

# Why Do They Read It?

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*Explaining that bewildering American phenomenon, Gone with the Wind — how it changed the reading habits of a nation, why it outsold all best-sellers*

A NATION that presumably has no time for books has found time for a novel that contains only twenty-five pages less than the Sears Roebuck catalogue. When the Pulitzer Prize Committee gave its annual fiction award this year to *Gone with the Wind*, the news was greeted with popular approval. A few critics, and some more exacting persons, had hoped for another choice, but by and large, it was considered a natural and inevitable selection. Millions of satisfied readers nodded approval and smugly felt their enthusiasm vindicated. For the first time a Pulitzer prize has been awarded to a novel with a sales record of over a million copies.

*Gone with the Wind* was published June 30, 1936, and by Christmas of that year it had sold a million copies, setting a record as the fastest-selling volume in history. It is 1037 pages long, and if all the copies sold to date could be piled one upon another, the stack would be two hundred and fifty times taller than the Empire State Building.

The Hollywood producing firm which bought the motion-picture rights has received 100,000 letters suggesting various film stars for the rôles of Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler, leading characters in the novel.

A New York taxicab driver has claimed the record for reading the book through in the shortest possible time—eighteen and a fraction hours. The average is a week, though it can easily be done in three days with time out for meals and sleep. If all of the 50,000,000 Americans who are old enough and literate enough to read the book were to follow this procedure, the time expended would amount to 410,000 years, or, in round numbers, infinity.

Nothing like it has ever happened in the publishing industry. *Anthony Adverse*, a forerunner in size and romantic appeal, was a tremendous seller for two years, but it sold a mere 300,000 copies in its first six months and only about 750,000 in three years. The combined books of Joseph Conrad, when he was at the height of his fame, sold a million copies in five years.

A lot of other time—enough if used wisely to under-

stand the relativity theory or discover a cure for cancer—is being spent by critics and publishers to divine the reason for this mass immersion in a story about the South after the Civil War and what happened to certain people whose lives were disrupted and left dangling by the surrender at Appomattox.

In part, it is an ordinary phenomenon of taste. The

Civil War has always been popular as a fiction subject with Americans, because it contains more elements of human drama than any other crisis in the country's history. It set us against each other, and it left the South in the appealing position of a beaten but beautiful foe. The Southerners were charmingly romantic in their perpetuation of the dispute at a higher level. They continued rebellious in spirit, proud and gracious of manner, and dignified among the ruins of their economic system.

But there have been other books about the Civil War and the Reconstruction days. Stephen Crane, without ever seeing a battle, wrote a magnificent story about a young Federal soldier, *The Red Badge of Courage*. It made Crane famous, and it is still a favorite. There were thousands

of other books about the struggle and its aftermath between Crane's book, written in the nineties, and *Gone with the Wind*. Yet these two stand out, and because both writers followed the same method of preparation, it may be that there was method in their system. As a boy, Crane read everything he could lay his hands on that pertained to the War. He lived with a dream of himself as a young soldier. He executed his book with simplicity. Margaret Mitchell did likewise. She lived for seven years with her characters, and she knew them thoroughly, even to the clothes they liked to wear and the foods they liked to eat, and how much money they had in their pockets at any given moment. When she executed her book, she did it with the simplicity of rushing narrative.

Both Crane and Miss Mitchell recognized, perhaps intuitively, that the primary task of a writer—poet, novelist, or playwright—is to tell a story, a story about ordi-



nary human beings with ordinary feelings and intellects, who are faced with the solution of problems imposed upon them by history, God, or other human beings. This, in essence, is the drama of man: He is operated upon by forces over which he has no control, and with the rational elements within him—mind and conscience—he must accept them as his experience and continue to exist with and despite them. The Civil War and the South afterward are the best laboratories in America for this drama. All they need are good tale-tellers. Crane was an artist. Miss Mitchell, though not a great artist and possibly a one-book writer, is a great tale-teller.

But these things do not explain the phenomenal sale of her book. They expose reasons for a normally good sale. If *The Red Badge of Courage* had appeared in place of *Gone with the Wind*, it might have had a normal sale, a fairly good sale, or it might have been lost in the shuffle of too much good reading. It is a brief book, for one thing, and it centers on a single experience. There are no women in it. Ladies all over the country would not go to visit their neighbors with copies clutched to their bosoms, to sit solidly and with determination on the overstuffed lounge and proclaim with prophetic voice, "You simply *must* read this book!"

That is what happened to *Gone with the Wind*, and its story has nothing to do with the popular triumph of art. It belongs to another class of miracles—the kind we shall have to look backward to understand.

Historical romance had always been popular way back to Walter Scott. (At the turn of the century, historical novels had a staggering success: *Richard Carvel*, *The Crisis*, *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, *Janice Meredith*—all these sold from a half-million to a million copies.) So had war. Before 1860 such books as *Napoleon and His Generals* and *Washington and His Generals*, though stodgy and little read, had huge sales. After the Civil War a horde of disabled veterans became book agents and went around the country dropping tomes of the great conflict on every library and kitchen table. They fell with a dull thud, for they were immense and pedantic. But they were purchased, and in thousands of homes became the only companions of the family Bible. People liked to read about the War.

Then the Civil War drifted away. Its garrulous veterans died out; young men invented automobiles, airplanes, and all sorts of amazing things. A lot of potential young writers were busy at brooding, and there was talk of social consciousness, the inequality of the masses, eugenics, slum clearance. Among the books popular at that time were *The Winning of Barbara Worth*, by Harold Bell Wright, and *The Harvester*, by Gene Stratton-Porter. The War had given way to the Wild West and the wheat fields, but the formula was the same: simple folk fought with gun and Christian conscience against Satan, wind, and death.

In 1912 there was a marked change. Theodore Dreiser, in *The Financier*, began to debunk heroes and make them helpless victims of gross passions; Edith Wharton told, in *Ethan Frome*, a stark and naked tale of horror and frus-

tration which as late as 1936 was made into a successful play; Owen Johnson put forth a document attacking snobbery at New Haven, in his *Stover at Yale*. The intellectual revolution had come: realism, scientific intrusion into the supernatural, disrespect for wealth, long and cerebral tales, and recognition of conceit as poor blind fear were all represented in the book lists. The new age had begun.

The World War stopped it. A simple, primary madness enveloped the earth. Great men spoke with the minds of morons. Everybody forgot books, labor, social consciousness, and everything but battle. Then, suddenly, the War was over. America soon woke up to find herself with prohibition, woman suffrage, freedom of the sexes, the radio, air transportation, and universal higher education. The newspapers were printing foreign news on the front page.

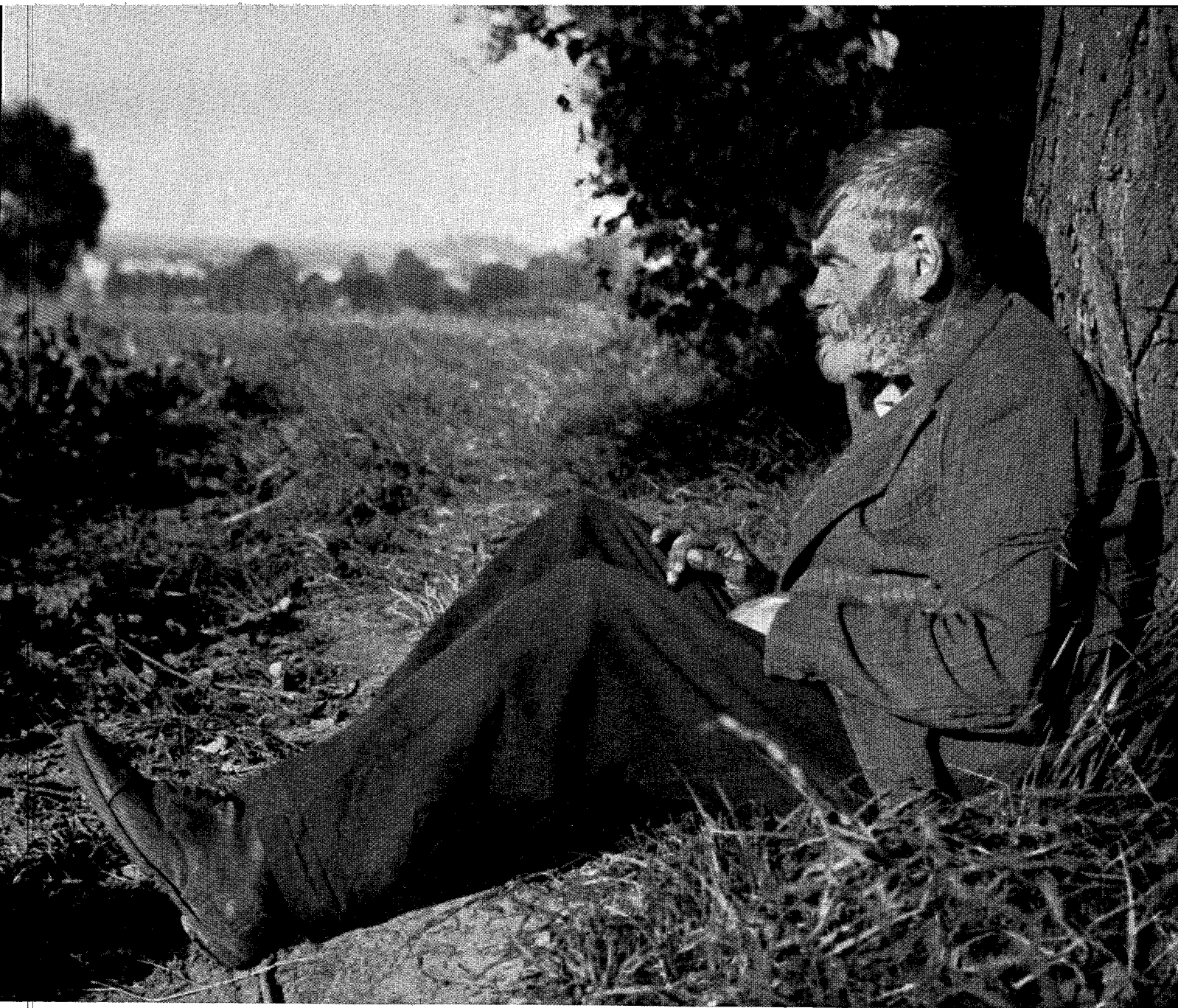
The book business, as always, was the mirror of the age. Ernest Hemingway and James Joyce and a host of others began to write four-letter words and insinuate even worse things. Marcel Proust, rotting in a cork-lined room in Paris, became a great man. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *This Side of Paradise*, and high-collared old men and heliotrope ladies staggered under the shock. The Lost Generation and the Younger Generation emerged—contemptuous, irreverent, flaunting their jazz and their flappers and their great discoveries of anatomy, fertility, and reproduction. Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* became their Bible; Edna St. Vincent Millay's line, "My Candle burns at both ends," was their theme song; Joyce's banned and ununderstandable *Ulysses* was their god. Everything was now going to be revealed, and it was going to be all right, too.

Revelation came quickly. Fitzgerald, just out of Princeton, fired the opening gun in 1920 with his little tale that talked in a big voice, a tale which then was frightening and daring, and which now seems mild and innocuous. In Europe, Joyce, going blind, saw his monument to the stream of consciousness printed and promptly banned, much to the joy of the first wave of American postwar tourists, who read the last forty pages and discovered why Adam and Eve were thrown out of Eden.

Not all of the new world was anatomical and glandular. A novel called *Main Street*, by Sinclair Lewis, made it all right to consider American life in the Middle West dull. H. G. Wells's *Outline of History* demonstrated that chronology and sequence can be absorbing facts and that it is not difficult, after all, to find out everything of importance that has happened on the earth. Wells helped to open up the stream of history to lay readers and to prove to them that human nature is much the same here, there, now, and yesterday.

Meanwhile, women were gleefully mastering the much-vaunted theory of the equality of the sexes. They were reading books on psychology, psychoanalysis, and sex, and, since there was no rule against their entrance into speak-easies, as long as they knew Jack, they poured this knowledge out to bartenders who were amazed, thrilled, and finally bored. Men were (continued on page 69)





WHEN EVENING NEARS—VICTOR POKORNY

## SCRIBNER'S PORTFOLIO OF AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Perhaps the most significant fact about the photographs hereinafter reproduced is that ten of the sixteen pictures were made by amateurs—business people, lawyers, teachers, radio operators, and the like. The quality of their work merits inclusion in any collection of the outstanding work of the past twelvemonth. While SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE makes generous use of photographic features from month to month, the Editors propose to publish this Portfolio of American Photography once each year. Like the rest of the magazine, it will reflect life in the United States in all its varied aspects. The assistance of the Leitz, Eastman, and Zeiss companies in compiling this Portfolio is gratefully acknowledged.