

# Whitewater Short Guide

## Whitewater by Paul Horgan

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# Contents

<a href="#">Whitewater Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns/Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>



# Characters

The plot involves a threesome of teenagers. Phillipson Durham, a bookstarved only child of ailing parents who grows up to become a college professor, finds some relief in friendship with Billy Breedlove, the popular athletic pride of Belvedere who is a young man of simple, uncomplicated truths, and with Billy's girl, Marilee, called by Melvin Maddocks, "every middle-aged man's vision of his first girl." When Phil unintentionally causes Billy to plunge to his death from a water tower while consummating a prank, Marilee, pregnant by Billy, commits suicide.

Victoria Cochran, a judge's widow and the town's freethinker who lives on an estate called Crystal Wells down a lovely cottonwood-lined lane, becomes, by virtue of her membership on the school board, Phil's friend and mentor. It is she who tells Phil to seek the beauty behind the banality and she who secretly provides the money for him to go away to college. As Victoria becomes privy to Phil's world, it puzzles her that Marilee is so much more smitten with Billy than with Phil, for she in her own way has come to love Phil (though, mercifully, she muses, without the stickiness of desire).

The town librarian, Miss Monica Malloy, also wonders why Marilee has chosen Billy over Phil. Miss Malloy was always uneasy around the worldly Billy who would flash his disturbing grin at her as if he knew the strange thoughts that sometimes occurred to her, even about him. At Billy's funeral she lapses into complete insanity and has to be removed permanently to the Good Shepherd Home in Orpha City.

Among the other residents to Belvedere are the philandering banker Tom Bob Gately, his wife Leora and his mistress Thyra Dooliffle. After Billy dies, the childless Leora and Tom Bob want to give to Phil the gold wristwatch they had intended to give to Billy. By this time Tom Bob has become a paralytic invalid and when in a powerfully drawn scene Phil is exposed to the man's naked pathetic catheterized condition, several more years' worth of maturity are suddenly forced upon Phil.

Other Peyton Place-type characters include the obnoxious garage mechanic who hankers after Phil's friendship, a corrupt and lecherous policeman and the local madame, Maudie, owner of the neon-lit "Silver Grille and Lounge."

## Social Concerns/Themes

The oppressiveness of growing up in a small town far from the civilizing influence of a large city, the familiar corniness of adolescent emotion, the ambiguous desires of parents for their children's future, and the prevailing survival of one main character after the deaths of the two other characters are some of the concerns that inform *Whitewater*.

If something went forever out of Phillipson Durham's life with the deaths of his two friends, much came in as well, and a crystal of character begins to form in him even during his last summer in Belvedere. Thus, optimism, a word used often in criticism about Horgan, wins out in the end, even in this tale of accidental death and suicide.

On another level James Boatwright isolates as major themes Horgan's desire to transform the commonplace into the legendary and to discover beauty behind a superficial banality, both generating forces behind much of art. The excellence of *Whitewater* prompted critic Alex Keneas to call Horgan one of the last socio-literary humanists.



## Techniques

Horgan's prose in *Whitewater* has been called spare. Much of it is dialogue. Horgan was praised by reviewers for not intruding, for conveying the tale cleanly with controlled intensity and compassion and with hauntingly beautiful language. The title itself is a symbol of death, man's relationship to his past, and the redemption of life's continuity. Not only is it the name of an artificial lake that submerges a town but it also names the scene of Marilee's eventual suicide. The remembrance of the lost town haunts the imagination of Phil and Billy and comes to suggest a certain redemptiveness by the very fact of its permanence.

For his epigraphs to the novel Horgan chose words from a hymn ("All things whisper in the blood"), a Spanish quotation from Mexican poet Octavio Paz (translated, "Today I recall the dead of my house") and Lermontov's lament that the world fails entirely to comprehend him with regard to his goodness and evil. These effectively prepare the reader for the seriousness of this soul-searching enshrining of the bittersweet ashes of adolescence lovingly reclaimed from the lonely landscape of the Plains.

## Literary Precedents

Whitewater probably owes some of its popularity to the examples set by Henry Bellaman's *King's Row* (1943), Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place* (1956) and Larry McMurtry's *The Last Picture Show* (1966), which also chronicle the private lives and secret transgressions of entire communities. McMurtry's novel even shares the same West Texas setting, as does his earlier novel *Leaving Cheyenne* (1963), also about two friends who love the same woman.

Perhaps a more flattering precedent than *Peyton Place* for the texture of gossipy details found in *Whitewater* is Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Horgan's knack for conjuring feelings that strike a chord of universal nostalgia inevitably leads to comparisons with Thomas Wolfe; and as a story of youth, *Whitewater* belongs to the tradition of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

There seems also to be a certain influence of Thomas Mann's short story classic "Tonio Kroger" (1903). Like Phil, Tonio envies his friend Hans for his uncomplicated nature and sees himself ravaged by intellect and introspection (Phil chides himself because while Billy's truths are simple, his own are a combination of what he knows and what he imagines or suspects).

Tonio falls in love with Inge who remains indifferent to him; and years later when he sees Hans and Inge together as a magnificent couple, he cannot summon up the courage to reintroduce himself to them.



## Related Titles

Horgan especially likes examining the lives of children and then following their adult lives in sequels. *Things as They Are* (1964) is about the child Richard who lives within an inner world of his own creation barred even to his loving parents. In *Everything to Live For* (1968), Richard, now eighteen, spends a summer with his older cousin Charles James Maximilian Chittenden who is rich and gifted, and befriends Max's girlfriend Marietta in a way suggestive of the Billy-Marilee-Phil relationship. In *The Thin Mountain Air* (1977), Horgan's first novel after the success of *Whitewater*, he then follows Richard's life as an adult.

In his earliest novels, this interest in the development of the individual from childhood through adolescence is also evident. *Main Line West* (1936) chronicles the birth and rootless youth of Danny Milford, and *A Lamp on the Plains* (1937) continues to tell his story.

In this novel Danny Milford's adolescent years are spent in a small sunbaked New Mexico town, where he meets Steve, whom he worships and resents at the same time, and then meets Kitty, who is older than he "but young enough to laugh when he laughed and share the delight of the day."



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