

## READERS' FORUM

### On "Jack Schaefer, Teller of Tales"

In addition to letters from subscribers, we include in this Forum comments from literary scholars and others to whom we sent complimentary copies of "Jack Schaefer" (*Aristos*, 10/96 and 12/96), or who learned of it through a brief piece by Louis Torres in the Winter 1997 Newsletter of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics. (Founded in 1993, ALSC is a sane alternative to the highly politicized Modern Language Association.)

I read with keen interest your work on Jack Schaefer. At the recommendation of a friend, I read *Shane* thirty years ago. I liked it, but knew of nothing else by him. After reading your fine article, with its concise synopses of other works, I have a desire to read more. I commend you for talking back to those scholars of literature whom I refer to as "the little talking people."

Don Koestner  
Silver Bay, Minnesota

Your Jack Schaefer article was well worth waiting for. *Monte Walsh* has been my favorite work of fiction ever since I discovered it about twenty-five years ago. The revisionists you criticize will never understand Schaefer, since they are Naturalists.

Art Smith  
Sidney, Maine

Your article on Jack Schaefer offers cogent analysis of his prose style and the thematic concerns of his work. I have read only *Shane*, and must say that your discussion of that novel was very compelling to me. I would like to read another novel or two of Schaefer's before long, and then re-read your essay in that light.

Stefan B. Herpel  
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Thanks for sending along your piece on Jack Schaefer, about whom, till now, I had known nothing.

Joseph Epstein  
Evanston, Illinois

Joseph Epstein was for many years editor of *The American Scholar*. (See *Brief Notes*, on page 6.)

I join you in wishing Jack had lived to read your tribute. Few people paid any attention to him in his last years; many thought he had long been dead. Once a dentist called him from Denver and wanted to drive down with a friend and

take Jack to lunch. They did, and Jack brought up their get-together several times after that; such simple recognition meant a lot to him.

In 1986, I presided over his getting the Golden Saddleman Award for lifetime achievement from the Western Writers of America (I was chair of the Saddleman Committee that year) and I had to make the presentation to him at Fort Worth. I had a hard time persuading him to fly over from Santa Fe and accept the statue in person, but he finally did so, graciously. (Till then, even some younger western writers were unaware he was still alive.) He came over by himself and I offered to have a limo pick him up at the airport. But Jack said, "Oh, don't bother. I'll just take a bus that will bring me right to the hotel." And he did.

In your Schaefer piece, your support of individualism and its defining importance in shaping his fictional characters stands as a high point. In 1922, Herbert Hoover declared: "Individualism is the most precious possession of American civilization." He was probably the last major public figure to express such unqualified praise for the idea, unless we hand the honor down to Ayn Rand.

The hatred today for individualism and for men like Shane, Jared Heath, and Monte, who are self-contained and overflow with inner strength, no doubt explains in part the belittling of Schaefer as a serious writer. In a column I wrote called "The Old-Time Cowboy," I point out that Shane-like people really did exist (and a few still do), so that Schaefer was not fabricating myths—he was just focusing on the best the West had to offer, instead of the worst, which ivory-tower academics delight in.

Marc Simmons  
Cerrillos, New Mexico

An independent historian who has written numerous articles and books on the American Southwest, Marc Simmons contributes a weekly column on historical matters to several New Mexico newspapers and the *El Paso Times*. Both neighbor and friend to Jack Schaefer for twenty years, he wrote the Foreword to the critical edition of *Shane*.

I read your two issues on Jack Schaefer, and I quite agree. I first read *Shane* many years ago. A friend later introduced me to *The Canyon*. In it I find the statesmanship required to steer between the maxim "no single man can change a tribe" and the maxim "no man should do what his heart tells him is wrong."

On my own I found *Heroes Without Glory: Some Good Men of the Old West*. To it I am especially grateful for the

discovery of the Indian hero Washakie.

Your article was helpful in introducing me to works of Schaefer that I had not read.

Do form the Schaefer Society.

Michael Platt  
Buena Vista, Virginia

Michael Platt is Chair of Humanities at Southern Virginia College.

I was delighted to read your piece in the *ALSC Newsletter* concerning Jack Schaefer, whose career was a marvelous one. My delight is obviously increased that your piece appeared in the newsletter of the organization of which I was one of the founding officers.

I think I am one of the few "academic" critics to have taken Schaefer's novels seriously, and if you will check my book *The Changes of Cain [Violence and the Lost Brother in Cain and Abel Literature]*, you will see my discussion of *Shane* in the Chapter "The New American Cain." But clearly you go far beyond that, and quote absolutely splendid passages from *Company of Cowards*, a book I have not yet read. My only—minor—criticism of your piece (minor because it is directed at a common practice) is in the need you felt to elevate Schaefer by demoting Steinbeck. They both can have quite legitimate virtues.

Please keep me informed as to developments regarding the Jack Schaefer Home Page, and the proposed society.

Ricardo J. Quinones  
Claremont, California

The writer is Josephine Olp Weeks Professor of Comparative Literature, and Director of the Gould Center for Humanistic Studies ([www.mckenna.edu/Institutes/gould.htm](http://www.mckenna.edu/Institutes/gould.htm)) at Claremont McKenna College.

I enjoyed your Schaefer article in the *ALSC Newsletter* and look forward to receiving the longer version as it appeared in *Aristos*. I am a generalist in British literature at Wesley College with special interests in the Victorian age, and in the nineteenth-century American West. I used *Shane* as a unit in freshman composition classes years ago, and have harbored a fondness for the story and the characters not often shared by colleagues. I think it would [be] satisfying at this late date in my career (I'm tenured and due to retire in a few years) to take up the banner in support of Schaefer's genius (at least as far as *Shane* indicates).

The same writer sent the following letter a few weeks later:

This afternoon I finished reading the long version of your article on Jack Schaefer and complimented myself for having had the good sense to send for it and you for the goodness and energy to research and write it. I want you to know how greatly I appreciate what you have done (especially in tackling the revisionists). Your article has me thinking of reading a lot more of Schaefer's work. I am especially curious to find a copy of *Company of Cowards* to add to my summer reading box. (I've always had a fondness for *Red Badge of Courage*, even for its "stilted" language—I'm at heart a neo-Victorian.) I'm certainly interested in further exploring the idea of a Schaefer society.

An acquaintance of mine, a writer and college-level creative-writing teacher, adores *Shane*. For her (as for me) the novel is, in part, a romance, an unhappy one. I would add that it also upholds the importance of married love and of a solid family structure for child rearing. I think Schaefer would agree.

A propos the issue of "myth," it is worth noting the distinction drawn by William Nicholls (in *Christian Antisemitism: A History of Hate*) between myth as defined in "ordinary speech"—i.e., "an untrue story" (what you call the "primary" sense)—and what I suppose we can call "archetypal" or "religious" myth. According to Nicholls:

When scholars who study religion use the word, they . . . mean a story or a group of images in which religious energy and emotion are invested. The story tells the members of the community who they are, giving the community its identity and distinguishing it from others. The myth is the charter of a religious community, the energy center by which it lives.

Surely the high regard for *Shane* shared by so many readers stems from the fact that in some sense the book "charters" us. There's something central and vital to human experience in *Shane*. It speaks to the deep layer of meaning, of moral value, in each of us—what you describe as the "timeless metaphysical and moral issues at the heart of literature"—and challenges as well as reaffirms how we "really feel about the world and about other people," as Nicholls argues.

Eugene G. Rowley  
Dover, Delaware

Eugene Rowley is Associate Professor of English at Wesley College.

Thank you for your letter and your impressive study of Jack Schaefer. You have caught the man and taught me much.

The romantic western, the sort that was all about character and courage rather than the West per se, is all but dead, though one never knows what the future may bring. Few are published

today, and those are mostly reprints of old books by long-dead authors. Not many years ago, virtually all the paperback houses had western lines; now only Leisure produces them, and only a handful, and mostly reprints. There may be several causes for this: there was a cultural shift during and following the Vietnam War, in which old verities were abandoned. Urbanization, technology, new forms of storytelling, the fading memory of the frontier, have all contributed. But what intrigues me the most is the loss of interest in a literature of character, or a literature of the virtues—courage, love, determination, loyalty, industry, and so on. It is as if the younger generation have gone blank on these things, or never were taught them.

Another problem is simply the contempt that has always been visited upon westerns. Literary mandarins have regarded them as the worst sort of hack work, not literature, not worthy of the name of fiction. Political correctness has taken its toll as well. There have been numerous accusations—by those ignorant of the genre—that westerns are racist, sexist, imperialist, etc. The reality is much more complex, and it is necessary to separate western films from fiction to come to any sort of conclusion about that. Contrary to widespread perception, westerns have been largely sympathetic to Indians.

Richard S. Wheeler  
Livingston, Montana

Richard Wheeler ([www.imt.net/~gedison/wheeler.html](http://www.imt.net/~gedison/wheeler.html)) writes historical western fiction. His most recent novel, set in the Gilded Age, is *Second Lives*.

Thanks for your interesting and insightful evaluation of Jack Schaefer's work. I'm delighted that folks are still digging into the novels and other output of that talented man. I agree entirely with you: he was a fine novelist, regional designation aside.

Jack, I suspect, would have given a curmudgeonly laugh at all this, but be secretly proud.

In his first letter to me back in 1965, he chewed me out because I'd used the then-trendy word "alienation" in regard to *The Canyon*. I was a young pup who'd earlier dropped him a note after deciding to write a paper on his work for a Western American Literature course at Washington State University. I was much less interested in being a scholar than in learning whatever lessons his books might teach an aspiring writer. That I ended up publishing a bit about him came as a surprise to me, since I really didn't make much of an effort at criticism.

I strongly endorse your efforts, and look forward to the formation of a Jack Schaefer Society.

Gerald W. Haslam  
Penngrove, California

Professor of English at Sonoma State University, Gerald Haslam is the author of "Jack Schaefer," in *Shane: The Critical Edition*.

Thank you for your recent letter and the copy of your essay. I enjoyed both—and am particularly pleased to cross paths with someone who sees the merits of *Company of Cowards*. Of all Schaefer's works, this one is, I believe, the one most routinely—and wrongly—neglected.

We can, of course, quarrel over the extent to which I have "misread," "misconstrued," or "misrepresented" Schaefer's work, but since you yourself overlook my 1978 essay "Jack Schaefer: The Writer as Ecologist" and Forrest Robinson's 1989 piece "Heroism, Home, and the Telling of *Shane*," such quarrels are the sort better conducted over a bottle of wine or a pitcher of beer than in the columns of an academic journal. (As an aside, I've been called many things in my career, pejorative as well as honorific, but you're the first to call me an "altruist.")

The important point is that you grasp the merits of Schaefer's writings, and are striving to gain a greater recognition for them. For your efforts in that direction I applaud you, and wish you all good fortune in your endeavor.

Fred Erisman  
Fort Worth, Texas

The writer is Lorraine Sherley Professor of Literature, and Chair of the English Department at Texas Christian University. He has written on Jack Schaefer in the critical edition of *Shane*, and in *Fifty Western Writers and A Literary History of the American West*.

Louis Torres replies:

My article on Jack Schaefer appears to have touched a sympathetic chord in a good number of our readers, a few of whose letters we have included here. That *Shane* has long been known and loved is hardly surprising. That at least one reader has counted *Monte Walsh* as his favorite novel for the past twenty-five years is more unexpected, and therefore especially gratifying.

In comparison, the degree of scholarly response regarding Schaefer has been disappointing. Of the thirty-five present and former officers and board members of the Western Literature Association to whom I sent my article, for example, not one has bothered even to acknowledge receipt, much less to comment on it. As for the two thousand members of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics who may have read my brief piece on Schaefer in the Winter 1997 newsletter, only Ricardo Quinones and Eugene Rowley (neither of them a specialist in American literature) wrote

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## READERS' FORUM

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to request my longer article. Their response is all the more appreciated.

I was particularly interested to learn of Professor Quinones's *Changes of Cain*, in which he treats *Shane* seriously in the context of world (not merely regional American) literature. Although I disagree with his view of Shane as "represent[ing] dangerous violence," I applaud the fact that he considers Schaefer's novel alongside John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* and Herman Wouk's *Caine Mutiny*. To my knowledge, he is the only non-Western literary specialist to have accorded Schaefer such attention. As I emphasized in my article, however, Shane is never "violent," properly speaking. He uses force only with measured restraint, and always in the cause of justice.

Regarding my comparison of Schaefer and Steinbeck, I did not mean to "demote" Steinbeck, whose work I have long admired, but rather to elevate Schaefer in the minds of critics who have undervalued his work.

Professor Erisman disdains to "quarrel" with me in the pages of *Aristos*, in part because I overlooked an early essay by him on Schaefer, and he facetiously offers to meet me over beer—where any discussion would not be subject to the scrutiny of scholars or other readers. In any case, his acknowledgment that *Company of Cowards* has been "routinely—and wrongly—neglected" seems too little, too late, given that he included only a passing, mistaken remark about that work in his article on Schaefer for *A Literary History of the American West*. Further, Professor Erisman expresses surprise that I ascribe an "altruist bias" to him; but what else could be inferred from remarks such as "all action demands sacrifice" or "[Shane] risks his life for the good of the community" (a claim flatly contradicted by the text)?

Professor Erisman's 1978 essay on the ecological implications of Schaefer's work, though more generous in its appreciation of Schaefer's literary virtues, in no way nullifies my critique of his later essays. Not surprisingly, some of the same interpretive errors are evident there. For example, he cites, as relevant to Schaefer's viewpoint, the claim that "in an ecologically balanced community the group supports the individual and the individual has to perform his particular function in the group." He also argues that Shane, "unarmed, is simply a competent human being." To the contrary, Shane exceeds mere "competence" in everything he does—from his barefisted encounter with Fletcher's men to his setting fence posts on the Starrett homestead. As Schaefer clearly implies throughout, Shane would be expert in anything he undertook. Nor is Professor Erisman's estimate of Monte Walsh any more accurate: he characterizes this supremely self-sufficient cowboy hero as "incomplete" without his friend Chet.

Then there is Professor Erisman's evidently serious recommendation of Forrest Robinson's 1989 essay on *Shane*. That piece, reprinted in *Having It Both Ways: Self-Subversion in Western Popular Classics*, is so riddled with bizarre misrepresentations that I scarcely know which to cite. Professor Robinson contends,

for instance, that Shane engages in "massive" violence (82), in which he takes great "relish" (83); that the relationship between Shane and Joe exhibits a "powerful homoerotic dimension" (81); that Shane projects an "imperial sexual authority" in his relationship with both Joe and Marion (97), though he is "inclined to celibacy" (103); that Joe is "pitiful" and suffers "diminished self-esteem and a readiness . . . to die" (92); that Marion is "hopelessly weak" and full of "sexual vanity and manipulateness" (81); and that there is a suppressed "erotic element" in young Bob's response to Shane (96). Moreover, the Starrett homestead, according to Professor Robinson, is a "shallow and constraining place," and Bob is not only guilty of "nervously constrained voyeurism" (93) but is also afflicted with "an ample measure of oedipal energy" (97). Finally, the heroic figure of Shane is a "fabrication"—the "unconscious fantasy" of Bob, the adult narrator—to evade the "messy maneuvering" that had gone on around him (95).

True to his postmodern premises, Professor Robinson gratuitously injects racial politics, as well, into his analysis before he is through. Citing another writer's claim that Shane, the "pure white . . . American hero," finally "turns his back on white society," by choosing to live "by death, by killing," (102) he assures us that what Shane most craves, ultimately, is "power . . . the key to it all." (104)

That Professor Erisman takes such pseudo-scholarly tripe seriously is disturbing enough. More disconcerting is the thought that this sort of bogus literary criticism is today so common in academia. Pity the poor students who are daily exposed to it.

## BRIEF NOTES

[www.aristos.org](http://www.aristos.org)

On March 18, 1997, the *Aristos* web site was launched at the above address on the Internet. Among other items, it includes a sampler of short articles from past issues of the journal, a summary of the editors' forthcoming book *What Art Is*, and a Jack Schaefer Home Page, as well as an annotated table of contents for back issues and subscription information. Links to other web sites of interest, and to splendid color illustrations of works cited in *Aristos* articles, provide a dimension not possible in the print version. The site will be updated and expanded periodically.

**Joseph Epstein and "The American Scholar"**

The news, earlier this year, that Joseph Epstein was being forced out as editor of *The American Scholar*—for his inattention to "gender" and "ethnic" issues—was an unwelcome sign of the state of the culture. During his 22-year tenure with the journal, Mr. Epstein (who teaches literature and writing at Northwestern University) held it to an impeccable standard of both scholarship and readability, blissfully free of the sort of trendy interpretations that now pass for literary criticism in the academy. In addition, his personal essays, under the pen name "Aristides," offered a distinctive and always delightful blend of humor, candor, and erudition. They will be missed, as will his editorial stewardship.

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