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Reader Resources

True Grit

by Charles Portis



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“I have never been one to flinch or crawlfish when faced with an unpleasant task.”

Preface

From the moment it was published, Charles Portis's *True Grit* earned acclaim from critics as a classic Western tale. In the decades since, readers of all ages and fans of all literary genres have fallen in love with the indelible voice of Mattie Ross, as she recounts her youthful quest to avenge the murder of her father with the aid of a down-at-heels federal marshal named Rooster Cogburn. The rousing adventure story inspired two award-winning films, but on the page, readers will discover fully the rich humor, inventive prose, and compelling characters that have made the book a masterpiece of American storytelling.



What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

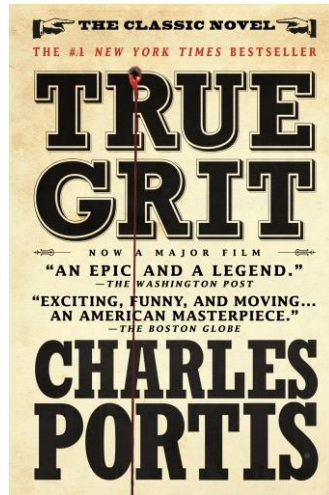
In the first line of *True Grit*, Charles Portis introduces the reader to the engaging voice of Mattie Ross, narrating from old age the great adventure of her life: "People do not give it credence that a fourteen-year-old girl could leave home and go off in the wintertime to avenge her father's blood but it did not seem so strange then, although I will say it did not happen every day."

In language straightforward but strongly her own, full of feeling but unsentimental, she goes on to relate the tale of her search for her father's murderer, "a coward going by the name of Tom Chaney," during a hard winter across the "Choctaw Nation" in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. To aid her in her quest, she seeks a man with a quality she calls "true grit" and thinks she finds him in Rooster Cogburn, a shabby and overweight but affable federal marshal. Also seeking Chaney, for other crimes, is LaBoeuf, a proud, young Texas Ranger, who enters into a sometimes uneasy partnership with the pair.

As the three track the killer across the still-untamed territory, they find themselves challenged by the landscape and its natural perils, by the deadly enemies they face, and ultimately by one another and their own fears.

Portis vividly recreates the roughness of an America that is barely a hundred years old and still deciding what kind of country it will be. A portrait of a specific time, it nevertheless exudes a mythic timelessness. In his unforgettable characters, he explores the meaning of friendship, courage, and fidelity to a moral code. Even as he plumbs these broad themes, the action never flags and the tale bristles with humor.

In the near half-century since it was first published, readers of all ages—including Portis's fellow writers, who admire the craft as much as the rousing story—have come to treasure it as a classic, not just of the Western genre but in all of American literature.



Major Characters in the Book

Mattie Ross

Raised on a farm in Yell County, Arkansas, Mattie is resolute and resourceful in seeking justice for the murder of her father. Headstrong, independent, and witty, Mattie—even at fourteen—insists on eventually facing down Tom Chaney herself, carrying her father's "Colt's dragoon" to kill him even if the law would fail to do so.

Reuben J. "Rooster" Cogburn

A former Confederate soldier, Rooster has become a federal marshal who patrols the Indian Territory. Prone to drinking bouts and the administration of his own brand of justice that some consider "pitiless," he is employed by Mattie to track down her father's murderer.

LaBoeuf

Proud, handsome, and something of a dandy in his "clanking" spurs, the Texas Ranger is seeking Tom Chaney for the murder of a Texas state senator. He clashes with Rooster over their differing approaches to the pursuit and suffers Rooster's antipathy toward the Rangers.

Tom Chaney

An itinerant hired man on Frank Ross's farm, Chaney kills and robs his employer on a trip to Fort Smith to buy horses and then flees to the Indian Territory. He is distinguished by a black mark on his cheek, which he received after a man shot him in the face, lodging gunpowder under his skin.

Lucky Ned Pepper

Long sought by Rooster and earlier wounded by him in the lip, Pepper heads a band of outlaws, which Tom Chaney joins after killing Frank Ross.

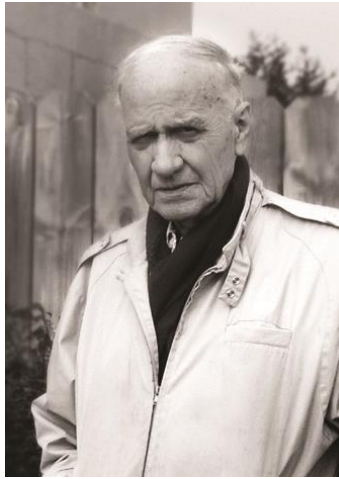
Little Blackie

The spirited pony carries Mattie, who calls him her "chum," over the Winding Stair Mountains on the quest to find Tom Chaney and eventually plays a crucial role in her very survival.

About the Author

Charles Portis (b. 1933)

In "Combinations of Jacksons" (1999), the one piece of autobiography he has published, Charles Portis describes a happy childhood roaming the rural landscape of south Arkansas, cooling watermelons in streams, devouring comic books, and listening to stories from relatives like his great Uncle Sat, "a strong and fluent talker with far-ranging opinions."



Charles Portis. Image courtesy of Jonathan Portis.

His father was a school superintendent and his mother a homemaker who was also a "good poet with a good ear," as he described her in a rare 2001 interview. After graduating from Hamburg High School in 1951, Portis enlisted in the Marine Corps and served overseas during the Korean War, as did Norwood Pratt, a character from his first novel, *Norwood* (1966).

The G.I. Bill allowed Portis to attend the University of Arkansas, where he majored in journalism which he chose because he "thought it would be fun and not very hard, something like barber college." After graduating, he worked for several newspapers, including the *Commercial Appeal* in Memphis, the *Arkansas Gazette* in Little Rock, and the *New York Herald Tribune*, where he covered the civil rights movement, worked in the newsroom with Tom Wolfe and Jimmy Breslin, and eventually became London bureau chief.

In 1964, he left that job and moved back to Arkansas to try his hand at fiction. His first novel, *Norwood* (1966), received glowing reviews, and his next one, *True Grit* (1968), became a bestseller and a star vehicle for John Wayne, whose 1969 portrayal of Rooster Cogburn earned him his only Oscar.

A private man who rarely grants interviews, Portis has since lived a quiet life in Little Rock, with occasional driving trips to Mexico and points west, while producing three more novels, *The Dog of the South* (1979), *Masters of Atlantis* (1985), and *Gringos* (1991). Wildly different from one another but consistently displaying deadpan comedy and empathetic satire, these novels were difficult to categorize (especially for readers who knew Portis only as working in the Western genre) and went out of print until the late 1990s, when fans like critic Ron Rosenbaum began championing them. All of Portis's novels are now available

from The Overlook Press, and a collection of his journalism, short stories, travel writing, and drama, *Escape Velocity: A Charles Portis Miscellany*, was published in 2012 by the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies.

Portis's work has long attracted a cultish following, especially among fellow writers such as Calvin Trillin, Donna Tartt, George Pelacanos, Roy Blount Jr., and the late Nora Ephron, who recognize the mastery in making such a difficult thing as comedy appear so effortless.

Portis of Arkansas

In Charles Portis's third novel, *The Dog of the South*, narrator Ray Midge proclaims: "A lot of people leave Arkansas and most of them come back sooner or later. They can't quite achieve escape velocity." This comment, both funny and surprisingly poignant, refers to the mysterious gravitational pull of the particular place called Arkansas. While wandering off and returning, a theme as old as the *Odyssey* and one of the themes of *True Grit*, isn't completely unique to this state, it certainly applies to Charles Portis.

When Portis has allowed an author biography on his book jackets (the first editions of *The Dog of the South* and *Masters of Atlantis* had none), they have sketched his career thusly: Born and educated in Arkansas, he served in Korea as a Marine and worked as a journalist in Memphis, Little Rock, New York City (often traveling South on the civil rights beat in 1963), and London, where he was bureau chief of the *New York Herald Tribune*. He moved back to Arkansas in 1964, and except for road-trip research in Mexico and elsewhere, he's remained there ever since, working as a freelance writer.

Novelist and journalist Tom Wolfe, his colleague at the *Herald Tribune* in the early 1960s, famously summed up Portis's return to Arkansas in the introduction to an influential collection called *The New Journalism*: "Portis quit cold one day...and moved into a fishing shack in Arkansas. In six months he wrote a beautiful little novel called *Norwood*. Then he wrote *True Grit*, which was a best seller. The reviews were terrific...He sold both books to the movies...He made a fortune...A *fishing shack!* In *Arkansas!*"

Despite Wolfe's astonished italics and exclamation points, Arkansas was a good place to go to work, far enough from both coasts as to be invisible to them. Without the distracting noise emanating from literary fashion in Manhattan or the movie world in Hollywood, a writer in Arkansas circa 1964 could go peacefully about the daily grind of making perfect novels. Portis produced five.

How perfect are they? As opposed to the output of a writer like Robert Penn Warren, who wrote one generally

acknowledged great novel and many lesser works, Portis wrote at least one great novel, *True Grit*, and four maybe better ones. In an essay that appeared in the *Believer* magazine in 2003 (included in the recent collection *Escape Velocity: A Charles Portis Miscellany*), novelist Ed Park sums it up this way: "He has written five remarkable, deeply entertaining novels (three of them masterpieces, though which three is up for debate)."

Curiously, Arkansas is not fundamental to the imaginative world of his novels in the way that Mississippi is for William Faulkner or Los Angeles for Raymond Chandler. Both Mattie Ross and Ray Midge, for instance, hail from Arkansas, but have their adventures far afield. If Arkansas has a claim on Portis, it is as the place where he learned to listen. His father's side of the family "were talkers rather than readers or writers. A lot of cigar smoke and laughing when my father and his brothers got together. Long anecdotes. The spoken word."

And in the one piece of direct memoir he has written so far, "Combinations of Jacksons," he describes how his great-uncle Sat discoursed at length on many topics from World War II to hunting and "may well have been the last man in America who without being facetious called food 'vittles' ('victuals,' a perfectly good word, and correctly pronounced 'vittles,' but for some reason thought to be countrified and comical)."

As far away as his imagination travels, Portis himself has stuck fast to Arkansas and writes with great affection, outside his fiction, for its people, its history, and its landscape. He can be said to share with Mattie Ross her opinion of its detractors, with its own exclamation point, "People who don't like Arkansas can go to the devil!"

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Charles Portis

1870s

- 1872: Mark Twain publishes *Roughing It*.
- 1875: Judge Isaac Parker, the "Hanging Judge," oversees the first of 79 executions during his tenure in the U.S. Court for the Western District of Arkansas.
- 1876: George Armstrong Custer's troops routed by Lakota and Cheyenne fighters on the Little Bighorn River in Custer's Last Stand.

1880s–1890s

- 1882: Jesse James shot and killed.
- 1889: President Benjamin Harrison authorizes claims on Indian Territory land for white settlement.
- 1890: Buffalo population on the Western plains reduced from 30 million to fewer than one thousand.

1900s–1910s

- 1902: Owen Wister publishes *The Virginian*, a novel romanticizing 1870s cowboy life in Wyoming cattle country.
- Oklahoma enters the Union in 1907; Arizona and New Mexico follow in 1912.

1930s

- 1933: Charles Portis born in south Arkansas.
- 1939: John Ford directs *Stagecoach*, his first Western to use sound, starring John Wayne.

1940s–1950s

- 1946: Portis's great-grandfather Alexander Waddell, who fought for the South in the Civil War, dies at age 99.
- 1953: *Shane*, starring Alan Ladd as a taciturn gunslinger, released.
- 1958: Portis serves as a Marine in the Korean War, graduates from the University of Arkansas with a degree in journalism.

1960s

- 1964: Portis works for the *New York Herald Tribune*, rising to London bureau chief.
- 1968: *True Grit* published, after being serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post*.
- 1969: John Wayne stars in the film version of *True Grit*, for which he receives his only Oscar.

1970s–1990s

- 1992: *Unforgiven*, a Western starring and directed by Clint Eastwood, wins four Oscars, including Best Picture.
- 1998: *Esquire* magazine essay on Portis inspires The Overlook Press to reissue Portis's out-of-print novels.

2000s

- 2010: The Coen brothers' version of *True Grit* released.
- 2012: Two decades after Portis's last novel, *Escape Velocity* published.

Other Works/Adaptations

Portis and His Other Works

Those who know Charles Portis only as the author of *True Grit* may have wrongly assumed that he is a writer of Westerns in the manner of Louis L'Amour. In fact, as wonderful and popular as *True Grit* is, many critics and fans feel that his literary reputation ultimately will rest on his other four novels, which are more directly comic and genre-defying.

His first novel, *Norwood* (1966), follows Norwood Pratt, a Korean War vet, auto mechanic, and aspiring country singer from Ralph, Texas, on an odyssey to New York City and back to recover a \$70 debt from a Marine buddy. Clocking in at less than two hundred pages, the book offers a brisk picaresque through oddball America, including an encounter with the "world's smallest perfect fat man," the liberation of a "College Educated Chicken" named Joann the Wonder Hen from a penny arcade, and a sort-of love story. The book establishes Portis's deadpan comic voice and laugh-out-loud observational acuity, as when Norwood notices a sign on a closed furniture store instructing patrons "to call R. T. Baker in case of emergency" and imagines such a call: "Hello, Baker? I hate to bother you at home but I need a chair right now."

The success of *True Grit* and the pigeonholing of Portis as a writer in the Western genre no doubt accounted for the initially tepid response to his next novel, *The Dog of the South* (1979), a shaggier picaresque. In it, a newspaper copy editor, Ray Midge, sets out from his home in Little Rock, Arkansas, to Mexico in pursuit of his wife, his colleague she has run off with, and his prized Ford Torino. Along the twisting way to British Honduras, Midge picks up Dr. Reo Symes, a fluid talker and ne'er-do-well schemer who, as Midge observes, once "sold wide shoes by mail, shoes that must have been almost round, at widths up to EEEEEEE." Midge's first-person narration propels the book to its comic heights, and it is most often cited by fans as Portis's funniest. It sold poorly until five years after publication, when two New York City bookstore workers bought all existing hardcover copies and filled their store window display with them, reviving interest.

Within a year of that resurrection, Portis had another novel ready, *Masters of Atlantis* (1985), the tale of a second-rate fraternal society, the Gnomons, founded by Lamar Jimmerson, who, while serving in World War I, comes upon a document that he believes holds the key to the lost city of Atlantis and its alchemical secrets. The book traces the rise and fall of the society, as various cranks engage in infighting and power plays. Both Conan O'Brien and Garrison Keillor have listed it among their favorite funny novels, and Jesse

Sheidlower, editor-at-large for the Oxford English Dictionary, recently went one step further in a Tweet: "Blown away: this is truly a great American novel."

Portis's most recent novel, *Gringos*, was published in 1991. Less baldly comic and altogether darker, it may be his most fully realized work of fiction in the depth of its characters, the turning of its plot, and the complexity of its moral world. Nevertheless, his trademark clarity of language and fineness of observation are everywhere. For example, the laconic narrator Jimmy Burns, an expatriate American in the Yucatan, faces a cult-like group's menacing leader, whose Aryan Brotherhood tattoo "was a rough, homemade job done with a pin and spit and burnt match-heads."

While fans wait for another novel, they can be happy with a new compilation of Portis's previously uncollected work, *Escape Velocity: A Charles Portis Miscellany* (2012). In addition to short stories and newspaper and magazine journalism, the book includes a previously unpublished, once-produced play, *Delray's New Moon* (1996), which novelist Glen David Gold has called Portis's "sixth major work."

Works by Charles Portis

Fiction

- *Norwood*, 1966
- *True Grit*, 1968
- *The Dog of the South*, 1979
- *Masters of Atlantis*, 1985
- *Gringos*, 1991

Collection

- *Escape Velocity: A Charles Portis Miscellany*, 2012
This volume contains journalism, travel writing, short stories, a full-length play, and a rare interview, as well as several essays about Portis's work from other writers.

The Western Film and True Grit

As a genre, the Western film dates to the earliest days of the medium itself. According to cinema historian Gerald Mast, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) was the single most popular film in moviemaking's first two decades. Its final frame of a gunslinger pointing his weapon directly at the viewer and firing shocked audiences in its day. Up until the 1930s, the Western, and primarily silent Westerns, thrived largely as simple, pulpy action tales that set up archetypal characters and landscapes.

Early Western films evoke "vast western vistas and the dignity of the good-bad men who inhabit these spaces," as Mast writes in *A Short History of the Movies*. The one film that did more than any other to change the genre from mere entertainment to cinematic art was John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939). Starring John Wayne in his first major role, it was nominated for five Academy Awards and won two.

Ford became the preeminent director of Westerns for the next fifteen years and Wayne the biggest star; they collaborated on classics like *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *The Searchers* (1956), which the American Film Institute has named the best Western of all time. Ford and other directors explored themes of courage, human decency, and written versus individual law. As critic Robert Warshow wrote in 1954, "The Westerner is the last gentleman, and the movies which over and over again tell his story are probably the last art form in which the concept of honor retains its strength."

In the 1960s, consistent with the counterculture of the time, Westerns became more morally ambiguous, glorifying the outlaws in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and portraying graphic violence in *The Wild Bunch*, both from 1969.

That same year, Henry Hathaway directed 62-year-old John Wayne as Rooster Cogburn in the film version of *True Grit*, which earned Wayne his only Best Actor Oscar. Compared with other Westerns in the late 1960s, *True Grit* had a more traditional feel. Nevertheless, it was very popular and ranked among the ten top-grossing films of the year. Fans of the book complained that Kim Darby was too old for the part of Mattie Ross, and that country singer (and Arkansas native) Glen Campbell, playing LaBoeuf, was too green an actor. The film did stick largely to the plot and structure of the book; Portis said that in the couple of days he spent on set he noticed Hathaway often referring to a marked-up copy of the book. Portis also observed that the actors "had trouble speaking the (intentionally) stiff dialogue." Although he did not write the screenplay, he did write the final scene in the film in which Mattie and Rooster talk in her family's

graveyard before he mounts his horse, jumps a fence, and rides away.

In 2010, Joel and Ethan Coen directed a second version of *True Grit*, also extremely popular and award-winning, earning ten Oscar nominations. Starring Jeff Bridges as Rooster Cogburn, Matt Damon as LaBoeuf, and newcomer Hailee Steinfeld (who was actually fourteen during filming) as Mattie, it was praised as a more "faithful" remake, mainly in that Steinfeld's Mattie was more true to the forceful adolescent of the book and the actors skillfully mastered dialogue that was often taken verbatim from Portis's scenes.

Whatever the flaws or faithfulness of the two versions, their popular success, forty years apart, affirms the timeless quality of the source material and the enduring appeal of the genre.

Discussion Questions

1. Mattie says that she is looking for a man with "true grit" to avenge her father's death. When given a choice of marshals, including one who is "straight as a string" as opposed to Rooster, who is the "meanest," why does she choose Rooster? How do you think she would define the quality of "true grit"?
2. What evidence can we find that Mattie won't abide mistreatment of anyone because of his or her background? What prejudices does she admit to?
3. Though Mattie often seems very mature, self-assured, and tough for age fourteen, in what scenes do we see her react in a way more like a person her age?
4. Rooster admits to killing and stealing and is portrayed as a drunkard. Why does Mattie, an upright and moral Christian, have such affection and admiration for him? Does this reveal a contradiction in her moral code?
5. Do you think Mattie's account of her adventure, as she looks back at her actions from a time decades later, is an accurate one? Why or why not?
6. At many points during the action, Mattie, Rooster, and LaBoeuf all "stretch the blanket," exaggerating or lying under certain circumstances. In which situations does the lying seem justified? Do any of these instances of lying or exaggeration change your impressions of the characters?
7. In what ways are LaBoeuf and Rooster similar in their personalities and in their beliefs about what is right and wrong? In what ways are they different?
8. There's an old proverb proclaiming that there is sometimes "honor among thieves." In what ways do the outlaws and bandits encountered in the book by Mattie, Rooster, and LaBoeuf display a code of conduct that argues that they're not purely evil?
9. The language of the book is vivid and colorful, yet often unfamiliar. How does Portis keep the characters' dialogue authentic to the historical period but make it accessible to a contemporary reader?
10. Near the end of the book, when Mattie encounters the elderly outlaws Frank James and Cole Younger at a "Wild West" show, she is polite to Younger but says to James, "Keep your seat, trash!" Why does she view them differently and what does it say about her memory of her adventure?

Additional Resources

If you'd like to read other books set on the American frontier, you might enjoy:

- Mark Twain's *Roughing It*, 1872
- Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 1927
- Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*, 1935
- A.B. Guthrie's *The Big Sky*, 1947
- Hal Borland's *When the Legends Die*, 1963
- Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose*, 1970

If you'd like to read other books in the Western genre, you might enjoy:

- Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, 1902
- Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*, 1912
- Louis L'Amour's *Bendigo Shafter*, 1979
- Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*, 1985
- Denis Johnson's *Train Dreams*, 2011
- Patrick deWitt's *The Sisters Brothers*, 2012

Credits

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Acknowledgments

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