

James Branch Cabell Biography

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Biography

The American essayist and writer of romantic fiction James Branch Cabell (1879-1958) played an important part in the battle against sexual taboos in American literature during the 1920s.

James Branch Cabell was born in Richmond, Va., into an aristocratic "Old Dominion" family. He graduated from William and Mary College in 1898, having taught French and Greek there. His first book, *The Eagle's Shadow* (1904), was a romance attacking contemporary materialism. However, he achieved greater success with *The Line of Love* (1905), *Gallantry* (1907), and *Chivalry* (1909), romantic tales of disillusionment set in the past. Both Mark Twain and Theodore Roosevelt praised the first of this series.

Cabell's most productive and popular period came in the 1920s with the continuation of his "Biography of the Life of Manuel." This saga chronicled the career of the pivotal character, Don Manuel, and the history of seven generations of his descendants. *The Soul of Melicent* (1913), revised as *Domnei* in 1920, was part of the saga, followed by *Jurgen* (1919), *Figures of Earth* (1921), *The High Place* (1923), *The Silver Stallion* (1926), *Something about Eve* (1927), *The White Robe* (1928), and *The Way of Ecben* (1929).

Cabell's best-known and most typical work was *Jurgen*, the story of a middle-aged pawnbroker wandering through a mythical realm known as Poictesme. When his youth is miraculously restored, Jurgen travels through other imaginary lands searching for "justice." In depicting these countries and the hero's adventures in them, Cabell satirized many contemporary beliefs and attitudes. As he recounted Jurgen's love affairs, he used Freudian symbols to make fun of sexual mores.

The guardians of American morality were outraged and acted to suppress the book. A hotly contested and widely publicized trial followed; sales of the book soared. Cabell became famous and his novel went through many editions. The publicity also increased the sales of his other books. Cabell fought hard to free literature from rigid values imposed by puritanical society, and for his forthrightness he was much admired. By 1932, however, Cabell's fame had waned, and his later books were not successful.

In his volumes of criticism, such as *Beyond Life* (1919), Cabell expounded the theory that fiction should allegorically interpret a dream life superior to sordid and meaningless actuality, thereby enlarging mankind's visions.