



## Features

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[/THE UNEQUAL MARRIAGE OF WORDS AND MUSIC.html](http://www.operanews.org/Opera_News_Magazine/2008/8/THE_UNEQUAL_MARRIAGE_OF_WORDS_AND_MUSIC.html))

# Opera's Book Club

**BARRY SINGER** takes a look at the current read-the-book-see-the-opera school of commissioning new work.



Photo by James Salzano

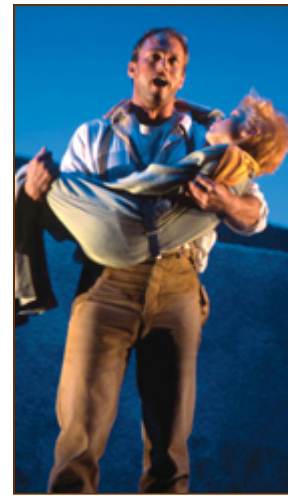
First came the sign-up selections - *Little Women* in 1998, not just by Louisa May Alcott but by Mark Adamo; *The Great Gatsby* in 1999, not just by F. Scott Fitzgerald but by John Harbison and Murray Horwitz. Olive Ann Burns's *Cold Sassy Tree* was the pick in 2000 - a less than major work, but certainly a solid book-club choice for composer Carlisle Floyd. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* was next, via Rachel Portman and Nicholas Wright in 2003, followed in 2004 by a Salman Rushdie children's book, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, and Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, as re-rendered by Charles Wuorinen and James Fenton, Jake Heggie and Heather McDonald, respectively. Over the next three years, right up to today, according to OPERA America, of the twenty-five or so new operas that have bowed at opera houses or universities worldwide, at least nine have boasted librettos by the book - that is, derived from books, both major and minor. Increasingly, composers and librettists throughout the hard-to-sell realm of new American opera are turning to classic literary fiction for inspiration and, perhaps, commercial salvation.

Why have the world's great books suddenly become opera's source material of choice? Why not old movies, as on Broadway for new musicals? Or old television shows? Or old-time radio? Or cartoon strips? In fact, according to the creators themselves, it may soon be all of the above. But for now, books are the thing. As to the reason why - well, that depends on whom you ask.

"'Why don't they leave these books alone if they love them so much?'" That essentially has been the attitude of our most vociferous critics," acknowledges J. D. McClatchy, the esteemed American poet who has become an in-demand librettist for opera's new literary endeavors. Recent adaptations include Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (with composer Lowell Liebermann) for the Juilliard School in 2006 and John Gardner's novella *Grendel* (with composer Elliot Goldenthal and his wife Julie Taymor) for Los Angeles Opera that same year.

"As long as there has been opera," observes McClatchy sagely, "composers and librettists have been drawn to history's great myths for their subject matter. The great books of the past two centuries *are* our great myths. Because of the energy and the great passions that they contain, these novels have achieved the status of myths in our time. As such, they are our most natural opera resource."

The nobility of this viewpoint is indisputably elevating. But at least one counterpart of McClatchy's has a far more earthbound explanation. He is librettist/composer Mark Adamo,



**Rachel Portman's *The Little Prince* at Houston Grand Opera, 2003**

(<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/littleprince1g8108.jpg>)

Rachel Portman's *The Little Prince* at Houston Grand Opera, 2003



**John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby* at the Met, 1999**

(<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/gatsby1g8108.jpg>)

John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby* at the Met, 1999

whose popular adaptation of *Little Women*, produced by Houston Grand Opera in 1998, has received more performances than any other work in opera's current literary new age.



Jake Heggie's *The End of the Affair* at HGO, 2004

© Brett Coomer/Houston Grand Opera 2008

"We are at the beginning of what I hope is an operatic renaissance in this country for new work," remarks Adamo optimistically. "Finally there is energy and momentum behind commissioning new work. In the nineteenth century, when opera commissions were also plentiful, creators turned to the novels of Victor Hugo and others. Today, more and more of *our* era's classic novels are being turned to. It's just inevitable, I think, with the increasing numbers of commissions - a confluence of events, really, no more and no less."

It is also possible, however, to view opera's appetite for famous books just a bit more caustically. These books really have one primary function, one suspects - commerce, the instant-recognition factor that great literary works carry with an audience. Ticket-buyers appear to be the biggest target of opera's current book-club aesthetic, an aesthetic derived not from mythology or from kismet but from cold box-office calculation.

Composer Tobias Picker readily acknowledges this. "Audiences want something already familiar to them," insists Picker, who, with librettist Gene Scheer, brought Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* to the Met as a commissioned new work in 2005. "New operas are more easily accepted by opera companies when they arrive carrying some kind of name-brand recognition. Well-known books are a perfect means for that."

So far, all four of Picker's operas have been derived from books, but books possessing varying

degrees of recognition. *Emmeline*, a Santa Fe Opera commission in 1996 (libretto again by J. D. McClatchy), was based on a less-than-best-selling 1980 historical novel written by Judith Rossner, the best-selling author of *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, a children's work with a libretto by Donald Sturrock, was adapted from a fairly popular book-length Roald Dahl fable. *Thérèse Raquin*, whose 2001 world premiere occurred at Dallas Opera (libretto by Gene Scheer), was drawn from an Emile Zola novel, but not one of his more famous ones.

"*Thérèse Raquin* was not widely known in the U.S.," notes Picker, "and *Emmeline* actually sold poorly. Even *An American Tragedy* has fallen from its populist pedestal - there was a time when you couldn't go through high school without reading *An American Tragedy*, but no longer. So I guess you could say, yes, I was attracted to books, but mostly to neglected works. I figured there might be a kind of buzz in their rediscovery.

"Now, though," admits Picker, "I don't think any of my books were popular *enough*. Audiences today only want to see something in an opera that they've seen in the movies, or have read in better-known books than the ones I chose. No opera company wants to do the second production for any of these pieces of mine, in large measure because they see them as unmarketable. The money is only there for premieres - though, of course, that's not exactly news."



Ricky Ian Gordon's *The Grapes of Wrath* at Minnesota Opera, 2007

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When great books are made into operas, who chooses them? "The composer," according to McClatchy, "almost always." Perhaps. Increasingly, though, it appears that opera companies are making the selections, picking the book, then commissioning the composer and librettist. This is not a new phenomenon, but it is more and more prevalent, and therefore more and more indicative

that the big-books phenomenon in opera really has its source in ticket sales.

"*Little Women* was originally suggested to me by the Summer Opera Theatre Company of Washington, D.C.," says Adamo. "The idea didn't appeal to me at all. I felt *Little Women* was pretty treacly, that there was no drama in it. Interestingly, Louisa May Alcott seems to have had the same reaction when first approached by her publisher to write what he termed a female answer to *Hans Brinker*. 'Why are you coming to me?' she reportedly responded. 'I write Gothic fiction. The only family I know at all is my own, and my family is pretty odd.'

"I began to think about that family of hers," says Adamo. "And it occurred to me that the first part of *Little Women* is actually all about Jo and her sisters and how those sisters were outgrowing Jo - through no fault of her own. Jo was really a post-feminist creation, a woman who had chosen to get from her family what she might have otherwise gotten from a marriage - to use her relationship with her sisters almost like a marriage. I decided to make my opera about that. I cut most of the book to get to that notion.

"Unfortunately, the Summer Opera people didn't want *that*. They wanted a sunny kind of family opera, like all the movies of *Little Women*. But this had now become *my* piece, and I wanted it *this* way. So, at Carlisle Floyd's suggestion, actually, I sent it to Houston Grand Opera, which took it. As is."

Composers and librettists, of course appreciate commissions of any kind. But do they universally appreciate opera companies handing them big books to musicalize? Adamo's experience with *Little Women* makes it clear that the answer can be no, at least initially. Ten years ago, composer Ricky Ian Gordon was approached by Minnesota Opera about tackling *The Grapes of Wrath*. "I had to admit I'd never read it," Gordon says. "And, I have to also admit, I wondered, why me? Until then, my works for theater and for opera had been scaled quite small. I was drawn to intimate subjects. Then I finally read *The Grapes of Wrath*. I was overwhelmed. It could not have been more operatic. The characters, the story, the story-telling itself were absolutely biblical. And I realized, ah, you turn to these big novels because you're always looking, as an opera composer, for a story that is large enough to really warrant singing it. *The Grapes of Wrath* was already singing operatically when I got to it. In the end, working on such a large landscape, I found a whole new writer inside of me. This new voice just came out. The big books push you to go much further than you ever believed you were capable of."





Tobias Picker's *An American Tragedy* at the Met, 2005

© Beatriz Schiller 2008

Grand old novels, then, can indeed stretch a composer. For a librettist, though, tackling one can often seem a lesson in diminution. Nearly everyone involved agrees that making operas from novels generally requires tossing much of the original novel out. "You don't have the benefit of a narrator's voice," notes librettist Herschel Garfein, who, with composer Robert Aldridge, turned Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry* into an opera that had its premiere last season at the Nashville Opera Association. "Sinclair Lewis's narrative voice in *Elmer Gantry* is almost unrelentingly sarcastic. We decided to eliminate most of that. It wasn't the tone we wanted to sing with. You're forced to tell the story solely through the characters onstage. But you're also always cutting or combining characters who fulfill similar functions in the book. It's pretty tricky."

For Mark Adamo, the process is even less genteel. "You have to shred the book up into little pieces and see what you can use. You can't rely on the strength of your subject matter. You have to get beyond it. The opera is not a footnote to the novel."

Or the video. Sometimes it isn't even the book itself that sets things in motion. Sometimes, as in real life, it's the video that comes first.

"Taking on *Elmer Gantry* was Bob Aldridge's idea," confirms Garfein, "but Bob watched a video of the movie before even reading the book. He next screened it for me. We agreed that the setting was great, the characters rich, for an opera. Only then did we read the book."

Whether hardcover, softcover or video-derived, one question remains about these operas: Can they make an already great book greater? Clearly the answer is altogether subjective. And no composer or librettist would dream of making such claims directly. Still....

"I subscribe to the theory of critic Harold Bloom," volunteers Mr. Garfein, "that sometimes characters in a book elude the grasp of their author. *Elmer Gantry*'s Sharon Falconer is one such character. She practically takes the book over, but Lewis kills her off just halfway through. We decided to give Sharon Falconer her due. In fact, her death ends our opera. In at least that sense, I think, our opera is even better than the book - if I may dare to say so." □

BARRY SINGER *won a 2007 ASCAP Deems Taylor award for his most recent book, Alive at the Village Vanguard.*

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