

AFTERWORD

All the world loves a villain. We have our own clusters of heroes, to be sure, and some of them are genuine. These are the folk we look up to, the ones we cite as inspirations or guides in the shaping of our lives. We admire their actions, we respect their values, and we embrace their ideas as we develop our own. They are the Good Guys, and we're proud to be seen in their company.

When push comes to shove, however, it's another story entirely, for it's the villains of the piece that we really look up to. They are, after all, the ones who supply the tantalizing, raffish counterpoint to the goodness of the heroes, and they're almost always more seductively intriguing than the square-jawed, clear-eyed folk they oppose. Where, after all, would Faust be without Mephistopheles? Jim Hawkins without Long John Silver? Sherlock Holmes without Moriarty? The Virginian without Trampas? Luke Skywalker without Darth Vader? It's the dark side of the force that, if we're honest with ourselves, we find the more appealing, and, good citizens though we may be, we deep down harbor a hankering to be, just once, a villain for a day.

This itch for irresponsibility is particularly strong when the villain is portrayed as an outlaw. The very term, outlaw, resonates with possibilities, for it implies a person who's not necessarily a bad sort, but who has somehow, whether by choice or by circumstance, found himself at odds with the larger dictates of the prevailing law. If the break with legality has come about by circumstance, we sympathize with the poor

soul—think of Josef K. in Kafka's The Trial, who can never find out why he's been arrested—and cheer on his efforts to get satisfaction from, or revenge against, the faceless, unfeeling minions of society.

If the break comes by choice, though, a whole new realm opens up. We can ask, legitimately, why has the person broken with conventional morality and opted for life on the fringe? It can't be natural depravity, for that's what generates criminals. It may be a desire to challenge a grasping, repressive society (as in Robin Hood's taking from the artificially maintained rich to give to the unfairly downtrodden poor), or it may be a more generalized, often inarticulate, determination to set things right. The textbook example of this latter motivation appears in John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee. McGee, who's fond of saying that there are countless ways of separating a person from his property that are entirely legal and wholly immoral, makes a career as a "salvage expert," retrieving that property and restoring the balance of the world while he turns a tidy profit. It's a desire, in short, to do what's right, whether or not it's legal.

Because "right" and "legal" aren't always synonymous, this distinction creates a moral gray area in which we like to think the outlaw may be working. The person's actions may be at odds with statutory law or social convention, but they're committed for reasons that are higher than just being anti-social. The motives may be an effort to achieve some kind of personal satisfaction or fulfillment, or a conviction that some things exist that can't be dealt with through conventional means. Either way, the individual stands out, and we're drawn to him because he speaks and acts in ways we understand and empathize

with, yet can't bring ourselves to adopt.

This character, nominally outside the law yet reflecting a considered individualism and embracing a closely held set of beliefs, we've come to call the antihero. Unheroic by any conventional standard, this person nonetheless has a core of sufficient principle that we want to like him, we quite irrationally trust him, and we're confident that, at the crucial moment, he'll automatically do what's right. He may be thoroughly unwholesome by every criterion (the major characters of Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch come immediately to mind, as does Clint Eastwood's Will Munney, from Unforgiven, a "known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition"), but we sense the nucleus of essential morality that's present, we eagerly wait for it to come to the surface and take over, and we're rarely disappointed.

Just such an antihero is Bryan Woolley's Sam Bass, central character of the 1983 novel of the same name. Woolley, himself Texas-born, draws upon Texas history for his materials. There was a historic Sam Bass, an Indiana-born individual who robbed trains across North Texas during the 1870s and became one of the legendary outlaws of the region. But, as Woolley makes explicit, he has written a novel, not a history, and so has felt free to shape reality to his own creative needs.

We first meet Woolley's Bass as a boy of eighteen or nineteen who has come to Texas to be a cowboy. Right away, we know we're dealing with myth. Bass has a youth's vision of what a cowboy is and does; what's more, he's driven by two recurring dreams—one of riding a cosmically fast horse, the other of giving a horse to an

anonymous woman and receiving her simple thanks in return. In his pursuit of those dreams he's frustrated by the cowboy's life and discouraged by his fallback life (stableboy at a hotel), but he's also electrified when he finds the horse of his dream, a two-year-old sorrel mare named Jenny. Jenny is unbeatable on the racetrack, and the easy money she brings in is more temptation than Sam can resist. Like the twentieth-century yegg who robbed banks because "that's where the money is," Sam follows the easy money and becomes at last a train robber and killer. His is a classic story of moral decay, and, yet, there is merit in Sam that we can't shake off. Good with horses, open-handed with his money, and loyal to his friends, he's an attractive, sympathetic character, and we eagerly follow his deeds in hopes that he'll at some point turn around.

Intensifying Sam's merits is the way Woolley presents him. We see and hear Sam only through the eyes and ears of others—a mixed bag of associates each of whom brings a separate set of criteria to judgment. Though we see Sam's deeds and hear him speak, the accounts are colored by the values of the person relating them, and each adds his or her bit to the slowly developing picture of Sam that we form.

Two of the observers are women. The first is Maude, a Dallas whore who's the lover of train robber and gang leader Joel Collins. After Joel is killed during a holdup she transfers her affections to Sam, and it's from her that we get wry accounts of the Pinkertons, the Texas Rangers, and assorted other lawmen who are in pursuit of Sam. By profession she's an outlaw of a sort in her own right, albeit one who's informally sanctioned by the community, and so has a distinctive perspective on right and wrong,

law and legality. Unabashed in her whorishness, and even a bit proud of it, she sleeps with law and outlaw alike, and her observations are a quirky commentary on the nature of the human animal.

The second is Mary Matson, a young black woman living in a near-ghetto outside Round Rock, Texas. Though she's no outlaw, because of her race she is nonetheless an outcast and outside the mainstream, and so brings yet another point of view to the picture Woolley builds. She shelters Sam in the days preceding his attempt on the Round Rock bank, sharing her bed as well as her supplies, and it's to her home that the Rangers bring the mortally wounded Sam to await his death. She gives Sam a brief interlude of peace in the frantic last days of his life, and she becomes for him the woman of his dream, to whom he gives the horse. Hers are the last words we hear in the novel, a simple, genuine "thank you."

The other observers are men, and from their differences we learn still more about Sam, his desires, and his essential self. They themselves are a mix of good and evil, honorable and dishonorable; their actions and the consequences of those actions say as much about Sam as they do about the participants. The first we meet is thirty-six-year-old William F. "Dad" Egan, sheriff of Denton County, the voice of self-control and social responsibility. He guides Sam to his first job, acts as a second father, and at last becomes a reluctant but determined pursuer. The oldest of the principal characters, Dad brings a balanced, thoughtful wisdom to his view of Sam's life. As a sworn lawman he necessarily must bring Sam to justice, but as a one-time friend he can't sever his knowledge of Sam the

boy from that of Sam the bandit. He does his job, but he does it with regret for a life wasted.

Next is Frank Jackson, five years younger than Sam and drawn to his band because of the dreariness of his tinsmith's life. An unanointed apprentice to the drunken physician with whom he rooms and a reader of the classics, he goes willingly with Sam at first, taking part in the escapades and serving as the group's medico. He cannot, however, shake off his feelings of trepidation and sense of responsibility, and, finally, with Sam's blessing, disappears into the West, reappearing as a small-town doctor under a different name. He's in many ways Sam's alter ego, the person who sees the allure of the outlaw's life, yet who's wise enough to know that it's a transient existence; there's more in life for a person to do, and from his eventual perception of evil comes a career of good.

Last is Jim Murphy, son of a Denton saloonkeeper and another of Sam's first acquaintances. Like Frank he's at heart a good citizen; unlike Frank, he's weak and susceptible, and his well-meaning choices bring about a still greater evil. When his father is jailed as one of Sam's accomplices, Jim's concern over the older man's failing health compels him to cut a deal with Major John B. Jones of the Texas Rangers. Jim will join Sam's gang and keep the Rangers informed of their movements, allowing the lawmen at last to arrange a trap. Thanks to his information, the robbery at Round Rock is thwarted, the gang broken up, and Sam brought down, but the lawmen look upon Jim as a Judas. He has upheld the law but he has betrayed a friend, and he will ever after be an object of contempt. In their eyes, his single crime is greater than Sam's entire record.

Woolley's novel is called Sam Bass, but it's really the story of six persons. It considers their dreams and their demons, their pain and their joy, their decisions and their actions, and becomes a thoughtful commentary upon not only the law and the outlaw, but also upon human relationships as well. It's a story, as well, of youth and age. Sam, eighteen or nineteen in 1870, doesn't live to see thirty after he's gunned down in 1878. Dad Egan, for all of his paternal wisdom, is no older than his mid-forties at book's end, yet he speaks for age and experience, saddened by what he's seen, compassionate toward Sam, yet devoted to the enforcement of the law as he understands it. Lawman or outlaw, whore or faceless African American, physician or traitor, each of the six leads us toward an understanding. We come to understand them, and, through them, come to understand Sam.

In many ways, the crux of the novel occurs early on, after Frank Jackson mounts up and rides away with Sam. As the two ride away, Frank revels in what he calls "a young man's freedom, which is the absence of responsibility and the prospect of unlimited possibility. . . . I felt like an outlaw but not like a criminal, and the beauty of the day and its freedom filled me." (pp. 51-52) It is the quintessential dream of youth and it highlights Woolley's ruminations on youth and age, impulse and wisdom.

This lyrical moment says all we need to know: why Sam turned to robbery, why Frank initially followed him, and why we continue to cherish the outlaw. The outlaw's life is somehow separate from a life of crime. It's a life we'd like to live, with its carefree freedom, its absence of responsibilities, and its infinite possibilities, and it's one we, as

responsible citizens, know we can't live. (Edward Abbey makes this same point in Hayduke Lives! [1990].) But, if we can't live it, we can dream it—and, if our mundane lives bring us real responsibilities and limited possibilities, they still offer us the opportunity to stand by our friends, savor the beauty of the day, and find our freedom within our own hearts and minds. We may not experience as much adventure as the outlaw, or garner as much money, but what we gain will be longer lasting. It's a simple, eternal truth, and we should feel a debt to Bryan Woolley's novel for once more reminding us, as all literature must do, of what is genuinely worthwhile, of what really matters.

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