

He Excelled at His Job of Telling Stories

by Garner Roberts

Profile of James A. Michener

In the 1990s when students and professors from the Texas Center for Writers at the University of Texas held their annual barbecue at the Salt Lick, James A. Michener was always there. Despite his declining health, he sat at the center table and greeted everyone in his customary bolo tie, Hobo Times baseball cap and tennis shoes with Velcro straps.

So it seems appropriate that a few days after his death in 1997, about 40 young writers, all supported by Michener fellowships, gathered at the Salt Lick Bar-B-Q in Driftwood. As usual, the vegetarians complained about eating meat, the poetry professor got lost on her drive southwest of Austin, and someone broke up with her boyfriend in the parking lot. There was one difference. No one sat at the center table.

At Michener's funeral, one of the graduate students told the Center's director, James Magnuson, "He was such a chronicler. Wherever he went, he would always come back and tell us everything he learned, everything he found. This is the first time he's gone someplace where he can't tell us what it was like."

Few men ever made more of their time on earth than Michener. He was insatiably curious about the world, its people and their stories.

Equaled by few as an author, world traveler, philanthropist and art collector, he described himself simply as "a storyteller." In an 1989 interview, he said, "I'm sure that in the dawn of civilization I would have gone out with the hunters, then stayed behind a safe tree and at night explained how it all happened."

In a letter to "dear friends" written a week before his death and reprinted for his funeral, he added, "I savor every memory as they parade past. What a full life they made. And what a joy they bring me now; what a joy your recollection of them gives me now. It is in this mood that my final days are being passed."

Among his more than 50 books were nine novels that reached the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list. His first novel, Tales of the South Pacific, won a Pulitzer Prize, and despite the fact that originally it wasn't a best-seller, it became a

classic, long-running Broadway musical by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein.

His popularity with readers surpassed his critical success. Famous and prosperous but unpretentious, he was not judged by his words alone. He presented history in action, taking his readers through time in an entertaining fashion and introducing them to peoples and lands they did not know. His formula seems unlikely for this media age: big, old-fashioned narratives weaving generations of fictional families through densely-documented, factual events, celebrating the all-America virtues of common sense, hard work, frugality, harmony, courage and patriotism.

“It’s a wonderful job I have,” he told the *New York Times*.

In his memoirs, *The World Is My Home* (1992), he wrote, “My job has been to write books, not defend them.” He said the only goal he ever set for himself was to be “a reliable citizen who works to help society hold itself together.”

He acknowledged that critics were often unkind, but he was more concerned with his readers. “A great number of people write to tell me that their lives have been changed just by reading one of my books,” he told the *Austin American-Statesman*. “You forget that books can be so compelling.”

Critics often found fault with the length of his books (“as if that were a detriment,” he said). Indeed, the average length of the nine books that topped the best-seller list is 848 pages. A review by Hughes Rudd in the *New York Times* in 1985 of Michener’s book *Texas* said “the novel is so heavy you could probably leave it on a Lubbock coffee table in a tornado and find it there when everything else was in the air over Kansas City.”

But Michener said, “Every month throughout the year I receive letters complaining that the novels were too short. They wanted more.” He said his novels were “a tribute to the industriousness of both author and reader.”

In his memoirs, he attributed his success to two “accidental advantages.” He explained, “I published my books at the precise time when Americans were beginning to look outward at the entire world rather than inward at themselves. They were spiritually and intellectually ready and even eager to read the exploring kinds of books I wanted to write.

“And with the intrusion of a largely banal television, many were prepared to seek refuge in long books. Had I come along 50 years earlier, when America was isolationist, I doubt if anyone would have bothered much with my writing.”

His nine novels that earned the *New York Times*’ top spot were Hawaii (1959), The Source (1965), Centennial (1974), Chesapeake (1978), The Covenant (1980), Space (1982), Poland (1983), Texas (1985) and Alaska (1988).

After Tales of the South Pacific (1947), the semi-autobiographical The Fires of Spring (1949) and two other books, Hawaii was the first to employ Michener’s formula of intertwined multicentury, multiracial and multigenerational plot strands. His books were long sagas featuring many families and illustrating the historical and social evolutions of nations, states and regions. (A reviewer in *Time* magazine carped, “He begins with the first faint primordial stirrings on the face of the deep and slogs onward through the ages until he hits the day before yesterday.”)

But his books were published and purchased in the millions, and he became America’s storyteller.

Tales, his first published fiction, was actually a collection of short stories inspired by his visits to some 50 islands in the Pacific while he was in the U.S. Navy during World War II. Despite the sleazy format of the first edition, it was called by Orville Prescott in the *New York Times* “one of the best works of fiction yet to come out of the war..It is original in its material and point of view, fresh, simple and expert in presentation, humorous, engrossing and surprisingly moving.”

But W.J. Stuckey, author of *The Pulitzer Prize Novels* (1966), says it took a change in Pulitzer rules for Michener to win the award.

On May 11, 1947, five days after Robert Penn Warren won a Pulitzer for All the King’s Men, the *New York Times* reported that the official terms for the Pulitzer novel award had changed. In the future, the prize could be given not only to a “distinguished novel,” but also to “distinguished fiction in book form.” The prize could now be awarded to a collection of short fiction as well as to a novel.

Stuckey wrote in his book, “The (Pulitzer) Advisory Board, it seems, lifted the ban against short story collections only because it wished to give the 1948 award to James A. Michener’s Tales of the South Pacific. One board member has recently

revealed that at the May 1947 meeting, seven months before the close of the nominating period, some members of the Advisory Board had already made up their minds that South Pacific was likely to be the best choice for that year.

“Thus, when the board reconvened in May of the following year, it must have been somewhat disconcerted to find that the jury of literary experts had not even nominated Michener’s book for the prize. Since the Advisory Board had the authority to name the prize-winning book, however, it was a simple matter for it to disregard the jury’s recommendation and give the prize to Tales of the South Pacific.”

Years later board member Arthur Krock said they had “rescued South Pacific from oblivion and set its author on the road to fame and fortune.”

Still unconvinced, however, was Mabel Haddock Michener, a widow in Doylestown, Pa., who raised the orphaned James. “She knew the value of a secure job and was appalled to find that I was considering shifting to a career as fickle as writing,” Michener remembered. “She predicted not once but many times that no good would come of it.”

Michener told the *American-Statesman* in 1983 that the only thing that appeased her was when an excerpt from South Pacific appeared in *Saturday Evening Post*. “I heard her telling a neighbor, ‘Well, he did sell a story to the *Saturday Evening Post*, and they don’t fool around.’ ”

Michener often described himself as a “foundling” (a child found by strangers, a child left on a doorstep) rescued by Mabel in 1907. Biographies of Michener say he was born Feb. 3, 1907, in New York City, but he wrote in The World Is My Home that he really didn’t know when or where he was born or who his parents were. “I have no idea who I am,” he said. “I know what I was told, that I was a foundling.”

Mabel made her living by taking in orphans, doing other families’ laundry and sewing. She and the children often moved, sometimes “at night to escape some problem or another...Food was not plentiful. In some years, Christmas was a bleak affair, but there was abundant love,” James said.

“The normal childhood presents did not come our way. I never had a wagon or a pair of roller skates or a baseball glove or a tennis racket or a radio or a bicycle. I never had more than one good suit, and it had to last years, or more than one pair of shoes.”

But he added, “Mrs. Michener, into whose hands I fell one way or another, was one of those great women who serve in silence but leave behind a legacy that glows forever.”

In later years he said, “I have always lived as if bad times were sure to recur...As a Quaker I live simply, spend little and often chide my wife for her reluctance to give away things we don’t need.”

Mabel also introduced James to books, libraries, music and the opera. She read aloud to the children, especially from Charles Dickens and the classics, an experience that proved of value to the future novelist. “I remember it most vividly,” he wrote.

Also a footloose youth, he began at the age of 14 to explore the world by hitchhiking. “I bummed across the country on nickels and dimes,” he recalled. “Before I was 20, I had seen all the states but Washington, Oregon and Florida. I had an insatiable love of hearing people tell stories.”

A star basketball player in high school, he received a scholarship to attend nearby Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pa. He studied English and history and earned a B.A. degree *summa cum laude* in 1929.

He also studied abroad two years on a Swarthmore fellowship in Scotland, England, Italy and Spain. Michener taught at a prep school in Pottstown, Pa., and a Quaker school in Doylestown before spending three years in Greeley, Colo., 1936-39, at Colorado State College of Education (now University of Northern Colorado), where he received his M.A. degree.

He was also a visiting professor at Harvard University in 1940-41 before beginning his publishing career as an editor at Macmillan. He once ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. House of Representatives in Pennsylvania’s eighth district and campaigned for presidential candidate John F. Kennedy.

His career at Macmillan (1941-42 and 1946-49) was interrupted by World War II. He joined the Navy reserves in 1942 and was sent to the Pacific in 1944. “As the war wound down,” Arthur Grove Day explains in his book *James A. Michener* (1964), “he retreated to a jungle shack and began writing the stories that were to appear as Tales of the South Pacific.”

He returned to Macmillan, which published Tales, but his shares of royalties from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical South Pacific enabled him to become a full-time writer.

Film and television rights to some of his novels added millions of dollars to his already enormous royalties. By his count before he died Oct. 16, 1997, at the age of 90, he had sold 90 million to 100 million books.

And he shared his profits. The *Chronicle of Philanthropy* reported in 1997 that his gifts to universities, museums and libraries totaled more than \$117 million, including \$37 million to University of Texas. He also donated his manuscripts, papers and extensive collection of Japanese and American art. Married three times and twice divorced (Mari, his third wife of nearly 40 years, died in Austin in 1994), he had no children.

The opening page of his 512-page memoirs says, “I want the reader to see in careful detail the kind of ordinary human being who becomes a writer.”

Bob St. John, writing in the *Dallas Morning News* in 1983, said Michener “is as you would want to be if you were rich and famous. I do not believe I have ever seen anybody who is somebody who is so personable...He made people that he had never seen before nor would ever see again feel as if he were their friend.”

St. John added, “After I talked to him for a while, he seemed like a regular person instead of a world-famous author. Then I realized the best thing about him was that he was both.”

Michener said in The World Is My Home that he had lived and worked in 103 nations. One of those was Israel, where he lived while researching The Source (1963), his novel about the history of the Jews.

But he never knew his own source, never knew his own parents. “I don’t know who I am,” he told Sterling Watson of Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Fla., where he was a visiting professor in 1990. “I could be anybody. I could be Jewish or Catholic, Russian, Polish, German or Irish.”

Michener was anybody, everybody, at home anywhere in the world.