

# The Shadow Riders Short Guide

## The Shadow Riders by Louis L'Amour

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# Characters

The three Traven brothers — Dal, Mac and Jesse — are dark, tall, tough, and indistinguishable. In fact, the three are very similar to the three Sackett brothers Orrin, Tell, and Tyrel (the same three actors, Sam Elliott, Tom Selleck, and Jeff Osterhage played the Traven brothers in the TV version of *The Shadow Riders* and the Sackett brothers in the TV miniseries *The Sacketts*).

The love interest in the novel, Dai's fiancée Kate Connery, is a stronger, cleverer, more plucky woman than Angie Lowe in the earlier *Hondo* (1953).

This increased strength and intelligence for a L'Amour heroine may have resulted from the influence of the women's liberation movement on American society. As Kate is more active in the novel than earlier L'Amour heroines, she is also more violent: She stabs one man in the throat with a pointed stick and leaves another to drown. Also, although Kate is more resourceful, the knowledge she uses comes from a male. Before she acts, she constantly asks herself what Dal would do in the same situation and tries to remember what he has taught her.

More interesting in *The Shadow Riders* are the minor characters: Happy Jack Traven, Martin Connery, and Maddy Wyatt. Jack Traven, the independent black sheep of the family, is obviously a favorite of L'Amour. Although a man of questionable — possibly even criminal — background, he nevertheless preaches L'Amour's moral doctrines. The character Martin Connery is not fully developed but is interesting historically: He is a pirate rancher. In an interview printed in *The Shadow Riders*, L'Amour tells of reading about pirates who worked the Gulf and then settled down to become ranchers in Texas. Maddy Wyatt, a great contrast to Martin, is the typical motherly soul upon whom all the neighbors can depend, but the warmth and spirit of her dialogue makes her character rise above the stereotype. When the Traven brothers arrive at her home, she welcomes them enthusiastically, "Light an' set!" She then describes how she avoided capture by the slavers: she "bellied down in the ol' rifle pit up yonder" and stayed hidden until the marauders left. It is characters like Happy Jack, Martin and Maddy who color the otherwise sketchy background of this book.

## Social Concerns

With the publication of the first Sackett novel *The Daybreakers*, in 1960, L'Amour changed his focus from a single man on the frontier to families, especially brothers, working together to establish and maintain their communities. The Sackett novels now number eighteen, and L'Amour has created other families, including the Talons, Chantrys and, in *The Shadow Riders*, the Travens. L'Amour's concentration on the family reinforces traditional middle-class values and the growing concern with the state of the family in American society of the 1970s and 1980s.

In an interview published along with *The Shadow Riders*, L'Amour explained his views on the importance of the family, past and present: "A lot of people think the family's going downhill. I don't think so at all ... In those days the family was a unit, you see, and they worked together . . . it gave a whole lot of unity and a whole lot of strength to the country itself."



## Techniques

Perhaps because *The Shadow Riders* was written to turn immediately into a television movie, it skimps on L'Amour's typically strong portrayal of setting. For every evocative description like that of the town of Refugio — "a muddy, rutted alleyway between two rows of nondescript shacks, sodden with rain" — there are several clichéd descriptions empty of sensual or emotional content. The narrator at one point, for example, tells his readers, "It was almighty still, and there was nobody around a body could see."

L'Amour is working with a setting other than the West — the gulf coast of Texas — but, aside from writing about whooping cranes and having one villain fall in a swampy pit, fails to take full advantage of this new setting.

Another related change is an increase in dialogue. This, too, may be rooted in the quick conversion to a television script, but it also has roots in the nature of the heroes. In a family novel the characters must talk to each other, whereas earlier L'Amour novels with the lone man against the wilderness and hostile forces need more description of action and setting — there can only be so much interior monologue.



# Themes

Building on the theme of the importance of the family, L'Amour tries to show that the caring of a family can spread outward to the community.

When little Susan Atherton's mother, for example, is captured by rebel slave traders, the Traven take Susan with them and leave her in the care of their neighbor Maddy Wyatt who lovingly welcomes the girl.

Another important theme, a natural to a Civil War story, is slavery. Although L'Amour does not explore to the moral depths possible the irony of white slavery after the emancipation by the whites of black slaves, he does take the opportunity to give the history of the word slave (early Roman slaves coming from Slavic countries), to explain that whites as well as blacks have been slaves, and to condemn those who have enslaved their own people and races.

Still another theme of *The Shadow Riders* is the greed and corruption which follows war. Colonel Ashford, a rebel unwilling to give up the cause, steals women and animals to trade for munitions to mount another campaign.

L'Amour exposes Ashford's idealism as a front for greed. Happy Jack Traven, uncle to the Traven brothers, speaks for L'Amour: "There's some folks will justify anything if it will make them a dollar. Commonest excuse is that if they don't do it somebody else will."

Although L'Amour understands how hard times were after the war with men returning home to ruined plantations and three men available for every job, he sees no excuse for dishonesty and thievery. His solution for unemployed men is to set them to work farming, to create rather than destroy.

# Adaptations

The Shadow Riders was made into a successful television movie in 1982. A sign of its popularity and relative quality as a television movie is its reshooting numerous times since its first broadcast. The movie starred Sam Elliott (Dal), Tom Selleck (Mac), Jeff Osterhage (Jesse) as the Traven brothers and Katherine Ross (Kate Connery) as the love-interest. The first half of the movie follows the book rather closely, but the second half veers off, especially when Kate dresses as a nun to visit the imprisoned women to tell them of the escape plan. In an interview published at the end of *The Shadow Riders*, L'Amour expressed general satisfaction with the movie, although he felt that the action he provided in the novel needed no expansion.

## Literary Precedents

Fiction on the corruption following the Civil War abounds. It ranges in quality from Margaret Mitchell's extraordinarily popular *Gone with the Wind* (1936) to Faulkner's portraits of the Compson, Sartoris, Snopes, Stevens, and Sutpen clans in his short stories and novels. L'Amour's fiction does not reach the level of Margaret Mitchell's nor even approach that of Faulkner in intellectual depth, emotional power, and artistry. There are, nevertheless, similarities. All are interested in families, the relationships between their members, and depiction of the postwar South. All depict the mixture of races and nationalities — whites, blacks and Hispanics — both in friendship and hatred. All value those who exhibit courage, who endure and who fight the battle of good over evil. All emphasize the importance of the land and the strength that it gives to those who possess it.





## Related Titles

L'Amour has not written of the Traven family again, although, as mentioned before, his Sackett novels are very similar. Similar character types and plot elements can also be found in other L'Amour novels. The sweet little girl figure (Susan Atherton in *The Shadow Riders*) also appears in *Down the Long Hills* (1968). L'Amour has used semi-retired pirates like Martin Connery in *The Shadow Riders* twice before, in *Lando* (1962) and *The Sackett Brand* (1965). The pathos L'Amour tries to create with the Travens finding their loyal family dog butchered when they return home after the war plays on the same emotions he tried to create in *Hondo* when Hondo's dog is slaughtered while trying to protect him.



# Copyright Information

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