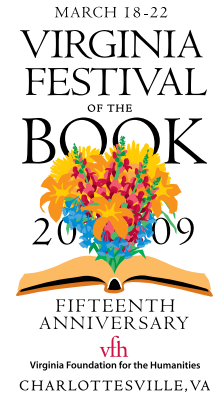


The Virginian by Owen Wister recommended by Steve Watkins

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the “VABooks!” column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Steve Watkins—associate professor at the University of Mary Washington and author of *My Chaos Theory*—recommends *The Virginian* by Owen Wister. We hope that individuals, book groups, families, and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



I was an eight-year-old kid in the early 1960s who lived in the town library, a one-room building made of concrete blocks turning green from mold and neglect. Outside steps led to the roof, which had a crenallated parapet, great for hunkering down and pretending I was the lone defender of a mighty castle.

Other than the tiny librarian, I never saw anyone else inside. It was just me, a dusty floor, and a couple of shelves of Hardy Boy mysteries and Chip Hilton, All-American.

Then one day I stumbled onto a grown-up book called *The Virginian*. Whoa! Could this be the same Virginian as the then-new, supremely popular TV series?

I started reading, and yes, in fact, it was. And there he was: the Virginian himself, “a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures,” riding the train and heading for a life of Western adventure in Medicine Bow, Wyoming.

The book got some things wrong, at least based on my authoritative TV watching, most significantly the character Trampas. On television he was the loyal sidekick, but in the book he was the bad guy, and his ongoing battle with the Virginian—who was never given a proper name—provided narrative cohesion for the interconnected stories that made up the plot.

Early on, a game of poker between the antagonists gave *The Virginian* its most memorable line:

“Therefore Trampas spoke. ‘Your bet, you son-of-a--.’”

The Virginian’s pistol came out, and his hand lay on the table, holding it unaimed. And with a voice as gentle as ever, the voice

that sounded almost like a caress, but drawling a very little more than usual, so that there was almost a space between each word, he issued his orders to the man Trampas: ‘When you call me that, SMILE.’”

In the 1902 book, as in the 1960s TV show (and the 1929 Gary Cooper film) the Virginian was always uber-cool, taciturn, and righteous. Foreman for The Judge on a monopolistic cattle ranch. Strong, silent, frequently tongue-tied suitor to Molly Stark Wood, the babelicious schoolmarm. And erstwhile friend to the morally ambiguous Steve, who played both sides of the law—until he went too far.

Which was where things got complicated for one little eight-year-old reader. Moral ambiguity wasn’t supposed to happen in books. There was none of that in the Hardy Boys or Chip Hilton. And the Virginian sure as heck wasn’t supposed to lynch his best pal—even if he did feel terrible about it and suffered a heavy heart.

Plus the story should have been over after his big gunfight with Trampas, so what was that business about him ending up owning a coal mine? He was supposed to be a cowboy, for pete’s sake!

But there it was. And there I was, changed forever.

Sure, *The Virginian* opened the floodgates for a hundred years of bad Westerns. Sure, it established all the now-familiar tropes of violence and sentimentality, distrust of government, rugged individualism. Sure, its politics were all messed up (though Wister did dedicate it to his old college pal Teddy Roosevelt). Sure, as one critic listed its myriad sins, it was “racist,

The Virginian by Owen Wister
recommended by Steve Watkins (continued)

misogynistic, elitist, imperialistic.”

But there was a lot of complicated stuff in there, too—stuff that’s recently prompted a significant reevaluation of the work among literary and social critics. *The Virginian*, for all flaws, may actually have a lot to teach us about a certain controlling vision of an “expanding” America, about our mythologizing ways, about how we write the story of who we are.

Not that I was aware of any of that when I first read the book. Back then I was just my little eight-year-old self, hiding out in a dusty, small-town library—suddenly transformed.

After *The Virginian*, I wasn’t sure I could ever go back to the Hardy Boys. Having come to realize there was something else out there—moral ambiguity and all—I kind of wanted to go find it.