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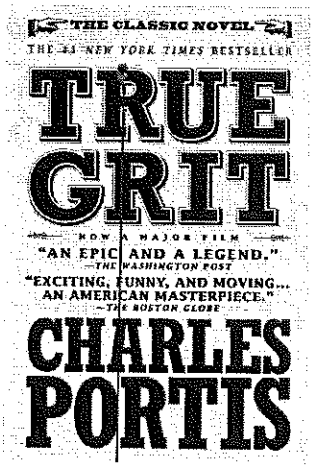
Reader Resources

True Grit

by Charles Portis

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.

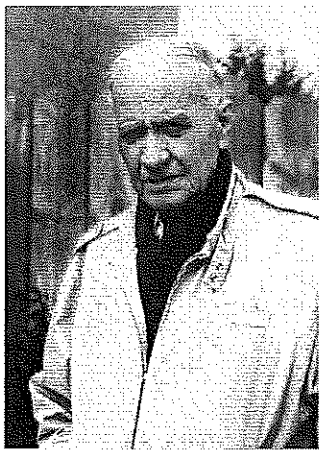
Tom Chaney
An itinerant hired man on Frank Ross's farm, Chaney kills and robs his employer on a trip to Fort Smith to buy horses and then flees to the Indian Territory. He is distinguished by a black mark on his cheek, which he received after a man shot him in the face, lodging gunpowder under his skin.

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)



Charles Portis. Image courtesy of Jonathan Portis.

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."

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.

HANDOUT ONE

The U.S. Marshals

Thanks to movies and television series—especially *Gunsmoke*, which is still shown on cable channels, long after its 20-year primetime run ended in 1975—everyone is familiar with the term "marshal" as a form of address for law enforcement officers, especially in the Old West. But most of us know surprisingly little about the U.S. marshals, given the wide scope of their duties and their long and distinguished history.

The United States Marshals Service, as it is now officially known, is in fact the nation's oldest federal law-enforcement agency. It was created in the landmark Judiciary Act passed by Congress on September 24, 1789, less than five months after the inauguration of George Washington as the first president. The act established the Supreme Court, the office of Attorney General, and the entire federal court system. It also mandated the appointment of marshals, charging them with the administration of the court system—including staffing, security, and transportation of prisoners, among other duties—and the enforcement of its decrees, such as serving all civil and criminal writs issued by the courts, including summonses, subpoenas, and arrest warrants.

As suggested above, the history of the marshals is indelibly associated with the history, and the legends, of the American West. In addition to *Gunsmoke*'s fictional Marshal Matt Dillon of Dodge City, Kansas, the agency's roster has included such well-known actual figures as Bat Masterson, Wild Bill Hickok, and Wyatt Earp. In many frontier towns, local law enforcement was inefficient, corrupt, or nearly nonexistent, and local officials sometimes resented and clashed with the marshals, who represented the often-hated national government. In the unorganized territories, such as the Indian Territory in which the second half of *True Grit* takes place, the marshals were the only representatives of the law.

In the West, the work was frequently hazardous. From 1794—when U.S. Marshall Robert Forsyth became the first American lawman ever killed in the line of duty—until 1860, only five marshals died in service. From December 1869 to the end of the nineteenth century, more than 150 marshals, deputy marshals, and posse members were killed while carrying out their official duties. No fewer than eight of them died in 1878 alone, the most likely year for the events of the novel.

Another demonstration of the novel's historical accuracy occurs with the business about Rooster Cogburn's fee sheets. It was not until 1896 that marshals were paid a salary; previously, they had worked on a fee system. As the point is made on the official website of the Marshal Service (which is quite candid about the fact that many marshals, especially in the nineteenth century, were not always overly scrupulous in the performance of their duties): "The biggest problem besetting the Marshals of the 1800s was not catching lawbreakers, but accounting for the monies used to run the courts. A small army of accountants at the Treasury and Justice Departments audited them at every turn, disallowing their expenditures on the slightest excuse. Keeping track of the courts' funds was a headache of a job compared to which pursuing mail robbers and other outlaws must have seemed a welcome relief."

To the delight of many admirers of *True Grit*, Fort Smith, Arkansas, will be the future home of the U.S. Marshals Museum.

HANDOUT TWO

The Shadow of the Civil War

Without any doubt, the Civil War is the most devastating and traumatic event in our national history (a fact that was made inescapably real to millions of viewers by Ken Burns's 1990 documentary series). Over four incredibly bloody years, it took the lives of as many as 750,000 men and inflicted wounds and injuries upon countless others. It tore apart families, devastated the landscape, and inflamed sectional and political tensions that have not fully subsided even to this day. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the war should cast its long shadow over the characters of a novel set less than 15 years after the end of the fighting.

All three of the principal characters are Southerners. Mattie is the daughter of a Confederate veteran from Arkansas. LaBoeuf, a proud Texan, and Rooster, who is from Missouri, also fought on the Confederate side. (Rooster's cat is called General Sterling Price, after a Confederate commander and former governor of Missouri.) At one point along the road, Mattie questions Rooster about his background. She notes that, despite his having fought against them, "Now you are working for the Yankees," and he replies: "Well, the times has changed. ... I would have never thought it back then." The changing times may also help to account, at least in part, for Rooster's evasiveness when the subject of the war comes up, especially in his exchanges with LaBoeuf.

Chiefly at issue here is Rooster's having ridden with William Quantrill (1837–1865), whose band of guerilla raiders included (as Rooster points out) Frank and Jesse James and Cole and Jim Younger. Quantrill, who had deserted from General Price's army, attacked Union troops and pro-Union civilians. In August 1863, he commanded a raid on Lawrence, Kansas, to avenge actions in Missouri by Union forces from Kansas, particularly an attack on Osceola led by U.S. Senator James Lane. Quantrill's forces rounded up and shot nearly two hundred men and boys, and set fire to many of the town's buildings. The Lawrence raid shocked even the Confederate government, which withdrew its previous support for Quantrill. LaBoeuf, who served honorably in the regular forces at the end of the war despite being only 15 years old, presses Rooster about Quantrill and Lawrence. Clearly, LaBoeuf fancies himself one of nature's noblemen, in contrast to the dissolute and slippery Rooster.

Another effect of the war and its aftermath is shown in the novel through Mattie's politics. The Republican Party had been founded in 1854 in opposition to slavery. The 1860 election of Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican president, had provoked the secession of the eleven Southern states and the outbreak of the war in April 1861. For a century after the Civil War, the "Solid South" expressed its lingering antipathy to the Republicans by voting all but exclusively for Democrats, even when their candidates at the national level espoused policies at odds with the political tendencies of the region. (These allegiances changed with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 under Democratic president Lyndon Johnson, and the Republicans' subsequent courting of the white Southern vote.) Thus, Mattie is a loyal Democrat who supports New York Governor Al Smith for president in 1928, and brushes aside his support for the repeal of Prohibition even though she is fiercely opposed to alcohol.

HANDOUT THREE

Pride and Prejudice

Most readers want the protagonist of a work of fiction to be a sympathetic and even admirable person, and many go so far as to want to be able to identify with him or her. Mattie Ross does have a number of admirable characteristics—courage, tenacity, and seriousness, to name a few. But it is one of the more remarkable aspects of Charles Portis's achievement in *True Grit* that he makes us feel irresistibly drawn to a character who also has a number of seriously off-putting traits. Mattie is scornful, superior, and quick to judge other people, usually dismissively and often for absurd reasons. Other characters point out her flaws from time to time: Lawyer Daggett's letter refers to her "headstrong ways" and concludes with "...you are a pearl of great price to me, but there are times when you are an almighty trial to those who love you." Even Tom Chaney upbraids her for her smugness: "You little busybody! What does your kind know of hardship and affliction?"

If asked to describe what happens in the novel, most readers would of course summarize the plot—Mattie's determination to avenge her father's murder, and the events that follow from that determination. But there is something else that happens in the novel that is of equal, if not greater, importance. As in most narrative works of serious literature, the protagonist of *True Grit* goes through a series of significant experiences and achieves some new insights and growth of character as a result of those experiences. Nowhere is this more clearly displayed than in her relationship with Rooster Cogburn. In many ways, Rooster is everything that Mattie despises: he drinks; he is slovenly and disorganized; he is self-serving and lacking in nobility; she never seems certain that she can rely on him to keep his word and fulfill his responsibilities to her; at one or two points along the way, she all but concludes that he is a coward.

Yet her interaction with Rooster will turn out to be the most important experience of her life, and she will learn a great deal about life from him. When she insists that Tom Chaney must be punished for the murder of her father—and must be made aware that that is what he is being punished for—Rooster responds: "You are being stiff-necked about this. You are young. It is time you learned that you cannot have your way in every little particular. Other people have got their interests too." She learns the truth of his words when Tom Chaney's end turns out to be very different from what she anticipated and when she pays a much higher price for his destruction than she ever imagined. Even more importantly, she learns from him that people are not all good or all evil, that human nature is complicated, and that courage, nobility, and self-sacrifice can coexist with other, less attractive personal characteristics.

Despite all his faults, in the end Mattie comes to admire and even to love Rooster, as is touchingly shown in the last few pages of the novel. Her encounter with Cole Younger and Frank James is a striking instance of the subtlety and depth of Portis's character portrayal. She is still the same Mattie, making sweeping snap judgments about both men for the flimsiest of reasons; after all, people don't turn into something completely different from what they started out to be. And yet her opinions of both of the old outlaws exactly correspond to Rooster's, as he had expressed them to her 25 years earlier—still another demonstration of his profound effect upon her.