

Clear

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One

I couldn't even begin to tell you why, exactly, but my head was suddenly buzzing with the opening few lines of Jack Schaefer's *Shane* (his 'Classic Novel of the American West'. Remember?). I was thinking how incredibly *precise* those first lines were, and yet how crazily effortless they seemed; Schaefer's style (his – *ahem* – 'voice'), so enviably understated, his artistic (if I may be so bold as to use this word, and so early in our acquaintance) 'vision' so totally (and I mean *totally*) unflinching.

'I have huge balls.'

That's what the text's shouting:

'I have *huge* balls, d'ya hear me? I have *huge* fucking balls, and I *love* them, and I have *nothing else* to prove here.'

The rest – as they say – is all gravy.

Because let's face it, when you've got balls that size, you automatically develop a strange kind of moral authority, a *gung-ho*-ness (for want of a better word), a special intellectual *certainty*, which is very, very seductive to all those tight-arsed and covetous Princess-Tiny-Meats out there (the Little-Balls, and the No-Balls – Good *God*, let's not forget about them, eh?).

I don't make the rules, okay? I'm just a dispassionate observer of the Human Animal. If you feel the urge to argue this point (you're at *perfect* liberty to do so), then why not write a detailed letter to Ms Germaine Greer? (That's it, love, you run off and fetch your nice, green biro . . . *Yeah*. And I'm sure she'd just love to read it, once she's finally finished rimming that *gorgeous* teenager . . .)

Schaefer (to get back to my point), as a *writer*, simply jumps, feet-first, straight into the guts of the thing.

If I might just . . . *uh* . . . quote something, to try and illustrate (and this is entirely from memory, so bear with me) . . .

'He rode into our Valley in the summer of '89. I was just a kid back then, barely as tall as our perimeter fence . . .'

Yes. So that's a really (*Ouch*, no . . . I mean a *really*) rough approximation of the original (I can't find my copy. And don't sue me, Jack, if you're still alive and misquotation is the one thing that keeps you up at night. Or – worse still – if you're some crusty bastard working in the copyright department of some big-ass publishers in Swindon who just *loves* to get his rocks off prosecuting over this kind of harmless, well-meaning shite: it's meant to be a *tribute* to the man, so will you maybe just cut me a little slack here?).

It's a *rough* approximation (as I believe I already emphasised), but I'm sure you get the gist of the thing . . .

Let's cut it right back to the bone then, shall we?

He. Yeah? The first word: *He*. That's *him*. That's *Shane*: The Man.

Just a single, short breath into the narrative, and already he's *here*. He's arrived. It's *Shane*. He's standing

right in front of us: completely (quite *astorishingly*) dimensional.

And in the *second* breath? (If you can just *try* and suppress your excitement for a minute.) In that second breath he's . . . Oh. My. God. He's coming *even closer*.

WAH!

He's almost on top of you now (Smell the warm leather of his chaps – the sweat on his horse – the grease in his gun-holster).

Uh, let's rewind for a moment: the second word (*second* word, right?) is 'rode'. *He* rode . . . He *rode* . . . (just in case some of you weren't keeping up).

'He rode into our valley . . .'

He *rode* . . .

And there you have it. In just two, short, superficially insignificant words, A Hero Is Born.

God.

It's so fucking *humbling*.

Please (pretty please) don't let me harp on too long about all of this (because I will harp. Harping's my trademark) but what absolutely *immaculate* styling, eh?

(Give the man credit for it why don't you?

Schaefer?

Stand up and take a bow!

Schaefer . . . ?

Wow. He's certainly getting *on* a little now, isn't he?

And . . . *uh* . . . he's kind of wobbly on his . . .

Whoops!

Can he . . . ?

Would you mind . . . ?

Oh.

Is that his *secretary*, just next to him there?

Could she maybe . . . ? Yeah?

Well that's . . . that's *good*. Great . . . *Uh* . . .

Hup!

Wowsa.

Phew!

Steady. Steady . . .

Aw.

Just *look* at the old dog – *look* at him! – lapping it all up.

And the audience?

On their feet. Waving their *bic* lighters, singeing their thumbnails. Stamping their feet. In a state of complete bloody *ecstasy*, and all because of just *two simple words*. That's two. *Count* 'em.)

You can't learn that stuff. No way. It's *born* (I'm serious. I should know). And you can call me naive (if you like. I'm man enough to take it), but I'm not seeing Schaefer (in my mind's eye), his head tilted on one side, his mouth gently gaping, his pencil cocked, taking detailed notes on 'structure' or 'the use of metaphor' at some cruddy creative writing seminar in some embarrassing further education college in the American Mid-West circa 1947. (Fuck off!)

Because this is no-frills writing at its *very best*. This is 'am-it', 'lived-it' stuff. Shane (yeah, remember him? *He* . . . ? He *rode*?) is the first person Schaefer mentions in the book; the first *syllable*, no less. And if I've got this right (and I'm fairly sure that I have . . . Okay, *bollocks*, I *know* I have), then he's also the last. He's the *last syllable*.

(*Cue music for The Twilight Zone.*)

It can't be an accident! It just can't.

The novel ends on his name (this time, though, Shane

is leaving, not arriving). The whole narrative essentially *resounds* to the rhythm of his name:

Shhhh-aaay-yne (Yeah. I think that works better phonetically, for some reason).

Please note – the secret poets among you, especially – that perfect *hush* in the first part of the word – *Shhhh*! Be *quiet*! Someone *important* owns this name! Pay attention! *Shhhh*!

(Okay, so maybe I'm starting to over-egg this thing a little.)

But the name definitely chimes. It's almost as though the book (that heavy weight in your left hand – the pages read – and no weight at *all* in your right, because it's over: the journey is travelled, it's done) is just this great, big, old grandfather clock, striking for all it's worth. This huge, sonorous bell:

'And he was *Shane*.'

(That's the last line.)

Boinggg!

I mean *Ka-fucking-Pow* or *what*?!

I'm actually laughing out loud. I swear to God (sad bastard? *Me*? Won't bother denying it). Because I am putty – literally *putty* – in Schaefer's hands. And I *love* his hands (Calm down. There's nothing even remotely unmanly about it). I just love this feeling. I do. To be manipulated, to be led, to be *played*, and so artfully. It's just . . . I'm just . . . I'm very, very happy to be a part of that process. Because you can't beat that sensation (so you might as well join it, eh?).

Bottom line: Schaefer's just *owning* that shit.
(Man, you've got to own your shit. *Fact.*)

So maybe I think about *Shane* a little too much, sometimes. And maybe I'm prone to overanalysing everything, but then 'life is in the details', as they say ('they' in this particular instance being the Special Features Writer in a copy of *Elle Decoration*, which I paged idly through at the Sexually Transmitted Diseases Clinic in Bow last Tuesday, who was holding forth – and so passionately – about leather-look wallpaper. It's the coming thing).

It was his first book, actually. *Shane*. It was Schaefer's first. I read his other big one – can't remember the title (*fuck* it. That's so . . . *uh* . . .).

Company of Cowards!

Ting-ting!

Yeah. It just wasn't so good.

But then lightning rarely strikes, etc.

Hmmn.

Are you . . . ? Am I . . . ?

Let's press *rwnd* for a moment, shall we?

Slow it *right* down . . .

Then just . . . *uh* . . .

. . . *HOLD!*

Good.