

James A. Michener
Curriculum Supplement

Introduction:

One of the earliest memories of James A. Michener is of the road that ran in front of his house in Doylestown, Pa. To the east, it ended abruptly at a farm about a half-mile away. To the west, it ran forever, “leading to strange places and wondrous adventures that I could not even imagine.”

To young Michener, the road was magic. Often when he walked home from the farm after finishing his work harvesting asparagus, he would visualize himself continuing to walk westward “toward the wonders that my geography books assured me existed.”

In his memoirs, The World Is My Home (1992), he remembered, “I always saw myself as traveling alone, moving into one great adventure after another, and never did my mind tire of that imaginary exercise.”

Back home under the light of a kerosene lamp, he would pore over maps and “try to conjure from the little pictures of Iowa and Colorado visions of what those distant places must be like. Before I was nine or ten I could identify all the states on the maps we were given in school.”

One summer day, his friend Ted Johnson, like Michener an orphan, astonished him by saying, “Nothing doing in Doylestown. Why don’t we see what’s happening in New York?”

The impressionable, 14-year-old Michener liked the idea “so off we started on the first important journey of my life.”

They began the 75-mile journey with less than 25 cents each and “with not the slightest doubt in the world that we would make it.” And, indeed, they did make it “without spending any of our capital” thanks to a truck driver who carried them on the ferry from New Jersey into the city.

At the back door of restaurants they found free food, and they saw “with wide-eyed wonder sights we did not understand and whose historical importance we did not appreciate.”

After two “wonderful” days, they headed home for “a few boring weeks” before starting another trip, this time to Florida. Again they met with unfailing kindness and assistance, but in a small town in Georgia police intercepted the hitchhiking pair.

“What do you kids think you’re doing?” a policeman asked. Ted and James spent a night in jail before the policeman arranged a ride for them back to Philadelphia with a friend who was a truck driver.

The footloose youths made a third trip, this one to the Canadian border, before Michener began to travel alone. “I was my own pilot, my own counselor, and was able to do pretty much as I wished,” Michener said. “I was a free agent...I liked being off by myself and doing things in my independent way.

“I was in many ways the poorest boy on the road, in others the richest,” he wrote. “I was always happy to be on the road meeting new people, hearing new stories and seeing new landscapes.”

Asked in later years why his elders allowed the trips or why he felt the need to leave home, Michener said it was not because of “any deep-seated psychic deficiency.”

He explained, “Home was not exciting enough to keep me tied to it, and I had no physical possessions of any kind to hold my interest for long periods of time. Yet I was not unhappy with my family, my school or my friends. The simple fact seems to have been that once I saw that mysterious road outside my house...I was determined to explore.”

Michener admitted that “I was from the start an impressionable person, and I think I traveled in order to be changed from what I was so it all led to alteration. Whether for good or ill is not for me to judge. But I suppose those boyhood trips established my lifelong pattern of wanting to be free and of seeking new vistas, experiences and friendships.”

Michener often described himself as a “foundling.” Sterling Watson of Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Fla., where Michener was a visiting professor in 1990, says, “I believe he always lived and worked in the energy and the tragedy of that image and that idea. He was always on the move, always a stranger making friends. “He relied on the people he met to give him things. He relied on their generosity. Mostly, they gave him their stories,” Watson continued. “Unlike most writers, he was a good listener. He was infinitely interested in the lives of others, in their lineages and

all the strains of culture and history that made them who they were. I believe this is at least partly because he knew so little of his own origins.”

So after Mabel Michener, a Quaker widow who rescued him shortly after his birth in 1907, introduced young James to books, libraries, music, opera and art, he became America’s favorite storyteller of the 20th century, the author of nine novels that reached the top of the *New York Times* best-seller chart.

“I write at 85 for the same reasons that impelled me to write at 45,” he said in 1992. “I was born with a passionate desire to communicate, to organize experience, to tell tales that dramatize the adventures which readers might have had. I have been that ancient man who sat by the campfire at night and regaled the hunters with imaginative recitations about their prowess.

“The job of an apple tree is to bear apples. The job of a storyteller is to tell stories, and I have concentrated on that obligation.”

Summary:

Michener is best known for his fictional works that illustrate the history of a nation, state or region. His novels are history lessons disguised as fiction. He brings together setting, people and story to create an interesting account of some part of the world.

Despite his fondness for independence, he was not a recluse. And he didn’t back away from controversy. He seemed to always engage in a rich social life with everyday people, business leaders, politicians, and leaders and citizens of other nations. “I studied people, listened to their stories, weighed the honesty of their statements and always judged myself in terms of their achievements,” he wrote.

He called himself “a humanist” because “I think humanity can, with constant moral guidance, create reasonably decent societies.”

In his novels Hawaii, Centennial, Chesapeake, Texas and Alaska, he gives revealing portraits of five areas of his native America. Centennial, his account of the history of Colorado, called the Centennial State because it became part of the U.S. in 1876 on the nation’s 100th birthday, contains what he calls “one of the best chapters I’ve written” about a cattle drive from Jacksboro across west Texas up the Pecos River to Horsehead Crossing and the Venneford Ranch in Colorado. The reader vicariously participates in the dust, heat and hard work of an authentic cattle drive as seen

primarily through the eyes of 14-year-old Jim Lloyd, one of the book's more complex characters because Michener shares with readers Jim's thoughts as well as his actions.

Michener wrote about a wide variety of topics in his other books set in the United States, ranging from sports (Sports in America in 1976) to politics (Report of the County Chairman in 1961 and Presidential Lottery: The Reckless Gamble in Our Electoral System in 1969) and the development of the space program (Space in 1982). His other books included The Drifters (1971) and Kent State: What Happened and Why (1971) about young members of the counterculture and the shootings on the Kent State campus, The Recessional (1994) about old age and problems faced by the elderly, and James A. Michener's Writer's Handbook: Explorations in Writing and Publishing (1992) and The Novel (1991) about the art of writing and the business of publishing.

His second book, The Fires of Spring (1949) comes closest to an autobiography, and his memoirs were published in The World Is My Home (1992).

He even wrote about the Alamo, Sam Houston and Santa Anna in The Eagle and the Raven (1990), which was actually developed from a deleted chapter in Texas.

But Michener wasn't limited to the U.S. for his subjects. He traveled, lived and worked in 103 nations around the world, researching and documenting his ideas and looking for new ones. "I always have a great backlog I want to write about," he said. "I can't ever conceive of running out of ideas. They crowd me. Ideas have been the joy of my life."

In whatever country he visited, he said, "I met dreamers who longed to reach America and its promise of an enriched life. So I knew we had a country rich in opportunity."

Asia and the Pacific certainly figure prominently in his collection of works, beginning with his first novel Tales of the South Pacific (1947), because he felt an understanding of this region was absolutely crucial for Americans. Titles that followed included The Voice of Asia (1951), Return to Paradise (1951), The Bridges at Toko-Ri (1953), Sayonara (1954), The Floating World (1955), Hawaii (1959), Japanese Prints: From the Early Masters to the Modern (1959), and The Modern Japanese Print: An Appreciation (1968).

Sen. Daniel Inouye called him "Mr. Pacific" and said, "I found that in many capitals in that part of the world, James A. Michener was one of the best known Americans."

Other international settings for his books included South Africa for The Covenant (1980), Poland (1983), the Spanish peninsula for Iberia: Spanish Travels and Reflections (1968) and Miracle in Seville (1995), Israel for The Source (1965), Afghanistan for Caravans (1963), Nicaragua for The Legacy (1987), Caribbean (1989) and Mexico (1992).

On several occasions he lived for extended periods of time in places where he and the native people didn't understand each other's language.

“That I am a citizen of the world is quite clear,” he wrote, “but I have never been willing to adopt an affiliation with something vague and amorphous. My home is only one nation within the greater entity, but I serve the whole much more effectively when I serve my homeland best.”

No doubt many readers made notes as they progressed through his books about places they too wanted to visit.

Themes:

In his memoirs, Michener wrote, “A novel is a receptacle into which the writer throws everything he believes to be relevant, but the reader will be enticed only if the matter is thrown with skill and artistry.”

Some literary critics may disagree, but Michener's skill and artistry that produced his themes were obviously popular with readers. He wrote primarily in the mornings on a manual typewriter and admitted that “writing is hard, exhausting work...At 12:30 when I stop, I am usually sweaty.”

He described himself as “an old-fashioned two-finger typist who won't give up his manual typewriter...There is a theory among writers that if you type with 10 fingers you type faster than you can think. Even with my two fingers I sometimes outrun myself. The problem is to get a typing speed that is harmonious with your brain speed.”

He added, “Throughout my writing career I have tried to use effective words that are not too arcane in sentences that are not too long to achieve paragraphs that produce a narrative that will constantly lure the reader from one page to the next...Good writing, for most of us, consists of trying to use ordinary words to achieve extraordinary results.”

His manuscripts were scribbled upon, cut and pasted, and endlessly revised. “I may not be the world’s greatest writer, but I’m certainly one of the great rewriters,” he said.

Michener compared a writer sitting at his desk with an empty piece of paper to “the explorer who stands at the edge of a continent uncertain of how to proceed. Where do we go from here?”

He was taught that a novel consisted of two distinct types of writing: “*carry*, in which the forward movement of the novel is revealed in bold strokes, and *scene*, which reveals the character involved in a specific action at a specific site.”

In his Writer’s Handbook, he said the best job for a would-be writer “is working in the token clerk’s booth of a New York City subway.” In addition to seeing and meeting interesting people, “you leave work after eight hours with your unused mind eager to tackle something of importance.”

For Michener, the act of writing also implied the taking of a moral stand. In some ways, he’s more of a teacher or preacher than writer. His books were a reflection of his life and background, celebrating the all-America virtues of common sense, hard work, frugality, harmony, courage and patriotism. Again and again, his stories are variations of the Quaker belief in the literal brotherhood of man.

“Theme has been of extreme importance to me,” he said. “Early in my career I elected to write about far places in turmoil, men at war, new nations emerging, and that decision has served me well.”

Often he tells stories with missionary zeal of problems caused by the lack of understanding among ethnic groups, the role of migration and adaptation to new situations, concern for the environment, the condition of women, and the state of modern American society.

He added, “Stressing theme too obviously produces mechanical plotting, stereotypical characters and tedious reading.” He noted that “thousands of people read Hawaii without recognizing it as a strong statement on race relations.” He places great importance on human tolerance, and whether the issue is race, religion or culture, his books promote respect for all human beings.

Michener's books tell of people who cannot flourish without using the land and its products, but it's difficult for them to find the balance in the struggle to make the land fruitful without ruining it. In The Source, he tells of the transformation of a promised land into a desert. The farmers in Centennial subject their fields to erosion, the cotton farmers in Texas don't realize their deep wells deplete underground sources of water, and greed motivates hunters in Alaska.

Characters:

Literary critics often find fault with the characters in Michener's books. Because of the type of historical panorama or saga that he presents, he sometimes doesn't devote enough time or space needed to fully develop them. But his readers do find memorable people, including principal characters who also serve as narrators, to whom they can relate and react as the story progresses. But they are occasionally people of action and not reflection.

"I tend to accept characters more or less at face value, preferring to have them reveal themselves in their own way," he said in The World Is My Home. "I have tried to create men and women who capture the imagination and hold it."

Michener said he centered his writing on "ordinary but memorable characters whose lives shed a kind of radiance, whose behavior, good or bad, illuminated what I was striving to impart."

He does admit in his Writer's Handbook that "I realize that there may have been a better approach that relied less on setting and more on character."

Michener's characters display courage and hard work. They possess the fortitude necessary to press on against difficulties caused by climate, terrain, wars or other people. They are willing to exert themselves to achieve goals. Harry Brubaker in The Bridges of Toko-Ri continues to fly missions over Korea because his sense of doing a job well overcomes his bitterness about leaving his family to fight in a war. Levi and Elly Zendt in Centennial push on across the plains despite the hardships of the journey. In Texas, Fray Damian de Saldana represents the devotion of Catholic missionaries, working for the Lord with humility and diligence, and Emma Larkin survives her years in captivity by Comanche Indians.

He knew that the melting pot was a primal American image, and he knew that novels about people from far-away places would appeal to the tolerant strain in Americans, no matter how submerged it sometimes was. "I always loved people, their histories,

the preposterous things they did and said, and I especially relish their stories about themselves,” he said. “I was eager to collect information about everyone I met. I was a listener, not a talker.”

Quotations:

A Century of Sonnets:

“The touchstone of my life was loyalty
To any task for which I volunteered.
I did not pledge to local royalty
But to the common good that I revered.
Those who employed me found an eager man,
Not limited to short eight-hour day,
Who kept his eye upon the master plan
And strove to edge it forward on its way.
I loved my school, my team, my Navy station,
My state, my country and the human race,
But most of all I loved my occupation:
The task of writing with insight and grace.
In time I learned the way to help my nation
Was to excel within my own vocation.”

The Fires of Spring:

“Writing is like that. Seeing what no one has ever seen before and writing it down so simply that everyone will say, ‘Of course! I knew that all along.’ If I can see, I can write...If I could see into the core of some one thing each day, say a horse eating oats, or a ferryboat, or the way a chair stands on the floor, I’d soon be so terribly filled with material that they couldn’t stop me from writing. Not even with machine guns...There’s no reason why I couldn’t write as well as Balzac.”

Mexico:

“But of Mexico as a unique land, with its own promise and its own problems, no one had written. And least of all the Mexicans themselves. For anyone in this land who took up his pen did so either as a Spanish apologist or as an Indian or as an anti-American or as a pro-Russian. But as a Mexican? Never.”

Tales of the South Pacific:

“I thought of Hoag as I knew him, a man who never buttoned his shirt properly. He was from Atlanta, but he championed the Negro. He was a rich man, but he befriended his meanest enlisted man. He was a gentile, but he placed Jews in position

of command. He was a man tired with responsibility, but he saw to it that others got rest...Each man who lay on Hoga Point bore with him to his grave some promise for a free America. Now they were gone. Who would take their places? Women? Old men? Or were those who lived committed to a double burden?"

Texas:

"By the spring of 1845 the varied assignments given the self-taught surveyor, Ludwig Allerkamp, had enabled him to know more of Texas than most of its other citizens, and since he had an innate curiosity and a love of nature acquired from his ramblings in the woodlands of Germany, he perceived relationships which others did not. He saw, for example, that this central part of Texas consisted of five clearly defined strips, each a minor nation of its own...As Ludwig told his family when he returned from his assignment: "It's as if nature wanted to give a signal: 'Here begins a new world.' And she laid down this barrier of great rocks and hills." He told them: "Austin will become the most beautiful city in Texas because it lies right on the Balcones, land goes up and down, up and down." Now the government assigned him the task of inspecting the fifth and most noble strip, those marvelous, quiet lands which lay to the west of the Balcones. With his two sons, Ernst, home from his service with the Rangers, and Emil, he set out to explore the very best part of Texas, the hill country."

The World Is My Home:

"How can I possibly be what so many have called me, the incorrigible optimist? First, looking at the way in which good luck seemed determined to seek me out, with one scholarship after another, a series of good jobs plus a Pulitzer for my first book and a subsequent glorious Broadway musical, and with one best-seller after another, who should be optimistic if not I? Second, if I survived three major airplane crashes, revolutions and several major health problems, why would I not conclude that I was being kept alive in order to tackle some challenging job?...It seems that I was born to smile at the world, and such men do not write tragedies."

Essay Topics:

1. Explain how Michener's childhood influenced his writing.
2. What do you think it was like for Michener to hitchhike alone as a teenager across the U.S. in the 1920s?
3. People often gave Michener suggestions of ideas for other books. Briefly develop a topic you think he could have used for a book.

4. Which of the places Michener wrote about would you most like to visit? Why?
5. Write about the importance of setting or place compared to characters in a novel.
6. Describe how you will “help your nation within your vocation” as Michener writes in A Century of Sonnets.
7. Michener was a visiting professor of writing at several universities. Imagine yourself in a class taught by Michener. What would you ask him?
8. Write about why you think Michener’s books were so successful.
9. Why are most of Michener’s books upbeat and optimistic?
10. Write about your favorite Michener book or character.

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