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Shane's Technicolor morality

He rode into our valley in the summer of '89. I was a kid then. . . ." His name was Shane.

In Jack Schaeffer's magnificent 1949 story, we observe life through the eyes of Bob, the young son of a sod-buster working hard to make a peaceful life for his family on his small plot of land on the Wyoming frontier. "Shane" is the quintessential baby-boom myth. I now teach from the copy I bought at school in 1963 for 45¢, when I was roughly Bob's age.



Schaeffer's tale mirrors the experiences of veterans of the worldwide struggle between good and evil that made our country king of the free world. Like many World War II veterans in American suburbs, Bob's father and mother, Joe and Marian Starret, were planting their nuclear family out beyond the reaches of the communities where they had been raised. They were struggling toward new lives.

Bob sees the strain of their exertions, half understands the stakes of the bitter conflict between the sod-busters and Fletcher, the old cattle rancher who risked his life taming the frontier and now feels cheated by the many settlers who, with no risk of life, lay claim to parcels of his land,

fencing off the range and cutting off his water. The boy is fascinated by the coiled energy in Shane's every movement, his constant alertness and his remarkable clothing: dark serge trousers, finespun brown linen shirt and a plain black, soft non-Stetson hat, all worn and soiled. He is astonished that Shane wears no gun. But he has seen the dark polished steel Colt in Shane's saddle roll. He will eventually admire its deadly beauty in full and then look on wide-eyed as Shane demonstrates how to draw, aim and shoot it with lethal virtuosity.

Jack Schaeffer is telling his son, to whom the book is dedicated, and all sons of World War II parents a parable about violence, when it must be used by individuals and by society as a whole, and what it does to good and bad men. In 1952, George Stevens projected Shane, Joe, Marian and Bob, renamed young Joey, up on the big screen as Technicolor archetypes for our subconscious minds. Hollywood stripped

away the frayed moral certainties of the novel. Alan Ladd as Shane rides onto the Starret homestead in a tan buckskin outfit and matching hat. He wears a fancy gun belt with a holstered six-shooter strapped along his right leg.

Never mind. Good was good, and we knew who the bad guys were in those days. Hollywood made the contrast between good and evil, the moral lessons about guns and violent acts, neat and clean. Alan Ladd as Shane faces down Jack Palance as Stark Wilson, the hired killer dressed in black. The patterns of life in the '50s for families of the great American white working class were stamped out with precision. For youngsters in such families, life was almost as halcyon as Doris Kearns Goodwin in "Wait Till Next Year" remembers it. Polio and the looming threat of Russian nuclear attack might intrude fleetingly as bogeymen, but life had good, simple rhythms. Moral certainties were certain. Mainstream American families believed the future would be better. As child-raising

expert Madelyn Swift remarked in a recent lecture, the years from 1945 to 1980 were arguably the only period in world history when so many children had innocent childhoods.

No more. Instead of Shane riding into our valley, 15-year-old boys and 14-year-old "little blond girls with glasses" enter their schools and shoot, wound or kill defenseless classmates. We blame them, their homes,

their peers, their teachers. We even blame ourselves. But we do nothing about their guns, and we acquiesce in economic and political philosophies that pretend no children will be left behind as we widen the gap between rich and poor and spend less and less on social services.

On late Tuesday afternoon, I sat with my 6-year-old son Emmett at a picnic table at Central Market. He laughed and laughed, snuggled next to me as we read two funny children's books together. On Tuesday evening, I began reading about children again using guns to kill children at a school in Santee, Calif., and at a traffic light in South Austin. How can we preserve innocence for our children in such a world?

Come back, Shane. Please come back.



Good vs. evil is a lesson made simple in 'Shane,' starring Alan Ladd.

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