

The Fictional Art of Harold Robbins: A Study

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Abstract

Harold Robbins was undisputedly the most popular writer in the world, and his books - not one of which has ever been out of print - are said to have sold, in 42 countries, three-quarters of a billion copies. His most popular, *The Carpetbaggers* (1961), has sold 30 million copies, making it, apparently, the fourth most read book in history.

Key Words:- Novel, Melodrama, Money Power, Glamour, Pain

Harold Robbins was a best-selling author whose novels about sex, Money and power were scorned by critics and loved by readers. After an aborted attempt in the grocery business, Robbins got work as a shipping clerk for universal pictures in Hollywood in the late 1930s. Robbins worked his way up to the executive level and began writing novels that could be turned into movies. In 1948 he had a hit with *Never Love a Stranger*, his first of many potboilers known for sloppy prose and racy passages. He began writing novels full-time around 1950 and by the mid-1960s was one of the richest authors in the world. Several of his books were best-seller, including *The Carpetbaggers* (1961), and *The Betsy* (1971) and Robbins was known as a larger than life character who surrounded himself with women intoxicants. By the wild 1980, low sales and bad health brought an end to the party and Robbins died deeply in debt.

He began writing in 1946, to win a bet after scorning the quality of the stories the studio was buying. His first two novels, *Never Love A Stranger* (1948) and *The Dream Merchants* (1949) were immediate successes and he even got

critical praise for his third, *A Stone For Danny Fisher* (1952), a coming of age novel set on New York's East Side.

Robbins loved the life of the life of the playboy, albeit one who produced a big book every couple of years. He did this by working 12 to 16 hour days, never rewriting nor working out his plots in advance. As he got wealthier, in addition to his glamorous lifestyle and outrageous parties; he got serious about art fine food and gambling. His extravagant lifestyle came to an end in 1985 following a stroke and then a fall in which he fractured both hips. Confined to a wheelchair he remained in his palazzo in Palm Springs for the rest of his life. He underwent a series of operations to repair his damaged bones, including one. In which he suffered painful nerve damage. An attempt implant an electric painkiller in his stomach failed and thereafter he took over- the counter painkillers every day to alleviate the constant pain.

He continued to type his books two fingered but now could only manage three or four hours a day. The wild spending, the divorces (he admitted to three wives

but it seems there were three other brief, unpublicized marriages, two possibly to the same woman) and the medical bills put a big dent in his bank balance. The houses, the cars and the yacht went. His marriage to his second wife, Grace Palermo, ended in divorce after 28 years in 1992.

The Dream Merchants (1949) was about Hollywood's film industry, from the first steps to sound era. Again Robbins blended his own experiences, historical facts, melodrama, sex, and action into a fast-moving story. His 1952 novel, *A Stone for Danny Fisher* was adapted into a 1958 motion picture *King Creole*, which starred Elvis Presley. He would become arguably the world's bestselling author, publishing over 20 books which were translated into 32 languages and sold over 750 million copies. Among his best-known books is *The Carpetbaggers*, loosely based on the life of Howard Hughes, taking the reader from New York to California, from the prosperity of the aeronautical industry to the glamour of Hollywood. Its sequel, *The Raiders*, was released in 1995.

Harold Robbins has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame at 6743 Hollywood Boulevard. Robbins was the playboy of his day and a master of publicity. He was a renowned novelist but tales of his own life contain even more fiction than his books. What is known is that with reported worldwide sales of 750m, Harold Robbins sold more books than J.K. Rowling, earned and spent \$50m during his lifetime, and was as much a part of the sexual and social revolution as the pill, Playboy and pot. In March 1965, he had three novels on the British paperback bestseller list - *Where Love Has Gone* at No.1, *The Carpetbaggers* at No.3 and *The Dream Merchants* in

the sixth spot.

Robbins's novels all recount life histories in which will Triumphs. His characters make themselves, by a series of conquests. They are themselves alone - the notion of a 'happy marriage' or a life-long relationship is anathema; a potential dropping of the will's guard. Robbins's heroes characteristically have no family. In his most violent novel, *The Adventurers*, the hero loses his mother in childhood in circumstances of sickening sadistic brutality. Having witnessed the murder and gang-rape of the female members of his family it is Dax's duty, as a mere *nino*, to machine-gun the captured bandits in the 'cojones'. It is described as a sexual fulfillment

*I walked over to him. He rested the gun across his Forearm and guided my hand so that my finger 'was on The trigger. He held the recoil barrel in the crook of his Elbow. 'Now he said, 'look doing the top of the barrel. When you see it is aimed at their cojones pull the trigger. I 'will do the rest.'*¹

The novel *The Inheritors* presents the story of people at the top of this cut-throat world as it moves into the television business, and of the people who are struggling to replace them. Stephen Gaunt takes over as president of a Broad-Casting company and brings it to the top of the ratings. He has status, money, and 80 many women that he must give them nicknames to keep them straight. As part of his adventures, he betrays a friend, ties to by his back, and helps in the destruction of the friend's daughter:

"A way to live with myself I guess that had always

Been the key. But it was not that easy to find the key

When you lived in a vacuum. And that was where I had

Spent the last three years. Waiting for something, I did not

Know what. Something to give the purpose.”²

The Carpetbaggers was also perhaps the first New York Times bestseller to include scenes of fellatio.” White it may have been just within bounds in the United States, in 1963 it was still one of 188 books prohibited from import into Australia, along with Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Grace Metalious’s *Peyton Place*, and no fewer than seven books by Henry Miller. *The Carpetbaggers is full of sharply drawn characters*

who search endlessly for power and love, and seek to dominate other even at the expenses of self-destruction.

Their sins are as great as their successes and Harold Robbins leaves nothing of their lives uncovered.⁸

The Dream Merchants is an American novel written by Harold Robbins and published in 1949. Set in the early 20th century, the book is a “rags-to-riches” story of a penniless young man who goes to Hollywood and builds a great film studio. A former University Studios employee, author Harold Robbins based the main character on Universal’s founder, Carl Laemmle. With the Hollywood history in the backdrop, it is a love story.

The Dream Merchants.... Dissects with intimate precision The glittering, amoral world of the movie moguls.⁹

Studying Robbin’s novel with respect to the entire category of bestsellers shows us that in many cases, the Robbins book had only one aspect in common with another bestseller. On the other hand, we can surmise that the formulaic approach to writing that some critics call “the artless quality” is not uncommon among the bestsellers. It is, in fact, its own sub-genre of books that sells millions of books a year.

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