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A Book to Take to Bed

The town of Peyton Place is a cesspit of gossip and malevolence, ruled by men.



Russ Tamblyn as Norman Page and Diane Varsi as Allison MacKenzie in the film version of 'Peyton Place' (1957). PHOTO: THE KOBAL COLLECTION

By Edward Kosner

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SAVE PRINT TEXT

12

What “The Amboy Dukes” was to adolescent boys of the 1950s, “Peyton Place” was to teenage girls and their mothers—a febrile page-turner and sex manual best read by flashlight under the bed covers.

Set in an inbred, hypocritical New Hampshire mill town, Grace Metalious’s book, published in 1956, eventually sold 20 million copies and became the best-selling novel up to that point of the 20th century. It spawned a sequel, a movie starring Lana Turner that was nominated for nine Academy Awards, a movie of the sequel, and a neutered TV series starring young Mia Farrow and Ryan O’Neal that ran for five years and was at its peak watched by 60 million people each week. Today, nearly six decades after the book came out, “Peyton Place” is still shorthand for small-town and suburban America seething with sexual intrigue and worse.

The novel is plainly an artifact of midcentury American pop culture, often conflated with Jacqueline Susann’s “Valley of the Dolls” (1966) and other later hot-and-steamy blockbusters. But is the book actually a central text that, once properly decoded, yields provocative insights into patriarchal dominance, cloaked feminine sexuality, class hegemony and other vexed issues that still shadow our society even in an unfettered age of cable TV “Housewives,” drug rehab and Internet porn?

UNBUTTONING AMERICA

By Ardis Cameron
Cornell, 223 pages, \$24.95

For those too old to remember devouring “Peyton Place” or too young to have had the experience, the book turns on three women: Constance MacKenzie, a beautiful clothing-shop owner; Allison, her sensitive daughter, who is unaware that she was born out of wedlock, the result of an illicit affair with a married lover; and young Selena Cross, who kills her drunken stepfather, a woodsman who has been raping her in their tar-paper shack since she was 13.

The town of Peyton Place is a cesspit of gossip and malevolence, but it is ruled by its powerful men—the venal mill owner, the kindly doctor, the principled newspaper publisher and such—who put in the fix at key moments, and everything turns out for the best in the end. Even the girl who loses her right arm in an accident at a carnival owned by the dastardly mill owner is happy with her lot.

“There is the scent of soap in Metalious’s opera,” Ardis Cameron, a professor of American studies at the University of Southern Maine, observed accurately enough in her introduction to a 1999 reprint of the novel. Now she has expanded her meditation on “Peyton Place” into a treatise called “Unbuttoning America,” which boasts a sizzling cover of a busty ’50s pinup girl resting a blue book on her sleek, gartered legs while flashing the reader a come-hither-quick look.

The cover, of course, is ironic. Ms. Cameron’s book is aimed at the women’s- and American-studies shelves, not the pulp-fiction table in your local bookstore. And, despite plenty of multi-syllabic academic jargon, she does a creditable job of teasing out the book’s significance as a bold exploration of sexual, political, gender and class questions rarely recognized in its time.

In her telling, Grace Metalious was the unlikely herald of a new muckraking impulse in American fiction. A housewife with three kids married to a teacher in the village of Gilmanton Iron Works, N.H., she wrote dozens of unpublished short stories in her squalid kitchen before striking it rich with “Peyton Place.” She was most comfortable in plaid lumberjack shirts, dungarees and sneakers, her hair tied back in a ponytail and a glass of rye close at hand. Money and celebrity brought her no joy. She divorced her husband soon after the book came out, took up with, married and divorced a local disc jockey, remarried her first husband, dumped him again, and drank herself to death by age 39.

She knew the landscape—economic, political and sexual—of her hometown. “To a tourist,” she once wrote, “these [New England] towns look as peaceful as a postcard picture, but if you go beneath that picture, it’s like turning over a rock with your foot—all kinds of strange things crawl out.”

Ms. Cameron argues that the Cold War and its concomitant anti-communism imposed a stultifying sexual conformity on America. Marriage was the norm, the bulwark of the nation against the communist threat. Women who had sex outside marriage—“wild” teenage girls, “loose” divorcees and young widows—were threats. Lesbians and gay men were “perverts.” Even married women who enjoyed sex too much were suspect. A conspiracy of silence and denial enshrouded illegitimate babies and men who abused their children.

Metalious’s book covered it all, and some of her sex scenes still carry a surprising erotic charge. “Exposing female sexual autonomy and expression as well as conventional sexual behavior,” the professor writes, “Metalious’s ‘H-Bomb’ . . . turned *Peyton Place* into a heady symbol for the destructive power and disruptive force of out-of-control sexualities.”

For the general reader, the most rewarding parts of Ms. Cameron’s book are her pages about Grace Metalious herself, the sources of her material, and her fervent fans. Ms. Cameron had access to a trove of thousands of letters written by readers to Metalious. Most came from grateful women who felt that she had told their secret, unguessed stories. A few came from men, including an ex-preacher from Oklahoma who urged her to “go a little stronger” in her next book. “Include some Spanking Episodes,” he wrote, “also Oral scenes.”

As it happens, Metalious based some of the most arresting elements in “Peyton Place” on tips and gossip from her best friend, Laurie Wilkens, the social reporter for the neighboring Laconia Evening Citizen. It was Wilkens who told her about the case of a young girl in another town who had shot to death her drunken incestuous father and buried him in the sheep pen, which Metalious confected into the pivotal plotline of her novel. Wilkens also shared along the story of the woodsmen who locked themselves in a basement with a dozen barrels of hard cider, booze and beer and stayed drunk underground for six weeks. Metalious’s Gothic nightmare turned out to be based on New England mill-town reality.

The publishing history of “Peyton Place” was fraught, too. Metalious found an agent’s name in a trade magazine and sent him the novel, originally titled “The Tree and the Blossom,” over the transom. He offered it to three old-line publishers, who turned it down, but a reader at one house sent it to her friend at a less-fastidious outfit, who bought the book for a \$2,000 advance. After a year’s massaging (including turning the incestuous father into a stepfather), the novel was published as “Peyton Place,” and the “housewife-author” known around town as “Mrs. Crazy” became a literary star. Years later, Metalious learned that the agent had been running a Madoff-style con in which he paid his older clients by skimming money from his newer ones, including her. “This book business is some evil form of insanity,” she concluded.

For all her theorizing, Ms. Cameron’s most compelling insight into “Peyton Place” and American society comes inadvertently in the epilogue to her book. Here she describes how Metalious’s raw, propulsive novel was tamed first by Hollywood and then by network television.

“*Peyton Place* got a moral facelift,” she writes. “Drunks sobered up; . . . abortion, incest and child sexual abuse disappeared. . . . Gossipy old men, eccentric old maids, impoverished woodsmen, sexually aggressive girls, economically independent women, ambitious females, odd boys, and cranky Yankees took flight. . . . The ache of poverty, a pattern that runs through the novel, disappears. . . . The TV Constance MacKenzie runs a respectable bookstore, the kind where novels like *Peyton Place* would never be sold.”

American popular culture had rendered Grace Metalious’s Eisenhower Age Sodom safe for democracy.

—Mr. Kosner, the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News, is the author of a memoir, “It’s News to Me.”

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