

**Dan Cushman and *Stay Away, Joe***

By Larry F. Slonaker

*This first appeared in Cirque Literary Journal, Vol. 10 No. 2*

The notion of woke-ishness, or woke-dom, or whichever suffix one chooses to grab and attach, has permeated and divided a society that already seemed predisposed to fracture anyway. The field of literature is certainly no exception. If one sets aside the woke-word itself (which has taken on a weight in excess of, and beyond connection to, its original usage), one still encounters the issue (let's call it an *issue*) looming or lurking around publishing, and in a highly influential way. That is true not only of discussions about what's being printed now, but what was printed *ever*—and not just in the canon, but also in the various nooks and crannies of popular literature, around the world and around the corner, from north to south, and yes, even east to... West.

The mythology of the American West that was formulated in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries was as cracked as the Liberty Bell—in large part because it was invented mostly by western European immigrants in their “settlement” of the West. This simplistic narrative conveniently

ignored the indigenous people who, oh by the way, were well-established in the region for centuries.

Thankfully, the one-time fever of Manifest Destiny today seems, at casual glance, like not much more than a vague malaise. Light dawned, Mountain/Pacific/Alaska Standard Time, and it's now a given that there's so much more to the story of the West than the vision of European immigrants and their descendants. If that's woke (sorry, the *issue*), then most folks smarter than a turnip are glad for it.

Great; we've gained at least that much. But in the process, it sometimes is circumspect to ask: What, if anything, has been lost?

Consider the case of Dan Cushman. It's been about 20 years since the death of Cushman, who, as a prolific novelist of Westerns and other adventure-type tales, was a literary celebrity in the region. He earned a spot mid-century in the select Montana authors' circle that included A.B. Guthrie, Jr. and Joseph Kinsey Howard.

Cushman achieved particular notoriety with a book called *Stay Away, Joe*. Feted by (some) critics, chosen for the Book of the Month Club, transformed mind-bogglingly into a [Broadway musical](#), and even more mind-bogglingly into an [Elvis Presley movie](#), *Stay Away, Joe* made Cushman a literary celebrity in his adopted hometown of Great Falls, and well beyond.

That did not last. Even in Montana, which like so much of the West is populated by devoted readers who have a special affinity for native sons and daughters, *Joe* has largely faded. And that's to the relief of many. It seems if it's remembered at all, it's mostly as a harbinger of contemporary sensitivities about white people writing wayward fiction from the point of view of non-whites. The [kerfuffle](#) over *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins comes to mind.

I enjoyed reading *Joe* years ago, as a teenager. Decades later, I'm somewhat embarrassed to admit that certain sections of the novel have continued to stick in my mind. After reading *The Way West* and *The Big Sky*, or any of Ivan Doig's novels, in time I retained almost nothing. But after just one reading of *Joe*, I still found numerous passages adhering to my brain, including the protagonist's funny and spot-on description of young bull's advantages over an old one.

Having meant for years to reread it, I finally ordered a hardback copy a while back from Amazon for ten bucks.

The plot was much as I remembered it. The synopsis: Louis Champlain is an impoverished Métis originally from Canada. He now lives in an area evoking the country around Cushman's childhood home of Box Elder, Montana, near the [Rocky Boy's Chippewa Cree Reservation](#). The story opens with a visit to Louis' shack from a local bigshot and a U.S. Congressman. They bring jaw-dropping news: As part of a government experiment to help so-called landless Native Americans (in this novel, "Indians"), they are giving Louis a herd of 19 Hereford heifers and a young bull.

Louis can hardly believe this splendid windfall, but his good fortune is immediately shattered by two simultaneous disasters.

One, a horde of friends and well-wishers and not-so-well-wishers hear about Louis's luck, and show up uninvited for an impromptu party that runs deep into the night. Short of cash and provisions, Louis gives in to pressure to feed the revelers by slaughtering one of his new cows. (He does not learn until the next morning that the beast they barbecued turned out to be his lone bull.)

Two, his son Joe, a rodeo bronc rider and Korean War veteran, shows up at the party out of nowhere, commanding attention with a most imposing figure. Here's where Cushman's attention

to language and detail, honed over the writing of dozens of novels, displays itself. Joe “was six three or four; an extra two inches were added by the heels of his riding boots, and his huge white hat made him seem taller yet.... He had a fresh haircut, and his sideburns were held stiff and comb-marked by pomade. In addition to the boots and the big white hat, he wore Pendleton stockman’s pants, a scarlet shirt with decorative pearl buttons, and a fawn-colored silk crepe neckerchief knotted like a four-in-hand and held to his shirt-front by means of a large Navajo silver concha.”

On reading that, one definitely envisions a figure. (Uh, maybe not Elvis, though.)

The rest of the novel chronicles the damage suffered by Louis, his wife, Annie, and daughter, Mary, as a result of the antics of the beer-guzzling, woman-chasing, bank-cheating Joe—and the inevitable attrition, one-by-one, of Louis’ prized herd.

My general impression after undertaking *Joe* this many years later is that, on one level, it’s a light read, mostly engaging, told with some vivid language (and some that’s clunky, too), and featuring an entirely sympathetic character in the endlessly-misfortunate-but-ever-optimistic Louis. To me, it’s also a page in an old rediscovered scrapbook, featuring a vivid black-and-white snapshot of the time and place.

But in these times, there is the whole other level that must be considered: the desperate real-life situation then of Native Americans, both on and off the reservations. When *Joe* was published in 1953, the status of Native Americans in the West was comparable to that of Blacks in the South in the same time-period. Social segregation was a fact of life. My memory of Native kids in elementary school is that of raggedy waifs so shy and deferential they almost never spoke. They were bullied without mercy, when they were paid attention to at all. The older I got,

the fewer Native students there were; and when I got to high school, all the Native kids seemed to have disappeared from class entirely.

The town where I grew up, Great Falls, had a vibrant downtown at that time, but if you strayed a block or two off the main, you found yourself on Skid Row, where Native guys panhandled and drank from paper bags. In much of the West back then, there were a few distinct castes: the merchants, the farmers and ranchers, and the Native Untouchables.

I was not one to deplore this at the time. In fact, I made not much of it at all, other than to accept it as How Things Were. And aside from the nuns and other charitable folks who ministered to and aided the landless Chippewa, Cree and Métis living in squalor on the infamous [Hill 57](#), I think most folks in Great Falls were as indifferent and ignorant as I.

Cushman, in *Joe*, actually evinces a much more sympathetic attitude toward Natives. He grew up among them, in Box Elder and Big Sandy and other small towns in northern Montana. The Great Falls Tribune published a feature on Cushman in 1994 in which he spoke with great fondness of a Métis named Champagne, who befriended him as a child. “He was a very personable and intelligent guy” Cushman said. In interviews with Brent D. McCann, who in 2001 wrote a comprehensive [master’s thesis on Cushman](#) at the University of Montana, Cushman identified Champagne as the inspiration for *Stay Away, Joe*.

But for all Cushman’s sympathies, the book is also very much a work reflecting the mindset of the mid-1950s. Various depictions of Native women are condescending and insulting—Cushman seems to describe every other Native young woman as “slatternly,” and the other “s” word is used several dozen times. Aside from Louis, most of the Native men are drawn as mere stooges, even when they aren’t drunk. Then there’s the underlying question of whether a

white man can legitimately write at all from a Native's point of view (although nearly every Native character in the book is a "breed" of one quartile or another).

None of this seemed to matter at the time. The plight of Natives then was an afterthought, if it lurked in mainstream thought at all. So, it's not a surprise that the book—distinctly light on "plight— was celebrated in mainstream Montana on its release, and for many years after. As McCann documents, there were highly favorable reviews in the *Tribune* and the *Montana Magazine of History*. Plus, there was the national Book of the Month Club selection, in which the novel was compared to Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*. Some East Coast publications' reviewers were not impressed, but the *New York Times* review praised its "brush strokes that are sharp and true...."

Cushman admitted, at least partly in jest, that he had qualms. After publication, he said in the [Tribune article](#), "I stuck my head (out) around the reservation to see if anybody wanted to take a shot at me." But no: "They said they liked it."

The general goodwill toward among Montana literati toward *Joe* was to change, however, in a well-publicized way. An excerpt was supposed to appear in 1988 in *The Last Best Place*, a well-respected, 1,000-page-plus anthology of distinguished writings about Montana. But the accomplished Native novelist James Welch famously vetoed *Joe* from inclusion. (An excerpt from Cushman's memoir, *Plenty of Room and Air*, was included instead.)

McCann interviewed Welch, who died in 2003, about his objections. "I thought (Cushman) portrayed the Indian people, the family and so on, as fools," Welch is quoted as saying. "And, if I remember correctly, when they get the herd of cattle...to celebrate they kill the bull. That is just a total farce. Indians aren't that stupid and I think it implies Indians are that stupid."

McCann asked Cushman about the criticism, and the anthology exclusion. He replied, simply, "Perhaps younger people don't want their ideals clouded."

Welch's misgivings are certainly understandable, but his criticism seems at least partly unfair. Or, yes, clouded. For example: Even as a teenage reader, I understood the slaughter of the bull not as an act of stupidity, but one of malice—some of the partiers were clearly jealous of Louis' luck, and they orchestrated the act on purpose.

And it's not accurate or fair to characterize all the Native characters as "fools." Annie is the voice of wisdom throughout the book. She sees through Joe from the moment he steps onto the place, all the way through the moment at the end, when the guys from the credit union haul away the hulk of his car, a once-cherry Buick he's converted into a forlorn living space.

And then there's Louis. It's he, after all, who is the protagonist of the novel. Joe—lying, callous, conniving, and utterly lacking in conscience—is basically a psychopath. But Louis possesses an indefatigable good-nature and a transcendent calmness about his place in the world. In the face of catastrophe, he finds solace in his pastime of carving animals out of wood.

Describing Louis' retreat to this diversion on one difficult morning, Cushman is at his best: "The pine was quite damp, so it was tough, and its grain was a richer brown than usual. The wood with its dampness smelled like fall—a different smell than damp wood of the spring. The fall dampness was everywhere, making a shine on the frost-tuned leaves of the bushes, giving the mountain valleys a misty purple cast, turning the pines a purplish green, and giving Louis a slight pain in the joints of his shoulders. He did not mind; it was the way of nature, and soon the sun would grow warm and drive the pain out of him with a good feeling that he could not get from donning his old mackinaw."

Cushman was a prolific writer, and his novels ranged from pulp and post-pulp to more literary efforts. But *Stay Away, Joe* was his pinnacle, and by all accounts he was quite proud of it. Today, though, it's all but forgotten. Doug Giebel, Cushman's nephew, who has been trying to establish a place for Cushman's archives in Big Sandy, told me, "There's little if any interest in *Joe* these days."

Twenty years after Cushman's death, it's pretty clear that *Stay Away, Joe* has profound shortcomings. With its clownish characters and lurching slapstick, it will never be lumped in with the distinguished literature of the American West. Beyond that, though, in the unceasing glare of modern sensitivities and sensibilities, no contemporary publisher would give it a sniff.

But for all its faults, in some ways it's a book that is true of a time— which I think has an intrinsic value. As McCann told me, Cushman "found a way to describe something he loved with all its complexity, i.e., the people of the high plains of Montana during the middle part of the 20th century."

And just as *Joe* is true of another time, it also depicts certain actions and events that were true of people. Not "a people." Just people. And sometimes, when you pick up a novel, that's all you can ask.

\*

[Larry F. Slonaker](#) is an essayist and novelist, originally from Great Falls, Mont., now living in the Central Coast area of California. His novel, *Nothing Got Broke*, is published by Cirque Press.