



Return to
Peyton Place
GRACE METALIOUS

With an Introduction by Ardis Cameron

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Peyton Place

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

ARDIS CAMERON

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For Jacques Chambrun—who talked me into this book in the first place.

Peyton Place and the Making of a Literary Sequel

Dear Grace Metalious

Just one thing I noticed. When Rodney Harrington and Betty Anderson had their little episode at Silver Lake, it was a very humid evening in summer. Rodney Junior was born the last of October in New York. How was this figured?

With appreciation,

A. Farnsworth Wood

January 26, 1960

IN THE FALL OF 1956, Mrs. Thomas H. Leary sat down to read the season's hottest new book, controversial novel about a fictional New England town called *Peyton Place*. But her reading was fraught with difficulties. Her son, a student at Dartmouth College, "was disgusted," she wrote in a letter to Grace Metalious, "and my husband wasn't much better pleased." Distracted and frustrated by the men in her family, she could not give the story her complete attention. A few years later, however, the Seattle housewife had occasion to try again. "After recently reading *Return to Peyton Place*," she explained, "I simply had to go back again to 'Peyton Place' and review the story." Alone at last, Mrs. Leary raced through the two novels, confirming her first impressions: "To me the story was completely fascinating ... please keep writing—your talent is too good to hide."¹

Mrs. Leary was not the only person who read *Peyton Place* on the sly. Neither was she alone in imploring the young author to continue writing, "no matter," as one letter writer put it, "what the critics say!" From around the country, readers expressed keen interest in the young author's work, often petitioning Grace Metalious to write more "Peyton Place" stories. "Congratulations on your book *Return to Peyton Place*," a "bookworm" from Charlotte, North Carolina, wrote. "I liked it better than *Peyton Place*. By next year this time I hope there will be a new *Peyton Place* book out."² After reading *Return*—"true to life, imaginative, really good reading"—a fan from the Bronx explained that he had followed the characters for five years, and they now seemed like part of his life. "I hope that you are contemplating in writing more about Allison, Joey, Selena, Constance, Mike, etc.... I am sure the American public shares my same feeling."³ Millions it seems did. Three weeks after hitting the bookshelves, *Return to Peyton Place* sold almost three million paperback copies, which, according to Doubleday publications, "made it the fastest selling paperback since *Peyton Place*."⁴ "Please," implored a *Return* fan from Brookline, Massachusetts, "give us another book soon."⁵

Like Mrs. Leary, a number of letter writers found themselves returning to *Peyton Place* after reading *Return*. "Dear Grace," a fan from Oregon enthused, "I have just finished reading 'Return to Peyton Place.' After I had read it, I picked up the copy of your first 'Peyton Place' to renew my acquaintance with these characters you have so beautifully created. Then I returned to your last novel and read it again through to the last word." Like many others, this reader came to think of the characters as "totally real"; a community of fictive friends. "It is a rare gift indeed," wrote another, "to have the ability to make every character alive and filled with such intensity that they will walk and breathe and live to the extent that when the reader puts aside the book, he feels he has known each

them personally.”⁶ One woman confessed that she dreamt nightly about the residents of *Peyton Place* “and always in ‘technicolor!’”

To the relief of many fans, the story of *Peyton Place* continued for more than a decade after its original publication. Both *Peyton Place* and *Return* became popular films, and in 1964 a television serial starring Dorothy Malone—and introducing Mia Farrow and Ryan O’Neal—was broadcast to over sixty million nighttime viewers. Its stunning success forced ABC to add an additional evening slot, making it available to prime-time audiences an historic three nights a week. Soon after, an avalanche of *Peyton Place* books rolled onto the literary marketplace, beginning with the imaginatively titled *Again Peyton Place*, followed in quick succession by *Carnival in Peyton Place*, *The Evils of Peyton Place*, *Hero in Peyton Place*, *Nice Girl from Peyton Place*, *Pleasures of Peyton Place*, *Secrets of Peyton Place*, *Temptations of Peyton Place*, and finally—just in case anyone missed the point of the series—*Thrills of Peyton Place*. But it was not Grace Metalious who would author these works. While Twentieth Century Fox patronized the famous writer, it gave Grace Metalious no role in writing the scripts for either film. Producers at ABC even went out of their way to publicly denounce the original novel, calling its author “negativistic” and “hateful.” And the paperback series supposedly written by Roger Fuller, was actually the product of unknown writer(s) working under a corporate pseudonym invented by Pocket Books. “Perhaps,” the respected magazine writer Otto Friedrich quipped, “Roger Fuller is a former police reporter for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, a schoolteacher with a mortgage payment overdue, a Barnard girl with a feverish imagination, and so on.”⁷ Even *Return* was partially ghostwritten, the idea for a sequel dreamed up by Dell publications and Hollywood producers who didn’t have to read Grace’s fan mail to know audiences wanted more Allison, Joey, Selena, Constance, and Mike.⁸

It was not what Grace Metalious imagined for herself as a writer. Already hard at work on a second novel entitled *The Tight White Collar*, she sought to prove that *Peyton Place* was more than a “flash in the pan.” *Return*, she told reporters, was just “so much sludge. It was written for the gentlemen of Hollywood who will do anything to make a quick buck. I wish that I had never let it happen.”⁹ And resist she did. She stormed around the house. She hung up the phone. She said, “No, no, no, no, no.” But her writerly ambition—her intense desire to insert herself into the realm of the “serious” writer—competed almost daily with less transparent needs: a bottomless hunger for love and validation, and a restless, unending search for financial security. People she loved pressed hard. Hollywood called again and again. Enormous sums were held out. Her agent pleaded. Piqued, Grace Metalious slammed the door to her study, hunkered down at her typewriter, and reluctantly returned to the New England town so many of her characters had longed to escape.

But like her heroine, the promising young writer Allison MacKenzie, Grace returned to *Peyton Place* with attitude. If she was going to have to write this stuff, she was going to have some fun. In a matter of months, she spit out a story that cynically echoed her own traumatic experiences as a young writer who found herself cheated by crooked agents, misrepresented by reporters, vilified by critics, and bullied by editors, publishers, and greedy Hollywood producers. No longer the starry-eyed ingénue of *Peyton Place* days, Allison gains fame and fortune in *Return*, not because her writing is regarded as good, but rather because her book is declared indecent, even pornographic. Allison becomes a celebrity by becoming a “hack”; a female writer of popular, “sexy” books. Dramatizing her

own experiences, Metalious takes a potshot at the backstage operations of book publishing, where publicity agents and editors take control of Allison's novel long before she decamps at Penn Station. "She did not know that in New York certain wheels had been set in motion and that the novel was no longer altogether hers, or that its fate was not to be left to chance" (71–72). When she objects to the misrepresentations and distortions, her agent smugly asks, "You want your book to sell, don't you?" (86). Like her creator, Allison is upset and disillusioned. "What a dirty business this is," Allison realizes. "How meaningless ... how goddamned silly this all is" (88, 92).

Sludge? Maybe. But as with so many "bad" novels, *Return to Peyton Place* has some good stories to tell.

In the spring of 1955, Grace Metalious was thirty-one years old, the mother of three children, and the wife of a New Hampshire schoolteacher. In their small "Hansel and Gretel" cottage called "It'll Do" the Metaliouses made do. But by summer, nothing seemed to work. Drought turned their dirt road into a swirling dust bowl. In July, the dug well dried up, along with the Metaliouses' credit line. "Frozen French-fried potatoes are a bit beyond your budget," Grace remarked years later. "But you buy them because they do not have to be washed before they can be cooked and eaten." The humidity made everyone grouchy. The marriage soured. More and more, "It'll Do" worked less and less. Then, as her best friend and neighbor Laurie Wilkins put it, "all hell broke loose." That August, Grace sold her "fourth baby," a longish novel about a small New England town called Peyton Place, to a New York publisher. Before the summer was over, Grace Metalious found herself sipping a daiquiri at "the fanciest saloon in NY." "I was an author," she later wrote, "with a contract which said so. I had a French agent and a lady publisher. I was in 'Club 21.' I had arrived."¹¹

Peyton Place was an instant success, a publishing phenomenon even by today's standards. Three months after publication, it topped the *New York Times* bestsellers list, where it stayed for more than fifty-nine weeks. "I was living in the Midwest during the fifties," recalled Grace Metalious biographer Emily Toth, "and I can tell you it was boring. Elvis Presley and *Peyton Place* were the only two things in that decade that gave you hope there was something going on out there." By year's end, one in twenty-nine Americans had purchased the novel, and by 1958, *Peyton Place* cracked twelve million copies sold, making it the best-selling novel up to that time (only *The Godfather* would sell more copies in the twentieth century). "This book business," Grace wrote a friend, "is some evil form of insanity."¹²

Hitting the ground with unexpected fury, *Peyton Place* was soon to become the silent generation's perfect storm. Decried by conservative critics as "wicked," "sordid," "cheap," "moral filth," and "tabloid version of life," the novel was declared indecent in Canada, France, and Italy. It was banned in Providence, Rhode Island, Ft. Wayne, Indiana, and Omaha, Nebraska, where politicians blamed the book for corrupting American teenagers. "I don't know why you want to read it," one perplexed bookseller announced, "but we are willing to sell it at \$3.95." Wealthy communities that measured their refinement by the kinds of books they kept in the town library took pride in banishing *Peyton Place*. In upscale Beverly Farms, Massachusetts, a sign was posted on the front lawn of the town library: "This Library does not carry *Peyton Place*. If you want it, go to Salem," a working-class town to the south. Among conservatives, the enormous popularity of the novel signaled the moral danger of postwar liberalism. "This sad situation," thundered the influential conservative William Loeb

editor of the *Manchester Union Leader*, “reveals a complete debasement of taste and a fascination with the filthy, rotten side of life that are the earmarks of the collapse of civilization.” Across the country, hundreds of men, women, and teenagers competed with disapproving officials, parents, and at times, husbands and sons, to secure a copy. In some states, town officials simply cut off library funding when librarians failed to comply. “I am so sorry that I can not say that I read your book,” a reader from Mesquite, Texas, explained to Grace. “I cannot afford to buy it and I have no access to a library. My state is still in the hands of thieves and for that reason it is very backward.”¹³

More judicious reviewers, however, found much to like in *Peyton Place*, at times comparing it to the small-town rebellions of Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and John O'Hara. Carlos Baker, professor of literature at Princeton University, praised the novel, singling out Grace Metalious as representative of the new “emancipated modern authoress” unafraid to ferret out the nation’s “bourgeois pretensions.” The writer Merle Miller made tribute to the “great narrative skill” of the author: “she may outrage you, but she never bores you,” he wrote in *Ladies Home Journal*.¹⁴ In December of 1957, the women editors of Associated Press newspapers voted Grace Metalious the most outstanding woman writer of the year. In tandem with her “sexsational” novel, the author became a household name, “one of the most talked about women in America,” *Life Magazine* announced. More famous than *Anthony Adverse*, *Peyton Place* outsold *God's Little Acre*, *Gone with the Wind*, and every other work of fiction published up to that time.¹⁵ Publishers scratched their heads; dozens of them had rejected the novel.

The main story of *Peyton Place* follows the lives of three women who, in different ways and for different reasons, come to terms with their identity as women and as sexual persons in the repressive atmosphere of small-town America. Allison MacKenzie, very much like Grace, is a young girl growing up in a fatherless household. She dreams of becoming a writer to escape a cloistered life of repressed emotions, conventionality, and dependence. Her working mother, Constance, whom Allison believes to be widowed, lives a lonely and sexually-frustrated life, haunted by the fear that her long-ago adulterous relationship with a married man will be revealed and ruin both her life and that of her daughter, the offspring of her passionate relationship with him. But the dramatic center was more clearly located in the story of Selena Cross, the dark-complexioned girl who lived across the track but whose beauty, intelligence, and sensuality captivate the town and frighten Constance. More than any other character, Selena represented the darkest side of American sexuality in the 1950s. A holder of youth's secrets, Selena is haunted and trapped by the sexual appetites of her stepfather, Lucas, who has been sexually abusing her for years. Seizing a moment offered to her on a snowy night just before Christmas, she and her younger brother smash in his head and bury his body in the sheep pen behind their shack.

What polite conversation hushed up, *Peyton Place* opened up to readerly fantasy, invention, and guarded conversation. Typically unused to candid portrayals of incest, abortion, oral sex, female lust, and female sexual pleasure outside of sleazy magazines and pulp books, readers dog-eared pages, exchanged scenes with friends, and memorized lines. In the imaginary topography of *Peyton Place*, readers—some of whom had never picked up a book before—readjusted both the parameters of the “normal” and their own relationship to it. So, too, did they find a depth and authenticity lacking in much of popular culture. “The first requisite these days of a best seller,” a woman from Springfield

Oregon, wrote to Grace Metalious, “is that it be liberally sprinkled with sex. However ... you have taken the reader into the intimate world of this so vital part of life. I found a depth in the book that I have not found in any other so called ‘best seller.’” She was not alone: thousands of women and men, young and old, mostly working class and white, wrote of how the book opened up to them “real life” in ways that seemed “true to life,” “honest,” “really good writing.” If for some it was a sex manual, for many others it was a way to remap the insistent contours of sexual and gender normativity.

It is often difficult for readers today to imagine the social landscape that confronted the “silent generation,” but in 1956 many sexual acts between consenting adults, including sodomy, oral sex, and sexual intercourse with a partner not legally one's one, were prohibited by law in most states. Abortion was illegal and understood to be an unfit topic for conversation. Rape was a word seldom printed and always uttered in a whisper. Birth control was unreliable and hard to get. Divorce was a source of shame, even a sign of mental instability. In several states it was illegal for a physician to even discuss contraception with an unmarried patient. Female sexual agency was itself highly suspected, a concern among policy makers and, at times, a cause for medical and psychiatric intervention. Forced sterilization remained a viable option with which to treat delinquent girls. Homosexuality was punishable by fines and incarceration. Books that printed such things were confined to railroad stations, newsstands, and drugstore racks, where gaudy covers and titillating images signaled their trashy place on the margins of respectable literature.

Yet even as sexual frankness in popular culture gained traction in the mid-fifties, especially after the famous *Kinsey Reports*, talk about sex in the private sphere remained difficult. “They coped,” the writer Annie Dillard recalled of her mother's friends. “They sighed, they permitted themselves a remark or two; they lived essentially alone.” Sexual knowledge was difficult to locate in an era when communication between parents and children, and even among friends, was often circumspect and limited. In her fictionalized account of growing up in the 1950s, *That Night*, Alice McDermott recounted how her mother struggled to tell her daughter that their neighbor Sheryl, an unmarried teenager, was pregnant. “After a botched, embarrassed and only sporadically explicit attempt to explain what Sheryl had done, she told me, ‘Let's say the stork missed our house and landed on hers.’ For some, *Peyton Place* was all they had, and because it was published by a respectable, hardback firm, readers could purchase it openly in department stores, five-and-dimes, and in quality bookstores. “I learned a few things from your book that I will not soon forget,” a fan wrote to Grace. And like many books, *Peyton Place* circulated as gossip, outrageous tale, and hot commodity in ways that brought the hidden but suspect into everyday conversation. “I heard my mother and her best friend whispering in the kitchen,” one reader recalled. “As soon as I entered they whipped a book into a bag but they were too slow. I had caught my mother reading *Peyton Place*, a book banned by our own town library.” *Peyton Place* was not just a written text, it was also a “spoken text,” a story whose meaning and influence increased as readers discussed it, exchanged passages, and used it to interpret, measure, and reimagine their own lives.¹⁶ “Please keep on writing,” fans implored the controversial author.

Grace Metalious had every intention to do just that. Before starting *Peyton Place* during the “winter of horrors,” she had completed another novel while her husband, George, attended the University of New Hampshire under the G. I. Bill. Entitled “The Quiet Place,” the story was based on a professor who had lost his position at the university due to his homosexuality. In the wake of *Peyton*

Place, Grace planned to rework the manuscript she now called *Tight White Collar*. But the reception of *Peyton Place* as a “dirty” book—“a bad book without redemption”—stunned and wounded her, putting her on the defensive well before she had time to cultivate confidence as a writer. Not unlike the nineteenth-century literary domestics illuminated by historian Mary Kelley, Grace Metalious was a housewife who struggled to write, primarily as a way to earn money.¹⁷ When she heard that her agent had sold *Peyton Place* to a small but well-regarded publishing firm called Julian Messner, she thought that “If I made \$10,000 ... I could pay off all the money we owed and have enough left over to see me through the winter.”¹⁸ It was, after all, her first publication. But as the “hullabaloo” unfolded, the newly published author found herself at the center of intense controversy: an “ordinary” housewife and mother whose “filthy” book called into question her fitness as both. “I don't know what all the screaming is about,” she told Patricia Carbine of *Look* magazine. “To me *Peyton Place* isn't sexy at all. Sex is something everybody lives with—why make such a big deal about it?”¹⁹

The controversy catapulted sales overnight, but her fame vastly outpaced her confidence. A few months after her publishing debut, the young author was invited to appear on television's hottest new talk show, *Night Beat*. The brainchild of Ted Yates and Mike Wallace—whose irreverent and confrontational interviewing style quickly earned him the nickname “Mike Malice”—*Night Beat* pioneered late-night programming, pulling into television's orbit millions of viewers eager to watch Mike take on the rich and famous.²⁰ Grace arrived by limousine, her new boyfriend, local New Hampshire disc jockey T. J. Martin, in tow. Nervous and uneasy in the public eye, Grace felt especially vulnerable under the *Night Beat* gaze, not only because of its hard-hitting reputation, but because the show was recorded live, an unedited hour that pioneered tight camera close-ups, black backgrounds, and one-on-one exchanges. The arrangement was designed to make guests sweat, and Grace obliged. Already uncomfortable in the requisite panty-girdle and skirt that replaced her comfortable dungarees and flannel shirt, she visibly wilted under the hostile gaze of Mr. Malice. “I thought your book was basic and carnal,” Wallace thundered. “You did, huh?” Grace squeaked. “What gives you the right to pry and hold your neighbors up to ridicule?” Grace's eyes moistened.

Poised offstage in her Schiffli-embroidered dress, fashion commentator Jackie Susann watched with fascination and horror as Wallace hammered away at America's most successful authoress. As Barbara Seaman tells the story, Susann prayed for divine intervention. “Don't let this woman cry in front of millions of people,” Jackie pleaded. “Get her through this show, God, and I won't smoke another cigarette tonight.”²¹ Grace played with her ponytail, twitched, pulled at her skirt, but she didn't cry. Then, suddenly, she altered course, rattling Wallace by calling him by his hated birth name, “Myron,” and asking him to tell the audience how many times he had been married (three), a subject still taboo on television and especially sensitive to the reporter.²² But to watch Grace Metalious on old television interview shows is to see a person much in conflict with herself: a vast insecurity and emotional vulnerability cohabitating with a keen intelligence and driven ambition. Wallace remembered liking her, “he found her ‘ample, not unattractive’” he told Toth. Others recalled her plainness: a dramatic ordinariness made more pronounced, perhaps, by her earthy use of language and her sharp wit. When Patricia Carbine, later a founder of *Ms* magazine, asked Grace if there was anything about sex that offended her, the young author quipped, “Far worse to me than any sex act is unattractive food, and I'm not a gourmet.”²³ To read Grace Metalious was to expect sartorial fireworks, confident poses, and ebullient

cigarette holders. Al Ramrus, a writer for *Night Beat*, imagined the author of *Peyton Place* as “a ve flamboyant, outspoken, colorful woman,” but he found instead an overweight wife and mother wh “could just as easily have been sitting behind a drugstore counter.”²⁴ Susann, with her “spiky fal lashes, chain smoker's gravelly voice, and glittery dresses,” was equally stunned by Metalious plainness.²⁵ But it was the popular writer's complete lack of promotional skills that made the futu author of *Valley of the Dolls* rethink her own career plans. “How could this woman, ‘chunk depressed, and colorless,’ Jackie wondered, write such a popular book “almost in spite of the author publicity efforts?”

Grace, too, was amazed by her success. It dazzled and at times frightened her. Unlike Susann, wh could bring all the elements of Hollywood hucksterism into the promotion of her books—pioneerin bookstore signings, personal appearances, and celebrity tie-ins—Grace knew little about publishin and even less about promotion. She imagined book publishing to be a noble endeavor, a business ru by professor-types in corduroy jackets with patches on their elbows and pipes always at hand. Sh found an agent by going to the Laconia, New Hampshire, library and picking out the first French nam on the list. Handsome, charming, and debonair, he would eventually cheat her of hundreds o thousands of dollars. If Jackie Susann brought to publishing “show-business vulgarity,” Grace broug images of art and culture, erudition and refinement. Press agents, producers, and promoters shocke then irritated and bruised her. Publicity of all kinds rekindled a constant sense of inadequacy—n pretty enough, never able to fit in, unloved and ultimately unlovable. When reporters flocked Gilmanton to interview her, she hid in Laurie's farmhouse. “She was a very scared girl,” Gilmanto neighbor Ken Crain remembered. “After the book came out, nobody let her be, and she was even mo scared.”²⁶ Even New York City—which once excited and thrilled Grace—grew increasingly traumati its tinsel tarnished by the pressures to produce another best-seller. Twenty months after her literar arrival at “Club 21,” Grace Metalious distanced herself from the city, settling into her beloved Grani State retreat, the Cape-styled house she had purchased with her fifteen-hundred-dollar advance f *Peyton Place*. Whenever she got back from New York, “she'd sort of embrace the fireplace,” he former friend and lawyer recalled, “as if it were the Rock of Gibraltar.”²⁷ Even after neighb shunned her and friends bled her dry, Grace never stopped calling Gilmanton, New Hampshir “home.” “Here I was safe,” she told a reporter. “I drank, I wept.”²⁸

Twenty months after the publication of *Peyton Place*, Grace hugged the fireplace, embraced th April mud season, and looked forward to “my return to normalcy.” In February she had marrie Thomas James (T. J.) Martin, the man she publicly and scandalously admitted was her lover. “M life,” Grace told reporters, “has resumed a pattern now. The only thing that is over is the storm. At la I have found my way safely home.”²⁹ When reports circulated that Grace Metalious was planning write another *Peyton Place* book, she fumed, “That's a damn lie.... I'm not going to write abo Peyton Place again, that's for sure.” And she meant it.

Not long before their marriage, Grace and T. J. had taken an extensive road trip out West. There the met with Jerry Wald, a sharp-eyed, up-and-coming producer who was fast turning Grace's “four baby” into a major motion picture for Twentieth Century Fox. But it soon became clear to everyon that Grace was not to have any part in the making of the film. Her “consulting job,” she quick realized, was a joke. Hollywood was a “wasteland,” a “junk heap,” the treatment of women “dreadful

with actresses sorted and branded like “cattle.” What Wald wanted was simply the publicity generated by Grace's presence in Hollywood. Grace Metalious left in a fury, but not before giving Wald a searing tongue-lashing and the scriptwriter John Michael Hayes a Bloody Mary in the face.³⁰ “The whole trouble with Hollywood and me,” she would generously write a year later, “was that we did not know each other's language.”³¹ But if Hollywood and Grace had a communication problem, Wald had no intention of providing a translator. Like the colonists who bought Manhattan for mere trinkets, Wald profited by the tangled languages that separated writers from their stories and authors from their titles. *Peyton Place* might have been Grace's “fourth baby,” but Twentieth Century Fox was its legal guardian. The studio owned movie and television rights to *Peyton Place* but also, and most unusually, owned the name. There would be no residual rights. *Peyton Place* was now a brand name, a simple commodity uncoupled from individual authorship. It could return or not, depending on the commercial needs and plans of Twentieth Century Fox.

In the wake of *Peyton Place*'s success as a film, Jerry Wald became convinced that lightning could strike twice, and legally nothing prevented him from creating a script for a new *Peyton Place* film. Indeed, the idea of hiring anonymous writers to produce stories from outlines created by corporations was central to the emergence of the cheap-book business and the expansion of a mass audience. Early in the twentieth century, literary syndicates such as the famous Stratemeyer group operated by developing ideas for books, pitching them to publishers, and then outlining them for ghostwriters hired to develop the story, usually into a “series” published under pseudonyms like Carolyn Keene, the invented author of girl detective Nancy Drew.³² Even before the syndicates, however, entrepreneurs of dime novels and story papers had depended on “unauthored discourse,” pulling into the production process anonymous writers who could meet tight deadlines and write according to formulas designed by others.³³ “In authorship, as in more tangible things,” noted the historian Mary Noel in 1955, “demand expressed in dollars and cents created a supply. With capital came the ‘hack,’ who was as much a product of the Industrial Revolution as was the Hoe printing press.”³⁴ Wald adapted the concept to suit the needs of studios, using “tie-ins” that increasingly bound authors and their hardback firms to paperback publishers and Hollywood studios. When Wald telephoned Gilmanton in the spring of 1958, all he wanted was a ten-page script. Grace's return to normalcy was over.

It took Grace thirty days to write *Return to Peyton Place*. What began as a ten-, and then twenty-page “original screenplay” for twenty-five thousand dollars huffed and puffed into a ninety-eight page “novelization,” which Dell agreed to publish if Wald came through with a movie version. Wald had smartly reversed the “tie-in” process whereby hardback publishers contracted for a book only if a paperback firm guaranteed it by purchasing reprint rights or Hollywood showed interest by buying movie rights. *Return to Peyton Place* became the first published book that originated as a movie “treatment,” a practice Wald made famous and that in turn made him one of Hollywood's most successful producers. It made Grace angry and sick.

Grace Metalious gambled that readers would understand the book for what it was: “a Hollywood treatment. It was never intended as anything else.”³⁵ To her, the short-page novella was an expensive bone tossed to a greedy Jerry Wald. She may also have been thinking of her many fans who so often requested a sequel. And certainly the beginnings of the novel must have given her a sense of satisfaction: payback time. Here she used her considerable narrative skills to illuminate the cupid she experienced as a young writer thrown, as she saw it, to the literary wolves. The main story

Return follows Allison MacKenzie and her family after she finds success by selling her novel *Samuel's Castle* to a small publishing house in New York City. More parody than satire, the novel strolls down Grace Metalious's own rise to fame like a bitter voguing act. As with her own novel *Peyton Place*, the publication of *Samuel's Castle* raises the indignation of townspeople, causing her stepfather, the Greek schoolmaster Mike Rossi, to lose his job and the neighbors to shun her and her family. And like her own bewilderment at having to rewrite *Peyton Place* to meet the demands of editors and publishers, Allison is forced to make alterations to *Samuel's Castle* that she fears will ruin her book and turn her into a hack. When she meets her new publisher, Lewis Jackman, we can feel Grace's own anger at Kathryn Messner, who forced Grace to change the incestuous relationship between Selena Cross and Lucas Cross into a nonfamilial rape by making Lucas the stepfather of Selena rather than the father. "No one," Messner and her editor pointed out, "would believe the story otherwise. Incest simply didn't exist, at least that's what people believed at the time."³⁶ "There are places, Miss MacKenzie, where your manuscript is a little too much," the suave Mr. Jackman tells Allison in *Return*. "He fingered pages of her manuscript and Allison wanted to slap him. She felt as if she had had a child and that Lewis Jackman was now fondling that child in a depraved, obscene fashion" (56). If readers wouldn't believe in child sexual abuse, Grace would show them publishers, agents, and Hollywood producers who raped writers and prostituted themselves every day. Grace always believed that by turning Lucas Cross into Selena's stepfather, her editors had turned "tragedy into trash." In *Return*, Grace slapped back.

But *Return* also provides readers a small window into Grace Metalious's vulnerability and intense insecurity. Known for her generosity of spirit and purse, the celebrated author often lent people, even strangers, large sums of money. She took unusual amounts of time to write back to her fans; she never turned away strangers who came knocking at her door; and she didn't ignore fans who asked for her autograph, even while dining out. But, like Allison, it all seemed to Grace an unearned celebrity. "I don't feel like such a fraud," Allison tells Lewis. "I know it's only me, little Allison MacKenzie. Why doesn't everyone else see that?" (93). Grace Metalious knew what it meant to feel inadequate; to live as an outsider hungry for acceptance, validation, and love. Running throughout *Peyton Place* is a pervasive sense of Otherness, of people who are not quite "right" and who feel the weight of being different. In *Return*, readers could marvel at Allison's success, make that dream their own, and recognize in themselves the writer's longing for acceptance and validation as well as for material things. But it was Allison's undercurrents of unease in the public world of success and fame that she performed in the sequel some of the emotional and psychic services rendered by the original. "Walking through the lobby of the Plaza, Allison looked at the expensively groomed, beautifully dressed women who sat chatting or strolling about. They were at their ease, in their element; places like this were a customary part of their daily lives. For them there was nothing dreamlike or exotic about stopping at the Plaza for cocktails. Will it ever be like that for me? Allison wondered" (60). Readers wondered, too.

But writing *Return* gave Grace the literary shakes. Concerned that she had sold out on some level, she also worried that *Peyton Place* might be remembered as a one-shot wonder. She began to drink heavily. But she also fought back. In both novels, Grace Metalious floats the unfashionable notion that popular stories and mass-circulated books are not mindless "ooze," as literary critics so famously

asserted throughout the fifties. Acutely aware that women writers were especially vilified for their popularity and high sales figures, Grace positioned Allison in opposition to the “boy geniuses” so admired by Norman Page and represented by David Noyes, who wrote what Allison referred to as “Novels of Social Significance.” “David was twenty-five and had been hailed as a brilliant new talent,” we learn in *Peyton Place*. “He wanted to reform the world and he had a difficult time understanding people like Allison who wanted to write for either fame or money” (PP, 356). In *Return* Allison's book sells in the millions, not because it is good, David suggests, but because of its “sexy parts and fraudulent publicity. David belittles her for her radio and television appearances, until Allison finally yells, “Maybe you don't care what happens to your books, but I care what happens to mine. What's the good of writing anything if nobody reads what you write?” (89). Like Grace, Allison wanted to write quality books, but she also took pleasure in knowing that millions of readers—many of whom had never picked up a novel before—had found her story to be meaningful and compelling. Nor would she concede to David the right to define the boundaries of quality. “She had made up her own mind: if there was a price to be paid for all this, then she would pay it. But she would not take David's way, would not sneak out the back door. She was young, but not so young that she still believed that art could be found only in a cold-water flat” (92). The cult of the solitary genius struggling alone in his garret fit the American literary imaginary, but Allison “had outgrown” it. Like her creator, she never confused poverty with literary merit, or popularity with bad taste.

Whatever Jerry Wald thought of the effort is unclear. Scriptwriters would rewrite the story anyway, so it had little effect on him. But no one else involved with the project was pleased. “We used her name,” Helen Meyer of Dell Publishing recalled. “But we hired somebody else to do the writing.” Too short, it was also at times incomprehensible. Grace refused to look at it again. In her place, Dell hired Warren Miller, a reputable writer of fiction whose novels had sold well. He took on the job, Emily Toth explains, as a “hoot” and earned a flat fee for the effort of several thousand dollars. Miller continued the saga of Allison's return to her small New England town as a celebrity authoress. Selena Cross, Betty Anderson, Constance MacKenzie, and Mike Rossi return to their lives, each haunted in some way by the shadows cast in *Peyton Place*. Miller obviously enjoyed hacking out the melodramatic sequel, but where his fun begins and Grace's ends remains uncertain. Just how the autumn birth of Rodney Junior “got figured” is also unclear. Grace never met Miller, and if she had “Another Bloody Mary down the shirt,” T. J. offered.³⁹

Given Grace's distaste for Wald's treatment idea, we can read *Return* as a mélange of cynicism, irony, self-parody, and spoof. And Grace Metalious's fingerprints are all over it. Consider the weird tale of Roberta Carter and her panting daughter-in-law, Jennifer. In *Peyton Place*, Ted Carter is the handsome boyfriend of Selena Cross, but his ambition to become a famous lawyer trumps his love, and he drops Selena when she is put on trial for the murder of her father. In *Return* disloyal Teddy gets his. Ted marries Jennifer, the daughter of a well-known and prosperous Boston lawyer. Unlike the loving and loyal Selena, Jennifer is manipulative, selfish, and wanton. Together the young couple visit Peyton Place often to see Ted's overly involved mother, Roberta Carter, and her husband, Harmon, both of whom had teamed up long ago to murder Roberta's first husband, the naive, but wealthy, Dr. Quimby. It is classic Grace Metalious melodrama/ camp. Roberta is out of fifties central casting: whining, clinging mother who is jealous of her daughter-in-law's relationship with her son. She spi

on their lovemaking. She thrills in their violent sexual encounters in Ted's childhood room. What is to be done? In true pulp fashion, Roberta plots to kill off the lustful Jen. And how, readers might wonder, does an ordinary woman in small-town America manage that? "Roberta Carter began to read murder mysteries ... During the day ... she wrote down the plot of each novel and listed the clues that had finally landed each murderer in the nets of the police. In this way, she discarded murder by shooting, stabbing, strangling, and poison" (200). What was left? Keep turning the page, the author answers. The lover of Nancy Drew, Grace Metalious knew how to use suspense, but she also understood that fiction was where many readers turned when seeking knowledge about life and sex, so why not murder?

Return was a publishing success, but the reviews tortured Grace. "Whatever the inspiration that set off a flat-wheeled caboose clattering after Author Metalious' steam-powered first novel, *Peyton Place*, *Time* magazine announced, "the sequel bears all the marks of a book whacked together on a long weekend."⁴⁰ Critic Elizabeth Bayard, an admirer of *Peyton Place*, was irked. "It takes more than spying on the eating, drinking, and love-making habits of Mr. Mrs. and Miss America to make a memorable novel," she scolded. Grace had hoped the book would pass "unnoticed" or at least that reviewers would understand that it was a script written for Hollywood. "People are all saying I couldn't write a second novel. It's a Hollywood treatment ... It was a foul, rotten trick. They made hell of a lot of money on *Peyton Place* and they wanted to ride the gravy train ... I've been played for a sucker all around."⁴¹ Her emotional swings grew more intense and frequent. She drank more. Fighting with T. J. escalated. Money rolled in and then flew out. "The bottle is empty," Grace told a friend "and I can see myself at the bottom."⁴² There were still many highs after *Return*: Grace would complete two more novels, both of them well received by critics and audiences alike. Her oldest daughter, Marsha, would provide her with a grandchild, and Grace would remarry her first husband, George. But *Return* had taken a toll. "Return to Peyton Place should never have been written," George Metalious later wrote. "It was another event in a series that helped in undermining Grace's confidence and contributed to her feelings of inadequacy."⁴³ But Grace also began to recognize the logic of Jerry Wald's universe. *Peyton Place* had become a cash cow. If the author had lost her "baby," she nevertheless maintained cultural capital as the authorized voice of Peyton Place, whatever its commodified form. But it was a Faustian bargain Grace made reluctantly with herself. When money needs pressed, taxes came due, and business ventures turned sour, Grace returned with new ideas on how to milk the Peyton Place cow.

"I think Hollywood would like another P.P. script," Grace wrote to her agent in the summer of 1960. "In spite of the fact that I've screamed No, No to this idea I might consider it now because of a project in which George and I are interested here in New Hampshire. It would not interfere with the new book because any day that I can't turn out a silly script for those silly bastards at 20th century I'll turn in my typewriter and get a job in an insurance office or something."⁴⁴ She was responding to a letter earlier that year from Jerry Wald, who had just previewed the rough cuts to *Return to Peyton Place*. "I can certainly say that lightning does strike twice in the same place." The film featured the music of Franz Waxman, whose score for *Peyton Place* won an Oscar. Eleanor Parker played Allison's mother, Constance, and Carol Lynley replaced the elusive Diane Varsi as Allison. Unlike the *Peyton Place* movie, which premiered in Camden, Maine, without Grace, Wald agreed to Grace's request that the first showing of *Return* be held in Laconia, New Hampshire, the closest town to Gilmanton that had

movie theater.

The success of the book and the early cuts of the film convinced Wald that there was money still to be made with Peyton Place. "One of the future projects I have in mind," he wrote, "is a story dealing with the conflicts between the townspeople and the constantly changing influx of students and teachers into a small New England town which has a college which offers a rather special situation which should provide possibilities for interesting dramatic conflicts." The new sequel, he suggested, might be called "Spring Riot in Peyton Place."⁴⁵ Grace thought the idea "nuts," then went on to develop a storyline of her own.

Only the outline remains. At the age of thirty-nine, Grace Metalious died suddenly, if not surprisingly, of "chronic liver disease." Known as the writer's disease, cirrhosis built up dangerously in her liver before many in her family even knew that she was sick. A few months before her death the motel that she and her husband George owned—"one of the future projects"—failed, and Grace wrote a panicked letter to her agent. "I could write another book, but as at December 12th, 1963, I feel that a contract and all the worry that that involves would be impossible for me. Is there a magazine market which could be met from Gilmanton, is there a newspaper market for Gilmanton gossip?" Can writing kill? "Disenchantment," Grace once wrote, "is a slow, painful, agonizing process. Sometimes it is a long road, and in the beginning you don't even know you're on it, then when it is too late you can't even fight or find a way back." *Return* was not a book Grace was proud to have written. But it is an enduring monument to an agency embodied in writing's social life. To reread *Return* is to enter into the complex relationships between authorship, book production, hierarchies of taste and readerly desire, and the labor of writing in an age of commodity production. It is also to grasp the hopes and fears of a young woman born on the social and cultural margins of America: an outsider even to those who knew her best. "I'm glad you came," Allison tells a friend at the end of *Return*. "You've helped me a lot ... by reminding me that the world isn't full of mobsters waiting to cut me down. And by showing me that work will exorcise all the ghosts that haunt me" (238). Grace may not have written this ending, but it was the kind of "happily ever after" finale she dreamed a literary life could ultimately provide. To the delight of her fans, Grace Metalious kept on writing, but in the end words failed her. They were never enough; the demons always returned. Grace Metalious died in Boston, Massachusetts, and returned for the last time to Gilmanton, New Hampshire, where she was buried in the spring of 1964.

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ARDIS CAMERON

1. Letter, Mrs. Thomas H. Leary to Grace Metalious, March 8, 1960. Courtesy of Marsha Metalious Duprey.
2. Letter, M. B. "bookworm" to Mrs. Metalious, March 20, 1960. Courtesy of Marsha Metalious Duprey.
3. Letter, Harvey Tauman to Grace Metalious, February 16, 1960. Courtesy of Marsha Metalious Duprey.
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5. Letter, Ralph E. Hoyt to Grace Metalious, February 28, 1960. Courtesy of Marsha Metalious Duprey.
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23. Carbine, "Peyton Place," 108.
24. Quoted in Toth, *Inside Peyton Place*, 163.
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27. Miller, "Tragedy of 'Peyton Place,'" 112.
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