

The Land Fish

Mason Trout was a determined but little known writer. This may have been spawned by the fact that he only read classic literature. When friends asked him what his three favorite books were, he answered without hesitation. "*Moby Dick*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses*." He then would grin like an angler who had caught an eight-pound bass.

"Mason," his wife Jill said one day while he was tapping away on a novel. "Have you ever read a book that isn't a dusty relic?"

"Just what are you asking me, babe?" he muttered.

"I'm asking," she said, "if you ever read a book not written by a dead white author?"

“Sure,” said Mason triumphantly. “The other day I finished *Cold Mountain*, and Charles Frasier is still alive. His allusions to *The Odyssey* are really quite amazing.”

“I’m married to a literary snob,” she scolded.

Mason shrugged and cracked his knuckles. “We’re all snobs about something, babe,” he said.

“Well, what good is being a *literary* snob if the public won’t buy your books?”

“I write for literati,” said Mason. “I don’t write for the common herd. Did you see the review I just received on *The Pitcher in the Wheat*? The reviewer wrote, ‘Mason Trout’s use of alliteration goes way beyond the pale.’”

“Most reviewers call your books boring and derivative.”

“What would they know?” said Mason. “Reviewers are only failed writers. Do you think they’d be wasting time writing reviews if they were able to write books themselves?”

“Is that any worse than writing books that only snobs will read?”

Mason closed his eyes and counted to ten. For a temperamental scribe in his seventies, he had remarkable self-control. Yes, his wife was the breadwinner, but that did not entitle her to be rude. What right did she have to barge into his den anytime she had a burr in her ass? It was bad enough that the critics panned him and the public ignored his books. The very least his wife could do was to show him a little respect.

“Have you seen today’s paper?” Jill asked him. “*Book World* mentions your latest novel.”

“How nice,” Mason grumbled as she handed him the Arts Section. Daphne DuBois, his most blistering critic, had written the review. Holding the paper as though it might burn him, he grudgingly scanned her attack.

A Load of Crap

We have come to expect the humdrum from local author Mason Trout, but his latest effort, Callahan’s Sleep, disappoints even these expectations. Told in what could be generously described as a subliminal stream of conscious, Mr. Trout captures none of the lyricism of the great work it emulates. The book is neither prose nor poem although it struggles to be both. Verbal hiccuping would best describe what his dreadful book has to offer. And why did Mr. Trout draw a fish and write fin at the end of his final chapter? Is he saying we should fly forever in Finnegans Wake like a flock of mindless gulls? I would urge that only insomniacs pick up this mind-dulling book.

“A load of crap,” griped Mason. “Honey, is that what *you* think of the book?”

“Stop asking me that question,” Jill said. “You know I never read your books. It’s bad enough that I have to live with you without knowing what goes on in your head.”

“My use of colons is exquisite,” said Mason. “Even *Book World* concedes to that. You won’t find anything like it in those Harlequin romances you read.”

“If your books do justice to colons,” said Jill, “I’ll leave you to ponder that thought.”

“A load of crap,” Mason repeated as Jill breezed out of his den. He could picture Daphne DuBois smirking while trashing *Callahan’s Sleep*. What fiendish delight she must have taken in writing that toxic review. You’d think she was something mightier than a critic for a local rag.

He wanted to smear her with honey then pour ants onto her, but his writer’s imagination came up with an idea that was far more poetically just. Why not write a book so bad it will make her squirm for real?

“A load of crap,” Mason said yet again. “I’ll give her a load of crap.”

Setting aside his novel in progress, *To Save a Hummingbird*, Mason pondered the sort of book that might make Daphne DuBois squirm. *Why not a woman’s romance?* he decided. *One of those saccharine parodies inspired by Jane Eyre. A trashy tale of a forlorn heroine who is rescued by true love.*

Excited, Mason began to write and he soon had 2,000 words. The book flowed from him so fluidly that he knew it had to be tripe. Great books do not come so easily. Great books take effort and time. Great books require texture, thought, and poetic connotations. But his fingers scrambled like lemmings as they traveled over the keyboard, and before he knew it, Mason was up to seven thousand words. Forfeiting meals and sleep, Mason continued to write. After three days, he had completed a book of sixty thousand words. Words so hastily written, phrases so soggy and trite, that it was all he could do not to puff out his chest and crow like a rooster at dawn. The book was not crap but diarrhea. It was sure to get Daphne DuBois’ goat. He read over the book a second time to make sure he had not missed a cliché.

The heroine, an eighteenth-century beauty born in the highlands of Scotland, had raven-black hair, the fairest of skin, and eyes that flashed like diamonds. Her name was Megan McCullough, she was wild and temperamental, and she liked to stand on perilous bluffs and let the wind toss her hair. On her twentieth birthday, Megan agreed to marry a wealthy landowner, but on the eve of her wedding, she suffered a terrible accident. While cantering her Arabian stallion across the highland moors, Megan lost her grip on the reins and the horse ran away with her. When a deer jumped in front of the stallion, causing it to rear, Megan was thrown from the saddle and tumbled down a ravine. She survived the horrible fall, but both her legs were crushed, and she lay for three days in a peat bog until a huntsman came across her.

At this point, Mason suspected most readers would put down the book, so he felt a grim satisfaction as he read it to the end.

On becoming a convalescent, Megan called off her engagement. "The loss of my legs I must live with," she told her anguished mother. "But I will not suffer pity as well. I would rather the life of a spinster." "Lord Hawthorne still wishes to marry you," her mother reminded her gently. "And what kind of wife would I make him?" Megan bitterly replied. "No, never shall I marry unless I can walk down the aisle."

Retiring to a small fishing village on the rugged Scottish coast, Megan spent her days in a shack staring out to sea. The shack was cold and drafty, the porch was falling to pieces, but at least the mutinous North Sea swells afforded her company. One day, her gaze lingered upon a local fishing lad: a simple boy name Angus McNeill who was carrying his nets to his skiff. Noticing Megan sitting on the porch, Angus

tipped his rainhat. "Pretty miss, may I be of service?" he said, having instantly fallen in love. "Away with you, lout!" shouted Megan. "Can't you see that I am a cripple." "Ah, but I have legs for us both," said the lad, and a smile touched Megan's lips.

And so began a friendship that weathered many a storm. Insulted by his kind intentions, Megan scolded the boy like a parrot, but the stalwart lad withstood her tongue-lashings as though they were gentle rains. He brought her the freshest of northern pike, which he fried in batter and beer, and he fetched her bouquets of heather that he gathered in the moors. And when Megan's legs pained her to distraction, he stroked them as though they were kittens. "I know that my legs must disgust you," snapped Megan; the boy only shook his head. "Why must you think such thoughts," he replied. "I know only that you are in pain."

Nurtured by Angus' kindness, Megan recovered some use of her legs, and one day she put her ire aside and made a tearful confession. "I love you, Angus McNeill," she said. "I never planned such a thing." "I love you too, Megan McCullough," he answered. "Even more than I love the sea." The two of them wed in the village chapel and began a fine life together. And, yes, upon their wedding day, Megan walked down the aisle.

*So what should I call this piece of shit? Mason wondered as he typed "The end." What title best captures its mawkishness and relentless sentimentality. After thinking for only a minute, he titled the book *The Land Fish*.*

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Making an exception to her hands-off rule, Jill proofread the book. When she told him the book was wonderful, Mason knew he had written a dud. What better

proof did he need of this than a compliment from his wife?—a woman who never read anything but formulized, Harlequin trash.

The following month, the book was launched, and Daphne Dubois did not disappoint him. Her review was so scathing, so primal and base, that it seemed like a howl of pain. Smirking like Mephistopheles, Mason savored her every word.

This Fish Should Have Stayed in the Sea

What can I say about Mason Trout that I have not said already? Surely he stands alone as the most derivative of authors. But at least in his previous failures, he was trying to write something grand—something that might steal the glory of Salinger or Harper Lee. In his latest opus, The Land Fish, Mason does not even try to do that; he has chosen instead to emulate the worst of Nicholas Sparks. But not even a blaze of bathos can spark this sickening book. For characters as flat as cardboard, look no further than The Land Fish. For a plot as corny as Crackerjack, look no further than The Land Fish. For dialogue staler than rolls dug out of Pompeii, look no further than The Land Fish. This book wallows in its campiness like a mudskipper flounders in muck.

Laughing, Mason copied Daphne's review and posted it on Facebook. Let the world acknowledge that he had gotten the better of that sanctimonious shrew. Let the world know that his rapier wit had cut off Medusa's head. Let all the world see that woman as a bitch in the throes of a meltdown—a fishwife so vile and volatile that he had played her like a harp.

To keep the joke going, Mason took his book to his weekly critique group: a gathering of writers thoroughly versed in Shakespeare, Proust, and Beckett. After announcing that he had nailed his nemesis, he read them the book's first chapter, but it soon became apparent that the group did not share the joke. *Oh*, their collective stare seemed to say, *so you're writing pulp romances*, and their faces clouded over with the sort of indifference one might show a street musician.

Mason's disappointment continued that evening when he opened up his email. His queue contained dozens of messages from his stable of literary friends: guardians of the creative torch, preservers of culture and standards, bulwarks to the seas of amateurism that threatened to wash over the land. A scribe of historical fiction wrote, "Mason, why are you writing for money? Do you think thirty pieces of silver are worth your eternal soul?" Another, a professor of philosophy, wrote, "How could you do this, Mason? The reading public is dumb enough without you making it comatose." And a well-known essayist on Shakespeare's sonnets wrote only three brutal words. "Et tu, Mason?" he groused, and Mason felt as though he had been slugged.

"What have I done?" muttered Mason, burying his face in his hands. Would his name now rank among the doodlers—the Danielle Steeles and Nicholas Sparks? Had the book branded him as conspicuously as the red letter on Hester Prynne's blouse? His groans were so deep and labored that they drew Jill into his den.

"Mason," she snapped. "What *is* the matter. Is it something to do with your book?"

"My reputation is toast," Mason moaned.

“Your reputation with whom?”

“The protectors of the flame,” said Mason. “The finest minds in the land.”

“Mason,” Jill said. “I will say this just once, so please *listen* to me this time.

Whatever their accomplishments, your friends are like crabs in a bucket. Do you know what crabs in a bucket do when one of them tries to climb out? They latch onto him with ferocious claws and try to pull him back in.”

“Better to drown in a bucket,” Mason said, “than to roam the land a pariah.”

“Oh, Mason, stop being so silly,” laughed Jill. “You’re sounding like Megan McCullough.”

Had his embarrassment been confined to his emails, Mason might have been able to stand it, but when he checked his book’s ranking on Amazon Author page, his shame multiplied tenfold. *The Land Fish* was ranked thirty-fifth among the Top One Hundred Kindle Books, and among the Kindle Romances, it was rated number one. Number one over books with titles like *Bound by a Billionaire*. And even more distressing were the hundreds of Amazon customer remarks. Comments like “I’ve never been so moved” and “Please write more stories about Megan.” Who were these brain dead dilettantes who had fallen in love with his book? As he scanned the reviews he felt as though he were being eaten alive by zombies.

But Mason’s humiliation had only just begun. After the book had been out for a month, an executive from Walt Disney Pictures phoned him. The executive, who sounded like he was twenty years old, offered to buy the movie rights. He also mentioned that Jennifer Lawrence was interested in playing Megan McCullough.

Jennifer Lawrence! His celebrity crush! Mason blanched at the sound of her name. Hadn't that wretched book done enough harm without dragging down Jennifer Lawrence? It was only at his wife's insistence that he agreed to look over the contract.

When a contract for ten million dollars arrived in the morning mail, Jill took one look at the figure and slapped a pen into his palm. "If you turn it down, I will leave you," she snapped. "It's high time your writing made money. Since I've supported you for forty years, I'm vested in that book too."

"They want more than just one book," complained Megan. "Hollywood makes series now. That means they want me to write three more Megan McCullough books."

"Well, *write them*," Jill ordered. "It's not like you have anything better to do."

May Jennifer Lawrence forgive me, thought Mason. *May God forgive me too*.

Clutching the pen as though holding a snake, he signed away his soul.

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Although he had become an outcast, Mason kept attending his critique group. And he kept reading chapters of *The Land Fish* to unreceptive ears. He was losing hope that he would get the group to understand the joke, but the mocking stares he drew were better than the trauma of being alone. When alone, he was forced to suffer an even more crushing defeat. When alone, he was forced to realize his abasement knew no bounds. Because, when alone, he was forced to admit that he dearly loved *The Land Fish*. He loved its archaic sentences, its ornamental style, and he loved Megan McCullough so much that she seemed like a long lost daughter. *Oh*,

fortune, what have you done to me? he thought as he sat in his den. *Oh, muse, why did you program me to be a writer of pulp?*

When the movie came out, the guardians of culture descended upon it like locusts. The critic for *The Boston Globe* wrote, “I watched my colonoscopy on television—it was more interesting than *The Land Fish*.” The critic for *The Washington Post* wrote, “A beached whale of a movie. This flop makes *Beach Blanket Bingo* look like *Citizen Kane*.” And the critic for *The Wall Street Journal*, in the cruelest jibe of all, stated, “Even Jennifer Lawrence could not salvage this drippy script.”

And yet the movie grossed thirty million dollars in its first week of release. Theaters showed it on several screens to accommodate surging crowds, and adolescent girls carried canes so they could feign Megan McCullough’s limp. “I love it,” gushed Miley Cyrus, Disney Pictures greatest star, and Megan McCullough dolls soon appeared in Walmarts all over the country.

As though branded with the mark of Cain, Mason would not come out of his den. He shut down his Facebook and email accounts, refused all visitors, and he committed himself to a life of isolation and booze. In booze, he could blur his wretchedness, in booze he could soften his shame, in booze he could glimpse the specter of the writer he might have been. At Jill’s insistence, he sobered up long enough to attempt to write a sequel, a tale hoped to call *Megan’s Daughters* and infuse with some quality. But his fingers froze as though atrophied when he placed them upon the keyboard, and he returned to the bottle as inevitably as a frog hopping into a lake. His drinking became so heavy, his temper so epic and harsh, that

one day Jill came into his den and said she was leaving him. "You were annoying enough as a failure," she said. "In success you're impossible."

"Success will always elude me," said Mason. "I'm a writer of drivel and crap."

"Don't flatter yourself," Jill snapped. "You're no longer a writer at all."

"Better a fruitless life," Mason said, "than one of broken success."

"There you go sounding like Megan," Jill scoffed. "*Must* you be so melodramatic? I doubt that you would know success if it grabbed you by the throat."

"If I can drink myself to oblivion," said Mason, "*that* would be a success. If I no longer hear my miserable muse, *that* would be a success."

"Fine," replied Jill. "Stay drunk if you must. But you *will* hear from my attorney."

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After Jill left him, Mason spent three whole months moping in his den. He no longer bathed or answered the doorbell, he let his hair grow wild, and whenever he felt the urge to write—to tap his creative spring—he lay down on his unmade bed until the feeling went away. Where once he had ridden the rapids of a leaping imagination, he now dwelled in a stagnant swamp in which he hoped to drown.

On the day that his boozing caught up with him and he suffered a fatal stroke, he sighed like a faucet and went to his bed. *At last, at last*, he thought. But he felt no relief as he lay there and waited for death to come. Yes, an otherworldly light was streaming across the floor, but the woman who hobbled toward him seemed the unlikeliest of escorts. Her jet-black hair was as disheveled as his, her eyes were

hollow and sad, and she stared at him like a jilted bride as she sat on the foot of his bed.

“Why did you let me go?” Megan asked.

“I had no choice,” replied Mason.

She locked her eyes upon his and spoke in a tiny voice. “I cannot fault you for scorning me, sir. I am feral and cruel as the wind. But are my transgressions so loathsome that you would take my life as well?”

She was gazing at him with pity and sternness, yet he felt only unbridled love. Pygmalion could not have loved his statue as much as he cherished this small, unkempt woman.

Her eyes were now sparkling with tears, and a barb crept into her voice. “I had so many adventures to come. Will you write them now, Mason Trout?”

“Does it matter now?”

She frowned like a critic. “Why *wouldn't* it matter, sir?”

She still has her temper, thought Mason, but I love her in all her moods. Were she my very own flesh and blood, I could not love this woman more.

“May I quarrel with my daughters?” she asked. “May I lash horses across the moors? May I spread my legs for scoundrels after my husband dies at sea?”

“I’ll write them, damn my soul,” Mason said. “You’ll break a hundred hearts.” He knew now he had never been worthy of her, this brave, impossible woman, and he experienced the deepest of gratitude when she chuckled and lowered her eyes.

“Then come, sir, the highlands await us,” she said. She slowly rose from the bed. Taking his hand in hers, she led him toward the light.

