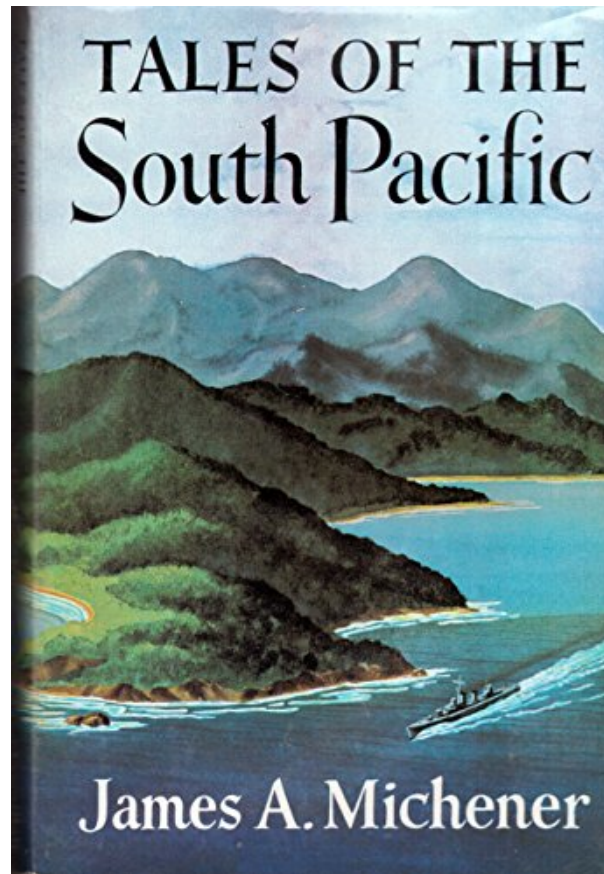
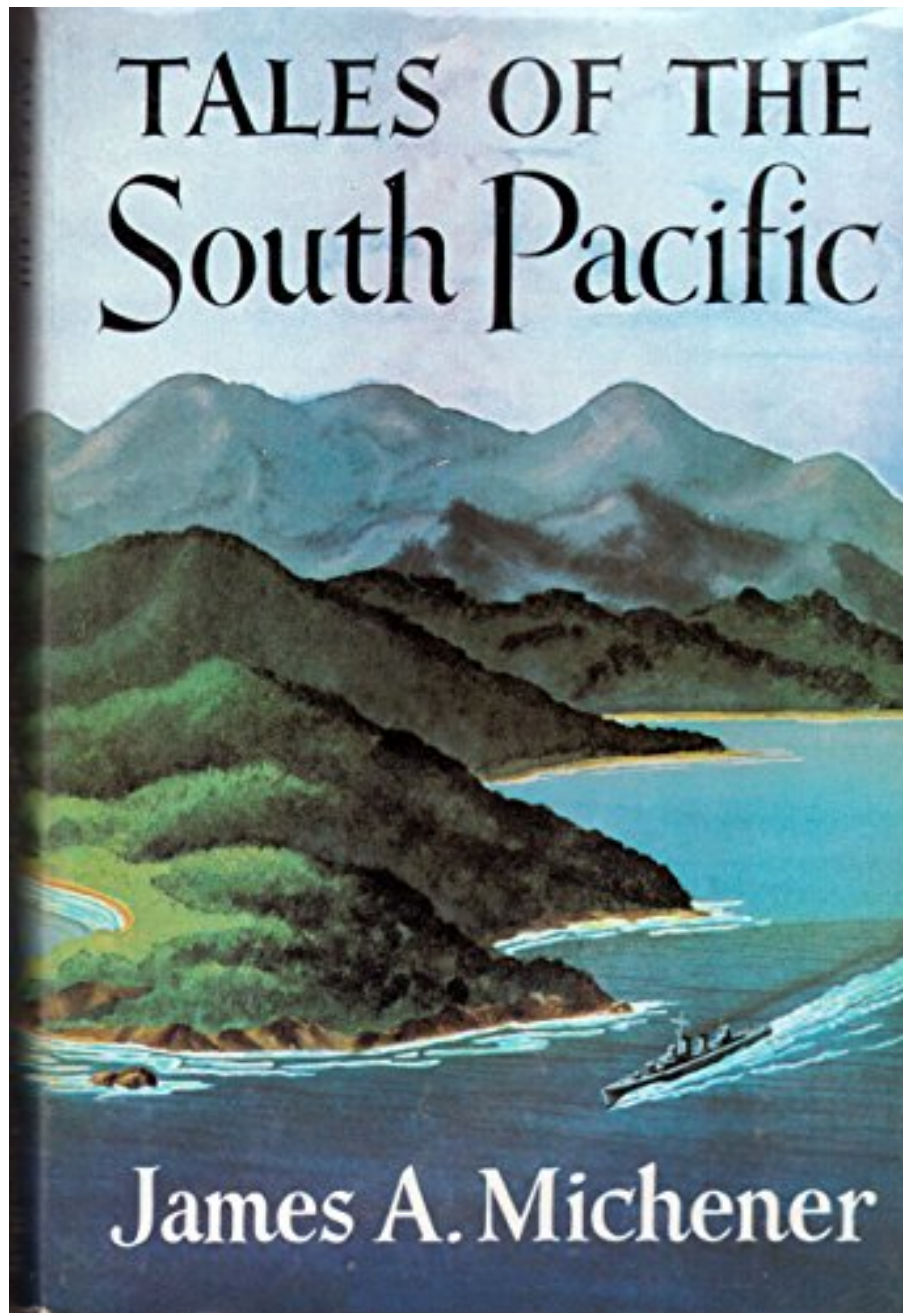


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Underrated American Masterwork--Provocative, Complex, Profound (and Patriotic)

By Sam Chell

The omission of this work from the academic canon is another comment on the discriminatory but hardly discriminating state of literary studies today. Michener is far more than a captivating storyteller, collector of colorful characters, painter of vivid natural imagery, and documentor of the orchestrations of world warfare. Each of the "tales" comprising his carefully-constructed epic narrative is at once thematically and stylistically related to the other smaller narratives and at the same time artistically whole in itself.

If the reader has expectations of a single-minded patriotic paean to the fighting men of the South Pacific, a close reading of the early chapter, "Mutiny," should dispel any such illusions. Here, as throughout the book, Michener uses nature and the ocean as a test, a touchstone, and a foil--exposing the folly not just of warring nations and military campaigns but of arrogant, imperialist civilizations and many of their prideful citizens. Tony Fry, his anti-authoritarian, compassionate "hero," commits a subversive act that links him with the mutineers on board the *Bounty* and casts the American command in the role of Bligh and Hitler! In the next story, "Cave," Fry emerges as a war-time philosopher whose meditations on courage move him to acts of selfless, Christ-like charity. In "Boar's Tooth" Fry is able to overcome his resistance to a primitive religious ritual involving pain and sacrifice as he contrasts it with the empty and self-serving practices of modern religion.

The American fighting men and women who come to the South Pacific bring no small amount of baggage from a flawed social order back home, and Michener's heroes are not simply the individuals who perform fearlessly in combat: they're just as likely to be the narrow-minded Americans who are transformed by their experiences in the South Pacific into better human beings. "Our Heroine," the story of Nellie Forbush, is a shocking expose of racism, delivering a reeling blow comparable to explosive moments in Flannery O'Connor or Faulkner. When Nellie learns that her fiance's former lover is dead and rejoices not because a rival has been removed but because a black person has been eliminated, she would seem to be beyond the redemption experienced even by O'Connor's most degenerate souls. But in an earlier story about "the Remittance Man" Michener's narrator has constructed a definition of heroism based on courage and an exclusive vision of the sacred status of all human life, allowing us to see how Nellie's eventual change of heart qualifies her for inclusion among the company of true heroes.

The famous Bali Hai chapter ("Fo' Dolla"), far from an escapist love story, is at once romantic tragedy in the

tradition of "Madame Butterfly" and tragicomedy in its portrayal of accessory characters who recall the nurse and friar in "Romeo & Juliet." And once again the narrative's definition of the "heroic" allows us to see the tragedy play out not merely as a tale of star-crossed lovers but as a drama of choices and their painful consequences. In each case the act precedes and produces illumination: Joe Cable's venture into Bali Hai and the Dionysian produces self-discovery because ultimately it becomes a "shared discourse" with his dark-skinned, native lover, who turns out to be a "real person" with a history of her own.

Michener is as likely to locate the heroic away from the war as on island battlefields or the Pacific main, because his real subject is human nature and the courage to live in the face of obstacles both natural and human. To their credit, Rodgers and Hammerstein detected (and partially, if unevenly, captured) the strength in Michener's novel: Each of us has a Bali Hai, and our failures to reach it can be traced as much to failures of courage and vision as to the ironclad circumstances of existence.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Michener's first great book (Pulitzer Prize) and without the usual first 100 ...

By Joseph Fjerstad

Michener's first great book (Pulitzer Prize) and without the usual first 100 pages of geological / earthly formation descriptions found in some of his other classics! If you've seen the play or movie, then you pretty much know the plot. Nevertheless, a great read!

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Musical is Based on the Book.

By SharonKM

It was a gift that I sent to my son who is appearing in the musical South Pacific this summer. Perfect for him to read the stories that the play was based on back in 1947 when it won a Pulitzer Prize He said many from the cast were reading their own copies as well.

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