

Grace Metalious, the author of one of the most notorious and best-selling novels of the 1950s, was born Marie Grace de Repentigny on September 8, 1924, in Manchester, New Hampshire. Populated by multiple ethnic groups, Grace's mother downplayed their French Canadian heritage due to the discrimination directed towards the group by "native" Yankees and the Irish, who were at the top of the social structure of the New England mill town. Anxious for Grace to better herself, her mother insisted upon their living in neighborhoods in which there weren't many French Canadians, one of the last groups to emigrate to Manchester and thus, located far down on the social totem pole. From her mother, Grace learned first-hand about dissembling and hiding secrets, the revelation of which would lie at the heart of her first and most famous novel, "Peyton Place."

"Little Canada" or "le petit Canada" (a.k.a. "la petite Canada") is the name traditionally given to neighborhoods in cities and towns settled by immigrants from the Province of Quebec, known as French Canadians. Approximately 900,000 French Canadians emigrated to the United States in the period of 1840-1930, the vast majority of whom settled in New England. The immigrants typically moved to states close to Quebec, particularly those bordering the province, due to the physical proximity to Quebec and because their generally impoverished state obviated greater mobility.

The New England textile industry was a major recruiter of Quebecois laborers. The West Side of Manchester, a city with a large French Canadian population due to the hiring of substantial numbers of Quebecois to work in the textile mills in the 19th and 20th centuries, was the site of one of the more famous "Little Canadas" in the U.S. La Caisse Populaire Ste. Marie, or St. Mary's Bank, located in Manchester's Little Canada, was the first credit union chartered in the United States, the credit union being a financial institution pioneered in Quebec due to the inability of francophones, who were primarily Roman Catholic, to obtain credit from the mainly Protestant anglophone population that dominated "La belle province."

In 1968, Quebecois revolutionary Pierre Vallieres, jailed in New York City as a terrorist, wrote a book about the French Canadian population and their relationship to the Anglophone oligarchy, which sums up the French Canadian's perceived status. Indeed, during the 1972 presidential primary, the local newspaper, 'The Manchester Union Leader,' owned by the reactionary William Loeb, printed a fake letter planted by President Nixon's dirty tricks squad that had a staff member of Senator Edward Muskie, the Democratic front-runner, equating French Canadians with African Americans during a campaign stop in Florida. The so-called "Canuck letter" became a well-known Watergate artifact, referenced in the 1976 film *Tutti gli uomini del presidente* (1976).

When she was 11 years old, Grace's father walked out on his family, which consisted of Grace, her mother and her two sisters. The Catholic Church frowned on divorce

and until the 1980s made it very difficult for a person who was a Catholic to obtain one and remain a member of the faith in good standing. This meant that it was very unusual for a married French Canadian couple to legally dissolve their marriage in the first half of the last century. Grace and her sisters felt shame, shame for coming from a broken home and shame from the resulting social stigmatization, a psychological state underscored and deepened by the social, economic and political inferiority of the French Canadians by the Yankees (descendants of English and Scottish Protestant stock who had originally settled the state) and by the Irish, who dominated the working class and felt animosity towards the French Canadians as many had been recruited to the mills to break strikes the Irish had led.

Despite the common religion of the French Canadians and the Irish, the antipathy between the two ethnic groups ran so deep that two different Catholic church and parochial school systems evolved on the West Side of Manchester, one for the Irish and one for the French Canadians, whose ethnic youth gangs continued to fight each other through out the Depression years. Grace's mother avoided this by keeping what was left of the family rooted in the supposedly more genteel East Side on the other side of the Merrimack River that bisected Manchester and once provided power for the city's mills. The Merrimack is the same river that flows south through Lowell, Massachusetts, the hometown of another famous French Canadian, Jack Kerouac, and on through Lawrence, where singer Robert Goulet was born, on its trip to the sea. Manchester, once called "The Cottonopolis of the World" due to its huge output of textiles, was hard hit by the Great Depression, and the city's great Amoskeag mill complex went bankrupt. Hard times descended on the "Queen City" making the already hard lives of the working class even harder.

Grace escaped by writing romances in which a heroine eventually is united with the man-of-her-dreams and achieves happiness at the denouement of the story. She also appeared in school plays, which had the added benefit of taking her away from her unhappy family, a malaise exacerbated by their poverty. The family mood became even dourer when Grace met and fell in love with George Metalious, a younger boy she met at Central High School, but whose remarkable intelligence meant that he had been advanced in grade and was Grace's class contemporary. An ethnic Greek with a different faith, George was viewed disdainfully by her family, but Grace and George married over their objections in 1943.

While he went off to the Army during World War Two, a housing shortage and poverty forced Grace to undergo the ignominy of having to live on Manchester's West Side in the Squog neighborhood not far from "la petite Canada" her mother had always tried to avoid. Her last name, though, allowed her to deny her French Canadian heritage, and most of her adult acquaintances and many of her friends did not know the truth. When George returned from the war, he enrolled at the University of New Hampshire on the G.I. Bill to study education, and the family, which now consisted of the couple and their first-born, moved to Durham, New Hampshire. It

was in Durham that Grace Metalious began to seriously focus on her writing. Her neglect of her house, her appearance, and her children (the Metaliouses eventually had three) earned her the disapprobation of her neighbors.

After taking his degree at UNH, George accepted an offer to be the principal at a school in Gilmanton Iron Works, New Hampshire. The family of five had to subsist on George's modest salary. Gilmanton Ironworks was the model for the fictional Peyton Place. Grace was inspired by the story of a real-life murder that had rocked New Hampshire in the post-war years, in which a young girl had shot her father who had been molesting her and hid his corpse in a barn. Grace wrote the first draft of a novel in 10 weeks in 1955. That novel was "Peyton Place."

In 1956, "Peyton Place," was accepted for publication by the New York publishing house Julian Messner. The manuscript had to be heavily edited, but when it was published in the autumn of that year, it became an unprecedented "blockbuster," surpassed in the 1950s in terms of sales only by The Bible. Though the book was panned by critics as "trash" and attacked by the moral arbiters of society, it stayed on the New York Times bestseller list for over a year and was a global hit. Her riposte to criticism that she was a poor wordsmith was, "If I'm a lousy writer, then an awful lot of people have lousy taste."

To charges that she was a dirty writer, a purveyor of filth, she responded, "Even Tom Sawyer had a girlfriend, and to talk about adults without talking about their sex drives is like talking about a window without glass."

"Peyton Place" made Grace Metalious, who had known poverty and hard times all her life, a wealthy woman. Eight million copies of "Peyton Place" were sold in hardcover, along with another 12 million paperbacks. The press made Metalious a media-star, shining the spotlight on the plump housewife dressed in dungarees who wrote a bestseller defying the conformity of the 1950s, which held that the nuclear family in which the wife was subservient to her husband and children was the ideal lifestyle. Grace earned the sobriquet "Pandora in Blue Jeans" as she had opened up a box of sin, which was then revealed to the world.

The "Peyton Place" of Metalious' novel is a small, seemingly respectable New England town that actually is a cauldron of secrets and scandal boiling just below the seemingly placid surface. Aside from depictions of sex, rape, abortion, and suicide, there is a murder trial, when young Selena Cross is tried for murdering her father, who had molested her. Even before the publication of the novel, the good citizens of Gilmanton Iron Works were outraged, convinced that Grace had shamed them by washing their dirty linen before the world and making their town synonymous with lust and perversion. Grace eventually was threatened with libel lawsuits, and the town, which demurred from buying a copy of the best-seller for its public library, refused to extend her husband's contract as school principal.

"Peyton Place" not only changed the image of Gilmanton Iron Works, but it revolutionized the image of small town America from a Norman Rockwell painting to something more akin to the Potterville (Bedford Falls) of George Bailey's nightmare in *La vita è meravigliosa* (1946). The term "Peyton Place" became a buzzword to describe the duality of middle class life, with its deep secrets and rampant sex beneath a hypocritical veneer of propriety. The book was banned in many cities and towns, and by the Dominion of Canada. Grace Metalious and her book were denounced from the pulpit and by politicians, who claimed it corrupted the morals of young readers.

The book was read by tens of millions of people worldwide, and Hollywood quickly closed in and bought the novel for \$125,000. Producer Jerry Wald's 1957 movie of *I peccatori di Peyton* (1957), starring Hollywood superstar Lana Turner as Alison MacKenzie, was a hit and even garnered nine Oscar nominations. (Validating the theme of troubles boiling just beneath the surface of people's "public" lives, Turner's 14-year-old Cheryl Crane slaughtered her Mafiosi boyfriend Johnny Stompanato with a butcher knife in her mother's bedroom less than a fortnight after the Academy Award ceremony.) The movie spawned the sequel *Ritorno a Peyton Place* (1961) in 1961, based on her 1959 follow-up to her original novel. "Peyton Place" also was spun off into a high-class, prime-time TV soap opera that made Ryan O'Neal and Mia Farrow into stars.

Metalious and success did not mix well. She spent her money freely, hit the bottle, divorced her husband George, married a local disc jockey, and partied in Hollywood before eventually returning to her home state towards the end of her life. She settled in Meredith, which was the heart of New Hampshire's beautiful Lakes Region nestled among the majestic White Mountains range. Back in the Granite State, she trolled the Lake Winnepesaukee area in a drop-top Cadillac, drunk, with a succession of lovers attracted by her cash.

The "Pandora in Bluejeans" remarried George Metalious in 1960, but her destructive behavior was too far developed, and they divorced for a second time in 1963. The failure of her other novels to achieve the level of success as "Peyton Place" -- in addition to the sequel "Return to Peyton Place," she published "The Tight White Collar" in 1961 and "No Adam in Eden" in 1963 -- added to her malaise and dipsomania.

Before the war, she and her young husband George used to drink a home-brewed Greek concoction called ouzo. But for Grace, alcohol was no longer a case of sharing warmth and laughter around the kitchen table with some friends; she had become a full-blown thirty-something bottle baby. Suffering from depression and alcoholism, she quickly went through her money.

"I looked into that empty bottle and I saw myself," she said.

Thirty-nine-year-old Grace Metalious died of cirrhosis of the liver on February 25, 1964, never having achieved the peace of mind that seems to have eluded her since the days when the mother taught the young girl to deny her heritage as a way of getting along in a world whose hypocrisies Grace could not ignore. Her life story illustrated the old saw: "Be careful what you wish for: You just might get it." She was a dreamer who did not know that realizing her dream would become her nightmare.

Grace Metalious will be remembered as the first popular women writer that pried the lid off societal hypocrisy and violence directed towards women, a small-minded world that smoothed over the horrors of life through conformity to an ideal of polite, middle-class virtues that were more honored in the breach than in the observance. Her book made possible such subsequent early "chick-lit" as Jacqueline Susann's "Valley of the Dolls."

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