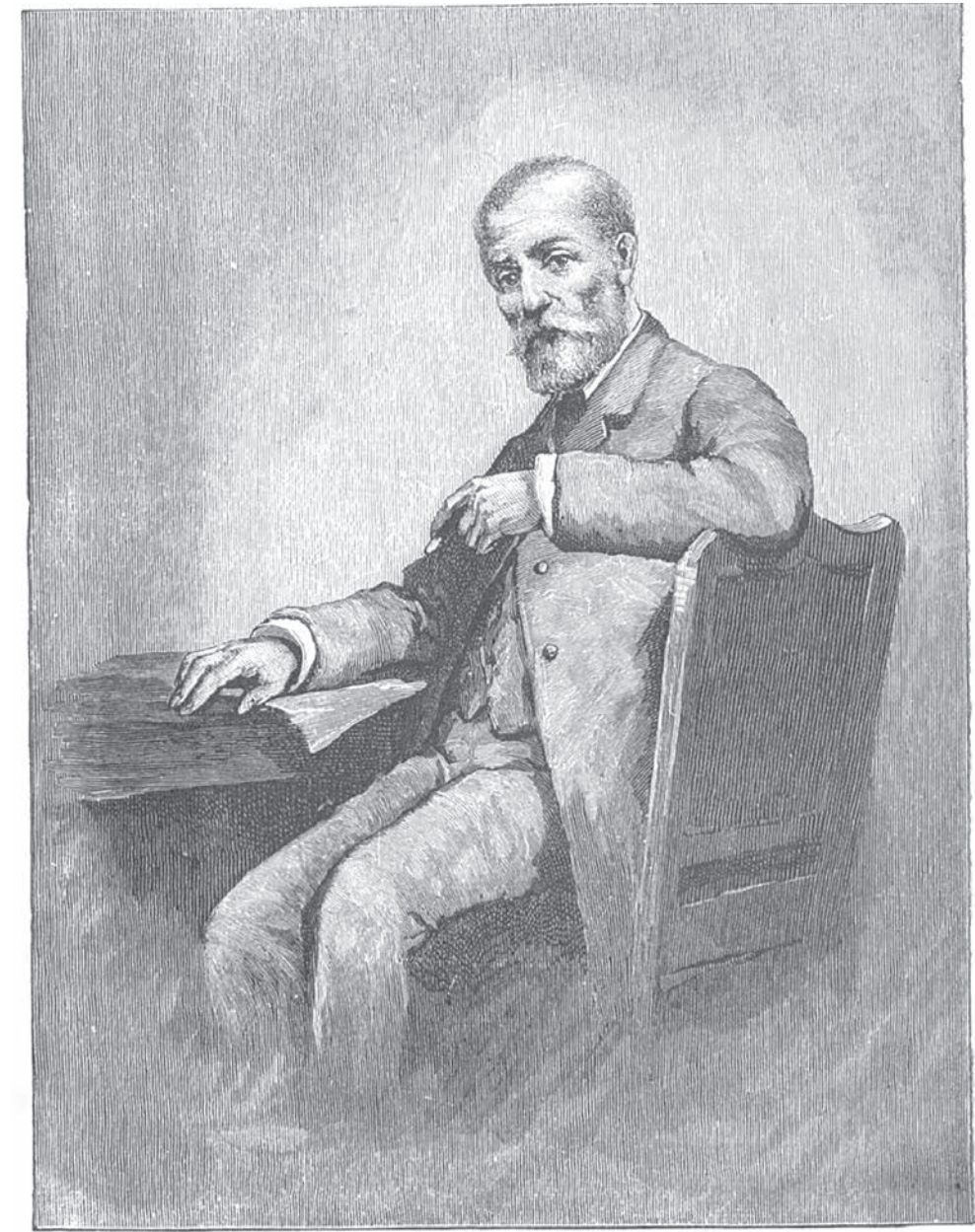
Sean Fitzpatrick serves on the faculty of Gregory the Great Academy, a boarding school in Elmhurst, Pa., where he teaches humanities. His writings on education, literature, and culture have appeared in a number of journals including Crisis Magazine, Catholic Exchange, and the Imaginative Conservative.



“King Solomon’s Mines” is often sold with “Treasure Island.”



English writer Sir Henry Rider Haggard (1856–1925) is best known for his adventure stories. The George Grantham Bain collection at the Library of Congress.



An illustration, 1887, by Charles Henry Malcolm Kerr, of the character Allan Quatermain, from the novel named for the character. Quatermain served as an icon of gentlemanliness.



“A Player With a Hermit,” circa 1846, by Moritz von Schwind. Oil on cardboard, 24 inches by 18 inches. New Pinacotheca, Munich, Germany.

REACHING WITHIN:
WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

Finding Rest in Art: Moritz von Schwind’s ‘A Player With a Hermit’

ERIC BESS

Amid our daily interactions and pursuits, we may dream of a quiet life out in the middle of nowhere, a place where there’s no social media and no mention of politics but instead harmony and peace—a place where we might simply get away from it all.

I recently came across “A Player With a Hermit” by the Austrian-born German painter Moritz von Schwind, and this painting reminded me of our need to rest our minds, bodies, and spirits.

The Romantic, Moritz von Schwind, and ‘A Player With a Hermit’
Schwind, a 19th-century Romantic painter, sometimes took elements from fairy tales and folk legends to craft painted scenes of an idealized Austrian and German land and culture.

It is interesting to note that the Roman-

tic movement occurred in response to the heavy scientific rationalism of the 17th and 18th centuries. Known as the Age of Enlightenment, these philosophies allowed for the fastest material development of production in our known history: the Industrial Revolution.

Many of the Romantic artists, however, thought that a profound spirituality was missing from the scientific focus of the Age of Enlightenment. Romantic artists often focused on the mysterious aspects of life, things that science could not explain.

In 1846, Schwind painted “A Player With a Hermit.” It shows the seclusion offered by a rocky valley, and two people meet: a hermit who has withdrawn into this barren, narrow spot in order to lead a godly life far from civilization, and a minstrel who seems to be staying at this hermitage. The musician has settled on a rock and blows his bagpipe. The hermit, possibly return-

ing, is completely wrapped in a brown cloak, with his face covered by a hood, so that we cannot tell whether he is happy to greet this visitor or not.

The focal point of the painting is the “player” or “minstrel,” as the German is translated both ways. Modestly dressed, the musician has placed his bundle and hat outside a cave, against a wall where he sits and plays music. He looks toward the left of the composition as he plays his tune.

To the right of the musician is the hermit, who carries his bundle across his shoulder and opens a makeshift gate. Irrespective of the hermit’s face being hooded, he leans toward the musician.

On the left side of the composition, we see into a cave where there is a fire blazing and a pot, which may be used for cooking.

Both figures are surrounded by nature. The arrangement of tree trunks, branches, and leaves harmonize with the angles of the cave to guide our eye throughout the composition.

A Spiritual Need for Rest

To me, “A Player With a Hermit” reveals the Romantic understanding of art’s purpose. The musician is the focal point for a reason; let us say that the musician represents all art. And we can presume, then, that Schwind wants us to know just how important art is.

But why is art important? Let’s first ask why the musician is settled in this spot. This spot is not the musician’s home but

the hermit’s home, and the hermit, we must remember, has left civilization to lead a godly life.

The wandering musician appears to have stopped at the hermit’s house to play a tune on his journey, and this tells us that the musician has also left civilization.

The steps at the bottom right are the only visible path the musician could have taken to where he now sits. We can presume that the steps lead back to “civilization.” The steps, however, lead to the bottom of the picture plane, which is one of the darkest areas of the composition.

Is Schwind suggesting that civilization is overrun with darkness? Is this why the musician needs to escape for a while?

The musician escapes to a hermitage, a religious refuge not only outside of civilization’s darkness but also above it. It’s here that the musician can rest and is inspired to play a tune. Is it the case that the artist must rise above the darkness of civilization not only to rest but also to gather the inspiration to create?

Is it the natural setting that supports the “godly life” of the hermit and the inspiration for the musician? The hermit gets everything he needs from nature: His home and food are integrated into and harmonized with the natural setting. As a hermit, he is more concerned with godly ways than he is with material gain.

Though the hermit’s hood hides his face—intentionally, I believe, by the artist to reassert the mysteries of life in con-

trast to the Age of Enlightenment’s desire to know and explain everything—I think the hermit opens the gate to welcome the artist to his home. How else would a hermit who harmonizes with nature behave toward a guest?

But this leads us back to our question about why art might be important. To me, this painting suggests that the artist who rises above the darkness of civilization, who harmonizes with nature, and who finds rest and inspiration in godliness can create a work of art that does the same for us. In other words, perhaps art can lead us outside and above the darkness of civilization so that we may harmonize with godliness, and there, we find rest.

The traditional arts often contain spiritual representations and symbols the meanings of which can be lost to our modern minds. In our series “Reaching Within: What Traditional Art Offers the Heart,” we interpret visual arts in ways that may be morally insightful for us today. We do not assume to provide absolute answers to questions generations have wrestled with, but hope that our questions will inspire a reflective journey toward our becoming more authentic, compassionate, and courageous human beings.

Eric Bess is a practicing representational artist and is a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts (IDSVA).

FILM REVIEW

'The Card Counter'

Yet Another Redemption Yarn From Paul Schrader

MICHAEL CLARK

Love him or hate him (and there are few people on the fence), you've got to give filmmaker Paul Schrader credit for one thing: He's consistent. He's consistent in that he uses the same blueprint for most of his movies, something that some might deem as lazy and repetitive.

When regulated to providing just the screenplay ("Taxi Driver," "Raging Bull," "Bringing Out the Dead"—all directed by Martin Scorsese), Schrader's antihero-seeking-redemption motif is not so much easier to take but livelier.

When unchecked and directing his own material ("Hardcore," "Light Sleeper," "Affliction," "Forever Mine," "First Reformed"), Schrader's films are visually stylish but narratively inert and relentlessly grim.

'The Card Counter'

Oscar Isaac stars as William Tell, an Iraq War veteran and convicted felon, who spent his years in the can learning how to count cards. A talented poker player, Tell (probably not his given last name) is a master of blackjack and knows that keeping a low profile and winning just enough to get by will not raise the ire of casino watchdogs.

Literally living out of a suitcase, the nomadic Tell travels from city to city while staying in second-tier motels and avoiding his fellow man. When not clad in full black at the casinos, Tell stays in his room, which he augments by removing all electronic devices and artwork and covering everything in light gray bedsheets. Why Tell does this is never hinted at or explained. He doesn't appear to have OCD and is not a germaphobe.

While in the rooms, he faces walls writing in a journal while sipping high-end whiskey. It almost certainly is Schrader suggesting some sort of spiritual symbolism, but it is vague, oblique, and borderline condescending to the audience.

Haddish Is Out of Her League

Tell's tedious routine gets a jolt when he reconnects with La Linda (Tiffany Haddish), a woman who recruits professional gamblers for wealthy backers who wish to remain anonymous. The problem, at least initially, is that Tell actually prefers routine and not having to answer to anybody.

Unlike many comedic performers and former stand-up comics who've made successful transitions to drama, Haddish fails miserably. She cannot present Schrader's ultraheavy dialogue convincingly and is woefully miscast. Her lackluster turn is made all the worse by her appearing opposite the acting powerhouse Isaac.

Schrader's films are visually stylish but narratively inert and relentlessly grim.

In what is arguably the most contrived and forced passage in the film, Tell takes a break from the gambling tables to take in a sparsely attended law enforcement lecture, hosted by John Gordo (Schrader regular Willem Dafoe), a "security expert" Tell knew in Iraq. Given the gravity of what's presented in flashback sequences taking place at Abu Ghraib prison, it is impossible to believe that Gordo would not recognize Tell, who is sitting mere feet away and making lingering eye contact.

At this same lecture, Tell is approached by Cirk (that's "Kirk" with a "C") (Tye Sheridan), the son of another man who knew Gordo in Iraq. With information that only a cop or stalker might know, Cirk reminds Tell that Gordo is an enemy to both of them and that they should kill him.

Having spent years trying to leave his iffy past behind, Tell takes Cirk under his wing



'The Card Counter'

Director
Paul Schrader

Starring
Oscar Isaac, Tiffany Haddish, Tye Sheridan, Willem Dafoe

Running Time
1 hour, 49 minutes

MPA Rating
R

Release Date
Sept. 10, 2021

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Originally from Washington, D.C., Michael Clark has written for over 30 local and national film industry media outlets and is ranked in the top 10 of the Atlanta media marketplace. He co-founded the Atlanta Film Critics Circle in 2017 and is a regular contributor to the Shannon Burke Show on FloridaManRadio.com. Since 1995, Mr. Clark has written over 4,000 movie reviews and film-related articles.

in an attempt to divert his mind away from homicide.

Isaac Must Carry the Film Alone

Like far too many child actors before him, Sheridan ("The Tree of Life," "Mud," "Joe") has had difficulty tackling adult roles. Apart from his stint as the younger Cyclops in the "X-Men" franchise, every role Sheridan has turned in since 2014 has been a bust. Looking alternately bored or confused the entire time, Cirk lacks anything resembling the required passion, rage, or anger of a guy bent on committing murder.

With Dafoe appearing on screen for less than 15 minutes and Haddish and Sheridan contributing next to nothing, Isaac is left with carrying the entire movie on his own, and he more than handles the challenge. A minimalist performer, Isaac's dark eyes and exacting baritone often hide (in a good way) his smoldering intensity. He's a perfect leading man for mysterious and calculating characters such as this, and Schrader would be wise to cast him again if at all possible.

Having preached to the same fervent but modest choir for nearly a half century, Schrader widened his audience somewhat with "First Reformed" (which netted him his only career Academy Award nomination). And he could have continued that momentum with "The Card Counter," but his questionable decisions regarding cast and plot resulted in a movie that could have been great but in the end is just average and largely forgettable.

As self-directed Schrader films go, "The Card Counter" borders on the hopeful and ends on a note that delivers redemption and good conquering evil, albeit in a highly bittersweet manner.

▲ William Tell (Oscar Isaac), an Iraq War veteran and convicted felon, earns his living playing poker in, "The Card Counter."

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