

Frank Norris

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Benjamin Franklin Norris



Pseudonym: Frank Norris

Born: March 5, 1870
Chicago, Illinois, United States

Died: October 25, 1902 (aged 32)
San Francisco, California

Occupation: Novelist, Writer

Nationality: American

Benjamin Franklin Norris (March 5, 1870 –

October 25, 1902) was an American novelist, during the Progressive Era, writing predominantly in the naturalist genre. His notable works include *McTeague* (1899), *The Octopus: A California Story* (1901), and *The Pit* (1903). Although he did not support socialism as a political system, his work nevertheless evinces a socialist mentality and influenced socialist/progressive writers such as Upton Sinclair. Like many of his contemporaries, he was profoundly influenced by the advent of Darwinism, and Thomas Henry Huxley's philosophical defense of it. Through many of his novels, notably *McTeague*, runs a preoccupation with the notion of the civilized man overcoming the inner "brute", his animalistic tendencies. His peculiar, and often confused, brand of Social Darwinism also bears the influence of the early criminologist Cesare Lombroso.

Contents

- 1 Biography
- 2 Bibliography
 - 2.1 Collected editions
- 3 References
- 4 External links

Biography

Frank Norris was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1870, and moved to San Francisco at the age of fourteen. He later became a member of San Francisco's artistic Bohemian Club, which included such literary notables as Jack London and Ambrose Bierce. He studied painting in Paris for two years, where he was exposed to the naturalist novels of Emile Zola. He attended the University of California, Berkeley between 1890 and 1894 and then spent a (reputedly dissolute) year at Harvard University. He worked as a news correspondent in South Africa in 1895–96, and then an editorial assistant on the *San Francisco Wave* (1896–97). He worked for *McClure's Magazine* as a war correspondent in Cuba during the Spanish-American war in 1898. He joined the New York City publishing firm of Doubleday & Page in 1899.

In 1900 Frank Norris married Jeanette Black. They had a child in 1901. Norris died in 1902 of peritonitis from a ruptured appendix, leaving his young wife and baby and leaving *The Epic of Wheat* trilogy unfinished. He was only 32. He is

buried in Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland, California.

Norris' *McTeague* has been filmed repeatedly, most famously as a 1924 film called *Greed* by director Erich von Stroheim, which is today considered a classic of silent cinema.[1] An opera by William Bolcoln, based loosely on this 1899 novel, was premiered by Chicago's Lyric Opera in 1992. The work is in two acts, with libretto by Arnold Weinstein and Robert Altman. The Lyric Opera's presentation featured Ben Heppner in the title role and Catherine Malfitano as Trina, the dentist's wife.

Bibliography

- *Moran of the Lady Letty* (1898)
- *BLIX* Grosset & Dunlap NY (1899)
- *A Man's Woman* (1900)
- *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* (1903)
— a collection of essay on the role of the writer

The *San Francisco* trilogy:

- *McTeague* (1899) — a naturalist work about the life and trials of a dentist in turn-of-the-

century San Francisco, California. Filmed as *Greed* by Erich von Stroheim in 1924.

- *Blix* (1900)
- *Vandover and the Brute* (posthumously published 1914) — a study of degeneration.

The Epic of Wheat trilogy:

- *The Octopus: A California Story* (1901) — describes the raising of wheat in California and the conflict between the wheat growers and a railway company; Norris was inspired by the events surrounding the Southern Pacific Railroad Mussel Slough Tragedy.
- *The Pit* (1903) — the second novel in the trilogy, about wheat speculation within the Chicago Board of Trade.
- The third novel, *Wolf*, was never written but was to have shown the American-grown wheat relieving a famine-stricken village in Europe.

Collected editions

- *Novels and Essays*, Donald Pizer, ed. (New York: The Library of America, 1986)
Includes *Vandover and the Brute*, *McTeague*, and *The Octopus*, with selected essays on literary subjects. ISBN 978-0-

94045040-0

References

- Hochman, Barbara. *The Art of Frank Norris, Storyteller* University of Missouri Press (1988) ISBN 0-8262-0663-8
- McElrath, Joseph R., Jr. and Crisler, Jesse S. *Frank Norris: A Life*, University of Illinois Press (2006) ISBN 0-252-03016-8 (the definitive biography of Norris)

External links

- Works by Frank Norris at Project Gutenberg
- Frank Norris Page at the William Dean Howells Society; includes links to works on the web, bibliography, index to *Frank Norris Studies*
- Frank Norris' Gravesite

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