

This 1950s book scandalized and captivated America—and eventually destroyed its author’s life

When Grace Metalious wrote ‘Peyton Place’ she had no idea how big it would be

Peyton Place author Grace Metalious in Gilmanton, New Hampshire, in 1956. (Hanson Carroll/Life Images Collection/Getty Images)

There was absolutely no precedent for Peyton Place, Grace Metalious’s blockbuster 1956 novel. The book—which went on to become one of the most famous television shows in history and arguably the template for the modern soap opera form—was the product of over a decade of writing, much of it done while Metalious was locked in the bathroom of her troubled childhood home. A housewife and mother of three, Metalious had grown up in an impoverished New England family, developing a piercing awareness of class and sexual politics.

Once that awareness reached the page, it would tear apart her hometown, and turn that torn-apart hometown on her.

Peyton Place unfolds mostly in a fictionalized New Hampshire town—not unlike Manchester, the one where Metalious grew up, or Gilmanton, the one where she lived—and follows three female characters: a mother and her illegitimate daughter, as well as a working class young woman “from the shacks.” Metalious was pleased when she heard the book’s title, which she thought was represented “a composite of all small towns where ugliness rears its head, and where the people try to hide all the skeletons in their closets.” For its time, and considering it was largely set in the years leading up to WWII, the book was daring, featuring among other things extramarital sex, incest, pregnancy, abortion, and murder. The New York Times review was headlined “Small Town Peep Show.” “If Mrs. Metalious can turn her emancipated talents to less lurid purposes,” it read, “her future as a novelist is a good bet.” (It was one of very few positive reviews the book received; many saw her work as simply lewd.)

Metalious did go on to pen three more novels, but none were as successful. And she hardly needed them to be. In a 2006 Vanity Fair piece called “Grace Metalious: Peyton Place’s Real Victim,” Michael Callahan wrote that the publication of the book helped create the contemporary notion of ‘buzz.’” In its first month, Peyton Place sold 100,000 copies (the average at the time was 3,000). It stayed on the New York Times Bestseller List for a solid year. It was adapted into a film in 1957, but it would be another seven years before its five-year run on ABC.

Actors Terry Moore and Barry Coe in a scene from the 1957 Peyton Place film adaptation. (20th Century Fox/Getty Images)

In many ways, Peyton Place anticipated the wave of women’s novels that would come in the 1960s, explorations of the confines of femininity and domesticity and envelope-pushing meditations on sexuality and the politics of “women’s liberation.” Peyton Place was not political in any direct sense, but it did serve as probing account of gender and class complexities in a small town. As Thomas Mallon wrote in a 2014 piece on what it’s like to read Peyton Place now, the book “is at its best when the author gives us portraits of women with a moment to themselves, reflective, solitary stretches in which we glimpse Mary Kelley, a hospital nurse who secretively assists with an abortion; Elsie Thornton, a spinster schoolteacher; and Nellie Cross, an

abused wife who presents herself in a Molly Bloom-like monologue just before committing suicide.” Though not concerned with women’s emancipation per se, the novel was clearly invested in making visible—and even sympathetic—many of the most stigmatized forms of female anguish.

Still, Metalious is frequently seen as the predecessor not to feminist novelists like Marilyn French or Marge Piercy, but to Jacqueline Susann, the failed-actress-turned-writer who wrote *Valley of the Dolls* in 1966 and then two more bestsellers in succession. That’s likely due in part to the runaway success of both Susann’s and Metalious’s work, the fact that neither woman seemed particularly likely to become a famous novelist, and their treatment of hitherto off-limits subject matter.

But the comparison to Susann may have even more to do with personality than prose. In an unusual move for the 1950s publishing industry, Metalious herself was at the center of the marketing blitz for *Peyton Place*. And she made for very good copy. A seemingly broke and burned out mom, Metalious came into her success virtually overnight, and she was determined to counter a lifetime of fears about her own irrelevance by consuming conspicuously and using her newfound notoriety to rub elbows with the rich and famous. According to Callahan’s *Vanity Fair* piece, she stayed at the Plaza Hotel, flirted with Cary Grant, and frittered away a million dollars. In 1956, though still married, Metalious took up with Thomas James Martin, a radio DJ, around the time that she signed a \$250,000 deal with Twentieth Century Fox for the film and television rights to *Peyton Place*. (Her then-husband George took photos of her in bed with “T.J. the D.J.” and used them to his advantage during their divorce proceeding.)

Martin encouraged Metalious to spend frivolously, reminding her that she was famous after all. As Callahan writes, she spent liberally on a “new Cadillac, new clothes, dinners at ‘21,’ cases of champagne, and chartered flights to the Caribbean. Grace poured thousands of dollars into renovating the country house she’d bought on Meadow Pond Road, which had once been owned by a Chicago gangster.” Her relationship with Martin was often hostile, occasionally even violent, and lubricated by appalling quantities of alcohol. The couple were married in 1958, but divorced two years later.

In spite of the longstanding success of the television version of *Peyton Place*, which featured guest stars like Gena Rowlands and is thought to have launched the careers of the likes of Mia Farrow and Ryan O’Neal, Metalious was sheepish about the association of the *Peyton Place* brand with tawdriness. According to Callahan, she threw her drink in the face of the show’s screenwriter when he asked if it was autobiographical.

It was a question Grace Metalious fielded a lot, and one that dogged her, even as she thrilled to experience a kind of power and influence she hadn’t expected. Her story began as a charming rags-to-riches tale about a mother who followed her dream of writing books, and wrote one so good it captivated the nation. But it went on to become an allegory for the swift, corrupting force of wealth and fame, and a sad testament to the potential for ugliness that awaits when we get what we want.

Metalious died of cirrhosis in 1964, just 39 years old.