



Shavetail

Thomas Cobb

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IN THE LITERARY TRADITION OF CORMAC MCCARTHY'S AND LARRY MCMURTRY'S HISTORICAL WESTERNS, SHAVETAIL TRACES THE BRUTAL COMING-OF-AGE OF A BOY SOLDIER STATIONED AT A REMOTE U.S. ARMY OUTPOST AND A YOUNG WOMAN'S TERRIFYING PASSAGE ACROSS THE AMERICAN FRONTIER.

Set in 1871 in the unforgiving wasteland of the Arizona Territory, *Shavetail* is the story of Private Ned Thorne, a seventeen-year-old boy from Connecticut who has lied about his age to join the Army. On the run from a shameful past, Ned is desperate to prove his worth -- to his superiors, to his family, and most of all, to himself. Young and troubled, Ned is as green and stubborn as a "shavetail," the soldiers' term for a dangerous, untrained mule.

To endure in this world, Ned must not only follow the orders of the camp's captain, Robert Franklin, but also submit to the cruel manipulations of Obediah Brickner, the camp's mule driver. Both Franklin and Brickner have been damaged by their long military service, both consider themselves able to survive the dangers of the desert -- floods, scorpions, snakes, and Indians -- and both imperil Ned.

Yet there are other characters, all richly drawn, who also confront Ned: half-wit soldiers, embattled Indians hidden in cliffs, a devious and philosophical peddler, and the fleshy whores who materialize in the desert as soon as the paymaster has left camp and dance with drunken soldiers around a fire late into the night.

After a band of Apaches attack a nearby ranch, killing two men and kidnapping a young woman, Ned's lieutenant -- a man seeking atonement for his own mistakes -- leads Ned and the rest of his patrol on a near-suicidal mission through rugged mountains and into Mexico in hopes of saving the woman's life. It is unlikely any can survive this folly, and those who do will be changed forever.

Meticulously researched and vividly told, *Shavetail* renders a time when the United States was still an expanding empire, its western edge bloody with the deaths of soldiers, settlers, and Indians. In language both spare and brilliant, Cobb brings readers this lost American landscape, untouched by highways or electricity and without the comforts of civilization.

Shavetail also marks the return of a great American literary voice. Cobb's first and only other novel, *Crazy Heart*, was published in 1987 to great acclaim and was edited by the legendary editor Ted Solotaroff. Cobb is also a former student of Donald Barthelme, who described *Crazy Heart* as "a bitter, witty psychological profile of genius."

Brutal and deft, laced with both violence and desire, *Shavetail* plunges into the deepest human urges even as it marks the ground where men either survive or perish.

Shavetail Details

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Author : Thomas Cobb

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From Reader Review Shavetail for online ebook

Sam Reaves says

A literary western shading more toward Cormac McCarthy than Elmer Kelton, this novel takes us to southeast Arizona in 1871, where the U.S. Army is establishing an outpost in territory recently and very tenuously pacified. The Apaches watch from the hills as a small detachment under a pair of dead-end officers, one a drunk and the other a depressive, builds a new post. A fresh recruit arrives, a New England lad who ran away from home after a traumatic experience. The cynical, hard-bitten mule skinner, the lonely, sensitive lieutenant, and sundry others take the boy's education in hand. Flash floods and a murderous Apache raid stir the pot and the detachment winds up blundering down into Mexico in pursuit of the Indians. Things do not go well.

It's not bad, if you adjust your expectations: this is a literary novel, with the customary lack of resolution and extended navel-gazing. Nonetheless the author didn't really lose me until he produced a Mexican officer who would flunk freshman Spanish ("Estoy capitán," for God's sake). How hard is it to get a native speaker to proofread your snippets of foreign dialogue? Literary excellence should include attention to such details.

Peggy says

I forgot how much I love reading a good Western. Cobb writes with enough subtle humor to bring to mind Larry McMurtry. Well-written characters, including the character of the harsh Arizona Territory. Despite the regular chuckles, his writing also elicits tugs on the heart. The tragedies that befall these men leave the reader surprisingly sad. I never gave up hoping that the lieutenant and the young calvaryman would each overcome their his missteps. Private Ned Thorne's brave, unrelenting attempt at redemption stays with me long after I closed the book.

Gloria says

I've just realized how much I miss reading westerns. This story was gritty, violent, raw and well-written. Louis L'Amour on steroids. I think I need to find more by Thomas Cobb.

Lorraine says

rather harsh, but probably true to the western frontier in AZ. very interesting coming of age story of 17 year old escaping unfortunate situation back east in the 1860s. he joins the army and is sent to Arizona territory. harsh army life.

Erin Moore says

If my stories were as eloquent, insightful, and compelling as this one, I would die happy.

This story of a failed mission of the early American soldiers out West evokes themes that carry us into the present day: the futility of war, the fight against an enemy that is really ourselves, and the coming of age through brutality.

Ned Thorne is our hero, but we cannot always love what he does. His choices are sometimes strange to our modern ideas and ways, and when the finale comes, we are left wondering what we would have done in the same situation.

Interwoven through Ned's story of learning how to be a man, we're also given Tony and Bobby, leaders of the ragtag group of soldiers and perpetrators of the failed mission. Their love for each other, and a dangerous dose of hurt pride, are what force the soldiers into an unnecessary danger.

And though we love Ned for his innocence and naiveté, it is Brickner who I secretly pulled for, and Brickner whose flawed morality and self-preservation instincts made him seem like someone we once knew.

This is not necessarily an easy read, but for anyone interested in the American West, our early (and most likely still current) attitudes towards the Native Americans, or just a great, engrossing read, this book will have you up late, following the small little clues that Thomas Cobb lays out like breadcrumbs. When we finally arrive at the wicked witch's home, it is not what it seems...

Ron Harton says

A very-well written Western. Right up there with Lonesome Dove. The ending is a little quick, more resolution is needed (or maybe a sequel), especially if the novel is to keep the promises made on the cover. But it is a good read. I was caught up in the strong characters, suspenseful plot, and intriguing setting. I hope this author writes more Westerns.

Richard says

Cobb's central characters come to life immediately. He tells three of their stories in alternating chapters, which I thought added a great deal. He also inserts the diary of another central character, a kidnapped settler. Cobb obviously has done his research. The pages bleed authenticity.

A splendid literary Western historical fiction novel. I put it above Far Bright Star, etc., and a hair under Blood Meridian and In The Rogue Blood. The characters are better developed than the above mentioned novels and the story/plot is better. It perhaps lacks the artistry of Cormac McCarthy's settings and the large lethal true stories that McCarthy and Blake took their lead from. Too bad Sam P. isn't around to direct the film.

Michael says

Good story, but it seemed to end before it was complete. There were a lot of things at the end that were left to the reader's imagination. Perhaps this was intentional to setup a sequel, but it didn't seem so. Trying not to give away a spoiler to the story, it was never confirmed if the woman the troop found was actually the one

they were looking for or someone else. Like I said, a lot let up to the reader's own interpretation, which can be a great thing if done well. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy this book, it just seemed quite long for the amount of story told and the ending.

Gina Shimpa says

Nice western. Love these stories of young men going out west seeking to find themselves. This young man was kind of running away. But it's something that I think I would have done if I lived in the same era of discovering the Wild West!

Leon says

Set in 1870s Southwest, this book has language that puts you in the barren, sweltering mountains of New Mexico, where you can feel the anxiety and strength that permeates Ned Thorne's existence in the US Army.

Robert2481 says

A book I enjoyed reading. It's really well-written, & the narrative just pulls you along. It presents the west & the cavalry as it was. It was stark & brutal, but, ultimately hopeful.

D. Pow says

The Book: Part One

Thomas Cobb's *Shavetail* is an impressive, compulsively readable novel that begins with the protagonist, young Pvt. Ned Thorne arriving in something like purgatory at the ass end of the universe, at an Arizona Army post in 1871, and it as it progresses things get very much worse than that.

Yes, it's a western. Yes, it has been compared to Cormac McCarthy and Larry McMurtry. Yes, this is by the guy who wrote the killer Country Western Novel *Crazy Heart* that the Dude finally won a best actor for.

As far as comparisons go I think the McMurtry one is more valid than the McCarthy one. Cobb is a more than serviceable stylist, but there are none of the virtuoso flourishes that you get with McCarthy but neither do you get the periodic head scratchers that bring the action up short. So no bum notes, the man can move seamlessly from scene to scene and he is a strong descriptive writer and the dialogue is spot on, the vernacular apt and easy on the ear. He also is psychologically shrewd, capturing exactly the thought processes, mind trips and self-destructive interior monologues that would beset men in such extreme circumstances.

A Partial Defense of Westerns

Yeah, it's a western. I know some folks here would rather put hot pokers in their eyes, listen to the Boxed Set of Vanilla Ice or chaw on a turd sandwich for an hour than read a western. And I can dig that. People like

what they like. And the dismissing of particular genres out of hand (and it could just as easily be noir or fantasy we're talking about here) is much easier and requires less intellectual effort than trying to judge each book on its own merits. Life is so short, there are so many books. That is one approach to reading, I guess. Stay in your own ghetto (or penthouse, no doubt), keep your blinkers on, but to dress that up as sophistication is ridiculous. An engagement with The West (ern) (and here too one must add an engagement with Western Film: the best works of John Ford, Howard Hawkes, Sam Peckinpah and Clint Eastwood) is an absolute *necessity* for anyone trying to firmly wrestle with the beast that it is the collective American Soul. It is the place where we are most naked & ugly, the place where our highest aspirations are constantly undermined by our most savage impulses. A place where brute individualism is beaten to bloody bits by the vastness of the land. Ah, the land! So reminiscent of our Judeo-Christian heritage. Biblical and stark, unforgiving. And maybe that its appeal to an author or reader. It's a place and a milieu, where things can be reduced to their most essential elements so that complex ideas, conflicting drives and the constant battle of man's worst aspects striving with 'the better angels of his nature' can be put under the most glaring klieg lights.

Aside: most westerns suck. As do most fantasy novels. As do most books in general. You have to wade through a lot of shit to find a McMurtry, McCarthy, an Elmore Leonard, Richard Matheson or Thomas Cobb. The Western Novel as an industry seems to bring out the most reactionary, God Fearing, White is Right, numbskulls on the planet.

Westerns, even at their best, seldom do right by women either (and this book is no exception). Women are subservient or absent, decoration or incidental. The Western novel is stuffed with the worst archetypes in this regard: the whore with heart of gold, the good girl, etc. There are exceptions: the wonderful version of Calamity Jane in the HBO series *Deadwood* and in the Pete Dexter novel of the same name, Elmore Leonard's female characters, who if they are seldom center stage in his novels, one can still always sense they are center stage in their own lives and the equals of their men.

The Book: Part Two

This book isn't reactionary in the least. It is subversive and constant in its undermining of certain forms of machismo. It points out over and over again to the uselessness of bravery in certain circumstances and is quite clear in its condemnation of the dehumanizing aspects of the military, while admitting to its transformative aspects. Cobb is also very good at displaying a man developing confidence in relation to repeated competence displayed, at showing that repetitive physical motion and gesture can bring a Zen-like tranquility to the mind and a new found purpose to life. That the gestures here are, in fact, the calm destruction of skulls through a skillfully aimed carbine adds a little irony to the proceedings. Cobb too doesn't seem to be buying into any sense of redemption here either, though all the POV characters here hanker after it with the fierce longing of teenage boys after womanly flesh. Any redemption that does take place is half-formed, barely there and sad as hell. Events spiral out of control, becoming more violent and apocalyptic by the chapter and though the book gets better and better it also gets exceedingly dark. And maybe there finally the McCarthy comparisons are apt.

Westerns and Me

I don't know why I love them so much now. There was a time I wouldn't be caught dead reading these things. I used to think they were worst kind of redneck bullshit. But now I'd much rather read something like this (or a novel or work of non-fiction set during the American Civil War) than almost anything except poetry. I think part of this is that one can find here history fully formed, undimmed by daily trivia and media machines. I think part of it is my love of the land. I can drive 80 miles and be in the sort of desert featured so

prominently in so many of these books. I can drive less than 20 and be at the site of the ruins of Indian Villages. I love the land, particularly the Southwest, it heals me and haunts me. Its vistas and features have come to speak to my soul(yeah, I believe in them) the way that no other place now does. The smell of sage and Manzanita, of scrub oak and pine, the howl of coyotes, the ruins of old Spanish buildings and horses run wild, all cliché perhaps, but clichés that speak to my deepest self. Add to it the layers of history, the idea of simpler things of subsistence only existence and I'm even more thoroughly hooked. The craftsmanship of old guns. Tamales and beans on the fire, coffee ground by stone. Old mud buildings, cook houses, farmers vs. ranchers and mining corporations coming to fuck them all out of everything and ruin the land for generations. Red rocks at sunset. And always the aboriginal people with a deeper wisdom and an understanding of their beautiful, dangerous land that we never quite achieve. What have I become? A reactionary and a romantic responding to a place and time that never quite existed in the way portrayed. But...

we love what we love.

Clifdisc says

A well written Western in the realist vein. I doubt this will make anyone's list of favorite Westerns yet I suspect it will be enjoyed by all fans of the genre.

Edward says

I agree with other reviewers that "Shavetail" gives a realistic and riveting look at life in an isolated Army outpost in the Arizona Territory during the war against the Apache. His portrayal of camp life as boring, dirty, banal and brutal is probably as close to the reality as any author has done. Cobb has done his research, and it is a delight to see his inclusion of historical sources at the end of the book. The characters are quite compelling: Thorne, his fellow soldiers, Brickner, Franklin, Austin, and even Donovan. I did, however, find the preoccupation with the odd relationship between Franklin and Austin a bit tedious. The ramblings were beginning to remind me of Colonel Kurtz in Apocalypse Now. I would rather have seen more about the camp and activities of the soldiers instead. The ending was somewhat of an anti-climax. Nevertheless, this was an exceptional and entertaining read, especially for someone with an interest in the time period.

Dianne says

Just starting this one. Really liked this book. It is somewhat different than what I usually read, but an excellent story.
