

# The Carpetbaggers Short Guide

## The Carpetbaggers by Harold Robbins

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# Characters

The *Carpetbaggers* is a roman a clef, and the main character Jonas Cord is an obvious portrait of eccentric billionaire Howard Hughes — in his earlier, more active years. Robbins is a master of the roman a clef mode, giving his readers more than enough information to make the connection but then improving on prurient curiosity with a fictional closure that explains (and explains away) just how Cord became such a hard-driving and hard-driven character. The real Howard Hughes had no daughter to disown mistakenly, but Cord's discovery of his mistake provides effective closure for this complex narrative. Robbins never settles for reminding the reader of a real person; he always follows this created character through to his logical development in a clearly orchestrated plot.

After Jonas, the most striking character in the book is perhaps Rina Marlowe, a conflation of Jean Harlow (for the unfortunate sex life) and Jane Russell (for the film career and the curious relationship with Hughes). The character of Monica Winthrop owes something to Jean Peters, and the character of Nevada Smith owes a great deal to the cowboy star Ken Maynard. The character of Jennie Denton, a prostitute who becomes first a movie star and then a nun, is a conflation of various real people.

## Social Concerns

Social significance is probably not something that any one of its millions of readers has picked up *The Carpetbaggers* expecting to find; however, in common with many of Robbins's other books, this one fulfills an important social purpose by providing readers with vicarious access to a world of power and yet suggesting that it is not worth the effort necessary for reaching it. Lower-middle-class readers would remain unconvinced by a conventional moralizing that suggested the price was too high because the hero had to lie, cheat, and kill his way to the top. But Robbins's message is more subtle: he takes no moral stand against the lying and the cheating and the killing. In fact he goes out of his way to find contexts in which these can be viewed sympathetically. What member of the lower classes would, for example, begrudge Nevada Smith the opportunity to take revenge on the men who had murdered his parents? The fact that his methods are peculiarly sadistic only endears him to Robbins's readers: sadism practiced in a good cause absolves the guilt. The problem with life at the top is not any moral price paid in getting there. The problem as Robbins presents it is that, despite its apparent glamour, life at the top is nevertheless empty and unsatisfactory. This recurring motif enables readers to congratulate themselves for not having wasted their efforts on success.

There is a practical corollary to this pervasive attitude toward societal success. Such a view of the nature of success is an illustration of the psychology of immaturity. In this context, the lurid sexuality of *The Carpetbaggers* is not only explicable; it is inevitable.

As John Sutherland has pointed out, Robbins recreates an adolescent view of the adult world, defining the parameters of power in the imagery of sexuality that is the only arena of power the adolescent mentality can understand.

Robbins is a master at ambivalent presentation of the attractions of power and its hollow ring. In *The Carpetbaggers* he is particularly masterful in using scenes of explicit sex and violence to present this ambivalence.

# Techniques

The Carpetbaggers is divided into nine books. The odd-numbered books are narrated in the first person by Jonas Cord. Each of the even-numbered books is a third-person narration focusing on a person whose life Cord changes: Nevada Smith, Rina Marlowe, David Woolf, and Jennie Denton. Book Two tells "The Story of Nevada Smith" with so much detail concerning this character's early life that it is virtually a self-contained novel.

# Themes

If *The Carpetbaggers* has a specific theme it is that only by the most Herculean efforts can an individual overcome the circumstances of his upbringing and lift the dead weight of the past from his shoulders. *The Carpetbaggers* is, however, the fourth most read book of all time for reasons that transcend theme. It is certainly a well told story, but it reached its extraordinarily large audience because of a combination of circumstances. It satisfies both normal curiosity about behind the scenes in Hollywood and prurient curiosity about the reclusive Howard Hughes. In addition, the extensive use of four-letter words and the scenes of graphic sex and violence certainly gave the work special fascination to its original readers. *The Carpetbaggers* is, in fact, the best illustration of the Robbins technique of entertaining the lower middle class with tales of the lurid sex lives of the rich and famous, showing his readers just how revolting life can be in the fast lane. Readers get a chance to enjoy pornography without having to admit that they do or that it has anything to do with their own uneventful lives.

# Adaptations

In 1964 *The Carpetbaggers* was given a lavish movie production under the direction of Edward Dmytryk. It stars George Peppard as Jonas Cord, Carroll Baker as Rina Marlowe, and Alan Ladd (in his last role) as Nevada Smith. The huge supporting cast features Bob Cummings, Martha Hyer, Elizabeth Ashley, Lew Ayres, and Martin Balsam.

Since *The Carpetbaggers* had been so recently published at the time and so widely read, the movie had to be reasonably faithful to the book, and despite the vast range of material, it is.

Although it has no special artistic distinction, it is clearly plotted and well paced. The cast is excellent and manages to be convincing even at the most melodramatic moments in the plot. The movie was a huge financial success.

In 1966 Henry Hathaway directed a movie western called *Nevada Smith* about the early life of this character and based on portions of *The Carpetbaggers* that had not been used in the movie version of that novel. This effective, lean revenge melodrama stars Steve McQueen, Karl Maiden, Brian Keith, and Suzanne Pleshette. *Nevada Smith* was remade as a television movie starring Cliff Potts, Lome Greene, and Adam West in 1975 under the direction of Gordon Douglas. This was the pilot for a projected series never made.

## Literary Precedents

The roman a clef was introduced to a wide audience in the novels of Benjamin Disraeli during the Victorian period. W. Somerset Maugham, Evelyn Waugh, and Ernest Hemingway have written in this mode, but it has become a particular vogue during the last few decades, in part at least because of the success of *The Carpetbaggers*. Other Robbins novels including major characters who are transparently derived from real people include *Where Love Has Gone* (1962, Lana Turner), *The Adventurers* (1966, Porfirio Rubirosa and Barbara Hutton), *The Pirate* (1974, a conflation of Adnan Khashoggi and Abdlatif al-Hamad), *The Lonely Lady* (1976, Jacqueline Susann), *Dreams Die First* (1977, Hugh Hefner), and *Spellbinder* (1982, Billy Graham).



## Related Titles

Together with *The Dream Merchants* (1969) and *The Inheritors* (1969), *The Carpetbaggers* is part of Robbins's Hollywood Trilogy. As in the case of *The Depression in the New York Trilogy*, the novels deal with unrelated characters but create a panorama when read in conjunction. Whereas *The Carpetbaggers* concerns Hollywood in the heyday of the studio system, *The Dream Merchants* concerns the early years of independent entrepreneurship, and *The Inheritors* concerns the new world of television.

At the time of original publication, *The Saturday Review* called *The Dream Merchants* "by far the most ambitious novel ever to be fashioned around the American motion-picture industry."

Johnny Edge is a small-time hustler who helps nickelodeon owner Peter Kessler rise to be a major Hollywood producer of quality films. At first seduced by the glamour of movie star Dulcie Warren, Johnny in the end reciprocates the love of Kessler's daughter Doris. The book is strong on characterization, and F. S. Nugent, the reviewer for the *New York Times*, particularly praised the book for avoiding the sort of caricature common in Hollywood novels. *The Dream Merchants* is framed by Johnny's first-person narration in the present, but he is interrupted by a number of third-person narrations from the past. This ingenious point of view is effectively maintained.

*The Inheritors* concerns the new generation in Hollywood. Stephen Gaunt brings a magic touch to the world of television programming, but the main interest of the book is what happens in the bedroom, not the board room.

Gaunt is an unsympathetic character who knows sex but not love. His affairs are numerous, but he never acknowledges his women by name; they are just a sum of their physical characteristics to him.



# Copyright Information

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